

## THE GERMAN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPEDITION TO THE KIMBERLEY, NORTHWEST AUSTRALIA (1938/39)

In October 2018, when **Martin Porr** spoke to the Kimberley Society about a German ethnographic expedition to the Kimberley, he used the subtitle 'A case study of critical research history and anthropological knowledge production' for his talk. Martin is an Associate Professor at The University of Western Australia, working in both the Discipline of Archaeology and the [Centre for Rock Art Research & Management](#). His impressive list of [publications](#) includes works undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous people and professional colleagues. Martin's involvement with Kimberley archaeology dates from 2009 and he provided the following summary of his illustrated presentation.

### The Frobenius expedition to the Kimberley in 1938

In 1937, the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* succeeded in acquiring the permission from the Australian Government to conduct an ethnographic expedition to the Northwest Kimberley in Western Australia. Despite some earlier activities and publications (Elkin, 1930; 1945; Love, 1936), this expedition represents the first dedicated effort to conduct detailed and extensive ethnographic work in the region (Beinssen-Hesse, 1991). Helmut Petri was named as the director of this *Frobenius-Expedition XXII*.

The expedition to the Kimberley was named after the eccentric founder of the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* Leo Frobenius (Figure 1). However, he did not participate himself in the expedition; in fact, he died in August 1938 when the members of the expedition were engaged in their main fieldwork in the Kimberley. It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> so-called Frobenius expedition and it was the first to Australia.

In Frobenius' research paradigm, Indigenous art and rock art related to a universal human ability of fundamental understanding, which is non-discursive and irrational: 'the symbolism of images knows no logic in a modern sense (*die Bildersymbolik kennt keine Logik im modernen Sinne*)' (Streck, 2014, p. 35; 2016). It was particularly opposed to the modern influences of literary education and thought. Rock art held a particular place within

Frobenius' worldview as an expression of the most foundational characteristics of human culture. His concept of human society and human engagement with their surrounds was certainly extremely idealistic and romantic. It also appears as naïve and analytically uncritical in today's research arena as it did even then. Professional and academic contemporaries were very much aware of Frobenius' particular "fanciful reality" and during his whole career he was heavily criticised. However, this did not diminish his broad public standing and the popularity of his work and, importantly, his ability to gain substantial (financial) support from influential business circles and individuals in Germany.



Figure 1 Leo Frobenius during fieldwork in Zimbabwe in 1933 (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt; reproduced with permission)

The expedition itself was consequently conducted in a fashion that was very like Frobenius' earlier endeavours. As far as it can be estimated at this stage, the expedition was strategically planned and executed to achieve a certain outcome. It was done within a very clear time frame (May – December 1938) and was intended to be a very intense period of collecting and recording. In this sense, it was conducted in the spirit of salvage anthropology.

The expedition included two anthropologists (Helmut Petri, Andreas Lommel; Figures 2 and 4) and two illustrators/painters (Gerta Kleist and Agnes S. Schulz; (Figure 3). As well as two other participants, Douglas Fox and Patrick Pentony (MA UWA, 1938), who appear to have had supporting roles, with Fox being responsible for logistical aspects and also for copying a number of rock images. Because it was assumed that Love had already covered the ethnography of the Woddordda (Wororra) whilst at Kunmunya Mission (Love, 1936), it was decided that the expedition should concentrate on the Ngarinyin and Wunambal (Unambal) "tribes". Lommel was to work on the latter and Petri was to work on the former. Petri subsequently mostly worked from the Government Station at Munja with the Ngarinyin, while Lommel concentrated his work further north, in an area that he named Wurewuri. Subsequently, a part of the group (Petri, Fox) travelled over land to the Catholic Mission of Pago (later Kalumburu) and continued their recording work during this time with members of these groups as well as local Kwini Aboriginal people. This research method was clearly based on a strategic division of labour between the participants to maximise the time and resources that were available.



Figure 2 Helmut Petri near Munja in 1938 (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt; reproduced with permission)

### **The recording and interpretation of Aboriginal art and rock art**

As in Frobenius' earlier expeditions to Africa, the recording of rock art formed a centrepiece of this Kimberley expedition. In this respect, the *Frobenius-Expedition XXII* was unique in the early period of research into the Kimberley. The main task of the German team's two artists/painters was to make large format copies of the rock art in the field on paper or canvas. Virtually all artists involved were women. In the case of the Kimberley expedition, Agnes Schulz and Gerta Kleist employed recording techniques that had a long tradition in

the context of Frobenius' earlier ethnographic expeditions. It was first used in the Atlas Mountains in 1913 and continued to be a part of the expeditions' methodologies into the 1930s (Streck, 2014, p. 178). Agnes Schulz had already participated in other expeditions of the Frobenius Institute to various parts of Africa and India and she would later return to Australia to work for the Frobenius Institute as the main researcher in the Northern Territory and Arnhem Land (Beinssen-Hesse, 1991; Schulz, 1956, 1971).



Figure 3 Getra Kleist (left) and Agnes S. Schulz in the Munja Camp in 1938 (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt; reproduced with permission)

Petri and Lommel, both published on the Kimberley and its rock art for their entire careers. However, they followed intellectual pathways that both converged and diverged at different times. 'Helmut Petri considered himself a student of Pater Wilhelm Schmidt of the Vienna *Kulturkreis* School. He had only taken up the position at Frobenius' Frankfurt Institute after graduation, meaning he himself was minimally influenced by Frobenius' theories and methods'. Nevertheless, he shared Frobenius' pessimistic view of the position of Indigenous cultures in the modern world. Frobenius even published a book entitled *Das sterbende Afrika* ('Dying Africa') (Frobenius, 1923), which is mirrored in Petri's (1954) main work on the expedition to the Kimberley. Implied in Frobenius' primitivism and romanticism are the idea that Indigenous people had virtually no agency whatsoever and remained passive carriers and executors of cultural and mythological roles and content. Even when Frobenius imagined the earlier stages of humanity and human culture to be the more energetic and creative ones, he nevertheless saw them locked into their supposedly primitive characteristics. For him, non-Western cultures were only of value as long as they remained pure. Petri moved away from this rather pessimistic thinking in his later contributions. However, Lommel (e.g. 1952; 1958a; 1958b) broadly preserved Frobenius' overall orientation in content and style. The latter was severely criticised for his judgements and diffusionist views as well as for his uncritical comparisons between art and rock art from different parts of the world, which is all very reminiscent of Frobenius' unconstrained arguments and associations (Beinssen-Hesse, 1991; see Porr & Doohan 2017 for further information and literature).

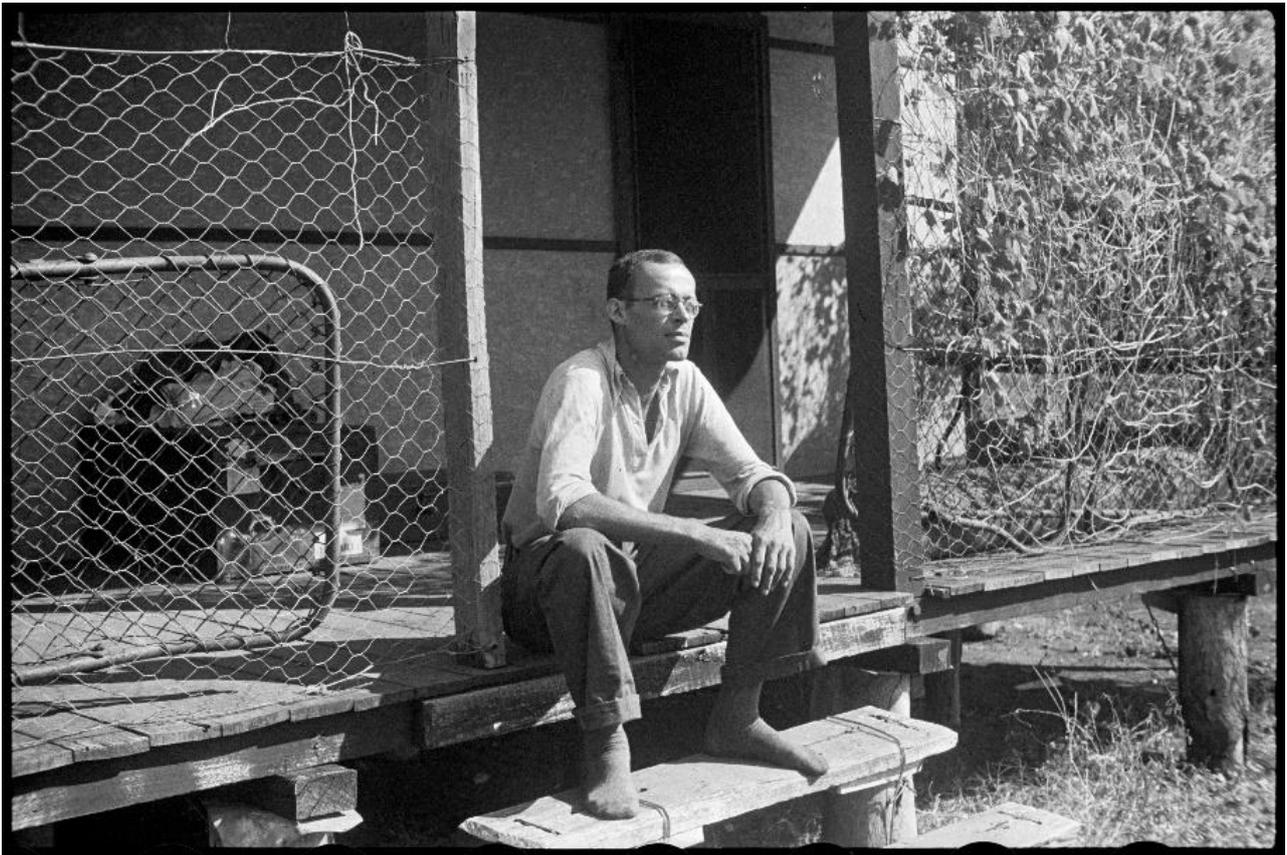


Figure 4 Andreas Lommel in the Munja Camp in 1938 (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt; reproduced with permission)

### **The German perspective today**

During our visits to Germany last year, Leah Umbagai repeatedly stated that one of her main motivations of being interested and involved in the project is the ability to check the information that is available in Germany about the *Wandjina Wunggurr* community and their culture. She said that a lot of the information might be wrong or incomplete, because researchers were not able to engage with Aboriginal people properly and over a longer period of time. She is consequently concerned that the wrong stories are being told about her people and about the objects that are being kept in Germany (see also Porr & Doohan 2017).

These aspects demonstrate the potential that exists in working collaboratively with this collection, to arrive at a better critical understanding of it and to disentangle its layers of meaning and significance. The involvement of active Indigenous participation has already allowed new insights into the possible role of Indigenous agency during the fieldwork situation. Overall, it seems that the relationships between the German researchers and the Aboriginal people were quite amicable. This seems not only reflected in the available photographs. So far, we have not heard a single negative statement from any member of the relevant Aboriginal community about the expedition.

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