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Travels

On the trail of Leo Frobenius, 100 yrs after

Nigeria, Germany tap legacy of an intrepid traveller who found and lost Ori Olokun

His full name is Leo Viktor Frobenius, but he is more popularly known without the middle appellation. Although his name rings a bell among a few local anthropologists, historians and some museum workers; nonetheless, a rather negligible number of Nigerians ever heard of Leo Frobenius, when viewed against the nation's 150million population.

Interestingly, Leo Frobenius, who was born in the German capital, Berlin, on 29 June 1873 to a Prussian military officer; nursed a deep interest in Africa. The 12 expeditions he made to the Mother Continent between 1904 and 1935 are ample proof. The intrepid German explorer also travelled in Nigeria from 1910 to 1912; however, to many of the very few Nigerians that ever heard of Frobenius, the name invokes images of controversy; of someone, whose leitmotif was at best nebulous, if not outright suspect.

It was through Frobenius' curiosity and effort that "Ori Olokun", a classical art piece of unparalleled beauty, was unearthed in 1910 at Ile-Ife. Ori Olokun served as symbol of the Second All-Africa Games, which took place in Nigeria in 1973; it is also on the insignia of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife as well as the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA). Curiously, despite being fazed by the artistic quality of his find; Frobenius would try to put the production and execution of that artefact past the capability of the Yoruba African community, where his excavation brought "Ori Olokun" to the fore.

A report Frobenius wired to "New York Times" on 29 January 1911, which turned out as the lead story of the US paper on 30 January; clues us in. In the story, titled "German discovers Atlantis in Africa; Leo Frobenius says find of Bronze Poseidon fixes Lost Continent's place"; Frobenius, then leader of the German Inner-African exploring expedition; claimed to have "discovered indisputable proofs of the existence of Plato's legendary Continent of Atlantis".

Interestingly, however, after describing "Ori Olokun" as "a (finely traced) work of high artistic merit" with "faultless mould"; Frobenius went on to declare: "It (Ori Olokun) is entirely devoid of Negro characteristics and there is no doubt that it cannot have been made of local casting". It is for this reason Nigeria's sole Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka took a swipe at Frobenius in Stockholm, Sweden; during his Nobel Lecture in 1986. Quoting the German anthropologist's statement of "I was moved to melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate

guardians of so much loveliness", Prof Soyinka described Frobenius' statement "as a direct invitation to a free-for-all race for dispossession, justified on the grounds of the keeper's unworthiness". In fact, this attitude prevails to this day in the dispute over illegally acquired African cultural properties held in many European and American museums.

In any case, controversy dogs Frobenius' legacy because of "Ori Olokun"; for, no one knows what eventually happened to the original of this antique piece. In his paper, titled "One hundred years of looting of Nigerian Art treasures: 1897-1996", Prof Folarin Shyllon recalls: "Although the (colonial) authorities in Lagos had given Frobenius permission to undertake his expedition, those in Ibadan became very concerned, when they found he was removing, not always with the full approval of the people, so many works of ethnological importance; works, in deed, of which the British government had been unaware, since it had never made enquiries".

According to Shyllon, currently a Professor of Law at Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU), Ago-Iwoye; a report by a board of enquiry instituted by the Resident at Ibadan, hinted at irregularity surrounding much of Frobenius' acquisitions at Ife. Consequently, Frobenius and his team were subjected to crude and unmannerly treatment, in spite of the scientific reputation of the German anthropologist; going by the same paper, written when Prof Shyllon was member of University of Ibadan Law Faculty.

"Frobenius was made to surrender some of his exceptional finds, including the bronze head of (Ori) Olokun, for which he paid £6 (six pounds), plus a bottle of scotch and a tumbler. Sadly, the original Olokun head described by Frobenius is now missing and only a copy survives", reminds Prof Shyllon, who thinks the copy was probably made by Frobenius immediately after the sale and which his interpreter told him was to go to the Ori of Ife, who believed that the original had been returned to him". Were this true, then Frobenius was guilty of swindling.

On the other hand, the German travel-writer and scholar has been widely hailed for his influence on Leopold Sedar Senghor, a former president of Senegal and exponent of "Negritude", who; reports indicate, "Claimed that Frobenius had 'given Africa back its dignity and identity'". A co-founder of the Negritude movement, Aime Cesaire; a Francophone poet, author and politician; is also believed to have quoted Frobenius as praising African people as being "civilized to the marrow of their bones".

For whatever it is worth, it would seem that Frobenius was at once hero and villain. Some of his writings, for example, the Ori Olokun piece project this ambivalent tendency or incongruity. Another instance can be found in Frobenius' record of his visit to Ile-Ife, where he states: "The Yorubans (sic) are, perhaps, the cleverest and most talented nation to be found in the whole of West Africa". This ostensibly contradicts his other remark of "this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much loveliness".

Frobenius' love for Nigerian, nay African, culture also popped up in his doc-



•Ife head terracotta

umentation on Tiv life; where the explorer noted: "What an extraordinary mixture it all was. This unrestrained excitement and this industrious labour; this busy occupation, this artistry, these ancient ornaments on the neck, and the head-dress, this cunning craftsmanship of the smiths, this graceful flute-playing and the enchanting song of the maidens. Can these 'savages' really be called 'savages'?"

Leo Frobenius spent his life on the road most of the time. He was an archaeologist, anthropologist, numismatist, explorer, a traveller, writer and to some extent, a master of hype. The story is told of how on returning to Germany, after an expedition to the Sahara, Frobenius; had stopped on the outskirts of Frankfurt to heap dust, sand and mud on his truck in order to elicit awe, when he eventually meets those that had lined the streets of the German financial capital to welcome him back.

Truly, this was a master of hype; but, whether or not such tendency clouds the veracity of his writings in the readers' mind; Frobenius was an uncommon personage. As author, Frobenius' books include "The voice of Africa" published in 1913 and "Pre-Historic rock pictures in Europe and Africa" issued in 1937 of which he is co-author. His debut visit to Africa took place in 1904, when he toured the Kasai District of

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Congo. By 1918, Frobenius had travelled what was then called Western and Central Sudan, which included a large part of West and Central Africa; apart from his voyages in the Maghreb as well as Horn of Africa areas.

Despite not being a career academic, Frobenius in 1920 founded the Institute of Cultural Morphology in Munich. He also taught at University of Frankfurt where he was later appointed Honorary Professor in 1932. In 1935, he was Director of Frankfurt Municipal Ethnographic Museum. Around 1925 Frankfurt acquired Frobenius' holding of roughly 4,700 pre-historic rock paintings from Africa. These paintings are part of Frankfurt University's Institute of Ethnology, which was rechristened Frobenius Institut in 1946 to honour the explorer, who died on 5 August 1938 in the Italian settlement of Biganzolo in Piedmont.

It is said that a rolling stone gathers no moss, that maxim flies in the face of the lore of Frobenius' life. As numismatist, the staggering collection he left behind is ample proof that this rolling stone achieved more than mere gathering of mosses; he acquired lichens, ferns, and virtually every species of the plant phylum.

As a culture scholar and collector, Frobenius usually returned to Germany with a huge haul of artefacts, documents and souvenirs after each sojourn abroad; and, his visit to Nigeria yielded a staggering holding. In this Golden Jubilee year of Nigeria's independence, an exhibition titled "Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team", helps to shed light on what the country was like 50 years before our nation succeeded in shaking Britain off its back. "Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team", which opened on Tuesday, 9 November; is organized by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in conjunction with Frobenius-Institut, Goethe Universitaet in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany.

Although Frobenius-Institut is marking a century of the late German explorer's tour of Nigeria with "Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team"; the show is similarly auspicious for the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, given the coincidence of the 100th-year with Nigeria's 50th independence anniversary.

Aside the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) venue, which is Cyprian Ekwensi Centre for Arts and Culture in Area 10, Abuja; it is worth noting that this exposition opened simultaneously in four other settlements; Ile-Ife, Makurdi, Minna and Yola in Osun, Benue, Niger and Adamawa states respectively. These centres, more or less define the route travelled by Frobenius during his tour of Nigeria from 1910 to 1912.

In his welcome address, the NCMM Director General, Mr. Yusuf Abdallah Usman said his Commission "considers this commemoration significant as it provides us the opportunity to take a look at Nigeria's cultural past, albeit,



•Tiv architecture 100 years ago

through the eyes of a German ethnologist, Leo Frobenius, who was especially inspired by our cultures, defended same to be as genuine as the cultures of other continents at a time when the western world thought we had no history. "Through the pictures", Mr. Usman continued, "we make available to the public an invaluable documentation of life in several Nigerian societies as they existed one hundred years ago. The intention of the exhibition is to make pictorial testimony, coming from a time, when pictures were extremely rare, accessible to the Nigerian public.

The Keynote Address by Tourism, Culture and National Orientation Minister Abubakar Sadiq Mohammed, who could not attend, was read by his representative, Mr. Gambo Dori, who is a Director of National Orientation Agency. In his address, the minister started by saying he needed to clarify that the exhibition is both "multi-dimensional and in a sense timeless". Alhaji Abubakar Mohammed went on to add; "Though the primary data that have been transformed into a pictorial exhibition is a documentation of different realms in Nigeria between 1910 and 1912; we are in deed vicariously examining ourselves and in deed Nigeria in 2010".

Put another way, the minister observed: "We are taking a retrospective look at Nigeria one hundred years ago and contemplating what it should be in the next one hundred years. Therefore, let it be known that what we are doing is in deed the beginning of a programme of cultural actions that would contribute to the envisioning of a prosperous Nigeria for generations yet unborn".

The minister, who applauded the Frobenius Institut and the NCMM for the collaboration, which made the exhibition possible, had earlier observed: "At each of the venues, where this exhibition is running concurrently, people will be afforded the opportunity to reinterrogate their past, select what they consider delectable, and through various instrumentalities, seek to perpetuate them".

Referring to the holding bequeathed to mankind through Frobenius' exploration of Nigeria from 1910 to 1912, which number over 3,000 images including paintings, drawings and other forms of illustrations beside photographs; and, in particular, to the repertoire on display, the minister declared: "All these works give a rich cultural impression of architecture, arts, handicraft, the day-to-day life and royalty in Nigeria".

Mohammed had also pointed out that Nigeria cannot be different, at a time every country in the world "is tapping into the wealth embedded in their cultural heritage to fashion out an image of themselves; which they communicate to the world in their own terms.

"As we consume cultural products of other civilizations, we must as a matter of urgency market what our predecessors achieved. To do this, we must take a retrospective look, to decipher what we consider worth projecting. If this exhibition puts us on that path, the purpose would have been achieved".

Other speakers at the event included Senator Dahiru Gassol and Hon. KGB Oguakwa, Chairman, Senate Committee on Culture and Chairman, House Committee on Culture and Tourism respectively. Although both men were also absent, their speeches were read by different representatives they sent. In his remark, Senator Gassol observed that, whereas countless Western explorers visited Nigeria in the pre-independence era as slave merchants, commodity traders, missionaries and colonial administrators etc; Leo Frobenius had a clear-cut mission to carry out documentation of tangible and intangible heritage of our people, which dove-tailed with his (apparent) aim of demonstrating that "in deed, Africa had cultural heritage for which it should be proud of". While commending the NCMM for organizing the exhibition, Senator Gassol reminded that, "The future can only be better, if the achievements of the past are duly acknowledged and mistakes corrected".

On his part, Hon. Oguakwa advised: "We need to get it into the hearts of all of us, that the appreciation of our cultural heritage is the foundation on which we can build a solid future".

In spite of the absence of political heavyweights penned down for the opening ceremonies of the pictorial exhibition, the event went very well and was a huge success. Aside a notable presence put up by members of the diplomatic community, including Argentina, Germany, China et cetera; and academics from various parts of the country, one was happy to see dozens of students of various secondary schools at the venue. Government Secondary School, Garki; Government Day Secondary School, Karu; Royal College, Masaka and Junior Secondary School were among institutions represented at the exhibition's launch. A stand-up comedian, known as Dr. Ayuba CFR (Comedian of the Federal Republic), also contributed immensely to the occasion through his rib-cracking jokes.

"Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team" is made more powerful and memorable through an accompanying book of the same title. The book, "Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team", is edited by Richard Kuba and Musa Hambola. Kuba (PhD) is an historian and anthropologist working at Goethe University's Frobenius-Institut in Frankfurt, Germany; while Hambolu (PhD) is NCMM's Director of Research, Planning and Publications. The book, an anthology, features eight co-authors; who treat different, though related, topics. The opening chapter, "The legacy of Leo Frobenius in Germany" is written by Karl-Heinz Kohl, a Professor of Anthropology and Director of Frobenius-Institut as well as current President of the German Anthropological Association; while the second chapter, "Germany's colonial involvement in Nigeria" is treated by Olayemi Akinwumi, President, Historical Society of Nigeria, who is also a Fellow of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as well as current Dean, Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University.

Subsequently, Hans Peter Hahn, Musa O. Hambolu, Richard Kuba, Fodayemi Famoroti, Gabriele Weisser and Editha Platte guide the reader through successive chapters titled "Leo Frobenius in West Africa: Some remarks on the history of Anthropology", "Nigeria 1910-1912: The context of Leo Frobenius' exploration", "Travelling Frobenius", "Leo Frobenius contribution to the study of African Art", "Context and Arrangement: Leo Frobenius' lost images from Nigeria" and "Found and lost in Ife: Leo Frobenius and the Olokun bronze head" respectively. Apart from the chapters, the book's editors; Kuba and Hambolu wrote the Acknowledgement, while Mr. Yusuf Abdallah Usman, NCMM Director General took care of the Preface.

The wisdom in producing such a welcome accompaniment to the photographic exhibition was succinctly expressed by Dr. Kuba, through a question; "After the exhibition, what is there to show ... what else"? Evidently, the 80-page book; would be there. "Nigeria 100 years ago: Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team" relied on pictures looking back, but it is a great leap forward; to be candid.



Richard Kuba