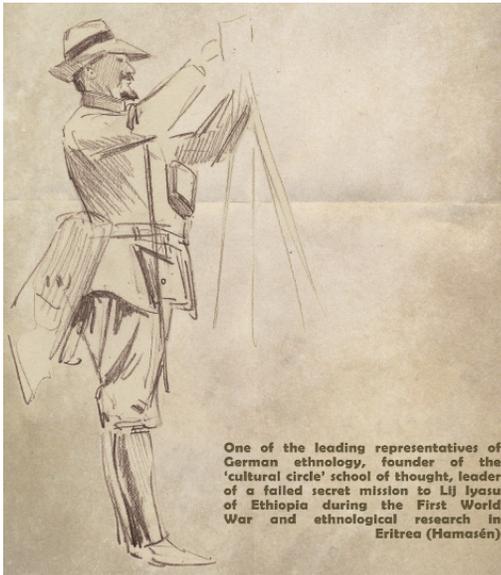


Leo Frobenius: pioneer of German ethnology



One of the leading representatives of German ethnology, founder of the 'cultural circle' school of thought, leader of a failed secret mission to Lij Iyasu of Ethiopia during the First World War and ethnological research in Eritrea (Hamasén)

This exhibition does not primarily place at its centre the pioneer and co-founder of German ethnology, but rather the then fairly unknown and younger researcher going on an expedition to Ethiopia in 1915, who got entangled in political missions on imperial assignment. As originator of fundamental theoretical assumptions of ethnology, Leo Frobenius is a crucial figure in the history of science. In an era which viewed colonial conquests as a European privilege, and which favoured racist models of explanation, Frobenius emphasized Africa's role as historical centre of the evolution of mankind. For Frobenius, the supposed negative view of Africans imposed by politics and justifying European politics, did not carry any importance. In his youth Frobenius had already travelled Sudan with his father, and early on he had based research projects on these

experiences. Frobenius became the largest collector of ethnographic data of his time, especially of rich rock paintings, whose comparison led him to his theory of 'cultural circles'. His notion of an 'Erythraean Culture', reaching from the Red Sea region all the way to Zimbabwe (a notion that has nowadays mostly sunk into oblivion), is part of this theory. However, he also utilised his position as ethnological publisher for political consulting: dossiers from the Foreign Office demonstrate his interest in the establishment of new German colonies, for which he developed detailed plans. The First World War afforded him an opportunity to travel to the region – an episode that has largely been overlooked by the history of science: the imperial government equipped him with numerous staff members, among them the German-Ethiopian Salomon Friedrich Hall, also known as 'Suleyman', and in 1915 officially deployed him for an ethnological research expedition to the Ethiopian highlands. The expedition did indeed reach Asmara, the colonial capital of Eritrea, and began to document different architectural styles, among others. However, the actual assignment was to enter into Ethiopia, to establish contact with the German delegation there and to foster a German alliance with the Ethiopian ruler Lij Iyasu. The aim was for Ethiopia to initiate colonial rebellions in the neighbouring colonies with the support of Germany and Turkey, in order to weaken especially the British forces, and thus enable a German advance into the Suez Canal region. But the activities soon failed: the Italian colonial administration became suspicious and cancelled the expedition. Ethiopia nonetheless did follow Frobenius in his project and subtly entered the warring activities on Germany's side – until, in the following year of 1916, Teferi, ally of the British and later Emperor Haile Selassie I., in a large-scale coup d'état, ousted the young regent Lij Iyasu. Ethiopia remained a subject of reflection and reference of Frobenius during his whole life of researcher and theorist.

Text: Wolbert Smidt



Exhibition at the Goethe-Institut Addis Ababa, April 2015