

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. RICHARD KUBA, CURATOR AT THE FROBENIUS-INSTITUTE IN FRANKFURT (GERMANY) ON THE OCCASSION OF THE EXHIBITION ‘NIGERIA 100 YEARS AGO THROUGH THE EYES OF LEO FROBENIUS AND HIS EXPEDITION TEAM’.

PROTOCOLS

It is a great honour to address this distinguished audience at the occasion of the opening of the exhibition “Nigeria 100 years ago through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his expedition team”

Let me just briefly talk about the personality mentioned in the exhibition title.

Already as a young man, Frobenius had nourished the dream to travel to Africa. He believed that the ancient cultures of Africa would be doomed to decay under the onslaught of modernity. Their documentation was the main motivation for his travels. Especially Nigeria was very tempting for him. Here the culture seemed older and deeper than in the rest of Africa.

Hundred years ago, the view of African cultures that Leo Frobenius developed in his many books and articles was everything but commonplace. He did not consider the thoughts and view of the leading authorities in the historical and cultural sciences. He was an outsider to academia who succeeded only at the end of his life to be awarded a professorship at Frankfurt’s University. Had he not been a maverick since his early youth, who knows if he would ever have dared to speak out in the way that made him a hero of the African intellectual scene in 1930s’ Paris?

Let us listen to what Senegal’s first President, Leopold Sédar Senghor, said about Leo Frobenius in the late 1960s, remembering his student days in Paris:

“While wrestling for our African cultural self-consciousness, it was Leo Frobenius, a German philosopher and ethnologist, who gave back to the African students their truth and their self-respect. This happened at a time when, in Paris, the theories of the ‘primitive Negro’ and the ‘pre-logical mentality of the African’ were alive and being taught.”

From a historical distance, however, this statement may sound a little strange. Is there any need for contemporary Africans to be given their own sense of self-

respect and dignity by a European ethnologist? This dignity is after all rooted in African culture and tradition itself. Yet we must keep in mind the conditions under which Leopold Senghor and his compatriots had to live in Europe in the period between the world wars: a dark age of racism, fascism and colonial arrogance.

At a time when Europe was still caught up in the prejudices of the superiority of the white race and its culture, Frobenius opened the door to a comprehensive historical view on African cultures.

While many of his historical conclusions are certainly outdated, the documentation produced during his 12 travels to Africa remained in the archive at the Institute bearing its name today and almost were forgotten. Most notable among this material are roughly 100.000 images. Recently these images were digitized and included in an online database. Thanks to this, we could identify over 3.000 images produced in Nigeria between 1910 and 1912. A selection of these is included in the exhibition.

In the name of the Frobenius Institute's Director, Professor Dr. Karl-Heinz Kohl, I wish to extend the profound gratitude of the Frobenius Institute to our Nigerian partner, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, who did a fantastic job.