

Symposium 19.-20. Februar 2014 – Leo Frobenius: eine „histoire croisée“ der Entstehung und Aneignung von ethnologischem Wissen in Deutschland und Frankreich

aktuell

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Titel

„Thinking in objects“ – Frobenius as collector, trader and museum planner

The discussion of Leo Frobenius' oeuvre and his influence by has been limited to his theories, travels, networks or his ambivalent character. But given the great significance of the material culture for the theories of "Kulturkreislehre" and "Kulturmorphologie", it is important to draw attention – in the sense of a material turn – to the complex meanings of objects in Frobenius' thinking. First approaches in this direction were undertaken recently in the art historical and ethnographic studies on the copies of rock art and their perception. On the contrary, the extensive collections gathered by Leo Frobenius during his expeditions in Africa and through the acquisition from other collectors represent a hitherto neglected field of enquiry. My paper will therefore concentrate on the complex and sometimes contradictory role of Leo Frobenius as a collector, merchant and museum planner and trace the multiple ascription of meanings to ethnographic objects in the cultural, scientific and museological context from the beginning of the 20th century til today.

At the Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, the over 5.000 objects acquired from Frobenius represent the most prominent collection in the Africa department. Besides similarly extensive collections to be found in Berlin and Hamburg, almost every ethnographic museum in the German language area possesses its own inventory of objects from this explorer. As for Leipzig, the majority of objects stems from the two expeditions to the Western Sudan (1907-1909) and to Nigeria/Cameroon (1910-12), financed by Karl Weule, the former director of the Grassi Museum and private donors. But Frobenius also acted as an intermediary trader. He purchased objects from private collectors to sell them to museums with some benefit.

In my paper I will focus on economical and political implications of the collection of objects in the context of colonialism and the global economy. The commodification of objects represented a possibility for explorers such as Frobenius to finance their expeditions. By presenting some examples of the Frobenius collection in Leipzig, I will critically assess the means by which Frobenius acquired the objects during his travels. Which were the strategies of commodification and authentication employed by Frobenius and other collectors to declare objects as particularly old, traditional, original, rare, endangered etc. vis-à-vis the museums. In this context, a special interest will be the agency of Africans who for example produced objects deliberately for the foreign market. Furthermore, how did such local cultural brokers contribute to the acquisition and generation of knowledge about the collected objects?