

MAGYAR AFRIKA TÁRSASÁG  
AFRICAN-HUNGARIAN UNION



AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA-TUDÁS TÁR  
AHU HUNGARIAN AFRICA-KNOWLEDGE DATABASE

-----  
BODROGI, Tibor

Leo Frobenius (1873–1938)

(angol fordítás / English translation: Gábor BÚR)

***Eredeti közlés/Original publication:***

Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) (Utószó/Postscript), in: Frobenius, Leo: *Afrikai kultúrák* (African Cultures), válogatott írások (Selected Writings), szerk., vál., jegyz. és utószó (ed., selected, notes and postscript): Bodrogi, Tibor, 1981, Budapest, Gondolat, pp 401 old. (Postscript: pp 5–16. old.)

***Elektronikus újraközlés/Electronic republication:***

AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA-TUDÁS TÁR – 000.000.689

Dátum/Date: 2013. október 6./October 6

***Az elektronikus újraközlést előkészítette***

***/The electronic republication prepared by:***

B. WALLNER, Erika és/and BIERNACZKY, Szilárd

***Hivatkozás erre a dokumentumra/Cite this document***

Bodrogi, Tibor: Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), *AHU MATT*, 2013, **pp. 1–16. old.**, No. 000.000.689, <http://afrikatudastar.hu>

***Eredeti forrás megtalálható/The original source is available:***

Országos nagy könyvtárak / Nationale großen öffentlichen Bibliotheken in Ungarn / Hungarian national public libraries

***Kulcsszavak/Key words***

Magyar Afrika-kutatás, Leo Frobenius élete és munkássága, kultúrakör-elmélet, kulturális formatan (kulturmorfológia), sorstudomány, paideuma-tan, Frobenius 12 afrikai expedíciója, Afrika története és az afrikai sziklarajzok, Frobenius szerepe a négritűde szellemiségének kialakulásában (Senghor) és az afrikai népek emancipációjában,

Hungarian African research, life and works by Leo Frobenius, cultural circle, morphology of culture, science of fate, paideuma-doctrine, 12 expeditions of Frobenius in Africa, history of Africa and the rock drawings in Africa, role of Frobenius in the development of the spirit of negritude (Senghor), and the emancipation of African peoples

---

AZ ELSŐ MAGYAR, SZABAD FELHASZNÁLÁSÚ, ELEKTRONIKUS, ÁGAZATI SZAKMAI KÖNYV-, TANULMÁNY-, CIKK- DOKUMENTUM- és ADAT-TÁR/THE FIRST HUNGARIAN FREE ELECTRONIC SECTORAL PROFESSIONAL DATABASE FOR BOOKS, STUDIES, COMMUNICATIONS, DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATIONS

\* magyar és idegen – angol, francia, német, orosz, spanyol, olasz és szükség szerint más – nyelveken készült publikációk elektronikus könyvtára/ writings in Hungarian and foreign – English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian and other – languages

\* az adattárban elhelyezett tartalmak szabad megközelítésűek, de olvasásuk vagy le-töltésük regisztrációhoz kötött/the materials in the database are free but access or downloading are subject to registration

\* Az Afrikai Magyar Egyesület non-profit civil szervezet, amely az oktatók, kutatók, diákok és érdeklődők számára hozta létre ezt az elektronikus adattári szolgáltatását, amelynek célja kettős, mindenekelőtt sokoldalú és gazdag anyagú ismeretekkel elősegíteni a magyar afrikánisztikai kutatásokat, illetve ismeret-igényt, másrészt feltárni az afrikai témájú hazai publikációs tevékenységet teljes dimenziójában a kezdetektől máig./The African-Hungarian Union is a non-profit organisation that has created this electronic database for lecturers, researchers, students and for those interested. The purpose of this database is twofold; on the one hand, we want to enrich the research of Hungarian Africa studies with versatile and plentiful information, on the other hand, we are planning to discover Hungarian publications with African themes in its entirety from the beginning until the present day.

**LEO FROBENIUS (1873–1938)**

by Tibor Bodrogi

In 1894 Leo Frobenius, a scientific assistant in the Bremen Museum of Ethnography, a modest young man barely 21 years old, approached Adolf Bastian, then one of the leading figures of German ethnology, founder and director of the Berlin Museum of Ethnography, with the request that he provide him with the possibility to visit the land of the Yoruba, Nigeria, the ancient Ife and Benin steeped in a rich mythology. Bastian refused the requested help because he had not believe in the traditions regarding the significance of Ife – and Benin together with it – for African cultural history. It would be difficult today to determine whether the sum requested by Frobenius – 20,000 marks – would at that time have been acceptable in the light of the Museum's annual budget, or whether it represented a vast amount; it is certainly a fact though – as Frobenius also writes – that the Berlin Museum of Ethnography later paid several hundred thousand marks for the Benin bronzes taken as spoils of war by the British in the course of their punitive expedition to Benin in 1897 and put to auction, although the Museum knew nothing at all about the function of the works or the role they played in the life of the society and its cult.

At that time Leo Frobenius, the descendant of a Prussian military family, was at the beginning of his career. From his early youth he had made a thorough study of the literature on African studies which at that time consisted mainly of writings of bold travellers on journeys of discovery, and he methodically prepared to join the ranks of African researchers himself when the time came. Although he did not sit for a matriculation examination and his university career also remained unsuccessful (his work on secret Societies in Africa, published in 1894, was rejected by the professors of the university whose names have since been forgotten), a whole series of his writings were accepted by the leading ethnological journals of the turn of the century. These studies which Frobenius, looking back on the early years of his career describes as "monographic and analytical, narrow and limited" were followed between 1897 and 1898 by

longer studies and books that opened up a new direction in German scientific work. During his work in Bremen he read with interest a study by Heinrich Schurtz, an assistant of the museum, dealing with the spread of "eye adornment" in which his colleague examined the spread of this motif and reached the conclusion that the decorative element known from the tribes of North-West America, showed related features to certain artistic styles of Indonesia and Melanesia (*Das Augenornament und verwandte Problemem*, 1895). Moving on to the Leipzig Museum, he came to know Friedrich Ratzel's writing on the African bow and the extensive archives covering African and Oceanian material, and he came into close contact with the anthropo-geographer who was a leading figure in German scholastic circles. Although he did not agree in particular with Ratzel's effort to link the problem of culture to the race question, unlike Bastian he basically accepted Ratzel's explanation of cultural coincidences and developed it further in his own, theory of cultures.

German ethnology began to develop in the years preceding and following the turn of the century. The major problem that drew the attention of researchers in the second half of the 19th century was the explanation of cultural coincidences. The predominant trend in the Anglo-Saxon countries – it is sufficient to mention the work of the Englishman, E. B. Taylor and the American, L. H. Morgan – was evolutionism which, although it did not deny the possibility of diffusion, represented the view that cultural and social coincidences between peoples living – in different parts of the world, many thousands of miles apart, can be traced back to man's identical psychic nature, to the process of development governed by the same laws. The concept was more complex in continental Europe, especially in Germany. A. Bastian, who came to the then emerging discipline of ethnology from the field of biological research, postulating the psychic unity of mankind (a thought that had already been put forward in the second half of the 18th century by Scottish world historians and philosophers, and in Germany by Johann Gottfried Herder), considered that the coincidences should be traced back to the idea of the satisfaction of needs in the same way under identical circumstances. In contrast, the geographer Friedrich Ratzel was a proponent of the notion of diffusion, considering that the coincidences could be traced back to migrations and contacts between peoples and to the transfer of ideas.

Bastian's influence was insignificant even in Germany itself, due in no small part to his heavy style and the confused nature of his theories (in his history of ethnology R. H. Lowie calls him "Herr Konfusionsrat"),

while Ratzel had a decisive influence on the young Frobenius. As Frobenius wrote, looking back on his youth, in 1898 he "completely threw off Bastian" and his thoughts were shaped by "the work in the museum, the proximity of Ratzel and the expansion of his archive". These thoughts assumed a definite form in 1897 and 1898; he first wrote about the West African culture, then published a book on the origin of African cultures. In these two writings Frobenius first used the expression "kulturkreis" (culture complex) and attempted to apply his theses and daring ideas to the African material (he tried to show that Indonesian cultural influences affected East Africa and reached as far as West Africa where their traces can still be detected), but he was also criticized for his attacks against the professional circles. However, the notion of the "culture complex" did not disappear without trace. Six years later in a session of the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory, two ethnologists, Fritz Grabner and Bernard Ankermann, read their papers on culture complexes and culture strata of Oceania and Africa, themes which Frobenius had since studied in depth. Although both papers were based on Frobenius theory and methodology, and served as a starting point for the culture complex theory that was the prevailing trend in German ethnology for more than half a century, Frobenius' concept of culture had already changed by then. In his speech he rejected his earlier mechanical-static views (the Greater the number of coinciding forms the greater the probability of a link) and attempts to establish relationships merely on the basis of the identity of forms and the coincidence of features of "cultural elements": since culture is a living organism, only whole cultures may be compared and even then only by using the method of development history.

This speech was delivered a few days before Frobenius set out on his African expedition to the Congo. Although he had entertained the idea of making research trips some time previously, it was when he was collecting material for his study entitled *West African Culture Complex* that he became aware that Africa was a region that had hardly been studied at all by ethnographers and such research was all the more important since European colonization was gradually transforming or even destroying the old culture. And in fact, although the boundaries of the colonies were becoming increasingly clear since the Conference of Berlin (1885), European rule still barely extended to the interior; the actual conquest and possession proceeded only slowly due, not least of all, to the stubborn resistance of the Africans. (To take only a few examples it took the French

ten years to conquer the West Sudan (1883–1893), while in Senegal they waged constant battles all the way to Timbuktu, and the British did not conquer Benin in South Nigeria until 1897.) Conquest was one of the important prior conditions for intensive ethnological work as information gathered in the course of armed expeditions penetrating into the interior of the continent or in the course of journeys was only an uncertain source. Africa was thus a particularly "dark" continent from the ethnological point of view and this veil of ignorance was only just being lifted.

Frobenius organized the expedition as a private undertaking and named it D.I.A.F.E. (German Inner African Exploration Expedition). The project was financed by state bodies, private funds and private persons and museums (especially Hamburg, Berlin and Leipzig), while the fees Frobenius received for his writings also contributed to the expedition's capital. The first journey of the D.I.A.F.E. in 1904–1906 led to the Congo–Kasai basin, with the same goal that was also followed later in forming a picture of the cultures concerned as a whole, particularly of the material culture and the myths. In selecting the region for the expeditions, Frobenius was largely guided by his concept of the African culture complexes and cultures.

The first trip resulted in the confirmation of his thesis of the "West African culture complex" and the expansion of the territorial scope of this complex, while the second and, fourth journeys to the West and Central Sudan (1907–1909; 1910–1912) attempted to prove the existence of the so-called "Sirte culture", that is, the route and nature of the cultural flow originating from the North African coastal region that it reflected not only in various objects and customs, but also and particularly in the Sudanese heroic epics. (On the fourth journey in the Nigerian region, especially in Ife and in general in Yorubaland, Frobenius dealt with a culture that he called "Atlantic" and that can be traced back to a postulated pre-Hellenic Mediterranean culture.) Between these two expeditions he conducted research in Morocco and Algeria in 1910 where he examined mainly the architecture and collected folklore and then, as the continuation of the Fourth, Central Sudanese expedition, he recorded phenomena in the folklore life of the Kordofan of the time.

The latter, fifth expedition, largely marked the end of a stage in Frobenius' work directed primarily at obtaining a knowledge of the living culture. The rich collection of myths and tales collected in the course of the previous journeys and the results of the excavations (among others, the discovery of the old Ife art), directed Frobenius' attention more and

more towards historical and prehistorical questions and in particular towards the problem of the rock drawings. He first began research on these rock drawings in the course of his sixth expedition in the Saharan. Atlas. The First World War interrupted the series of journeys, although in 1915 he visited the area of the Red Sea and Eritrea conducting research on instruction from the German high command and he even visited Romania where he collected material among African prisoners of war. The economic difficulties during the war and in the post-war years obliged Frobenius to work on the classification and study of the material already collected. Among other things, in 1921 he began publication of the 12-volume "Atlantis" series of tales and myths, he began work on his ethnographic maps of Africa, the "Atlas Africanus", and wrote *Paideuma*, his study presenting his concept of the essence of culture, to mention only the most important undertakings of his work at the time.

By that time the notes made in the course of his expeditions, and to a lesser extent, his annotated material from literature of the whole world (especially in the area of mythology), had so increased in bulk that it became necessary to provide some form of institutional housing. Finally, the "Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie" was created in 1922 in Munich with the aid of Oswald Spengler. It was transferred to Frankfurt am Main in 1925 where it functioned within the framework of the Wolfgang Goethe Universität under the direction of Frobenius, on whom the university bestowed the title of honorary professor in 1932. Later he was also appointed to the head of the city's Museum of Ethnography and from 1925 on he was able to continue his research in an official capacity, with the backing of the city and the university. His eighth expedition, intended mainly to locate and record African rock art, led to the Nubian Desert and this was followed in 1928–1930 by the South African journey in which Frobenius studied the traces of what he called "Eritrean" culture, as well as the South African rock art. In connection with this, in order to prove the Indian and Southern Asian origin of the Eritrean culture, he set out on his journey to Southern India and Ceylon in 1930. After the South African and Indian interlude, he led three more expeditions in search of rock drawings in South Africa, all three of which enriched human knowledge with important discoveries and a rich collection of archaeological finds and rock drawings. The tenth D.I.A.F.E. was conducted in Tripolitania in 1932, followed by expeditions to Libya in 1933 and in 1934–1935, mainly to sites in the Fezzan.

These twelve African expeditions were of epoch-making significance for African ethnological and historical research and are unique in the history of African studies, both for their quality and the wealth of data. It can be said without exaggeration that Frobenius did more than anyone else in making African culture known in all its aspects. He threw light on previously unknown facts of African life, culture and history – facts that represented a real sensation for European scholarly circles of the time and also had a deep influence on public thinking. In the light of these discoveries and the systematized literary material on Africa that attempted to cover the whole field, Frobenius was able to develop his theories on the history of African culture, on African cultural complexes and cultural strata. While the material collected at first hand, even if expanded and corrected in the light of more recent field work and excavations, still represents a highly important source, the theories based on this material regarding the external origin of African cultures and the centres from which their influence spread, now need to be revised to take into account the findings of research conducted up to the present. However, Frobenius initiative has certainly not lost its validity and is a fruitful source of inspiration for the researcher dealing with cultural history. Thus, although it is not precisely correct to conclude that the West African and particularly the Nigerian cultures were created by peoples around the Mediterranean or who migrated there from the legendary Atlantis or by their cultural influence and that in the living form in which Frobenius knew them they were "negrified vestiges", there can be no doubt that prehistoric and ancient Black Africa and the Mediterranean were in contact through the Sahara and that a number of West African ideas and forms can be traced back to distant sources. It is Frobenius merit that he recognised the influence of the White African cultures in the state formations of the Sudan and that more recent researchers – such as the American G.P. Murdock in his highly important Africa – have also postulated the spread of the Indonesian culture to West Africa, drawing on a wider body of material for proof than Frobenius had at his disposal and re-evaluating the earlier data. However, Frobenius was not just a compulsive researcher who spent great part of his life merely collecting empirical data, raptly listening to the epic songs of the Sudanese bards and diligently searching for the rock drawings that could be vaguely made out on rocks in the desert. Right from the outset he was guided by theory, even if he was attracted, through what he had read, by the natural romanticism of discovering new peoples and new cultures. His research followed a preconceived line,



whether it was directed at proving the existence of the culture complexes and at demonstrating the European links of the prehistoric African cultures. Many of his admirers and critics judge his life work solely on the basis of the empirical work of the twelve African expeditions (in itself an unrivalled achievement!). However, László Vajda, in his lecture evaluating Frobenius' place in science considers this to be a mistake: for Frobenius was both theoretical and empirical'.

We have already briefly mentioned Frobenius' work, referring to his work in revealing and applying facts. We have already noted that in 1898 he modified his views on the origin of African cultures and in 1904 those on the culture complexes, which thus become separate from the later "culture complex theory". It was precisely his expeditions and aspects of what he learnt about African life that helped to crystallise and transform his views on culture: this was the way he experienced cultures as "organic bodies".

This "experience", characterized by W. Mühlmann as enthusiastic in its scientific type, led to a fundamentally idealistic cultural ideology in Frobenius' intuitive approach. This doctrine was based on the view that can be most aptly expressed in Frobenius' own words:

"...in contrast with its human vehicles, culture must be conceived as an *autonomous organism*, and all forms of culture must be regarded as unique human beings who are born and pass through childhood, adulthood and old age. The forms of culture have a unique process of growth that corresponds to the course of development of the human individual."

The essential thing is that

"it is not the will of man that creates cultures. Culture lives on *maxi*. Today I would rather say it lives through man. The forms of culture are bound to definite areas, the *Kulturkreise*,"

and these forms of culture must be studied as a natural science, according to their morphology, anatomy and psychology. Thus, in addition to organic and inorganic nature, culture appears as a "third domain", a domain which life a "living being in its large organicism" is independent of man. Frobenius saw this distinction between the culture and the society or man, and the dominance of culture over man in such a sharp form in

connection with his African and South-East European investigations. As he wrote,

"...in Africa made the acquaintance of obscure races with powerful cultural forms, while in Europe one might encounter advanced human beings with a vestigial culture, or vice versa.")

All this means that each culture has a "spiritual essence", a *paideuma*, that corresponds to the essence of the culture, something that the researcher must "experience" and "feel". It also follows from the organic nature of culture that we are dealing with living "formations", the individual parts are linked together to form an integral whole, and it is the task of ethnology, that is, the science of culture, to study the special way in which the separate details combine into ways of life.

The *paideuma* theory, as a concept of cultural morphology, draws on a number of sources. Apart from his "personal experiencing", which is a natural psychological reaction for all researchers encountering manifestations that are foreign to their basic culture, "exotic" and therefore "stirring", Frobenius was influenced intellectually by Goethe, one of the few belletrists whom he read, and whose world view he described as intuitive. He was also influenced by Oswald Spengler, with whom he was in friendly contact for a long period even if he only mentions Spengler's views to support his own concept, agreeing with him that cultures are "organisms" and "living creatures of the highest order", and that cultures can and must be treated only in an intuitive way. To give an indication of his relationship with Spengler, it is sufficient to quote a sentence from Frobenius:

"I must express my sincere personal gratitude to him for his advice on many points in my writing /*Paideuma*/".

However, this concept which regards man not as the subject but the object of culture, also means that culture lives and survives through people and therefore for Frobenius the migration of people and of cultures are one and the same thing.

On the basis of this *paideuma* theory and the spiritual nature of cultures assuming objective form in objects, institutions and art, Frobenius distinguishes two fundamental types of African culture, the Ethiopian and the Hamitic. The Ethiopian spread in the central regions of Africa and its mode of subsistence is based on gathering and cultivation. Accordingly,

it "thinks in terms of plants" and is therefore "mystic". In contrast, the hunters and large-scale animal herders of the Hamitic culture (in the Northern and Southern areas of Africa) think in terms of "animals" and in the harsh struggle for life their spirituality is strictly bound to material and is rationalist. According to Frobenius, this duality is typical not only of Africa and is valid not only in the ethnographic present. As he argues in a later, justifiably debated writing in 1932 typical of the way of thinking of the whole volume and entitled *Schicksalskunde* /Science of Fate/, mankind has been divided into two choirs" since prehistoric times. In Eurafica, the realistic English and the rational French together with the Hamites and the mystic Germans with the Ethiopians belong to these two choruses"; the former are characterised by a "sense of fact" and the latter by a "sense of the reality" reflecting the differing spirituality and attitude to life of West and East.

However, the "Ethiopian", oriental mysticism of his theory, the excesses of the *paideuma* theory and his false conclusions drawn from fundamentally correct observations do not obscure the merit of Frobenius the ethnologist in adopting an unequivocal position in favour of the historicity of ethnology and contributing to the development of the methods that – together with archaeology – led to our knowledge of the history of ages and societies that did not have written records. It was not that his *Rag* age was anti-historical or ahistorical. Nevertheless, even when it spoke of world history, the horizon barely extended beyond Europe and at most the outlines of the Middle East and Egypt could be vaguely discerned. And whatever was beyond that, the underdeveloped peoples of Africa, Oceania and America, at the most served analogies for bold evolutionist theories.

When, in 1933, Frobenius looked back on the first years of his career, he wrote: "We must not forget that only a generation ago Africa was still a bleak area in the Imagination of Europeans of average education, the continent of fever visited only by adventurers and missionaries. The natives were regarded as half-animal barbarians, slave races, peoples whose brutal depravity (*Verkommenheit*) was the result of fetishism and nothing more."

It is the merit of Frobenius above all and a few other researchers that, as László Vajda so aptly put it –

"...they caused a radical change in the Europeans' picture of the world that can only be likened to that of Copernicus, when they helped to achieve general

recognition of the fact that the peoples of Africa and other foreign continents have – in simple terms – a history of their own".

However, this recognition and the wealth of cultural history material that it revealed not only changed the European way of thinking but also – although more slowly, later and, through the current of negritude, in a different way had an influence in Africa itself.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Senegalese poet and statesman, has written about what an influence the French translation of Frobenius' work on African cultural history had on him and the handful of African students studying in Paris who launched the negritude movement in the thirties. Their consciousness and self-esteem were raised not only by Frobenius' categorical statement that: "The idea of the barbarous Negro is a European invention," but alien more by the fact that they came to know Africa's rich past and with it the "black values".

"I have been saying for decades – *he (Senghor) wrote in the foreword to a Frobenius anthology in English* – the independence of the mind is an indispensable condition for all other independence. And it was Frobenius who helped us to achieve it. Therefore he is still our master... He gave us back our dignity."

Válogatásunkban nem törekedhattünk arra, hogy a hatalmas életműnek akárcsak legfontosabb állomásait bemutassuk. Így Frobeniusnak azokból a munkáiból adunk szemelvényeket, amelyek tevékenységének legfontosabb vonulatait, írásműveinek típusait jelzik, egyúttal pedig az életmű maradandó értékeit is tartalmazzák, mint az útleírás (*Úton Atlantisz felé*), anyagfeltáró terepmunka („*És Afrika szólt...*”, „*Eritrea*”), folklór (*Hőseinek a Szahelből*), művészet–sziklaképkutatás (*Afrika művészete, Hádsra Máktuba, Ekade Ektab*), portrék (*Korongo, a bárd, Karua Goberaua, a hetéra*). Kultúrkör-elméletét és afrikai kultúrköröit vázlatosan az *Afrika művészete* című tanulmányból ismeri meg az olvasó.







