

Learning from each other

The Frobenius Institute and the Oswin Köhler Archive have been cooperating closely with African partners for years

By Jonas Krumbein

From the collection of the Africanist Oswin Köhler: a powder box made from a turtle shell.





Goethe University Frankfurt's collections with reference to Africa are of great interest to the communities of origin as they contain important information about their history. In addition, scholars at Goethe University Frankfurt receive new input for their research from collaboration with community members.

Bows and arrows, animal skins and musical bows, woven or carved vessels: Frankfurt ethnologist Gertrud Boden has spread out hundreds of objects in front of her two visitors. Thaddeus Chedau and Sonner Ciayi Geria are delegates of the Khwe people in Namibia, who are one of the San – or Bushmen – groups in southern Africa. In October 2019, the two representatives came to Frankfurt to look at objects that are part of their cultural heritage. The Africanist Oswin Köhler had collected them on numerous research trips between 1959 and 1992. After Köhler's death in 1996, his wife donated the objects to Goethe University Frankfurt, together with dried plant samples, photographs, films, audio files, vernacular texts and dossiers such as research reports or letters. The collection has since formed the core part of the Oswin Köhler Archive at the Institute of African Studies. Since 2015, Gertrud Boden has been busy rendering the collection accessible to researchers as well as to the Khwe themselves, whose culture is under threat and whose traditions are largely forgotten among young Khwe. The German Research Foundation is funding the work.

Marginalisation of the Khwe

The settlement area of the Khwe in what is known as the Caprivi Strip, a narrow stretch of land in the far northeast of Namibia, was proclaimed a national park in 2007. In order to protect elephants from poachers, strict legislation has been introduced, which also restricts the Khwe and allows them to stay in the bush only within a five-kilometre radius of their settlement. As a result, cultural practices such as hunting or gathering medicinal herbs, as documented by Oswin Köhler in his films, photographs and other materials, can no longer be

carried out. As Gertrud Boden recalls, the two Khwe delegates, Chedau and Geria, were deeply moved to see the – to her rather inconspicuous – samples of dried plants, which they had not seen for years.

It's up to the Khwe people to decide

The ethnologist also wanted to make the collection accessible to the public in the form of an exhibition after years of being stored in boxes. Decisions about what to exhibit were made by the Khwe. And they had very clear ideas: in the exhibition at the Institute of African Studies in the *Neue Mensa*, a cafeteria and institute building on Bockenheimer Campus, only plant specimens whose benefits are already generally known were to be displayed. The Khwe were worried that the knowledge about medicinal herbs which they had passed on for generations might be stolen and patented by pharmaceutical companies. For similar reasons, recordings of traditional Khwe music from the Oswin Köhler Archive are only accessible after approval by representatives of the Khwe community. Under no circumstances should they be copied or used without paying a royalty, for example to produce pop songs or films. Anyone wishing to use the recordings digitised with funding from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme at the renowned SOAS University of London must first apply by mail to Namibia for approval.

Even though the objects in the Oswin Köhler Archive are not looted artefacts from the colonial era in the classical sense, the Khwe should have the right to decide on the conditions of use and on where the documents of their cultural heritage are kept. Goethe University Frankfurt has committed itself to this approach for all its collections from Africa.

This elephant sculpture is made of beeswax.



This drinking vessel, known as a calabash, was used by hunters to quench their thirst during hunting.



From left: Sonner Geria, Thaddeus Chedau, Judith Blume (collection coordinator at Goethe University Frankfurt) and Gertrud Boden look at Khwe objects in the Oswin Köhler Archive in September 2019.

Rock Art Archive nominated in UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

The Frobenius Institute, named after its founder Leo Frobenius and affiliated to Goethe University Frankfurt, is also following this approach. Born in 1873, Frobenius, an ethnologist, had initially financed his expeditions by collecting objects in Africa and selling them to museums. After receiving financial support from William II, the German Emperor, Frobenius was no longer dependent on collecting – and was able to devote himself to his main interest: the study of prehistoric rock art of past cultures in Europe and on the continents of the southern hemisphere, especially in Africa.

Leo Frobenius had recognised the cultural and historical value of rock art in the Sahara and southern Africa early on. But at the beginning of the 20th century, it was not yet possible to use cameras to document them for scientific records. These could only take black-and-white pictures – the rock art, however, was generally coloured – and the darkness in the caves led to poorly exposed photographs lacking in detail. Instead, Frobenius took visual artists with him on his expeditions, who produced drawings, watercolours and oil paintings of rock art. These copies are now stored in the Rock Art Archive in the basement of the Frobenius Institute in the Poelzig Building on Westend Campus. “What the artists commissioned by Frobenius depicted at the time is now an indispensable cultural memory that is used, for example, to reconstruct destroyed or damaged original rock art in South Africa,” explains Dr Richard Kuba, who is responsible for the Frobenius Institute’s archives. It is clear why the rock art collection was nominated by the German UNESCO Committee for inclusion in the Memory of the World Programme in November 2021. A decision on this recognition is expected to be taken in 2026.

The author

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Digitally accessible to all

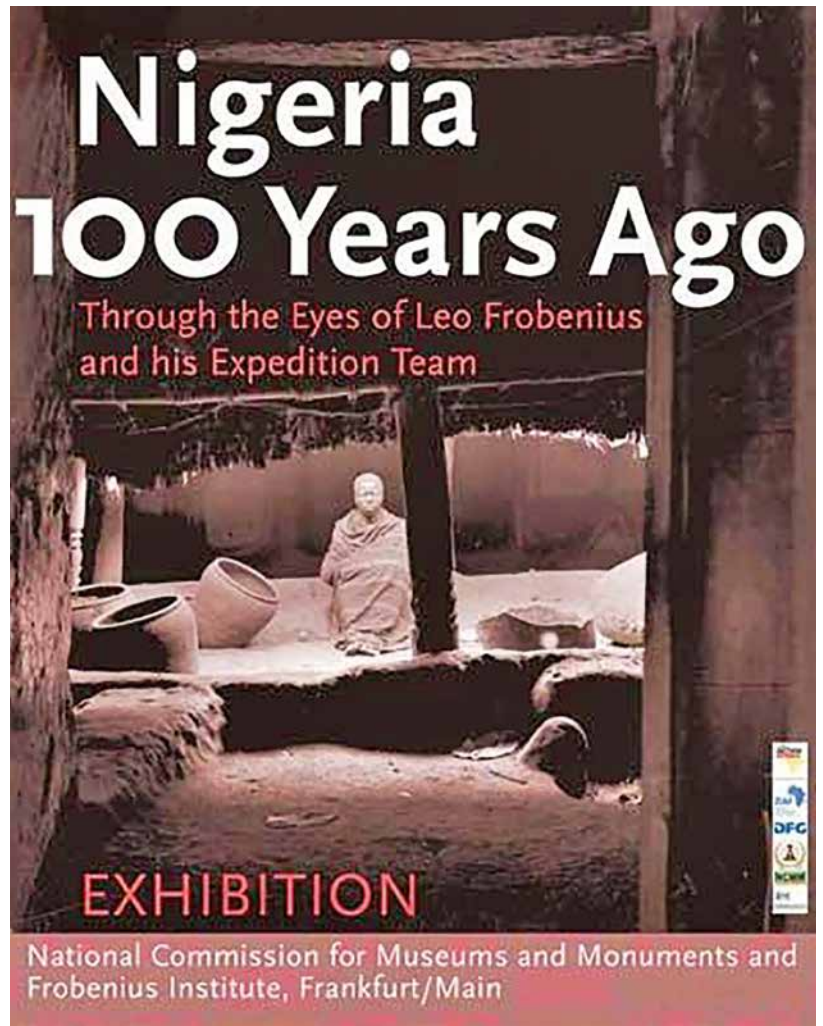
To make it easier for today’s custodians of rock art sites in Africa to access information on world heritage sites in the making, Kuba and his team – first and foremost Peter Steigerwald, head of the Frobenius photo archive – have digitised the painted copies in an elaborate process and made them available worldwide via the internet. There is currently no transfer of the rights of use to the artwork to their community of origin in Africa. “In Africa, which is now predominantly Christian and Islamic, there are hardly any local communities that associate themselves with the tradition of prehistoric artists and who ritually take care of such sites or claim rights to the images,” explains Kuba, who is also conducting research on rock art by indigenous people in Australia. “In northwest Australia, rock art is still a central element of culture and tradition, and we hand over images and rights of use,” he reports. However, in Africa, just as in Europe, the stories and myths surrounding the images, some of which are up to 12,000 years old, have long been buried. Wherever possible, the Frobenius Institute nevertheless strives to cooperate with African partners and in 2017 organised an exhibition with copies of African rock art in Dakar, together with Senegalese artists.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Artefacts from the colonial era looted in the classical sense are rare in Goethe University Frankfurt’s collections related to Africa.
- The Oswin Köhler Archive or the collections of the Frobenius Institute consist mainly of texts, photographs, drawings and paintings showing the cultural life of African societies, which researchers produced or commissioned while on ethnological expeditions.
- They are images from a time when images were sparse because classical colonial photography barely focused on African societies.
- For communities in Africa, the visual and audio documents are testimonies to a past that is partly buried by colonialism and world market integration and are now arousing new interest. The collaboration also enriches research at Goethe University Frankfurt.

Left: "Nigeria 100 Years Ago": the cooperative exhibition was shown in 2010 at the Cyprian Ekwensi Centre for Arts and Culture in Nigeria's capital Abuja.

Right: The front page of the exhibition catalogue.



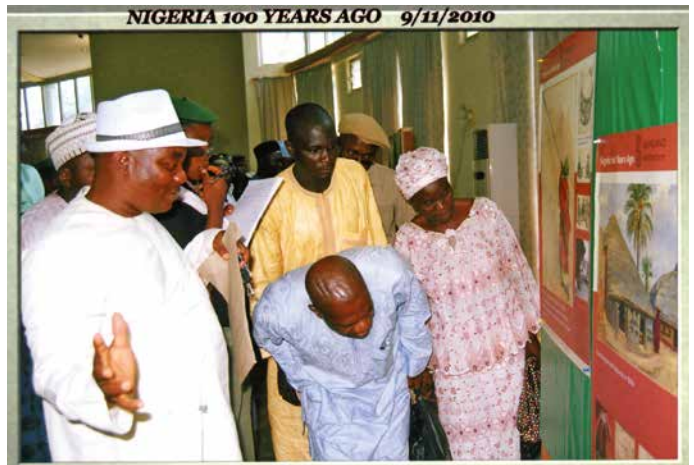
There was great interest in the rock art and photo exhibition "Art rupestre africain. De la contribution africaine à la découverte d'un patrimoine universe", here a picture from the opening in March 2017 at the Musée Théodore Monod d'Art africain de l'IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal.



Opening by the Governor of Niger State of the regional exhibition "Nigeria 100 Years Ago – Nupeland" at the UK Bello Arts Theatre in Minna, Nigeria, November 2010.

Images from a time when images were sparse

The rest of the Frobenius Institute's visual archives are of particular interest to partners in Nigeria or Burkina Faso. In addition to tens of thousands of early photographs, these include numerous drawings of traditional architecture, material culture and everyday scenes as watercolours or oil paintings, as well as portraits of special personalities, who were rarely the focus of colonial photography geared towards Europeans. Seen from the perspective of the communities of origin, they are "images from a time when images were sparse," as Kuba puts it. "The interest in the communities of origin stems not least from the fact that after the upheavals of the colonial and postcolonial eras, the precolonial past is becoming more interesting again," he explains. Kuba has therefore been involved in handing over images from the Ethnographic Pictorial Archive to the communities of origin. "As an institute, however, we are not interested in transferring these objects in order to cleanse



colonial guilt," he emphasises. "Rather, as an ethnological institute, we want to build and maintain relationships with the countries of origin. Their perspectives on the visual collections also enrich our research."

An example of this is the visiting scholar programme for researchers from Africa. This programme has resulted in successful exhibitions by the Frobenius Institute, such as "Nigeria 100 Years Ago", which was shown in several regional museums there. "Because of the great interest, Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and

Monuments even covered half the exhibition costs," says Kuba, delighted at this recognition.

It is the same delight that Gertrud Boden of the Oswin Köhler Archive radiates when she talks about her planned research trip to Namibia to finally implement plans for deeper cooperation with the Khwe. So far, the coronavirus pandemic has thwarted the project. Both Boden and Kuba experience the partnership with communities of origin, as promoted by the Frobenius Institute and the Oswin Köhler Archive for years, above all as enriching. ●

ABOUT GERTRUD BODEN



Dr Gertrud Boden, born in 1959, studied cultural anthropology at the University of Cologne. In 2003, she completed her doctoral thesis on "Prozesse sozialen Wandels vor dem Hintergrund staatlicher Eingriffe. Eine Fallstudie zu den Khwe in West Caprivi/Namibia" ["Processes of social change against the background of state intervention. A case study on the Khwe in West Caprivi/Namibia"]. Since 2015, she has been a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt within various projects funded by the German Research Foundation. With her colleague Anne-Maria Fehn and native speaker Thaddeus Chedau, she has edited the missing volumes of Oswin Köhler's vernacular encyclopaedia "Die Welt der Kxoé-Buschleute/The World of the Khwe Bushmen". Her current project, "Potentials of a Collection", focuses on intensifying joint research on Khwe material in collaboration with members of the Khwe community.

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ABOUT RICHARD KUBA



Dr Richard Kuba, born in 1963, studied ethnology and African history in Munich and Paris and earned his doctoral degree in Bayreuth on the precolonial history of West Africa. Since 2005, Kuba has been responsible for the Ethnographic Pictorial Archive, the Rock Art Archive and the Legacies Archive at the Frobenius Institute and has set up the institute's online pictorial archive. Kuba has curated numerous exhibitions, including ones at the Gropius Bau in Berlin (2016) and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich (2021).

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