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## **Report on results of research project G2009/ 7440**

### **Project title**

### **The bark paintings of the 1938 Petri/Frobenius-Collection Contexts and development of artistic practice in the Northwest Kimberley**

### **Project summary**

Between Mai 1938 and September 1939 the German *Kulturmorphologisches Institut* based in Frankfurt am Main conducted an extensive ethnographic expedition into the Northwest Kimberley (Frobenius-Expedition No. XXII). The aim of this expedition was to conduct ethnographic research in the areas of the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Unambal. This research aimed to provide a first systematic description of the ethnographic materials of the 1938 Frobenius expedition in the *Museum der Weltkulturen* in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, together with supplementary archival information, with an emphasis on paintings on barks and wooden boards that might allow establishing links with the well-known rock-art traditions in the region. Most importantly, the project is also understood to develop first steps to make the extensive ethnographic and archival materials in Germany accessible to local communities and to provide a basis for further collaborative research into the different activities of German researchers in the Western and Northern Kimberley.

Following the specific anthropological vision of Leo Frobenius, the director of the original *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* in Frankfurt am Main, the anthropologists and painters involved adopted a broad and holistic approach towards their fieldwork and attempted to record as many information as possible on material culture, rock paintings, genealogies, mythologies, rituals etc. The principal participants of this project were Helmut Petri, Andreas Lommel and Agnes Schulz. The 1938-1939 expedition can be seen as the earliest and most extensive, specifically ethnographically oriented project in this region. In addition, A. Lommel, K. Lommel and A. Schulz visited the Kimberley a second time in 1954 and 1955, mostly to record rock-art sites. A number of monographs and articles have been published as a result of these expeditions, most prominently the book by Andreas Lommel on the Unambal (1952), the second book he published together with his wife Katharina (Lommel & Lommel 1959), the extensive monograph by Helmut Petri (1954) on the Ngarinyin and finally the two contributions by Schulz (1956; 1971) on rock-art.

Altogether, the results, archival materials and publications have largely been ignored in the research into the region. Furthermore, so far no attempt was made to make these extensive materials and information available to local communities. From the major publications mentioned above, only two are available in English (Lommel 1952; Schulz 1956), but especially the major publication by Petri (1954) has never been translated. Furthermore, no systematic attempt has so far been made to

establish the exact extent and quality of the materials that can be related to these expeditions that are held in Germany, mostly by the *Frobenius-Institut, Universität Frankfurt*, and the *Museum der Weltkulturen*, Frankfurt am Main. Consequently, there has been no consultation process with local communities with respect to sensible and restricted information, objects and photographs. Therefore, while this project was specifically aimed at concentrating on the bark paintings that were collected during the 1938/1939 *Frobenius-Expedition*, an important aspect of the project was also establishing an understanding of the materials held in the German collections and initiating consultation processes with local communities and representatives with respect to appropriate procedures and possible future collaborative research.

On a theoretical level, the research concentrated on the bark paintings from this expedition, because these might be able to provide an unprecedented insight into the earliest transfer of imagery from rock to movable media in the region and therefore allow an understanding of contexts and development of artistic practice in the Northwest Kimberly. Ryan and Akerman (1993, 15) have argued that paintings of Wandjina on bark that were collected in the 1930s represent an early shift away from rock paintings to other media and towards the development of a separate and ultimately commercial art trade. However, the origins of these practices have apparently not been fully examined.

During the course of the research for this project, it was established that altogether 59 objects in the collections of the Museum der Weltkulturen, Germany, and the Western Australian Museum, can be related to the 1938/1939 Frobenius expedition. Although the colleagues in the respective institutions made all accompanying information available, the latter unfortunately are fairly limited with respect to their original contexts, their exact locations of origin and their cultural affiliations. Nevertheless, it could be established that the largest proportion of objects was acquired from around the government station of Munja, Walcott Inlet. File cards show that objects are affiliated with Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Woonambal, but this information has so far not been confirmed independently. The collections contain bark paintings, paintings on transport box boards and other decorated items (such as spear throwers, bark cradles, buckets). The collections also contain a number of restricted objects. Research and consultations into the aspects of cultural affiliation, exact origin locations and cultural significance is ongoing.

Furthermore, it was established that the University of Frankfurt holds a very large archive of photographic materials relating to the Frobenius expedition to the Kimberley as well as a substantial number of drawings of rock-art. This material has recently been digitalized and is partly available (in low resolutions) online. However, also these materials have not been subjected to a consultation process involving local communities. In the course of this project, only photographs involving bark paintings have been systematically identified and included in the documentation.

All available information was entered into a MS Access 2007 database, which also includes formal descriptions of each object, images, scans of the respective original file cards, bibliographic references as well as directly related photographic material. This database provides the basis for the systematic research into the contexts of the Northwest Kimberley bark paintings and their connections to other artistic and/or ritual practices and/or rock art. The database should also serve as a basis for fieldwork into the Northwest Kimberley to directly discuss aspects of expressions, learning and social memory relating to the contexts of artistic practices in the region. Following the

bark paintings to their origin would not only enable a direct comparison between the imagery on the barks with images on rocks, it would also enable Aboriginal people to visit their country and significant sites. Formal consultation processes have been initiated with the Kimberley Land Council and the Ngarinyin Aboriginal Corporation for the continuation of these research projects.

#### References

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