

Stefan Esselborn

Translating Africa to Modernity. The International African Institute, 1925-1975

The history of the International African Institute (IAI), from its foundation in the post-WWI years to the dawn of the postcolonial era in Africa and the “reflective turn” in African Studies in the 1970s, will be the focal as well as the starting point of my project.

At a time when the repercussions of colonial “modernization” in African societies increasingly started to shake the foundations of the European empires, the founding of the IAI was meant to answer the growing need to “understand” this seemingly primordial, strange and incomprehensible continent and its inhabitants. The Institute soon went on to transform itself into one of the most important transnational institutions in the field of African Studies, acting simultaneously as a scientific “clearing house of information”, an independent research institute, and a relay between science and colonial politics in Africa. It continued to occupy a key position after the Second World War, when, adapting to a changing political landscape, it gradually began to “africanize” and ultimately effected a remarkably smooth transformation into a UNESCO-accredited scientific NGO working in post-independence Africa.

Taking into account IAI’s origins, the project argues that the institute can be seen as an institutional vanguard of the attempt to make the contact between Western Modernity and “Africa” more manageable by rendering African languages, cultures and societies translatable and “readable”. “Science” – in its own understanding Modernity’s universal language – was meant to take the role of a “target language” as well as a mediating medium. A closer look at the diverse translation processes shows, however, that far from being only neutral transmissions they have to be understood as active interventions in scientific, political as well as economic discourses. The authority of scholarly language in particular contributed to the construction and consolidation of pivotal dichotomies such as “primordial Africa” as well as the “modern West”, which to this day have lost little of their influence. On the other hand, translation also offered new possibilities on both sides to deal creatively with these discourses. In this context, the ambiguous relationship between African Studies and the new African elites is as interesting as the growing self-reflection of Western “translators”, in which the direct, physical experience of African environments had a part. Both factors were influential in bringing about the vehement critique of Africanism, and cultural studies of “the Other” in general, which started in the 1970s and in which their implicit claim to objectivity was one of the primary targets.

The IAI as a “network of networks” (L’Estoile) can not only offer an insight into the history of Africanist linguistic and cultural scholarship on an international level, but also had a part in shaping it. Its development furthermore highlights the co-evolution – although not necessarily co-operation – of academic research on Africa, expert knowledge and politico-economical power structures. To put the institutional history of the IAI – which has not received adequate scholarly attention so far – firmly in its context, which extends into the history of science as well as the history of knowledge, I plan to explore a selection of the multiform “translation processes” effected through the institute and its network, analyzing them against the backdrop of their respective intellectual, political and economic contexts.