German Colonialism, the Civilizing Mission in Africa and the Formation of African Heritage

In the pre-colonial 19th century several European and German travellers crossed the African continent and their reports formed the minds of German and European colonial pioneers. Content and style of the travellers’ reports changed dramatically on the eve of colonialism that means in the years between circa 1850 and 1880. In the middle of the century Heinrich Barth for example presented Africa to the German readers as a continent of states and kingdoms, even of developed civilization and religious advancement – at least with regard to Islamic influenced regions. Twenty years later German visitors to Africa underlined the primitiveness of African culture and religion. The early colonialists saw Africa merely as a reservoir of exploitation. Only after the great upheavals in South West and East Africa in 1904/1905 and in the context of the so called colonial reforms German colonial policy underlined the task to civilize African societies, to make them acquainted with European values like family sense, industriousness and discipline. After the loss of German colonies in the consequence of the treaty of Versailles German images of Germany’s task and achievements in Africa changed again: Now German reports underlined the role of Germany as a trustee not only of the African peoples but of African culture und advancement – in distinction from the supposed behaviour of the other European powers in Africa. It was only then that an image of an African heritage was shaped. In the consequence renowned German ethnologists from Leo Frobenius to Diedrich Westermann dealt with the material and immaterial African heritage and laid the foundation of modern African studies in Germany. So in fact Germany’s design of African civilization and primitiveness was shaped by the European context: The image of Africa reflected Germany’s contested image of itself as a civilized nation.

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