



Universität  
Basel

## Research Project

### Decolonizing International Health. The Activities of the Swiss Tropical Institute (STI) in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania 1951–2007

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Decolonizing International Health. The Activities of the Swiss Tropical Institute (STI) in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania 1951–2007

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**Department**

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#### Description of the project

The Swiss Tropical Institute (STI) entered the stage of international health in the middle of WWII, at a time when the relationships between the West and the countries of the South underwent significant changes. Under the new ideology of “development aid” whole African societies were to be transformed according to a Western model. The struggle against African “tradition” and “backwardness,” against disease and other forms of human suffering was tackled with the transfer of Western technology and skills, often regardless of local cultural characteristics. In the 1950s, the STI transferred its activities from Basel to East and West Africa. In the Kilombero-Valley in rural Tanzania, the Swiss Tropical Institute Field Laboratory (STIFL) opened its doors in 1957, and the training centers for rural medical aids (medical auxiliaries respectively) only a few years later. The main goal behind the establishment of the Centre Suisse de Recherches Scientifiques (CSRS) in the Ivory Coast at the beginning of the 1950s was to broaden the scientific knowledge in different fields such as medicine, biology, nutrition sciences, and health and urbanization. Rather than emerging in an empty spot, both scientific endeavors were then shaped by local conditions, and entangled in various negotiations with African elites and the local population.

#### Objective

The thesis focuses on Swiss medical activities in Africa and the history of scientific institutions in the context of colonialism, decolonization and the more recent trends of health care privatization. I aim to reveal how Western science was produced in African countries and how the different networks established in Africa (laboratory–training-center–hospital–government–local population) interacted with those at Basel (STI–pharmaceutical industry–university–missionary society). The project will trace the travel of persons, ideas, flies, rats, and scientific devices over time and space. The inclusion of the “African side” in the historical narrative will be a main concern. The contrasts between the two host countries in respect to their colonial histories (French vs. British colonialism), the different paths they took after Independence (capitalism vs. socialism) and the different scientific approaches of the two Swiss institutions (basic vs. applied science / rural vs. urban health) will contribute to our understanding of the failure and success of international health interventions.

#### Methodology

Qualitative research methods and especially oral history are applied to achieve the mentioned goals. When contestation against western biomedicine is assumed, then it will be fruitful to follow not only the ways of how the local population in Tanzania handled diseases like Malaria or Schistosomiasis but also to follow the life-histories of some of the former students of the training centers. Such an approach can deepen our understanding of how these medical auxiliaries used their new gained knowledge and how they situated themselves between Western “biomedicine” and “traditional” healing systems. Furthermore, the thesis tries to contribute to the still young field of “transnational history” and its multi-sited attempts to dissolve the national state as a valuable entity of historical analysis. In so doing, the numerous impacts of the “African adventure” back on Switzerland are at the heart of the analysis.

**Keywords** Geschichte Afrikas, history of international health, history of science and technology, Swiss Tropical Institute, Development Aid, Postcolonialism

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