Translation in Anthropological Encounters and its Contribution to the Coloniality of Knowledge

The so-called ethnographic objects collected from the non-European world during early twentieth-century German anthropological enterprises were significant for the establishment of institutions, museums, and the discipline of anthropology itself. Despite the introduction of fieldwork and the development of participant observation, the anthropological task was primarily determined by the acquisition of all sorts of objects and knowledge about the Other. This was used to justify expensive expeditions, gain prestige in imperial Europe, and produce knowledge that could explain the evolution of humankind. Translation, in this context, signifies not only the transfer of material and immaterial culture from one place (or medium) and context to another, but also represents a sort of colonial tool, justifying the assumption that Europeans were producers of knowledge about other communities, which themselves were objects of study or, at best, producers of ‘material culture.’

In my contribution, I aim to discuss how translation has been used in anthropology as a strategy for ‘understanding’ the Other and how indigenous cultures from the Amazon region were somehow translated into anthropology, becoming and remaining passive objects of study. A critical examination from a historical perspective shows, on the one hand, that translation, understood as a colonial tool, contributed to the “coloniality of knowledge” through the reinforcement of asymmetrical relationships and essentialist discourses of the ‘West’ and the ‘Other.’ On the other hand, translation is shown to have been not merely a colonial tool, but also a strategy of resistance for indigenous people. This perspective should contribute to a revision in our understanding of the indigenous peoples in the region: no longer as passive objects, but as active agents in anthropological encounters.