"When things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same": Isotype in West Africa

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"When things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same": Isotype in West Africa

"Quando as coisas são iguais em todo o mundo os símbolos podem ser os mesmos": Isotype na África Ocidental

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Isotype, Marie Neurath, West Africa, symbols, colonialism

This is a study of work undertaken by the Isotype Institute in British colonial West Africa in the 1950s. It begins by reviewing the idea of "international", as set out by Otto Neurath, the inventor of Isotype. The discussion extends to initiatives whose aims included bringing Isotype work into contact with Africa and Africans, a possibility that greatly interested Neurath, but which he never realised. Projects later completed in West Africa by the Isotype Institute under its director, Marie Neurath, illustrate how Isotype's international method, approach, and symbols were adapted in response to local conditions. An addendum situates the work of the Isotype Institute within a broader context of development in Britain's West African colonies after the Second World War.

Isotype, Marie Neurath, África Ocidental, símbolos, colonialismo

Este é um estudo do trabalho realizado pelo Isotype Institute *na África Ocidental colonial britânica nos anos 50. Ele começa revendo a idéia de "internacional", tal como foi exposta por Otto Neurath, o inventor do Isotype. A discussão se estende a iniciativas cujos objetivos incluíam colocar o trabalho do Isotype em contato com a África e os africanos, uma possibilidade que interessou muito a Neurath, mas que ele nunca concretizou. Projetos posteriormente concluídos na África Ocidental pelo* Isotype Institute *sob sua diretora, Marie Neurath, ilustram como o método, abordagem e símbolos internacionais do Isotype foram adaptados em resposta às condições locais. Um adendo situa o trabalho do* Isotype Institute *dentro de um contexto mais amplo de desenvolvimento nas colônias da África Ocidental da Grã-Bretanha após a Segunda Guerra Mundial.*

1 Introduction

The title of this study is, in part, a quotation from an article written by Marie Neurath in 1971 for the Japanese magazine, *Graphic Design*. The article is titled "Otto Neurath and Isotype" and is a concise survey of its subjects (Neurath, 1971). It is one of several articles Marie Neurath published in the latter part of her career that looked back on her own achievements and those of her late husband (see also Neurath, 1960;

Neurath 1974). The statement, "When things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same", is one of the conclusions she arrived at as she reflected on her experiences in West Africa, where in the 1950s the Isotype Institute worked on projects in the British colonial territories of Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, and the Western Region of Nigeria.

Here is the complete paragraph, from which Marie Neurath's statement is taken:

> The number of symbols cannot be foreseen: new tasks and subject matters often require new symbols. The method and the approach are, I think, more universal than the symbols are. I had to discover this when I worked for Africans for some time. I had to make things clear to them, and I could not force our "international symbols" on them. Many symbols, of man, woman, house, tree, field, etc. had to be specially designed for them. When things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same. In time, uniformity may grow, and then more symbols can also be uniform (Neurath, 1971, p. 19).[1]

The quotation identifies several issues raised by Isotype projects in West Africa to do with method and approach, universality, and the idea of international symbols and whether these can be uniform everywhere and limited in number. A view stated by Marie Neurath – that such symbols in fact needed to grow in number and sometimes be specially designed for a particular place – seems, on the face of it, difficult to correlate with a system – Isotype – that by definition or perhaps as an ideal aimed for uniformity in international communication. Is there a contradiction here, and if so, what exactly is it? I would like to explore this question using the work of the Isotype Institute in West Africa to do so.

Elsewhere I have described Isotype work in West Africa as representing Isotype's farthest international extension into three territories that in the 1950s were gaining in autonomy and by 1960 would all achieve full independence (Kindel, 2013, p. 449).[2] It may be self-evident to state that in respect of culture, language, environment, and so on, West Africa was not much or not at all like Europe or North America – the developed West, one might say – despite the overlay of colonial governance there. It was a place unlike any other that Isotype had encountered. So how could West Africa be accommodated within the concept of "international" that underpinned Isotype?

Although Isotype, as the "Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics", was begun in Vienna in 1925 ostensibly for the Viennese, the aim to make it suitable for international application was articulated early on. Indeed, as Marie Neurath later stated, Otto Neurath believed that the Vienna Method was not, in the end, being created for the Viennese but rather for Africans. As time passed and as the Vienna Method gained a wider audience – and as those involved were themselves compelled to leave Vienna and become international – this aspect became explicit

[1] Marie Neurath's use of the term "universal" is notable since it occurs only rarely in her writing or in the writing of Otto Neurath. Here it is additionally qualified as relative and appears to apply more to the Isotype method and approach than to the symbols. Throughout this essay, "international" will be the more salient term and concept.

[2] Gold Coast gained its independence in 1957 as part of Ghana; both Sierra Leone and Nigeria became independent in 1960.

in naming. Thus, in 1934, a new name, "International Foundation for Visual Education", was given to the organisation that would continue the work in the Netherlands; in 1935, an acronym was invented, ISOTYPE – "International System of Typographic Picture Education" – to replace "Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics"; and in 1936, Otto Neurath wrote *International picture language*, a book about Isotype.

In *International picture language*, one immediately encounters Otto Neurath's remarks on the question of an international language (Neurath, 1936, pp. 13–16). Neurath is confident in asserting the need and value of one, in stating the advantages of a picture language able to serve as an international instrument, and in characterising Isotype as a helping language into which statements from all the world's "normal" languages could be put. A shared comprehension of the pictures would, he argues, free them of the limitations of normal languages and so they would become international. And when Neurath discusses the "signs" themselves (that is to say, the symbols, or more precisely the pictograms[3]), he is confident of agreement in their meaning, internationally, if they were well designed. Yet he is not so confident to forego some kind of insurance, and so he recommends that "for our picture language one general list of a limited number of signs is needed for international use, and this has to be worked out by or under the control of one *chief organization*" (Neurath, 1936, p. 32; emphasis in original). I understand this control to be a means of ensuring the international suitability of the symbols, however this was done in practice. In total, Neurath's remarks signal that after a period of development, Isotype was now ready to operate in a wider world.

Other remarks recorded by Neurath towards the end of his life in his visual autobiography also address the theme of "international". Thus, about early work in Vienna, he recalls:

> People from many countries collaborated with our museum ... and helped in some way or another to develop this new technique. The international prestige of our work led us to an adaptation of our visual elements to the demands of different countries, and in this way the language-like Isotype technique became more and more cosmopolitan (Neurath, 2010, p. 102).

Here is a virtuous circle where international prestige brings an accumulation of country-specific adaptations, which in turn enabled Isotype to become ever more cosmopolitan, both "of the world" and responsive to its differences and inflections.

Reading further in the visual autobiography, one comes across a declaration – international in spirit – where the Isotype approach is described as something for everyone, everywhere:

> the Isotype approach [is] something designed for mankind as a whole, enabling everyone to take part in argument by means of a common visual basis of information. ... [Isotype] is pageantry for the living, for people of every kind throughout the world, whatever way of life they may accept,

3 *International picture language* is written in Basic English, which is limited to a vocabulary of 850 words. This accounts for Neurath's use of "sign" where "symbol" might be more appropriate (but is not available).

whatever creed they profess or reject, whatever their colour, whatever language they use. Of course I must not try to overrate the importance of the whole approach, but at least I may be allowed to express my personal hope that the increasing spread of Isotype may perhaps be symptomatic of the spread of certain general trends towards a cosmopolitan attitude, a commonwealth of men connected in a human brotherhood and human orchestration. (Neurath, 2010: 126)

Here are terms related to "international" such as "cosmopolitan" (again), "commonwealth of men", "human brotherhood", and "human orchestration". They connect to Neurath's concept of the "humanization of knowledge" – knowledge given a form that is accessible and comprehensible to all.

And what about the symbols? Although in *International picture language* Otto Neurath appears to suggest that numbers of symbols for international use should be limited, this surely does not mean that only a limited number should ever be made since the stock of symbols would certainly need to be expanded as new subjects and tasks were addressed. Still, one can see an argument against expansion of a certain kind, as Neurath seems to describe:

> There is a … difficulty if one wants to speak of "trees" in general, because trees in Great Britain and trees in Africa are different; and even in Great Britain there are different types of trees. It is difficult to make a conventional drawing to indicate a tree with leaves and a fir tree simultaneously. Again, if we want to indicate fir trees within a certain visual arrangement, we have to decide which particular type of fir tree should be used (Neurath, 2010, pp. 105–106).

Neurath recognises that difficulties arise when discussing the design of symbols and their relationship to verbal language. The issue here is how to show the generality of "tree" when there are different kinds of tree, and more to the point, different trees in different places. And does a specific tree represent the generality of trees in a specific place?

Neurath's conclusion is understated, almost bland: "there are many other difficulties in bringing Isotype technique into line with the technique of verbal languages" (Neurath, 2010, p. 106). His implication seems to be that there is the possibility for symbols, in their particularity, to nevertheless tend toward a kind of a localization, in which form is generally comprehensible but the specific identity and significance of that form might not be. What is more, as symbols are made particular and local, they tend – however modestly – towards a particularity that represents what verbal languages do well, in all their richness, but which Isotype sought to circumvent to insure international usability. An aim of Isotype was debabelization and yet here is a tendency in the opposite direction. One might ask to what extent this should be allowed in a system that sought to capture information in a way that everyone could recognise and share.

I will leave these several dimensions of "international" for the moment. But since the last quotation mentions trees in Africa, I will take that as a cue to segue to Africa. But before turning to Isotype projects in West Africa, I will briefly review Otto Neurath's own growing interest in Africa towards the end of his life as another way to record his concept of international, now in an African context (Figure 1).[4]

4 Unless otherwise stated, figures show items in the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, and are reproduced by permission. Items from this collection are designated "IC", followed by their shelfmark.
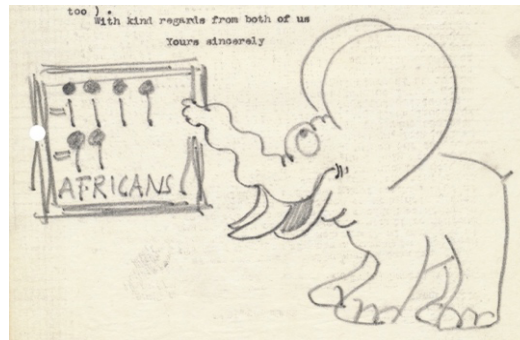

Figure 1 Otto Neurath, sketch in correspondence, 24 May 1943 (IC 1/44).

Between 1943 and 1945, two instances of Otto Neurath's interest in Africa can be found. The first was the planning of an exhibition titled "Human life in Africa". Despite the title's suggestion – that the exhibition would be about Africa alone – Neurath's plan evolved into an exhibition that would be about Africa and Britain. The idea was to compare features of life in both places, on equal terms, so that audiences could learn about what they had in common and about their differences. Neurath was intent on avoiding the common conception of Africa as an "ethnographic curiosity" or as "savage". Crucially, no concessions would be made to possible differences in audience reception in each place; instead, communication techniques would be used that were thought capable of reaching everyone, regardless of where the exhibition was located. For Neurath, a "cosmopolitan pure human approach should prevail" taking "human brotherhood as a start" (Neurath, 1943, p. 1).

The second instance of Neurath's interest in Africa evolved out of the first. This was a plan for Neurath to meet a group of African students in London to hear their views on informative pictures and on Isotype. A meeting date was scheduled in early 1944.

Both instances are instructive. The first would offer a practical demonstration that techniques of visual explanation, presented "in one mould" and including Isotype, would be accessible to all. And the second instance, as well as the first, would deliver the long-awaited opportunity to have non-Europeans engage with Isotype, people who, as Neurath envisioned them, did not have much experience of Western languages and therefore (presumably) of certain Western concepts. Both instances could prove that Isotype was indeed comprehensible and suited to Africans, as Neurath hoped.

But in the end, neither event took place and no Africans were met by Otto Neurath before his death the following year. Instead contact with Africa would be made by Marie Neurath and would involve meeting Africans not in Britain but in Africa. It would be for her to discover how and to what extent Isotype would prove suitable in this farthest of international extensions.

2 Isotype in West Africa[5]

5 This section draws on Isotype work in West Africa documented in Kindel (2013), which, in turn, draws extensively on project materials held in the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading.

6 Kindel (2013, pp. 453–454) and Foges (1983). The work would be undertaken by Buffalo Books, formed in 1951 as a subsidiary of the London-based book packager and colour printing specialist, Adprint. The Isotype Institute was a partner in Buffalo Books along with the printers, Purnell and Sons. The outputs of the work, discussed below, were credited to the Isotype Institute (design), Buffalo Books (technical production), and Purnell and Sons (printing).

When one reviews Isotype projects in West Africa, and especially in the politically progressive Western Region of Nigeria where this discussion will be concentrated (Figure 2), one soon encounters Marie Neurath's recollections of the work in her memoir, "What I remember" (Neurath, 1982). The work had been commissioned by the Western Regional Government as part of development activities facilitated by the British Colonial Office; its outputs would serve as public relations to inform the local population about government initiatives in education, health, agriculture, finance, infrastructure, literacy, and voting.[6] Operating under the title "Visual Aids Expert", Neurath made three journeys to the Western Region in 1954 and 1955. In her memoir, she describes the impact of first arriving in the capital, Ibadan, and the effect it had on her:

> Already in London I had been given a "white paper" on education to read … From this I had designed a large summary chart; it went straight into the wastepaper basket after I had walked through the streets of Ibadan; why should these people have to struggle with my chart? I made a booklet of 16 pages out of it; problems, tasks, solutions were shown step by step. This format was retained for all the other subjects (Neurath, 1982, pp. 95–96).

It is not clear what exactly it was in the Ibadan street-scene that led her to conclude that a chart would bring about a struggle and a booklet would be better. But it seems that the character and dynamics of social

Figure 2 Map of Nigeria, from *Forward to freedom* (1954). Action Group (IC 7.1/Nig.).

interaction and exchange she observed would not be well served by a typical Isotype chart.

Books and booklets were by no means new to Isotype. Among many examples from earlier years are *Die bunte Welt* (1929) and *Modern man in the making* (1939). Both would have offered helpful precedents, whether in their format, density of information, intensity of colour, or use of texts integrated with graphic matter in "picture-text style" (Neurath, 1971, p. 15). It is notable that work in West Africa also coincides with the writing, design, and production of Isotype books for children about science, technology, and history (Walker, 2013) (Figure 3). Gradually shifting away from Isotype's more typical graphic approach, these books integrate an increasing degree of naturalism into their scenes and the objects shown in them. They also frequently make use of concise narrative-like texts cued to structured visualizations. Some of the children's books appear intended for reading at home, perhaps with a family member, while others, more didactic in approach, were designed for use at school.

The booklet that displaced the chart in Marie Neurath's recollections is *Education for all in the Western Region* (Figure 4). In the context of Isotype books for children, *Education for all* seems designed in a similar way: for reading at school with teachers, then taken home and shared with family. The booklet's explanation of educational development in the Western Region would thereby be delivered in both places. It was a strategy that apparently evolved from visits Marie Neurath made to schools in Ibadan during her first visit in 1954.

Figure 3 Marie Neurath (The Isotype Institute), covers and spreads from *Fire!* (1950) and *The wonder world of birds* (1953), 215 × 185 mm (page). London: Max Parrish (IC 8.1A).

Figure 4 *Education for all in the Western Region* (1955), cover and spreads, 204 × 163 mm (page). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

7 This booklet and other outputs of Isotype work in the Western Region of Nigeria were produced in both English-language and vernacular (Yoruba-language) versions.

A look inside *Education for all* shows a narrative approach playing out – not exactly like a story book, but indeed with problems, tasks, and solutions aligned to characters, action, and resolution.[7] In this instance, two scenarios are presented to the reader, along with the question: why is education necessary? The following spread amplifies this by asking whether education should just be for some, or for all. The remaining spreads show how education for all can be achieved. The spread is the basic unit of narrative action, while the text (as seen in the children's books) is integrated with graphic matter to reinforce the narrative path. Evidence of how Marie Neurath's approach worked is suggested by notes from classroom sessions written by teachers (Figure 5). These were recorded during Marie Neurath's second visit in spring 1955 and seem to confirm that the social dynamics of the classroom assisted in the delivery of information as students and teachers gathered around the booklets to explore their content and digest their message.

With this example in mind, one can turn to remarks published by Marie Neurath in 1974, where she again looks back at the West Africa work and identifies the kinds of adaptation she thought had been necessary. They included "the approach, the speed of information, the colour scheme, [and] the ways to catch the attention" (Neurath, 1974, p. 147). Marie Neurath does not say exactly which features of
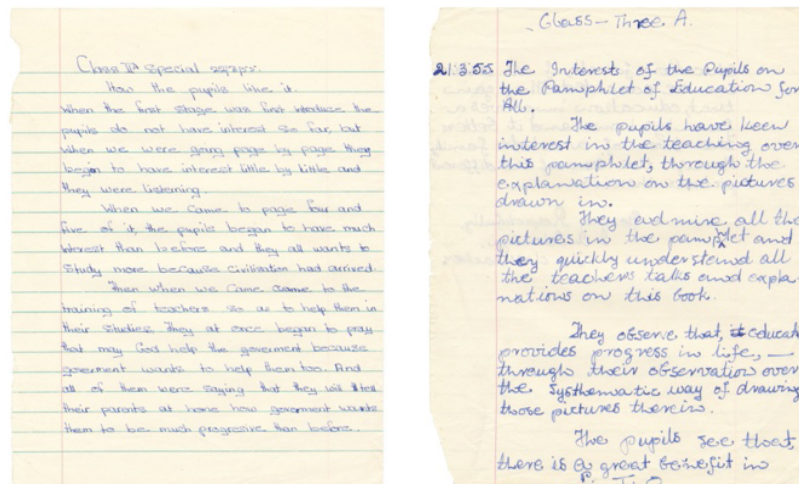
Figure 5 Notes from teachers' classroom sessions, 1955, 203 × 158 mm (IC 3.2/171).

the work exemplified such adaptations, but one can surmise. In other booklets, such as *Health for all in the Western Region* and *Voting in the Western Region*, a narrative approach can be observed where problems, tasks, and solutions take on topic-specific form in familiar scenes, or with identifiable characters following a course of action (Figure 6). This approach can be seen in another of the principal formats deployed in the Western Region, the poster-leaflet. These two-fold printed items provided information about diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy, and their treatment. They also promoted healthy living through diet and clean water. Poster-leaflets about leprosy introduced characters, then a dramatic situation, then action leading to resolution, and even a kind of lesson or moral of the story for those who did not seek treatment in good time (Figure 7). In an Isotype poster explaining how to vote, a narrative is compressed into a single scene where characters follow a journey and achieve a result (Figure 8).
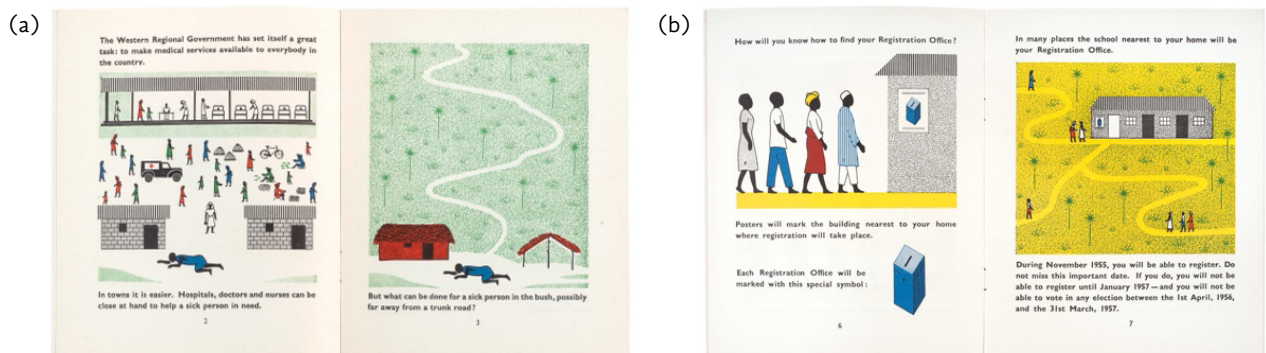
(a)

(b)

Figure 6 (a) *Health for all in the Western Region* (1955); (b) *Voting in the Western Region* (1955), spreads, 204 × 163 mm (page). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).
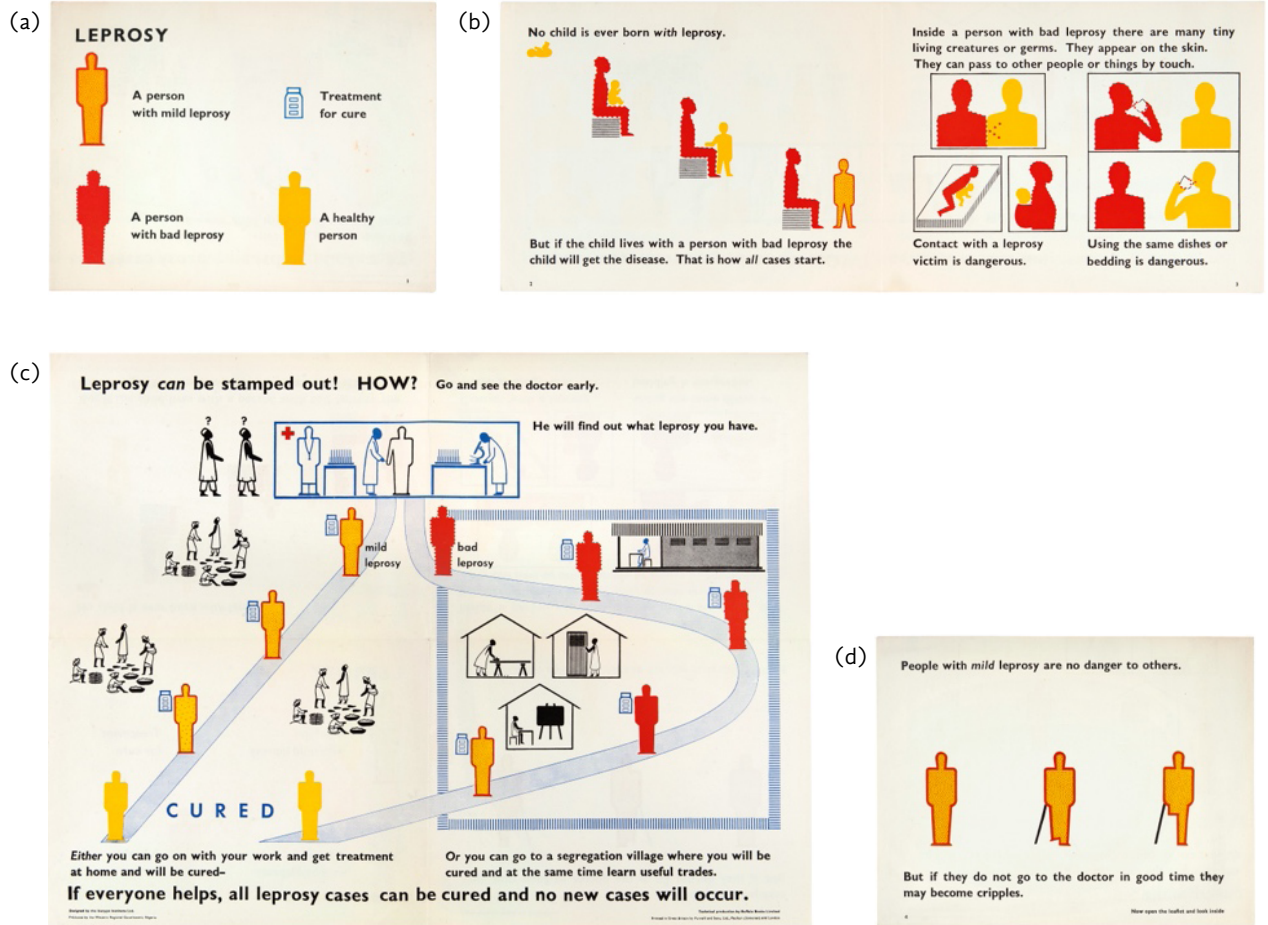
Figure 7 "Leprosy" poster-leaflet (1955), 190 × 254 mm (front panel); (a) front panel; (b) first fold-out; (c) second fold-out; (d) back panel. Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

Figure 8 "Vote early at your polling station" poster (1955–1956), 510 × 765 mm. Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.3/87).

Adaptations of speed were perhaps realised by several inter-related features including speed of page-turning or unfolding, which were determined by the unit of information – a spread of pages or the size of a panel – and the amount and density of information presented in it (Figure 9). Here adaptations relate to the pace at which concepts are introduced or actions happen. While it is difficult to detect a consistent approach to this adaptation, there are repeated instances where density increases as a booklet progresses or a poster-leaflet is unfolded. This is achieved by introducing a small amount of content at the outset, then holding the attention as the density of content increases and speed slows.

For adaptations to colour scheme, it appears that Marie Neurath is referring as much to local colour as to colour symbolism and meaning. Local colour was the natural colour of things depicted. Colour symbolism and meaning were important because specific colour associations in Yoruba culture in the Western Region determined choices that may have deviated from normal Isotype practice. Adaptations are especially prevalent in the poster-leaflets about disease, where red, rather than connoting aid, was locally associated with danger and misfortune and so best represented illness – though admittedly it was used for aid, too. Yellow signified health, while blue was linked with happiness and therefore was appropriate for treatment and protection, and for doctors (Figure 10).

For the last adaption in approach, catching the attention, Marie Neurath's specific reference is unclear since this could refer to many features of the work, such as the size of titles or headlines, colour
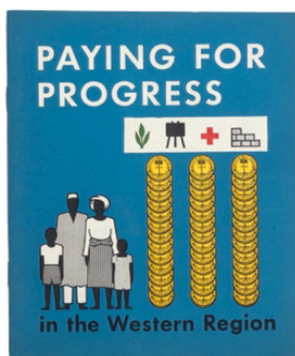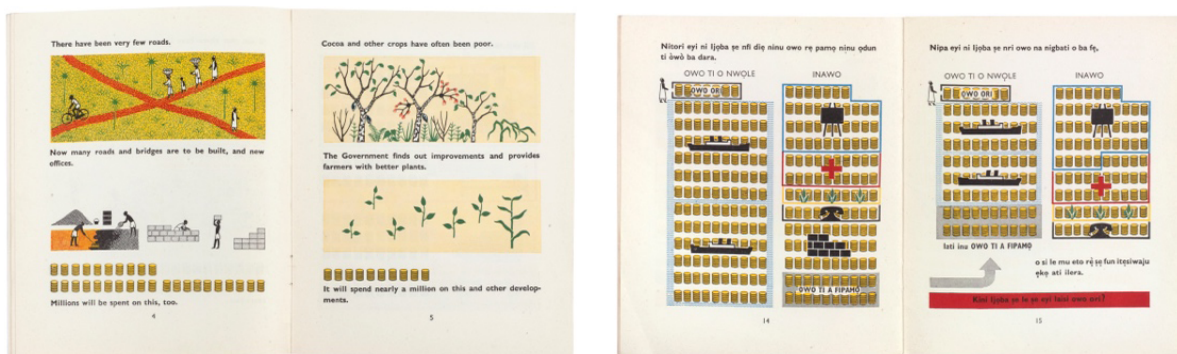

Figure 9 *Paying for progress in the Western Region* (1955), cover and spreads (including one spread from the Yoruba-language version of the booklet), 204 × 163 mm (page). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).
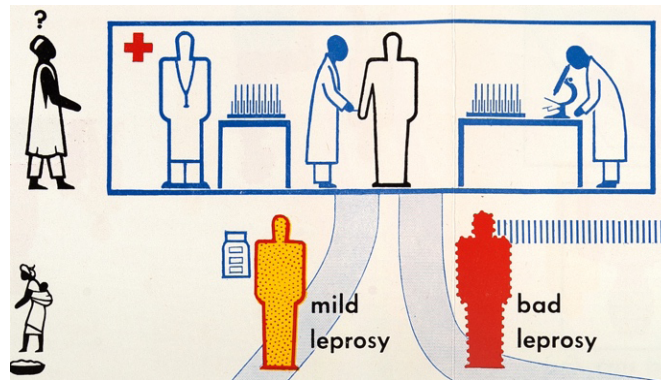
Figure 10 "Leprosy" poster-leaflet (1955), detail.
Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

vibrancy, conspicuous patterning, or narratives led by pictures rather than words. Or it could involve posing a question demanding an answer, presenting a scene tempting exploration, or prompting self-recognition in the reader.

Regarding self-recognition, it is helpful to review the specific forms of certain symbols and iconography since these may be most specific to place. Referring to the work in West Africa, Marie Neurath stated that "every chart has to represent a familiar visual background – adherence to the [Isotype] method cannot go as far as imposing an alien background on those unable to share one's experience of it" (Neurath, 1960, p. 117). Turning the pages of *Better farming for better living in the Western Region* or *Education for all*, one glimpses towns and villages, markets and farms (Figure 11). These may confirm why Marie Neurath chose to visit the Western Region for extended periods on each trip. The immersion gave her opportunities to observe and record flora and fauna, buildings and infrastructure, social spaces, and above all how people lived and interacted. Particularities of scene and the symbols within them can be traced to the (already mentioned)
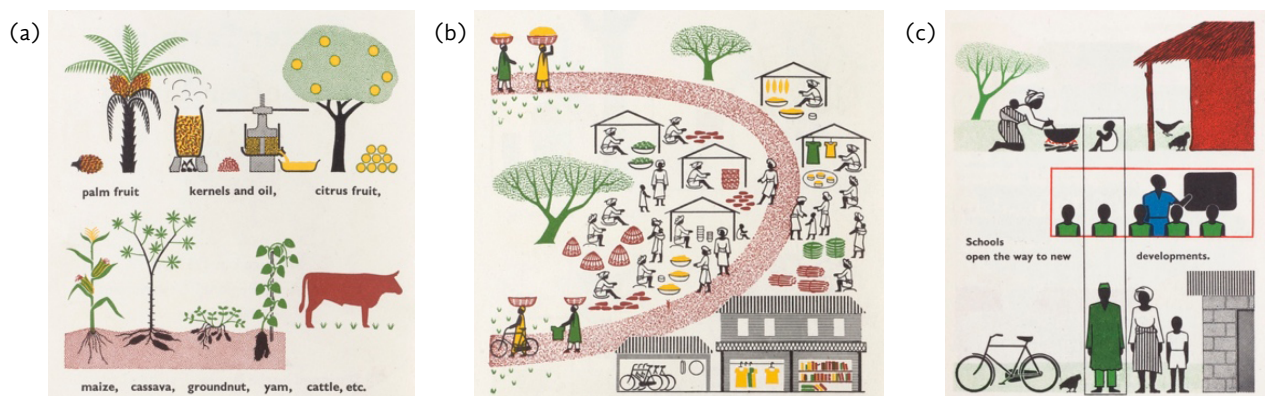

Figure 11 Details from (a) and (b) *Better farming for better living in the Western Region* (1955); (c) *Education for all in the Western Region* (1955). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

shift in Isotype work towards illustration based on greater naturalism and local detail. These features represent drawing in "a different way", which Marie Neurath argued was required in the Western Region (Neurath, 1974, p. 147[8]). This contributed to the self-recognition crucial to the didactic and persuasive aims of the work, in which the people should see themselves and their surroundings as integral to the government initiatives being explained.

And here one should turn to the symbols of the people themselves (Figure 12). Considerable efforts were made by Marie Neurath to create symbols for man and woman appropriate to the Western Region. Apart from a naturalism in silhouette, the rendering of clothing and headwear were intentionally and identifiably Yoruban, the majority ethic population in the Western Region represented by the party in government, the Action Group. Here one gets farthest away from an international symbol, where physical details and dress now convey a specific ethnic identity. In the context of the Western Region this had a political dimension, too, by reflecting Action Group ideology that promulgated the regionalisation of Nigeria along ethnic and linguistic lines. But it is also worth looking at other representations of people in the work, where men and women are shown in a variety of dress, Yoruban and Western, casual and professional, in this way communicating greater social complexity and a modernising outlook. And occasionally we see a kind of international Isotype figure entering the scene, representing a generic human, perhaps with the aim of introducing Nigerians to the idea of such a thing (Figure 13).

Figure 12 Symbol of family group, detail from
Health for all in the Western Region (1955).
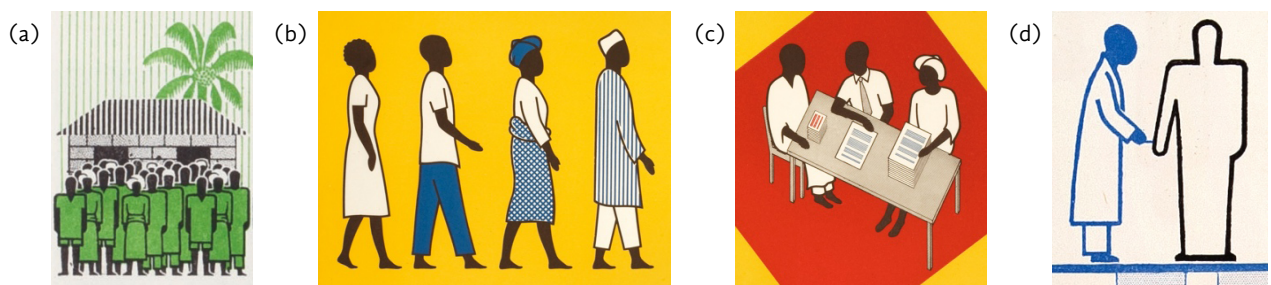Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

Figure 13 Symbols of people groups, details from (a) *Education for all in the Western Region* (1955); (b) and (c) "Register in January 1957" poster (1956); (d) "Leprosy" poster-leaflet (1955). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig – booklet, poster-leaflet; IC 7.3/82 – poster).

One other dimension of "international" in Isotype work that should be accounted for is whether and to what extent Isotype was accepted in the countries it was taken to. In the case of the Western Region of Nigeria, the answer is uncertain. Although the work was commissioned by the Western Regional Government and specifically by its premier, Obafemi Awolowo, and was apparently well received by the local people who encountered it, the Isotype Institute's projects in the Western Region and elsewhere in West Africa lasted only a few years. A review of the work shows it to be of high quality and seemingly impactful. But getting feedback or longer-term engagement from the government proved impossible, while efforts to set up a permanent Visual Aids Office in Ibadan, staffed by Nigerians trained to make Isotype work, came to nothing. Eventually Isotype's involvement ended when no further projects were commissioned. While there were probably several reasons for this, not least the evolving political fortunes of Awolowo, the Action Group party, and Nigeria itself as it moved towards independence, such contingencies must be factored into an accounting of Isotype's international dimensions. Where efforts to disseminate Isotype did not prove durable, one can argue that this in some measure compromised its aims of connection and exchange, a shared formation of knowledge, and a crossing of linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Marie Neurath's statement about Isotype quoted at the start of this study – that "the method and approach are, I think, more universal than the symbols are" – aligns with her later reflections on Isotype work in West Africa, in which she argues that "the international character was maintained in the basic approach" despite those adaptations (discussed above) she felt were demanded by the context of the work. This argument extended to the symbols (and iconography) whose more fundamental alterations were, in her view, still "within the scope of the rule that the symbols should 'speak', that is, be immediately understandable" (both quotations: Neurath, 1982, p. 97). Yet the West Africa work presents a conundrum nevertheless, where, as one adapts Isotype to different countries and localities, one must inevitably tend towards a particularity of "speaking" (so to say) that appears at odds with an international language, certainly at the level of symbols, if less obviously so in respect of method and approach. Returning to Marie Neurath's observation, "when things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same", one detects a rhetorical turn that is paradoxical in effect, in which she proposes a future where issues of adaptation and localization are redundant. But it is a future that is unlikely to ever exist, a Utopian state of affairs. I can not imagine Marie Neurath would have wanted such a thing – or at least not entirely so. While it might represent a certain fulfilment of Isotype, it would also serve to negate the world's profound variety, some of which she discovered in West Africa.

3 Isotype in its colonial context

I would like to offer an addendum to this study since I believe there is more to the narrative that is worth drawing out. In my chapter about Isotype work in British colonial West Africa (Kindel, 2013), which appeared in *Isotype: design & contexts, 1925–1971*, the narrative aimed for an accurate account of the work while venturing into a larger colonial context in only limited, if suggestive, ways. I would now like to sketch out features of that context, which I hope will add further dimensions to the idea of international as I have so far described it, and to an expanded understanding of Isotype where it intersects with modernisation, decolonisation, and representation.

As one surveys a larger context, as the momentum of decolonisation gathered speed, one soon encounters projects and initiatives financed by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, and 1945, passed by the British Parliament to support development in Britain's colonial territories during and after the Second World War.[9] Such initiatives brought "experts" of many kinds from Britain to West Africa. Development supported self-rule and by implication the advance towards independence, though the latter was regarded by many as a still-distant prospect.

But not everyone took this view, including Britain's then-foremost authority on colonial administration in Africa, Margery Perham. Perham was an Oxford academic whose longstanding engagement with African governance, starting in the 1930s, enabled her to present lucid explanations of the West African situation to a general readership in Britain (Faught, 2012). This was done, for example, in newspapers such as *The Times* (London) where in 1955 Perham authored a two-part article on Nigerian preparations for independence (Perham, 1955). Among her readers was Marie Neurath, as evidenced by clippings of the article preserved among Isotype project materials for West Africa.[10] They indicate that Neurath was conversant with arguments in support of self-determination in Nigeria while she was engaged in work there.

In connection with the experts just mentioned, one can point to other projects underway in West Africa whose aims, strategies, and outcomes run in parallel to those of the Isotype Institute. Such projects help contextualise Isotype work, confirming that it was by no means an isolated case but instead one among other initiatives that sought to deploy international expertise in support of modernisation along Western lines, with reference to local conditions and involving local collaboration. One sphere of work that can serve as an example is architecture and planning, and in particular the work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew.[11]

In 1942, Fry was appointed town planning advisor for Britain's West African colonies. The work principally involved the planning of new towns and villages and their buildings, or making proposals for the improvement of circulation, water, sanitation, and other

9 The 1945 Act was an amendment of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, extending its period of operation until 1956. A further Act was passed in 1955 (Wicker, 1958).

10 Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, IC 3.2/171.

11 The following discussion draws on Fry and Drew (1956); Richards (1960), a survey of projects in Britain's former colonial territories, with remarks by Maxwell Fry on projects in West Africa, 103–128; and selected recent scholarship: Crinson (2018, pp. 127–156); Liscombe (2006); Jackson and Holland (2016, pp. 147–214). Complementary to architecture and planning, see also a second exemplary sphere, that of indigenous West African ceramics and pottery whose development was supported by the activities of the British potter, Michael Cardew, in the Gold Coast and Nigeria from 1942 to 1965 (Harrod, 2012, pp. 161–301).

infrastructure. Together, Fry and Drew (his partner) evolved a modernising approach to planning and building responsive to social needs, the specifics of site, and the tropical climate. The approach was set out in their book, *Village housing in the tropics* (Drew, Fry, & Ford, 1947), a practical guide to what later became a more fully realised "tropical architecture", summarised by Fry (in retrospect), thus:

> It [tropical architecture and planning in West Africa] concerned first the needs of the people, which in the first few years came to us all in terms of education, and secondly it concerned climate, which I have come more and more to respect as a determining factor in architecture, because it has already determined so much else, from agriculture to the habits, customs and, finally, religions of the peoples who live dependent on it. When we study climate we are seeking an accommodation with nature; we are searching for the particular form from amid the general order of things, in hopes of fashioning what will be uniquely applicable to conditions as we see them. In doing so, we are creating a regional character answerable to local needs, a dialect of internationalism (E. Maxwell Fry, in Richards, 1960, p. 104).[12]

12 Later sources employ terms such as "tropical modernism" and "colonial modernism", which overlap with "tropical architecture". Crinson (2018: 128) summarises tropical architecture as "a pragmatic adaptation to local conditions and … an avowedly non-imperial architecture".

As their experience and reputations grew, Fry and Drew were awarded successive projects whose scope became more ambitious and extended to new building types, especially schools, designed (as just quoted) in a "dialect of internationalism". In 1953, their educational projects in the Gold Coast were surveyed in the British journal, *The Architectural Review*, introduced with a short text by Fry under the title, "African experiment" (*The Architectural Review*, 1953; Fry, 1953) (Figure 14). The survey captures "tropical" features in its plans, drawings, and photographs, including shallow building sections to enhance air circulation, rough-hewn local stone combined with rendered concrete walls, *brises-soleil* offering sun protection at the roof line and around windows, and shaded entrances and balconies with decorative patterning (including reference to the Ashanti stool). It was a hybrid architecture that balanced the structure, functions, and abstract (ostensibly neutral) character of international modernism with contributions of locally specific materials and forms.

This issue of *The Architectural* Review also contains a frontispiece illustration by Gordon Cullen summarising tropical features in an attractive scene embellished by silhouettes of indigenous flora and fauna, most notable among them a young West African student in Western dress, shaded by the architectural conception that surrounds her (Figure 15). For those able to detect them, the illustration implies other dimensions of development that accompanied such projects, whether the introduction of non-indigenous materials and building techniques, the training of a local construction workforce, or the integration of West African architects into international design teams, some of whom might be trained in Britain and receive qualifications certified by British professional bodies including the Royal Institute

Figure 14 Fry, Drew and Partners, Gold Coast educational projects. *The Architectural Review*, vol. 113, no. 677, May 1953. 307 × 248 mm (page). Private Collection.

Figure 15 Gordon Cullen, frontispiece illustration. *The Architectural Review*, vol. 113, no. 677, May 1953. 307 × 248 mm (page). Private Collection.

of British Architects. While these dimensions were broadly positive in their contribution to development, at the same time it is difficult to escape the fact that such projects were also inevitably imposed by the international (principally British) firms to whom they were awarded by a colonial bureaucracy.

Summarised in this way, the architecture and planning work of Fry and Drew in the Gold Coast and later in Nigeria is, in key respects, comparable to the activities of the Isotype Institute in the same place and at the same time. Under Marie Neurath's direction, Isotype work for the Western Region of Nigeria exhibits equivalent features, including its engagement with local culture and stakeholders, the adaptation of international symbols and iconography to integrate

locally recognisable content and forms, the observation of local audiences to gauge their reactions to Isotype work, and plans to train Nigerian artists – including at educational institutions in Britain – to create visual aids following Isotype principles. The similarities are striking.

A photograph of Marie Neurath taken at a presentation of booklets to Premier Awolowo prompts reflections on their reception (Figure 16). The spreads at which the booklets are open illustrate Nigerian systems of taxation and finance distribution, and a marketplace scene integrating depictions of trade (Figure 17). Given this translation of Nigerian circumstances into the international system of Isotype, one can ask what Awolowo himself thought of it. In his experience as a Nigerian, did he agree that Isotype's method and approach of visual explanation were universally comprehensible, as Marie Neurath later implied? And did Marie Neurath's efforts to "localise" the symbols and iconography help "make things clear" to him? Looking again at the photograph, one reading is that Awolowo's expression is polite but equivocal. Notably, he is the only one not

Figure 16 Marie Neurath, unidentified man, Obafemi Awolowo, *c*. 1955. Vienna Circle Archive, Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem.
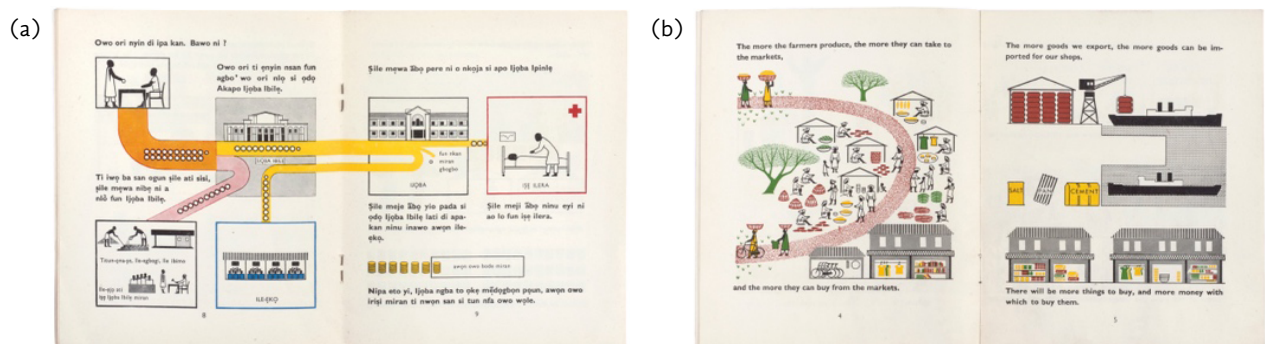

Figure 17 Spreads from (a) *Paying for progress in the Western Region* (1955) (Yoruba-language version) and (b) *Better farming for better living in the Western Region* (1955), 204 × 163 mm (page). Ibadan: Western Regional Government (IC 7.1/Nig.).

holding a booklet – perhaps this is to be expected of a politician who might be wary of appearing to endorse something by holding it in his hands. That Awolowo did not, in the end, agree to establish a Visual Aids Office in the Western Region or commission further Isotype projects may support a surmise of non-commitment, though this is speculative.

At the start of this study, I set out to explore the meanings of "international" in Isotype generally, and in the West Africa work specifically, by focusing on issues of method, approach, and symbols when introducing a declared international system – Isotype – into a non-Western context. This addendum, with its link to the example of tropical architecture and planning in a "dialect of internationalism", has sought to suggest credible parallel features of Isotype whose meanings are similarly complicated by the asymmetry of colonial rule and by international development that was both positive and yet maintained a status quo of foreign imposition, whatever the good intentions of those involved. Marie Neurath's statement – "when things are equal all over the world the symbols can be the same" – takes on greater resonance in this respect.

Yet it is still possible to argue that the activities of the Isotype Institute in West Africa were meaningful and constructive. If we turn to a photograph of Marie Neurath at the Volta Bridge in late 1955 during her third visit to West Africa (Figure 18), and put to one side the photograph's less positive signals, one can observe a congenial meeting of people from different parts of the world at an actual bridge being built during these promising years when West African self-determination and the end of empire brought about opportunities for shared endeavour and a working towards the future.

Table 1 Marie Neurath at the Volta Bridge, Gold Coast, late 1955. Vienna Circle Archive, Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem.

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