

## **Why the White Folks Need to Come Back to Africa**

by Wolf Lepenies

The word "Chimurenga" comes from the Bantu language Shona, the official language of Zimbabwe. It means something like "revolutionary fight" and has come to be associated with human rights, political dignity and social justice. The First and Second Chimurenga were both local uprisings directed against the British colonial government of Rhodesia. The first took place in the 1890s and the second in the 1960s and 1970s.

The print and online version of the Chimurenga Chronic - now-now, a quarterly pan African gazette - enjoys a large readership, particularly in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. The publication - a perfect example of successful foreign cultural policy - is funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, the Goethe-Institut and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. A German edition of the magazine will be published for the first time in 2014. Its evocative title would suggest that the former colonial powers are going to be lambasted by African writers.

The readers, however, are in for a big surprise. In the Chimurenga Chronic we encounter Africans who are resolved to emancipate themselves from their colonial past by accepting responsibility for the missteps of their continent. It is a position taken by the Nigerian Nobel laureate in Literature Wole Soyinka and the recently deceased Nigerian environmental activist Wangari Mathai, who won the Nobel

Peace Prize in 2004. In the latest issue of the Chimurenga Chronic, the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo expresses the same self-critical, but self-confident attitude in the feature interview. The title: "Let's face it: we're in over our heads. We need the white folks to come back."

Born in Cameroon's capital of Yaoundé in 1966, Bekolo is one of the best-known African film directors of our time. His films "Quartier Mozart", "Le Complot d'Aristote" and "Les Saignants" have been presented at the Sundance Film Festival and received awards from the British Film Institute and the Toronto International Film Festival. Jean-Pierre Bekolo heads the cinematic laboratory at the University of Yaoundé and teaches at Duke University in North Carolina. A French journalist once described him as an "Afro-futurist" who wanted to reinvent Africa. The interview in the Chimurenga Chronic paradoxically presents what such a reinvention might look like; Bekolo argues for a recolonisation of Africa.

The interviewer incredulously asks: "You say that you are in favour of a recolonisation of Cameroon?" Bekolo answers: "After fifty-two years of independence, we have to face up to the fact that the ideologies of self-determination and ultimately independence, born of the national liberation movements we all supported, are no longer in sync with the realities of present-day globalisation. We are at an impasse. It's become self-evident that we won't get where we want to go by insisting on doing things on our own because, in some regards, we're just in over our heads."

The interviewer: "So you want the white man to come back?" Answer: "In the end, the colonial project turned out to be far more successful than its initiators could ever have hoped - the only difference being that, as he wasn't well seen to be a colonialist anymore, the pilot parachuted out of the plane. Another one took over - he's the one at the controls now - and he's a crappy pilot doing his thing without a real flight plan. He pretends that he knows his way around the cockpit, but it's just an ego trip. He's a puppet pilot, whose only goal is to exploit for his own well-being resources that belong to the collective. What we need to do is turn the clock back to the moment when things started to go wrong, to the point where the lying and the hypocrisy began."

Bekolo expresses nothing but contempt and derision for native kleptocrats who began pillaging Africa the moment it gained independence. He is full of praise, though, for the achievements of the whites. "If we get rid of the negatives - exploitation and oppression - the recolonisation project is likely to go over very well with the people of Africa, who just can't take it anymore. Even when it comes to safeguarding our cultures, it's the white folks who care the most. It's like things haven't changed since the days of slavery. Let's thank Jacques Chirac for the Quai Branly museum: at least our heritage is being taken care of."

Bekolo explains that the African elite, who are busy plundering their own country, owe everything to the "white man". They earn his diplomas, drive his cars, wear his clothes, and send their children to his schools. Even the Cameroonian

president, Bekolo claims, is a product of the white man. He and his whole entourage act as if they were "white". There is no place for Africa and its traditions in the state apparatus except perhaps those traditional dance troupes who get "trotted out" to the airport whenever the president travels. It's as if, Bekolo scoffs, the whole thing hadn't been a colonial invention in the first place!

The interviewer counters, "You mean that Africans are incompetent?" Bekolo's response: "Let's be honest: what really works here? Why do we need to inflict such pain on our people? Just as a matter of ego, so we can claim that we're actually running our own country? We may have tried to build a modern democratic state, but we failed. It's time we quit with the hypocrisy and began moving forward. Let's not forget that we didn't create our countries. Cameroon is a Western invention: its territory, its laws, its cities - even its name. White people named it after the Portuguese word for shrimp (*camaroes*), and we're proud of that name. How can we hope to make it when we live in a colonial shell, empty of all content, because those who made that content - our very state - have jumped ship?"

According to Bekolo, the recolonisation project ought to be the African response to the challenges of globalisation. In the age of multinational corporations, no government can reasonably claim to be the master of its own destiny. "The concept of self-determination," Bekolo asserts, "has become little more than a political weapon in the hands of a corrupt, ruling elite claiming to face off with Western powers, while consigning its people

to an ideological prison and robbing them blind. We need foreigners to help us resolve the many problems we face. Let's say it loud and clear. Enough with the silence in which we shroud what the people already know: that we need all the outside help we can get."

Bekolo obviously hoped to provoke a public response with the interview; we can look forward to a deluge of letters to the editor. His criticism of the ruling African elite, however, is undoubtedly a matter he takes seriously. An enraged Wangari Mathai once wrote that Africa's main problem was no longer the stain of colonialism, but rather its inability after five or six decades of independence to produce a ruling class which strives for the welfare of all and accepts the legitimacy of democratic changes of government. Western observers would be well-advised to regard this recolonisation project with neither scorn nor triumphant arrogance. Jean-Pierre Bekolo envisions a recolonisation which is not driven by exploitation or oppression. Yet in this age of multinational corporations, we are far from it - not only in Africa.