

DIALOGUE ON AFRICA AND THE WEST

The following five short articles are 'posts' to a blog on *Dialogue on Africa and the West*. The blog intended to invite to an intercultural exchange, to a dialogue between Westerners and Africans. Of course, contributions from other cultural backgrounds were welcome as well; they may have similar experiences in the relationship with the West like Africa. The desired intercultural exchange did not take off. Therefore, I decided to close the blog. But those articles may still have relevance to the relationship between Africa and the West.

My basic thesis is: The relationship between Africa and the West is burdened

- due to their common history (slavery, missionary, colonialism)
- and due to the non-understanding of culture and mentality of the other side.

I have demonstrated the reasons for this thesis in *The End of Arrogance – Africa and the West. Understanding their Differences* (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 2012; German edition: 2012).

In addition, this relationship is strained by one-sided reports on Africa in the Western media and by Africa's dependency on the West caused by development aid, economy, and politics.

Due to the recent arrival of many asylum seekers in Europe, specifically in Germany, the need to be aware of the basic differences between the West and Africa and other cultures has become important. It is helpful to discuss them in order to arrive at a better understanding of the other side. For, the Westerners are strangers to the Non-Westerners as those are to them. The intention should be to clarify, to mutually elucidate, to understand the mentality and perception, the rationality and culture, the norms and values of the interlocutor. Also, it has to be regarded which *essential* differences exist *within* Africa and within the West. What can be done for the understanding for Africa and for the West in *concrete* terms?

By exchanging their arguments, the participants of such a discussion can clarify their own standpoints. Therefore, openness and the readiness to listen are desirable. Last but not least, it is about overcoming prejudices and mutual learning from each other.

An exchange like this one may contribute

- to promote the intercultural understanding in the context of the era 'after postcolonialism';
- to overcome the humanitarian conflicts – take as an example the boat refugees of the Mediterranean;
- to ease the living together of Europeans and migrants;
- to develop a perspective for the coexistence of independent African and Western partners;
- to support the cooperation on the diplomatic, political, economic and developmental level by discussing the foundations of the African-Western relationship. The increasing number of those who seek refuge in Europe underlines the urgency of a discussion about the question "Who are they?" and at the same time

about the question "Who are we, the Europeans?". What do we have in common; what makes us and them different? Therefore, I would like to draw the attention to another article (in German) of July 2015 with the title *Die unbewältigte Migrantenwelle*.

A Disturbed Relationship

(June 2014)

In April 2014, eighteen Western *ambassadors* in Nairobi sent an open letter to the Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. They challenged him to do more against *corruption*. This letter was also addressed to the media. A reaction from the office of the president states that the foreign "junior officers" should keep their opinion to themselves. Or they should use the correct channels to express it. They should start to learn that *the world has changed*; nobody really cares what they think. They are neither able to bring Kenyans to heaven nor to save them from hell. The government has noticed the existing corruption and fights it – without the preaching of diplomats.ⁱ

This event is *typical* for the relationship between Africa and the West – on the one hand. But on the other hand, something *new* is going on here. Therefore, it may be interesting to carefully analyse what this report contains. What is happening here?

- First, Western diplomats *teach* an African president and his government. This attitude to advise Africans and to interfere in their affairs indeed is typical for the West. Already in 1995, Wolf Lepenies demanded that industrial societies have to change from teaching to learning societies.ⁱⁱ
- Second, Western diplomats think they *have to* and are allowed to interfere in African affairs. With which justification; based on which right?
- Third, we can recognize an expression of Western *arrogance* in this attitude towards Africans. But more and more voices from the West and the non-West can be heard that demand to overcome this arrogance. For instance, Patrick Chabal published a book, titled "The End of Conceit"; the former South-African president Mbeki gave a lecture on „The West’s contempt for Africa has to end“; a book of mine is also called "End of Arrogance".ⁱⁱⁱ
- Four, let us imagine *African* diplomats would *do exactly the same* in Germany or in America, namely tell the German or the American governments what they have to do. The outcry would be immense. This demonstrates the extent of the Western arrogance towards Africa; for, here interference is allowed and even taken as a matter of course.
- Looking at the Kenyan reaction to the Western patronizing, we have to acknowledge that – five – *the matter itself*, namely the problem of corruption, is not denied; the government knows that something has to be done against it.
- Six, the Kenyan reaction contains a reprimand and an *insult* of the Western ambassadors. They are considered "junior officers" and they have to use the correct

channels for their matter of concern, meaning, they must not immediately address the media; they should know how to behave as diplomats.

- Now, this harsh attack – seven – is *the new* dimension. It speaks of a strong Kenyan self-confidence towards the Western powers. At the same time those are donor countries for development aid. But the Kenyans do not care about that. Certainly, the demonstrated strengthened African self-confidence also has economic and political reasons. For, on the one hand, the Kenyan economy is growing; on the other hand, the appearance of China, India or even Turkey makes the importance of the Western economic and political influence relative. One is less dependent on the West.
- In this way, we have – eight – to understand the statement that the *world has changed*. This may have economic, political and probably also military reasons. But this is also based on the growing self-confidence of the non-West. The non-West does no longer accept the claim of the West to dominate and to rule the world. The postcolonial era seems to come to an end. Development aid is criticized and perceived as a hindrance for development; African dependences from the West are decreasing – even as Mali, Central Africa, DR Congo or South-Sudan send contradictory signals.

The eighteen ambassadors of Nairobi only are an *example* for the relationship between Africa and the West. I am rather sure that they do not interpret their letter and the Kenyan reaction to it in the same way as I have done it. For the *Western attitude* towards Africa is deeply ingrained. It has *history*. Westerners grow up with it. Can they grow *out* of it?

Is an era *after* postcolonialism dawning?

Can the Relationship between the West and Africa Change?

(July 2014)

Since the Enlightenment, Europe and the West in general consider themselves to be on the top of the human development. Political and industrial revolution, the dignity of the individual and human rights, the advances of sciences and technology are achievements that seem to justify the West's superiority. And this understanding of being superior to other societies determines a good deal of the relationships between West and the non-West, specifically Africa, *up to date*.

Some examples of statements and observations, almost haphazardly collected, may demonstrate the *actual* situation.

1. The attitude of the West

Richard Rorty, American philosopher, in an interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 November 2011, after being asked whether dialogue of cultures would be an alternative

to bombs after 9/11: “I don’t expect anything from such a dialogue. During the two centuries since the French Revolution, a secular humanistic culture grew in Europe and America by which many social inequalities were overcome. There is still much to do, but in principle, the West is on the right track. I do not believe that it can learn from other cultures. Our aim should rather be to westernise the planet.”

In “The Irony of Manifest Destiny” (2010), William Pfaff shows the roots of the American political conviction, namely that America has a mission for the rest of the world which is based on religious belief and on the idea of ‘democracy’.

Pfaff quotes the American president Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924): “[America’s world role has come] by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way... It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America indeed shall in truth show the way.” (p. 71)

The documentary film “Wie andere Neger auch” (Like any other Negro) (1983) by Peter Heller tells the story of a lady from the Seychelles who intends to write an anthropological doctor’s thesis on a German social group, namely on protestants in Düsseldorf. She draws a parallel to African initiation rites and intends to apply the same anthropological approach that is used by Western anthropologists in their studies on African societies. However, her German colleagues and professor only criticize methodological aspects; they cannot accept that a German group is researched on like an African group.

The novel “Americanah” (2013) by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her short stories “The Thing around the Neck” (2009) depict innumerable occasions where Africans experience racism in America and Great Britain.

2. Reactions

In 2011, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister called the West “cocky and snooty”.

Philipp Lepenies in 2010 characterised development cooperation as “know-it-all with best intentions”, as “institutionalised know-it-all”. He sees the transfer of knowledge as one-sided; learning from others was not planned.

Auma Obama in an interview in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16 June 2012: “The West has always presented itself as the great model; but then it has to take the consequences and prove to be worthy of it... The West has to become more modest. And more honest”.

At a panel discussion of the German ministry for development on 29 August 2013, Christine Nkulikiyinka, Rwandese Ambassador to Germany, stressed the ignorant behaviour of donor countries towards African cultures. She talked about their paternalism and arrogance and demanded a change of consciousness of the West.

On 18 September 2013, the former South African president Thabo Mbeki gave a lecture at UNISA, Pretoria, with the title: “The West’s contempt for Africa has to end.”

Henry Farrell in an interview with the Deutsche Welle, 30 October 2013: “Most of the time, the USA are not conscious of the big discrepancy between the very noble ideals they represent and what they really do. If one mentions this contradiction, then Washington always talks of passing-by differences. In general, politicians and also US

Americans often really do not understand why in other parts of the world people perceive these opinions with scepticism and even hostility.”

In his book “The End of Conceit” (2012), Patrick Chabal demands an acceptance and appreciation of non-Western ‘rationalities’. The subtitle of the book is “Western rationality after postcolonialism”. Obviously, Chabal envisages an end of the era of postcolonialism.

Jared Diamond asks in his book “The World until Yesterday” (2012): “What can we learn from traditional societies?” Not only does he not use the characterization “primitive” for non-Western societies, which was the norm in social and anthropological sciences until recently, but he can also see something positive for the West in them. An end of the era of postcolonialism?

“End of Arrogance. Africa and the West – Understanding their Differences” (2012) is written in the spirit of those non-Western reactions. It pleads for parting with the superiority complex on the side of the West and with the distrust against the West and with counter-arrogance on the side of Africa. These steps will be facilitated by an understanding of the mentality and culture of the other side, and at the same time they are necessary to make understanding possible.

Can the West accept that its weakness is its ‘superiority’? Has the West overcome the *spirit* of colonialism?

Is Africa’s weakness her distrust of the West, imitating it at the same time?

Facts, no Dialogue?

(August 2014)

In GADO’s cartoon of 9th August 2014^{iv}, a plane of the “Africa-US Airway” is being unloaded. Huge wooden crates are labelled with “AGOA (extension)”, “Combating WILDLIFE Crimes”, “CUSTOMS MUTUAL ASSISTANCE AGREEMENT (CMAA)”, and “SECURITY Government Initiative (SGI)”. Wanjiku – the woman of the street – says to a man: “No human rights, freedom of press, good governance... They’ve caught up with China, you know!” Of course, the cartoon is referring to the United States-Africa Leaders’ Summit in Washington, 4th-6th August.

Trying to initiate and support a *dialogue* between the West and Africa and at the same time experiencing the well-known Western attitude of superiority, one may wonder, whether such a dialogue will ever happen. However, the West may be *forced by facts*, created by the non-West, to change its attitude towards Africa. China, Japan, India, the Gulf States, also Turkey and Russia, are doing business with African countries, partly giving aid, without preaching democracy and human rights. This is the point that GADO’s cartoon is making: It is economic pressure and the fear of losing power, not ethics and not intercultural insight, that forces America and the West at large to shift their focus and tactics of engagement with Africa. It is a shift from political and moral

demands – good governance, rule of law, accountability, democracy, human rights – to *pragmatism*, “from tyrants to turbines” as the *Sunday Nation*^v titles an article because of America’s energy programme for Africa. It is a shift from preaching the Western way of life to asking about African needs, i.e. where opportunities for business are.

The USA may not admit it, but this summit is limping behind China and others. For, since ten years China has held meetings with African leaders, has established the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation, and every year, either the Chinese prime minister or president visits African countries. What causes America’s limping may be a deep-rooted *Afro-pessimism*^{vi}. Only ten years ago, Africa still was the ‘lost continent’. In 2013, America’s trade with Africa was at \$ 85 billion while China’s trade with Africa was at \$ 200 billion. Thus, America has to catch up and has to perceive Africa as a ‘continent of opportunities’. American and other Afro-pessimists may be reminded that according to the Africa Development Bank six of the world’s fastest growing economies are in Africa; Africa has experienced a decade of steady growth and the emergence of a huge middle class; a new East-African railway line will be constructed. Kenya – as an example – will build a new harbour and new oil pipelines; has issued a Eurobond that was oversubscribed by 300%; is planning a technology and business hub – the “Konza Techno City”^{vii}; and is constructing – with Chinese involvement – big roads with dimensions so far unknown in Kenya. Afro-pessimists may not have noticed that such developments are going on in Africa. American politicians try to catch up now.

But what does the *economic* approach to Africa mean for the continent and her people? Does it result in an economization of the society and of life in general? Does it mean, for instance, that the gap between rich and poor is widening and nobody cares because this is not the focus of a pure business approach? Are the industrialised countries themselves not suffering from an economization of their thinking and planning? The educational ideology of the OECD countries gives an example for this: PISA and the Bologna-Process are aiming at an individual that is fit for the economy and for the national economic competition. Is this – the *homo oeconomicus* – what African societies are supposed to import through a one-sided economic relationship with the West? Is there not a need in the West to rethink their concept of humanity?

On the other hand, the positive view of business opportunities in Africa must not forget Africa’s big problems – the conflicts, the corruption, the inefficiency in administration and business, etc. Afro-pessimists may have a point here. However, and this is an interesting aspect, when the ‘development’ approach is replaced by a business approach – “trade, not aid” – then the responsibility of solving those internal African problems becomes an *African* affair. ‘Development’ is an ideological notion insofar it understands ‘development’ as the overcoming of under-development; and ‘under-development’ takes the West as the model of this ‘development’. Therefore, when ‘aid’ is replaced by ‘trade’ then the imposed development ideology – “West is best” – can be minimized; the West does not have to feel responsible for the political and moral behaviour of Africans; the responsibility for defining their problems and solving them goes to the Africans. This also means for African societies to find and develop *their* way; but, based on many conditions, their way into modernity cannot be the same as the Western modernity. (See the ‘City’ as the code for an upcoming African modernity in *End of Arrogance*^{viii}.)

GADO's cartoon visualizes the American shift from patronizing to business, presumably compelled by different approaches by China and others. But is it a real change of attitude? Is it a shift from arrogance to respect? Is being forced not to set conditions – 'good governance' – a guarantee for *listening* and *learning*? Does this shift mean dialogue is no longer necessary?

Refugees and the Rich

(October 2014)

Lampedusa – the name of an island between Tunisia and Sicily, Italy, – has become the symbol for a human tragedy. One year ago, on 3 October 2013, 366 refugees from Africa and the Middle East drowned there in the Mediterraneo seeking a life without war, persecution, torture, or poverty. 'Lampedusa' and the high number of dead on that specific day stand for many more victims and, above all, for an occurrence with global dimensions, namely for the clash between people in need and rich Europeans.

Who are the agencies and persons that are involved in that clash?

First of all, there are those 'elites' who create inhuman conditions that make people flee. Either they are politicians, unwilling and unable to provide prosperity for all, because they do not care for their citizens; this is the case in many African countries. Or they are dictators, clinging to their power by suppressing the ordinary people, like Afewerki of Eritrea or al Assad of Syria. Or they slaughter children and rape women in the fight for resources as militia groups do in East Congo. And there are the fanatic Islamists who kill and displace people 'in the name of God' for a religious ideology – Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, the 'Islamic State' in Syria and Iraq, and many others.

Then, the affected people get despaired and their only hope lies in other places. Most of them flee to neighbouring countries; only a relatively small number tries their luck in Europe. Mainly the Germans refuse 'economic refugees' as if it makes a difference "whether you die of starvation or of torture" (Jürgen Dahlkamp). Certainly, there are Africans who just strive for European prosperity, often sponsored by their family to make the dangerous trip through the desert and the sea. But what is the criterion for making poverty 'inhuman'?

Unfortunately, criminal traffickers misuse the desperate situation of those who want to flee, also relying on their ignorance of the real conditions, extorting them and putting them in life-endangering situations. The overcrowded boats are only one example.

Finally, the refugees are stranded at Lampedusa or at other places – and the European governments protect their populations, that are unwilling to give a helping hand, with 'asylum policies'. Of course, on the one hand, this is an unjustified statement because there *are* a number of European citizens who are willing to help, and governments have to seek a balance between national and foreign interests. On the other hand, there is indifference, ignorance, and xenophobia among Europeans; there are political

parties who are elected based on their xenophobic programmes (Danish opposition parties propose to send 16,000 Somali refugees to Kenya that is already hosting 600,000); there is the opinion of those who are willing to help that more could be done. And there are very practical and pragmatic questions, for instance: How could Germany manage 300.000 or 500.000 refugees? Put them in camps and would this provide them with a human life? Try to integrate them into the German society? How? What would be the social effect on that? Could such a number be financed, or better: would there be a political and a public will to do that?

Such practical questions reveal helplessness on the European side. Also the proposal to deal with the *roots* of the refugee problem does not promise success. Development aid of more than 50 years could not create sufficient prosperity in order to avoid 'economic refugees'. Could it achieve this now? On the political and ideological side, could power-hungry politicians like in South Sudan or dictators like al Assad or religious fanatics like Boko Haram be convinced to treat people more humanely? Certainly not, and thus, the causes of the problem remain.

When we consider that poverty, dictators, wars, and religious conflicts have been in this world for as long as we know history, what is *new* in the clash of refugees and rich nations that we have been experiencing in the recent years and that is symbolized by 'Lampedusa'? Is it a consequence of colonialism and post-colonial development aid? Of globalization with its Western features – 'West is best'? The 'Arab spring' including the uprising in Syria is an expression that people do no longer accept to be suppressed – because they have learnt about democracy and human rights. Poverty is compared to the wealth in Europe which is propagated all over the world and considered as an aim of life. And there is a counter-movement to the (Western) globalization, represented by the Islamists; 'boko haram' means: Western education is bad, sinful. Islamists in general are against Western culture; they specifically hate America. Does all this mean that the West has unwillingly, though sometimes culpably like in Iraq and Libya, caused a situation where life becomes unbearable for certain human beings and they flee and seek refuge to those who promise a bearable life?

The practical problems of European asylum policy only show the tip of an iceberg. The 'bearable life' as represented by Europeans includes material wealth; this has to be shared if Europeans relate the development ideology to themselves. For, 'development' means to overcome under-development, i.e. to become like Western societies; and this is not possible without sharing resources and, therefore, reducing Western wealth. But Europeans do not intend to share it with others; they want to retain it. The 'bearable life' also means values, among others the human rights. Under this perspective, underneath the visible 'asylum policies', the attitude of Westerners towards non-Westerners has to be questioned, i.e. their relationship to and their acceptance of refugees who represent alien cultures. Are fences and deportation the right answers?

Obviously, 'Lampedusa' raises a lot of questions that go beyond politics and finances.

Germans in Africa, Africans in Germany

(December 2014)

Dialogue between Africa and the West has to be cognisant of the realities an African is confronted with in Germany and – vice versa – a German in Africa. A lot of irritations occur on both sides; hardly any aspect is self-understood. The German in Africa is a stranger to the Africans; they are strange to him. The Africans in Germany behave strangely in the eyes of the Germans, and – vice versa – these behave strangely in their eyes. The irritation happens on *both* sides. The strangeness as experienced by the *other* side should be acknowledged and accepted. A problem arises when one side does not accept that it is strange to the other side, too. Often, it is the Westerners who consider themselves to be ‘better’, ‘more advanced’ and ‘developed’, and therefore, they cannot see that something is ‘wrong’ with them – ‘wrong’ for the Africans.

Coincidentally, I received two reports about such experiences at the same time. One describes the life of a German expatriate in Africa, the other reports the difficulties of and with African refugees in Germany. They illustrate what I have tried to describe as the mutual strangeness.

At first, I will summarize what Jürgen Haushalter reports about his life and work in Lesotho: Although his family was impressed by the skill of improvisation in the informal sector, they had to lower their expectations of quality standards in general. They lived in a simple government house and empathised with their sleeping watchman as he had a long and strenuous way to come to work. The members of the family were torn between the old and the new world. They enjoyed the company of the friendly Basotho, but deeply felt as unrelated observers. – The every-day life of the project work turned out to be more difficult. Identifying with the project idea, financial and technological possibilities, management, know-how, personnel management etc. faced contradictions between the expatriates and the local organisation. Foreign expectations and local circumstances permanently collided. On top came the pressure from the overseas headquarters that intended to achieve the project goals in time. Fortunately, the more serious contradictions at the higher organisational level did not affect the daily cooperation. For, African care and patience smoothed difficult situations. In spite of that, the general misunderstandings concerning planning and implementation as well as the mutual non-understanding of ways of thinking and doing things were difficult. Many discussions, workshops and well-meant assistance by the overseas headquarters did not change the fact that they could only partly achieve a target-oriented cooperation. In addition, they had agonizing discussions within their team on principles about the sense and nonsense of the project idea and on development aid in general. It was a painful fact that the development goal, i.e. implementing an independent local authority, could not be achieved after a total of ten years – mainly because of socio-cultural contradictions.

This is what Franz-Joachim Brinck reports from Germany: “Some of the Nigerian refugees whom I know are still of the opinion that they do not have to learn our language. On the other hand, they believe we, the Germans, are obliged to finance their cost of living so long as they are not allowed to work. – In a discussion about the im-

migration policy, retired economists supported the view of Paul Collier: Illegal refugees have to be returned to their home country; the local Goethe Institutes are to offer courses in German language while one applies for a visa; and young people are to get training in Germany on the condition they go back to their home country after the training. – A meeting with refugee volunteers gave the impression that their well-meant advice was not acceptable to the refugees. Some of those have difficulties to adopt a structured daily routine. There are language courses that last for almost one year. During the first half, only German language is taught; during the second half, specialised language is taught for potential employment that the students might be able to take up according to their previous work experience. But about twenty per cent drop out because they are absent without apology and are no longer able to follow the course. – Today, I am more and more uncertain how we should structure and arrange immigration policy. Question: What can be done? - We have to find an answer”

We see, there is inability and partly unwillingness on both sides to understand and to accept the different ways of thinking and of organizing life of the *other* side. In the case of the refugees in Germany, this kind of differences is underlying the moral dimension of demand for help and obligation to help. There is a basic need to understand the differences between Africa and the West. Only then can an adequate and human immigration policy be developed to address the tragic situation of refugees and only then can the refugees’ demands for help be put in a manageable, but realistic context.

i Sunday Nation, 13 April 2014. Also see the reactions of David Ndii: „Changing times: How Big Brother has lost his clout” (Saturday Nation, 19 April 2014) and Eric Ng’eno: “Envoys only managed to display their disrespect” (Sunday Nation, 20 April 2014)

ii Wolf Lepenies (1995): Das Ende der Überheblichkeit; in: Die Zeit, 48/1995.

iii Patrick Chabal (2012): The End of Conceit. Western Rationality after Postcolonialism. London/New York (Zed Books). – Thabo Mbeki: Lecture at UNISA on 18 September 2013. – Helmut Danner (2012): Das Ende der Arroganz. Afrika und der Westen – ihre Unterschiede verstehen. Frankfurt am Main (Brandes & Apsel), also in English: Nairobi 2012.

iv *The East African*, 9-15 August 2014.

v 10 August 2014.

vi See Peter Kagwanja: Summit proved Africa is rising from ashes of pessimism; in: *Saturday Nation*, 10 August 2014.

vii See: <http://www.konzacity.go.ke/> [16 Aug 2014]

viii Helmut Danner: *End of Arrogance. Africa and the West – Understanding their Differences*. Nairobi 2012. Also in German: Frankfurt am Main 2012.