

The unsung hero

Kum'a Ndumbe III – prince, professor, pioneer – leaves Berlin

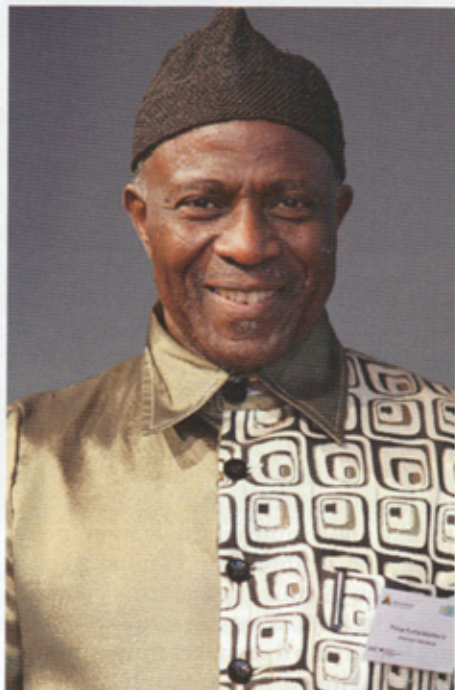
Documentary film-maker and theatre scholar Annette von Wangenheim (PhD) writes on the return of Professor Kum'a Ndumbe to his native Cameroon after more than 50 years in Germany and she bemoans his unsung contribution to a better German-African understanding.

I was perhaps mistaken in thinking that rather than just occasionally come to Berlin as a guest and enjoy a cordial welcome, I could as a writer, professor, researcher and social co-creator be actively involved. Given that as a pensioner I cannot afford the rent for a room in this city without falling into the welfare trap, I am leaving today. I do, however, leave behind a personal legacy which I entrust to you as the Lord Mayor of Berlin so that the city may have access to a sound, characteristically African basis for tolerance, diversity and the prevention of violent conflicts."

This is a quotation from Professor Kum'a Ndumbe's farewell letter of 1 November 2013 to Klaus Wowereit, Lord Mayor of the capital city of Germany, a country which Ndumbe in his capacity as researcher and professor served for many decades without ever receiving due credit from the Germans for his immense achievements. His farewell letter to Wowereit has remained unanswered to this day.

The 67-year-old African scholar's final leave did not come about abruptly but wore on – a process which the German media described as a loss on one isolated occasion: in 2003, 3sat TV showed a programme about Professor Ndumbe's last lecture at the Berlin Otto Suhr Institut für Afrikapolitik. By that time his chair had long fallen victim to rationalisation and Ndumbe had been teaching his students for an entire year without pay. Afterwards, things got increasingly difficult and another ten years later there was an article in the *Berliner Tagesspiegel* about him.

How can it be that the only African to



Prince Kum'a Ndumbe, a scholar of scholars, was the first African to be appointed professor of political science at a German university

© AFRICAVENTIR

have been promoted to Professor of Political Science at a German university and who taught at the university for ten years as department chair, private lecturer and visiting professor, was unable to establish a permanent livelihood in this country?

Ndumbe sought dialogue on equal terms at all levels in Germany – in the German language, of course. He worked with Heinrich Böll, May Ayim and Hans Christoph Buch, to name a few; he undertook research on behalf of numerous development co-operation organisations and came up with various models and perspectives on a global policy for peace.

Ndumbe's work always focuses on the shared fate of mankind in 'One World', a world which has been increasingly under threat. However, thanks to his dual analysis of African as well as European contemporary history he was perceived by many as provocative.

Ndumbe identified and denounced destructive power mechanisms in Germany as well as in Cameroon, his native country. His early major works "Was Wollte Hitler in Afrika?" ("What did Hitler want

in Africa?") and "Was Will Bonn in Afrika?" ("What does Bonn want in Africa?") had already touched on German post-colonial taboos. These were never truly cleared up, neither in 1945 after the end of the Second World War nor in 1989 following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Professor Kum'a Ndumbe III has been published in French, German, Douala and English; 20 of his books are available in 13 countries as well as a plethora of scientific and literary texts. He was President of the Cameroonian Writers' Association for ten years and Vice-President of the Central African Writers' Association from 1985 to 1991. In his capacity as a long-standing Professor of German Studies at Yaoundé University in Cameroon, he set up a library of specialist books written by Africans for Africans.

Ndumbe's courses, including those held in Berlin, were exceedingly well attended: up to 300 students at a time followed his lectures, some 120 participants attended his seminars and a good number of graduates and doctoral candidates chose him as their mentoring professor.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this resounding success the Chair of African Politics at the Otto Suhr Institut (OSI) of the Berlin Free University was abolished for good in 2002. This was the sole chair for African politics in Germany and home to highly qualified graduates who would have been in a position to redefine the future of German-African relations. But then this intellectual elite of enlightened and critical minds no longer had a place among the conservative establishment.

With the closure of the chair of African politics, an entire continent vanished from the range of research and subjects offered by the then biggest European institute of political science. Soon afterwards the OSI chairs of Latin American and Middle East politics were also abolished.

This academic-policy-motivated obliteration marked the end of an era which had lasted some 30 years and produced highly trained foreign relations experts in Germany who were well suited for creative work in politics, economy and the media.

Unfortunately, Kum'a Ndumbe III met

18 April | May 2014 THE AFRICAN COURIER



School children at the AfricAvenir International, a cultural centre for the promotion of international dialogue, in Douala. Until now Kum'a Ndumbe has also been denied the recognition he deserves in his native Cameroon

© AFRICAVENTIR

Ndumbe's work always focuses on the shared fate of mankind in 'One World', a world which has been increasingly under threat.

similar intellectual limits in his native Cameroon. He never joined the ruling party and the Cameroonian President failed to officially appoint him king of his people, the Bele Bele of Douala, although Ndumbe has been their elected traditional ruler since 1994.

And yet the Cameroonian government could have been proud of his name: it is the name of a royal dynasty that made history in Cameroon. Kum'a Ndumbe's grandfather, King Kum'a Mbape (known in history books as Lock Priso) showed the courage of his convictions as well as political vision and responsibility when he alone among the kings on the coast of Douala refused to sign the sovereignty transfer to the German Reich in 1884.

King Kum'a Mbape wanted to protect the Bele Bele's independence – and lost the diplomatic fight to colonial armed forces and the corruption of some of his compatriots. Today his grandson's demand that the royal insignia stolen by the German generals at the time be returned to his people follows in the footsteps of

the first Cameroonian freedom fighters who refused to be enslaved or bribed by the colonial forces.

Outside Germany and Cameroon, Professor Ndumbe is widely recognised and held in high esteem; 150 of his international publications are accessible around the globe and he has been honoured with prestigious international prizes and awards. In 2013 he was admitted into the Inaugural Hall of Fame in Atlanta, USA and awarded the Outstanding Culture and Heritage Scholar 2013 medal.



Prof Ndumbe teaching in Berlin. His courses were exceedingly well attended

And yet does not every prophet long for recognition in his own country – native country or adopted home?

Time and again Ndumbe has come up with new initiatives to promote dialogue between Germany and Cameroon. In Douala in 1985, he founded AfricAvenir International, a cultural centre with its own publishing house, library, video library and congregation hall which served as a meeting point for European and African students, scholars and art-

ists. Germans went to study in Douala and Cameroonians came to Berlin: a two-way model of cultural exchange.

Everything was financed independently, established on land owned by the family and run as a private foundation until 1992 when there was a break owing to political reasons which lasted until 2001. Today, the foundation's Cheikh Anta Diop Library holds more than 7,000 books and attracts more and more children and adolescents. The city of Douala, however, has plans for the demolition of the foundation's buildings, thus putting the Douala AfricAvenir foundation in jeopardy yet again.

Fortunately, further AfricAvenir sections have been firmly established in Namibia, Benin and Germany. The Berlin section was founded in 2000 and has been working systematically and self-critically on the relations between Europe and Africa ever since by providing a platform for the structurally underrepresented African perspectives in Germany. In 2008, it was awarded the renowned UNESCO Toussaint Louverture medal for "outstanding contributions to the struggle against domination, racism and intolerance".

Steady funding has resulted in the creation of a part-time position, an excellent website and an extensive cultural programme featuring top-class contributors and guest artists. The organisation's chairman, Eric van Grasdorff, is a political scientist and former student of Professor Ndumbe III, whose spiritual legacy he manages in Berlin in an honorary capacity alongside his full-time position with the department for media and public relations at the South African Embassy. In co-operation with Senegalese colleagues, he is currently involved in the launching of an AfricAvenir centre in Dakar.

Another former student of Ndumbe achieved the transformation of the Windhoek section in Namibia into an important address for African film-making. Furthermore, there are concrete plans for new AfricAvenir branches in France, Canada and the USA.

These days, thanks to the internet, Professor Kum'a Ndumbe III can manage his life's work globally from Douala. Other than providing access for all to literature, databases and films online, he can also follow the results of his work. Thus the digital era provides him with new forums for democracy, intellectual freedom and international understanding. The seeds he sowed are bearing fruits. ■