

Prince Alexandre Kum'a Ndumbe III in conversation with Cornelia Zetzsche about German colonialism, looted art and perspectives on Africa today.

In 1961, at the 15, Prince Alexandre Kum'a Ndumbe III came Munich for his education - following a tradition of his royal family. In his luggage: a dramatic family history that goes back 140 years. He graduated from the Maria-Theresia-Gymnasium, studied in Lyon, taught in Lyon, Yaoundé and Berlin and chose Hitler's Africa policy as his research topic. Cornelia Zetzsche met him at the Museum Fünf Kontinente.

MF: What fascinated you about Hitler of all people?

Prince A. K. Ndumbe III: I was a pupil in Munich, and everything that happened to the Jews was a topic in class, we read "Die Judenbuche" or "Die Ermittlung" by Peter Weiss. What happened to the Jews was madness. But I, as a black African, I heard nothing about Africa, nowhere. What did Hitler want with us? I couldn't find an answer, so I researched it, and that was an aha moment.

What did you in particular during your research?

This system. Germany had colonies in the Bismarck era. But Hitler was planning a new Central African colonial empire, the tropical complement to the new Greater Germanic Empire. And there was cooperation with apartheid South Africa, the segregation policy was already being practised in South Africa, and the "Nuremberg Laws" were then implemented in the so-called "Colonial Blood Protection Act". Discovering this was not pleasant. "The dumbest white man is more intelligent than the most intelligent black man" was the kind of thing I had to read. And the publicist and colonialist Carl Peters clearly stated that it was in the genes, that the others were slaves to "master race".

The global context of Nazi racial policy is astounding, including the journey of National Socialists to the USA to study the Jim Crow laws of 1865 on racial segregation.

Yes, the keyword back then was "racial hygiene". Hitler even went so far as to describe black people as "half apes". As you know, there were also so-called "Völkerschauen" in Munich, in Germany and other countries, where Africans were exhibited in zoos.

The continuity of colonialism and national socialism is striking. Carl Peters, the founder of the colony of German East Africa, who saw Africans as "cattle", was known for his cruelty; he also had his mistress and his servant hanged. In 1941, posthumously, he was celebrated as "Herrenmensch" in a film with Hans Albers. Exactly, the "Hänge-Peter". But - whether it's Carl Peters or Franz Ritter von Epp - these are people who had a lot of colonial and were very brutal. Franz Ritter von Epp was in the genocide against the Nama and Herero. And then he became head of the colonial policy office of the NSDAP and Reich Governor of Bavaria!

In other words, someone who was responsible for over 80,000 deaths in Africa and was active in China after the Boxer Rebellion.

And it's being celebrated! Where do you read something like that? Neither here nor in Africa. That's why I talk about "erased memory". In

In the 19th century, they taught "German-



Prof Dr Prince Alexandre Kum'a Ndumbe III.
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Tangué (ship's beak). Attachment for a racing boat, Duala/Cameroon (Bele Bele) | wood, oil paint, 70 x 145 x 64 cm | Provenance: Kum'a Mbape (Head of the Bele Bele), M. Buchner, MFK Inv. No. 7087
© Museum Fünf Kontinente, Photo: Nicolai Kästner

Rediscovered dignity



land, Germany above everything, above everything in the world", even old people we interviewed sang that, not just one, even after independence. That means: You have achieved nothing in the world, only when the Europeans came did history begin, we are bringing civilisation. Yet Africa is the cradle of humanity.

You interviewed 176 contemporary witnesses in the 1980s and them into 18 books, and there is much more material in the archive. What did people say about school, for example? They told us: First the priest came and asked the king for the children to come to school. If someone didn't turn up, the pastor or priest would call the military. The military went to the parents' house, the father was brought out, laid naked over a barrel and given 25 lashes - in front of the child and the because the child had not gone to school. Where did we read that? Not in any book!

On 22 December 1884, Max Buchner, the representative of the German Empire and curator of the ethnographic collection in Munich - a forerunner of today's museum - had a marriage, who saw humanity as "self-destruction" and was convinced by the "Your people, the Duala, bomb and plunder the king's house. Then he noted: "The house of Lock Priso is torn down, a moving picturesque image. We set fire to it. (...) My main booty is a

large carving, the feudal barge jewellery of Lock Priso, which is to come to Munich." It was about your grandfather and his ship's beak, the Tangué, which you have been asking for back for almost 30 years. What do you think about this quote?

That's how it was. Lock Priso, whose real name is Kum'a Mbape, was my grandfather. We heard stories as children, but not that precise. It was only later that I discovered that the looted things are here, in the Ethnological Museum, now the Museum Five Continents. I didn't know that when I went to school here. It was only when I was doing research that I realised it was about resistance. Max Buchner bombed because my grandfather said he wouldn't sign the treaty that Cameroon would become German. There was a letter dated 28 August 1884 from my grandfather to Consul Buchner: "I don't want your flag with me. Take it down, otherwise I will take it down. That's why there was a war, my grandfather's palace was bombed and looted. It wasn't just Buchner, other soldiers also went into the houses and took out what they found interesting. Buchner came from Kamerun to Munich, became director of the museum here and brought the things here. Because I was chosen by the family as crown prince and I speak German, is my responsibility to reclaim these royal regalia. It's about restoring your own dignity, about reconciling with yourself. And it's about reconciliation with the Germans. But the Germans are still not behaving like this.

In 1999, with the help of conductor Zubin Mehta, they wrote to Minister of Culture Zehetmair demanding the return of the tangué and received the reply that it had been a "gift".

Yes, and because it's a gift, you can't give it back. And it's valuable, he said, at a conservative estimate, half a million DM, for budgetary reasons alone you can't give it back. If I really want to, they can make a copy for me, at my expense. I realised then that people didn't want reconciliation.

Was Buchner's note already known?

I was familiar with the text, but people here might not be.

Today, the museum estimates that a third of its collection is looted art. They speak of 40,000 objects from Cameroon in public museums. With President Macron and the group led by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr from Senegal, things have started to move. One question about restitution is: to whom artefacts be returned?

It's strange: people say that African countries need museums so that things can be brought back. I always ask from which museum they take these things in Africa? If you take them from a house or a place, they have to go back there. How did these ethnological museums come about? In the course of armed conflicts in the colonies, where the things were looted! Today we understand that the aim was to take the Africans' souls, their basic knowledge. Everything was taken, including deeply religious artefacts. We don't have this tradition everyone being allowed to see everything at all times. It's not just the Tangué. My grandfather's throne is in my house and

is carried out during some rituals or celebrations.

For example, on 28 August, the day Lock Priso wrote the letter to the German consul saying he didn't want colonisation, we celebrate and rare artefacts like this come out. - It's madness what man has allowed and continues to allow himself to do to people. Research must reveal everything that happened to the Jews. Slavery, colonialism and the neo-colonialism that followed must also be dealt with. At what is in the world today, in Ukraine, in the Gaza Strip. You ask yourself, what is wrong with us? Humans are so barbaric.

You come to Germany from time to time. How do you political developments here?

Yes, the right-wing parties are strong in Europe. We Africans are waiting to see how Europe develops. But Europeans must not forget that the balance of power has changed. In

In the 19th century, Europe was the master. Today, the BRICS states are an enormous counterweight. In 2100, if the UN forecasts are correct, one in three or one in four people will be African. We always read here about Africa being in need of help, but this Africa is on the move. We are experiencing this awakening, this spirit of invention in Africa today. Africa is ancient. If you manage to harmonise this ancient with the most modern, it is a tremendous enrichment. ||

INTERVIEW: CORNELIA ZETZSCHE

Display




COLONIALISM IN THE THINGS

Museum Fünf Kontinente | Maximilianstr. 42 | until 18 May
Tue to Sun, 9.30-17.30 | Info and accompanying programme:
www.museum-fuenf-kontinente.de