

"Just because the smoke is annoying."

Hamado Dipama in conversation with Lena Fritsch and Mathilde ter Heijne

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This conversation was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of the artistic project Assembling Past and Present, which was later expanded for Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition Women to Go: The Personal and Impersonal in Presentation and Representation at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

Lena Fritsch: What significance does your activist activity have for your life?

Hamado Dipama: We organized ourselves as students to protest against the dictatorship in Burkina Faso [see footnote 1]. We couldn't go home anymore because we were wanted. The leading heads of the movement were threatened and terrorized. Many friends disappeared or were murdered. It was a difficult time. My personal situation became so precarious that I thought I had to continue outside the country, Burkina Faso. The goal was not yet Europe, I just had to leave. I was a privileged refugee because I had contacts in Mali, while others fled in the desert to suffer. In this way, with the help of contacts in Mali, I was able to take a flight to Germany.

I then lived for 6 years in a refugee shelter and after nine years I was 'tolerated'. 'Tolerated' is terrible, because it's a discriminatory status. It's a stay but at the same time not a stay. With this status, the authorities have all the data and you have papers, but when the police check you, you are still illegal. When I was living in the refugee shelter in a fucking nothing-to-do situation, I was with people every day who had the same experience as me and who, just like me, were in the nothing-to-do situation. Because what can you do? Sleep and watch TV. And while watching TV we often saw how many of our sisters and brothers ended up in the sea and drowned en masse. I had many sleepless nights during that time. I wondered why it had to come to this. I come from a continent that has everything - all the riches of the world to be able to live a comfortable life [2].

Mathilde ter Heijne: And what happened next? Why did you think it was necessary for Germany, too, to take action against injustice?

Hamado: I founded the working group "Pan-Africanism" here. The group represents the interests of people of African origin. Pan-Africanism is an old movement of the African Diaspora. The movement has changed from an anti-slavery movement to an anti-colonial movement to an anti-racism movement that advocates international understanding. I wanted to follow this line. Every generation has a different mission. I have to take up the work of the older generation, to continue on this path, in order to achieve the goal of my generation.

In our daily work, we have helped people affected by institutional racism. Some of us have been murdered by neo-Nazis. So we have to stand up. Of course, we do this without violence, but it is important to show that we are here and that we can stand together. It is also important to call for solidarity from those who are not affected. I wanted to use my experience to help others who have fled, who need even more help than I do or who have just arrived. And that's why I was involved in the "Caravan for the Rights of the Refugees" back in 2004, which led to me becoming a spokesperson for the Bavarian Refugee Council in 2007, which I still am today. At that time there were no counseling or support structures for people affected by racism and discrimination. The network "Rassismus- und Diskriminierungsfreies Bayern" (Bavaria free of racism and discrimination), which I founded, aims to establish and expand politically independent counseling centers - at the state level, but also locally in the municipalities and districts.

Lena: Has the way racism is dealt with in Germany improved in the years you've lived here?

Hamado: Last week in Nuremberg I came out of my office and there were four guys parked on the sidewalk. One of them yelled loudly and called me the 'N-word' as I walked by, and one of them spat on me. I stopped and asked quietly: "What's wrong?" The driver wanted to attack me, but luckily his mate held him down. Then the four of them went to a bar nearby. I called the police. They came straight away and took the man to the station. Also, on the subway, people often demonstratively look for another seat when I sit down next to them.

Racism is connected to power. People are categorized through the concept of race [3]. According to the color of their skin they're placed in categories and assigned alleged characteristics. If we manage to get these ways of thinking out of our heads, we might find common ground for a world community. Not the dishonest globalization that exists now. This globalization has winners and losers. This injustice makes it impossible for us to find common ground. People should not only try to be anti-racists but should also question their own privileges. It is important to know that you can't do anything about your own privileges, but that you profit - if you do nothing - from the racist system. When you realize this, it is already a step forward.

I think we have to move towards a community of solidarity - a movement of solidarity. It's not right for a person who isn't affected, so to say, for a white person, to act and speak for other people. I speak from experience. We, people of African origin, are familiar with this and we're fed up with it. We're tired of it. We've been written about. They haven't let us write our own history. They speak for us. Where are we? Let us talk for ourselves, then we can tackle the problems together.

There are so many "Africa experts" in Europe. We have no "Europe experts" in Africa. For example, I have lived here in Munich for quite a long time, but does that make me a "Munich Expert"? There are people who have been somewhere in Africa a couple of times and are meant to be experts. Africa is big, it has 55 countries. Many so-called experts don't even know half of the

countries of Africa. In Burkina Faso alone there are more than 60 languages and ethnic groups and it's the same in a lot of African countries. This thing with "Africa experts" only works because in the European Union Africa is seen as a little jungle. Just Sudan and Congo together are as big as Europe as a whole. Sudan alone is seven or eight times as big as Germany.

Mathilde: How do you build solidarity in the context of neoliberalism and hyper-individualism? The different, divisive elements in terms of race, class, nationality, sexuality, abilities, have their own specific kinds of effects within a neoliberal culture, and influence how people see themselves and others. It seems to me that there are many prejudices and misunderstandings between people and there are also assumptions based on generalizations. How do we get people to exchange ideas with each other at eye level, regardless of their social status? I think it's important that different people get in touch with each other to understand each other.

Hamado: The oppressors who oppress us in Africa are the same as those who oppress people in Europe. We actually have the same enemy and a common struggle. But many people don't understand that the mechanisms of oppression mechanisms that operate in other countries are also being applied here - in a completely different way.

Lena: In your opinion, apart from counseling and support centers for affected people, where is there an urgent need for action in Germany at the moment?

Hamado: The fight against right-wing extremism and neo-Nazis is going wrong here in Germany because the cause is swept under the carpet. I always make a figurative example: the fight against right-wing extremism in Germany is treated as a fire. Of course, when a fire burns, there is smoke. The smoke is disturbing and you try to clear the smoke away, but you let the fire keep burning.

Of course, you can breathe for a while, because you just got rid of the smoke. But as long as the fire keeps burning, the smoke will keep coming back. Instead of always getting rid of the smoke, you have to put the fire out. Only when the fire is put out will the smoke be gone.

[1] Burkina Faso ("Land of Upright People") is a West African country. Burkina Faso gained independence from the French colonial government on August 5, 1960. Blaise Compaoré came to power in a coup against Thomas Sankara and was president of Burkina Faso from 1987 to 2014. Compaoré was re-elected four times between 1991 and 2014, but had to resign due to a controversial constitutional amendment. An international arrest warrant is currently out against him in order to bring him before a military court in Burkina Faso for his crimes. The former associate of Roch Marc Kaboré, a former associate of Blaise Compaoré, has been president of the country since 2015.

[2] Burkina Faso, with a population of about 17 million, is one of the poorest countries in the

world, although it is considered the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa. Companies such as TrueGold, Iamgold, and Randgold Resources are active in the country.

[3] The term 'race' is only used here as an analytical category. We reject theories that attempt to demonstrate the existence of different human races. To express the contradiction in the text, the term is put in italics.