

Planting “African” Memories in “Austria”: A recollection of the “African Literatures Days” in Graz 2023

From May 5th to May 7th, 2023, Graz became the center of African literatures in “Austria” thanks to the CHIALA association, Chiala meaning the main square, the place (“chia”) where people (“la”) gather in the language Baham [Hom] spoken in the Bamiléké region, West Cameroon. During this year’s edition of the festival, curated by the current Grazer Stadtschreiber Abdelaziz Baraka Sakin and moderated by Ass.-Prof. Dr. Rémi Armand Tchokothe from the University of Vienna, the following authors gathered: Leila Aboulela (Sudan; Scotland), Ken Bugul (Senegal), Stella Gaitano (South Sudan; Germany), Mihret Kebede (Ethiopia; Austria), Precious Chiebonam Nnebedum (Nigeria; Austria) and Wilfried N’Sondé (Republic of the Congo; France).

The festival started off on Friday evening with a reading and spoken word performance at the Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten (Kultum). After a few words of introduction by the Managing Director of CHIALA, Kamdem Mou Poh à Hom, Abdelaziz Baraka Sakin welcomed the attendees. Rémi Tchokothe spoke next and elaborated on the festival’s motto “language crosses borders”, before the actual event began with a reading in French from *Le Coeur des Enfants Léopards* (2007) by Wilfried N’Sondé. Then followed a spoken word performance in Amharic by the Ethiopian poet and artist Mihret Kebede, at present a PhD student at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

“We must all dare craziness” – Ken Bugul

Saturday morning, Leila Aboulela held a three-hour workshop on creative writing with an unusual approach: Instead of asking the partakers, including Precious Nnebedum, to introduce themselves, she started out by inviting everybody to first do a short exercise and recite it: “Read your story first and then tell me who you are”, she demanded and clarified: “Usually, you won’t be there when others read your texts and you won’t be able to explain everything.” Since she believes that writing comes from reading and that the author stands behind the text, she asked the participants to reflect on and write about their reading experiences, starting with their favourite children’s books. After a short break, the exercises centred around different notions of “home” (physical place, person, culture, language, community, faith). Leila encouraged everybody to be specific in their descriptions, to draw pictures with words and provide details for the reader to hold onto – which brilliantly reflects her own writing technique as could be witnessed during her reading on Sunday.

The event continued Saturday afternoon at the Kunsthaus. After a minute of silence to commemorate the victims of the ongoing violent conflict in Sudan, Stella Gaitano opened the program with a reading of her story *Hurra, ich bin Tot!* (2014), centered around a main character who dies during the war, but continues to communicate with the reader after her death. Just like Sakin's play *Mind Schrödinger* (2022), her story is about a corpse that speaks and tells of the violence of war.

When asked about her motivation to write, Stella Gaitano expressed her wish to open people's minds and eyes to what has happened and still happens in Sudan and South Sudan. Although her story was written nine years ago, it proves to be more relevant than ever. Written in Juba Arabic, a Sudanese language blend that reflects human creativity, the purpose of the story's plot was to shock and raise the question of how we communicate with the deceased.

Her reading led to a discussion on women's roles in war, with reference to Dr. Ishraga Mustafa Hamid's poem "Krieg ist männlich" (published in *Gesichter der Donau*, 2014) and Svetlana Alexijewitsch's book *Der Krieg hat kein weibliches Gesicht* (1985; dt. 1987). Ken Bugul, who is part of the organization "Women Warriors of Peace", reminded the audience that "peace is fragile". She continued with a reading of her own novel *Rimwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999) and ended the subsequent discussion by appealing: "We must all dare craziness." For Ken Bugul, craziness can be a solution to the multiple crises of/in the world, since it is the expression of the self that can be found in craziness. However, craziness must always be directed towards positive action. Another important factor for her is spirituality, which can be found in everyday tasks and objects if only we pay attention.

"When Sudan was divided, I became a foreigner without moving."

Saturday's program ended with a panel discussion with all the authors present. Chaired and moderated by Rémi Tchokothe, it revealed the diversity of opinions and positions on topics such as translation, language, silence, and home. For Precious Nnebedum, language can create a safe space and signifies power and hope. Stella Gaitano had a similar approach, calling languages a life matter: "Languages, like people, need nurturing so that they do not perish." Abdelaziz Baraka Sakin defines language as a "system of signs" that comprises many different entities, some of which require more than a purely semantic understanding. Even though the author himself continuously experienced censorship, this doesn't impact his writing: "When I am writing, I forget about everything, even my own beliefs." Mihret Kebede raised awareness of silence as a means of communication and resistance, but also pointed out that silence can be manipulated to serve as a

barrier, a tool of censorship. Wilfried N'Sondé took a more practical approach to the use of language: "Since I speak that language it belongs to me, because it is just a tool to express feelings and ideas." While Ken Bugul pointed out that she writes solely for the sake of writing, never to be published, Leila Aboulela however explained that she writes primarily to be published, to reach people. The authors emphasized the importance of appropriating and reshaping colonial languages, with Ken Bugul taking matters to the extreme: "I bastardize the French language." Instead of sticking to classical structures and academic French, she writes from remembering atmospheres, sounds and rhythm, as well as the variety of Senegalese languages. As many of the authors live in the Diaspora, they also spoke about their relationship with the countries where they were born. Stella Gaitano pointed out that exile does not require agency: "When Sudan was divided, I became a foreigner without moving."

"Until the lions will have their own storytellers, their stories will be told by their hunters."

The festival ended on Sunday with a 'morning mass' to use Tchokothe's words at the Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten. Precious Nnebedum started off by performing her "ode to my 12 year old self" among other poems from her debut *birthmarks* (2022). The subsequent discussion centered around the importance of allowing people to tell their own stories instead of speaking for them. Wilfried N'Sondé explained that it does not matter to him who tells the story, as long as it is well written, while Rémi Tchokothe recalled the saying: "Until the lions will have their own storytellers, their stories will be told by their hunters" to emphasize the need to transcend the 'colonial library' (Mudimbe). Leila Aboulela went on with reading an excerpt from her novel *River Spirit* (2023), set in the Nubia mountains in 1881. Aboulela, who started writing after she migrated to Scotland in 1987 by recalling the Sudan she knew, revealed that she "found it easier to go back in history than to write about today's Sudan, because it has changed since I left". Referring to her short story collection *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) she confessed that she never had closure from a psychological point of view – which helps her writing. Whereupon Nnebedum agreed with her and stated that she experienced years of not feeling at home neither in Nigeria nor in Austria. In the end, she "came to accept that for me home is never going to be a place, but it can be a person or God, my faith". She ended the event with a wonderful spoken word performance of her poems "B(L)ack to the roots" and "Creation's song".

During these three days, as students taking part in an excursion in the framework of the course **Mapping "African-Diasporic" Literary Voices in the Austrian Cultural Scene**, we could see Graz really becoming the 'chiala', the main square, of African literatures in "Austria". Or, to use

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's words from *Re-membering Africa* (2009): Memories were planted. But instead of re-enforcing the colonial planting of "European" memories in Africa, "African" memories found their way to the heart of Europe in the form of literature(s). Finally, both the recital of the German translation of the texts by Ninja Reichert and the presence of the English-German interpreter Julia Kölbl contributed to a vivid multicultural and multilingual exchange confirming that languages cross borders.

A report by Laura Kisser and Anna Hell, with contributions from Simone di Silvio, Agnes Zachhalmel, Katharina Geilersdorfer, Julia Wachs