

Who is in solidarity with whom?

Interview with Mbolu Yufanyi Movuh of The VOICE on Refugee struggles, African independence and solidarity as self-liberation

Mbolu Yufanyi Movuh is an environmental scientist and deals with human rights, anti-racism and analyses critical postcolonial global power dynamics. He is active in The VOICE Refugee Forum, the PEACE (Peer Exchange of African Communities for Empowerment), and the African/Black Community Network.

glokal: Can you tell us about the history of The VOICE Refugee Forum?

Mbolu Yufanyi Movuh: If there was an example of self-organisation that survived the uncertainties of the times, then The VOICE is the very best. As a political network, The VOICE has existed for 22 years. The only organisation with which it is comparable at all is the ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany). The VOICE is a grassroots network for refugees. Refugees are among the most oppressed people in the world. The VOICE network emerged as a reaction to the oppression and discrimination of African refugees in a Thuringian camp. The VOICE remains faithful to the idea of seeing empowerment from the perspective of oppressed communities rather than from the perspective of privileged or elitist contexts. What is presently most appealing to me within The VOICE is its African perspectives. The VOICE started as The VOICE Africa Forum, as a cultural tool to put African issues on the political agenda. Some of the aspects that bring us together - even if many Africans have not yet realised it - are our cultural integrity, uniqueness and collective history. The connection between The VOICE and what I am now doing with PEACE is very strong. They both fight against racism and focus on empowerment, development and self-liberation. PEACE is also directly linked to Africa, because the founders and members came from Africa.

An important subject for The VOICE and PEACE are power constellations in political contexts: when, for example, independent migrant organisations are not present at European Union meetings on refugee and migration issues to represent their interests, decisions are taken without them. The same happens at European Union summit meetings, where you do not see any African presidents or representatives. But at meetings of the African Union, European heads of state or their representatives come to influence discussions and politics. Without my experience with The VOICE, I would not have seen these power structures as critically as I do today.

glokal: What were the main political demands of the self-organisation of refugees?

MYM: The VOICE has gone through different stages. In the first phase we developed and spread political awareness on problems in the African continent. We demanded human rights: In 1994, we opposed military dictatorships and the freedom of political prisoners in different African countries. The direct demand here in Germany was to prevent deportations to these countries, as they delivered the people to the persecutors from whom they had fled.

The second phase was to raise awareness for and among ourselves, to our different problems and struggles. The VOICE was the first network to launch a campaign against “Residenzpflicht” (residential obligation law for refugees) in Germany. I want left-wing organisations to know the history of our struggles before they open their mouths to talk about today's fights, which is not the case yet. I also want refugees to know about the history of their fights before they talk on marches or political confrontations. These struggles would not have been possible without the existence of The VOICE, without people who were ready to put their lives at risk. Two members of The VOICE were imprisoned because they had refused to pay the penalty for going against the “Residenzpflicht”, thus risking their deportation. In 2000, The VOICE organised the first refugee conference in Jena. The slogan was: Unite against deportation and social exclusion. Then, we began to question and criticise the role of the left-wing organisations as they accepted unsustainable political conditions. And that was the beginning of the third stage: We went from dealing with our own consciousness to the fight against deportation and social exclusion in general.

PEACE's political demands are less directed at the state or at the establishment, but rather are demands on ourselves. We should not focus on the goal of making our oppressors understand why we should be free or liberated. And also at The VOICE we say: We should stop trying to convince white people not to be racist. We should convince ourselves that we can fight against racism! A very wise person once said: *'If a white man wants to lynch me, this is his problem. If he has the power to lynch me, that is my problem.'* So I have to make sure that the white man cannot lynch me. So I have to look for ways to ensure that racist practices cannot be applied on me. It is not about singing, *'We shall overcome.'* One should rather say, *'Nobody will be able to do this to us!'* We learned this from within The VOICE and also teach it at PEACE. In short, in The VOICE and PEACE it is not just about theoretical self-empowerment, but also about deeds, about practical work.

glokal: You have just addressed left-wing groups working with refugees. What were your experiences with them? Do you see similarities to the way charity organisations work?

MYM: What happened in Germany between The VOICE and the left-wing is a microstructure. But

the same takes place as a macrostructure between Africa and bilateral and multilateral development co-operation. And even if it sounds too harsh: Whether left or right-wing, it is both the wings of the same bird, and this bird is the system. In order to balance the flight, the bird uses one or the other wing to achieve stability. And almost all the challenges we face are of a systemic nature. Looking at the experiences that I had with The VOICE with other leftist organizations, they are not fundamentally different from the situation which Pan-Africanists are confronted with, trying to cooperate with Western NGOs and institutions.

For example, the abolition of the “Residenzpflicht” has long been a political demand. And when we realised that we were not successful in calling on the state to abolish the “Residenzpflicht”, we decided to take it into our own hands. So we crossed internal borders, refused to pay fines, and went to court. When we went to meetings like “Grenzcamp” or No-Lager-meetings, the left always complained: *'Yes, but you cannot force all refugees to fight like you do. That is why we will help refugees who want to pay their punishment.'* And so the resistance to the “Residenzpflicht” was broken. And it was not broken by the state, but by the left!

Western NGOs also do not support the demand of the majority of African activists for a united Africa. It is an open secret that many Western countries, through their bilateral and multilateral institutions, are actively separating, destabilising and destroying African countries, in order to prevent this African unity.

glokal: So what is your understanding of solidarity? Is there any possibility for solidarity between white Germans, white German organisations and the refugee movement?

MYM: I would say that at the moment a paternalistic solidarity prevails. The question is always who is solidarising with whom. We have always discussed this within The VOICE: Do we stand in solidarity with the German left to improve their society, of which at the end we will not profit from? Or: is the German left in solidarity with refugees because they think that the asylum policy is not only bad for refugees but also for them? So, if I am fighting for a better society, where I am not even recognised as a member, then I am not the one who profits from it; it is the left. This means that we are already in solidarity with them. I believe that solidarity needs to be redefined in order to live up to our present struggles - on eye-level. This means that there must be a different understanding of equality and justice on the part of the white German left or NGOs. Only with this perspective can we begin to strengthen the anti-imperialist revolutionary grass roots solidarity culture - from below and not from above.

When in 2007 and 2008 Nigerians, Gambians and Sierra-Leoneans, who had applied for asylum, were deported as Nigerians to Nigeria against their will, we made the campaign *'Colonial*

Collaboration between Germany and Nigeria' as The VOICE. Today many white German leftist organisations and churches are talking about it. But the organisations that started this are not mentioned. The organisations that are now mentioned are leftist organisations that get funds from the state and even spread state propaganda. These are experiences that tell us: Actually, we should have cut all the connections to these organisations.

During the No-Lager tours, there was actually a discussion within the left, which linked our different positions. It was said: My freedom is connected with yours. This was a very advanced discussion. People who were part of the left saw their work not as solidarity through help or charity but as self-liberation. Solidarity has nothing to do with the fact that someone is weak and has to be protected - it has to do with myself. It must be an issue that comes from within: My liberation is connected with the person next to me. My liberation becomes reality, only if this person next to me is also liberated. This is how I understand solidarity. But the left did not understand solidarity like that.

glokal: Do you see a possibility for solidarity in North-South cooperation?

MYM: I think there might be a critical solidarity. But this is only possible if the neocolonial and corrupt relations are destroyed first. I think that no organisations should support these relations, that no NGO should send money to the Global South and that there should be no receiving side. In Africa we are in a situation where we were given so-called political independence. But when the West realised that those to whom it had given this political independence grew stronger, the West had created strategies that destroyed this strength, sovereignty, and independence. One of these strategies was bilateral cooperation. For example, the GIZ is committed to the German government. It does not comply with the rules of, for example, the Cameroonian government. And so it destroys Cameroonian sovereignty. In fact, the colonial powers still control all the different sectors of the Cameroonian state. In every important ministry in Cameroon there are representatives from the West, and also from GIZ. And do you know what they are doing now? They put Africans in these positions. So, when you come to a ministry, you do not see a white man, but their agenda is white.

We trust the white man more than we trust ourselves. This is the colonial influence of enslavement on us. Take me as an example: I am more willing to give you an interview for glokal than I would give an African organisation. The reason is that I was manipulated somehow to trust you more than an African organisation. We have to change this! One way to change the inequality in partnerships is to completely destroy this present partnership link. It's about making new connections, completely different connections.

glokal: Let's talk about PEACE: What is PEACE, what is your relationship with PEACE, and what is the organisation's self-understanding?

MYM: PEACE is more an organisation that promotes networking. It means 'Peer Exchange of African Communities for Empowerment'. The work of PEACE or the objectives of PEACE are to engineer critical thinking and facilitate change. We strive to empower Africans, making possible a self-conscious obliteration of the physical/mental enslavement and the enthronement of an African vision in our circles. One of our main mottos is, finding African solutions to problems arising in Africa. So it's not like getting solutions from outside Africa, but trying to analyse issues within the African context and our main base line is critical thinking. We deal with political, economic, sociocultural, and even environmental issues. For example, we deal with the deconstruction of the myth of wilderness, which was brought by the Europeans. And we intend not to convince Europeans, but our fellow community members, that before the white people came, we protected our environment. We had different indigenous ways of protecting our environment and now they have come with ways that actually exclude us from these environments. We did not solidarise with nature, we saw ourselves as part of nature, while the Europeans saw us and are still seeing us out of nature. We also look at political and economic issues concerning our well-being. We had different socialist structures within African communities, before the white man came. And I think we should look back into them. And part of these alternatives is what we are trying to create within PEACE. For myself, I see myself as an organiser within the PEACE network and one of its initiators.

glokal: What do you make different? Would you say at all that you are doing support, solidarity or development work?

MYM: The problem is that PEACE wants to build an empowering network within Cameroon. However, this is made difficult because most organisations need to work with whites. This means that certain words are used, certain people are contacted and certain funds accessed: one has to relate to the West. Because in Cameroon we are more dependent on white networks than on our own, we are thus improving white networks and not our own. Many in Cameroon also see it as a motivating factor to work with whites. And this is the point where we as an organisation, PEACE, are different from others. We see it as a demotivating factor! Some say: To change the system you have to work with and from within the system. But we do not want to be contaminated from the inside. And this is one of the difficulties, that we have financially, because we don't get direct aid or sign to certain developmental characteristics, we suffer a lot financially. Also because we turn perspectives upside down, it is sometimes difficult and we are viewed as very radical.

We are still dealing with enslavement, with colonisation, and we still struggle with neo-colonialism. There are still Africans - in Africa and the Diaspora - who are still mentally enslaved. We still have the problem that others control our brains. So African organisations working here in Europe should also get money, support, and stimulus from African governments. We should also be accountable to our African governments. Only then would I be able to speak of an emancipatory network within the diasporic communities - but that does not exist. There are more opportunities for Africans who have lived on the continent to carry their experiences in the diaspora than for people in the diaspora to carry their experiences back to Africa. The fact that I have been here in Europe for the past 18 years has meant that the Europeans have destroyed a lot of my cultural connections that I had with my community at home. And that's why I say, we wish and hope that PEACE gets much more contribution from the continent, than from the outside to redress the situation and revitalise these connections.

glokal: How did the experiences that you have made here in Germany with The VOICE and the African communities, influenced the way you conceptualise your work at PEACE?

MYM: We learned that collective discussion must not always mean trying to create a consensus, but it also means standing for what you believe in. And The VOICE has been standing for what it believes in from the very beginning. Part of the problems we have in Cameroon with some of our members is that we are not standing for own convictions. If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything. I've spent the last 15 years of my life mobilising Africans. And one thing that I've learned from The VOICE is to mobilise for the general good, not for the personal good, but I also understood that it comes with a cost. Empowering our struggles beyond personal safety enriches our struggles to protect and defend many others. This led to common struggles against the system, like the civil disobedience against the residence obligation law, deportation struggles, closing the lagers, police brutality (Oury Jalloh and others) and by later forming alliances with the Caravan for the rights of refugees and migrants.

I have told myself that what I have done or still do in Europe - whether I like it or not - will benefit Europe. If I were to do same and with the same intensity in Africa, it would benefit Africa rather than Europe. So it has something to do with where I am, which society profits from it. But I believe that what we are doing at PEACE is more of an advantage to African societies. If I would have come and said: oh, there are a lot of left-wing organisations like you, *glokal* or whatever, even some African organisations, yeah, let's work with them and try to better the relationship between us and them, then I would be saying to myself, I'm continuing the legacy of the white. I think we should stop it, even working with black organisations that propagate white agendas.

Three or four years ago there were the first two black German parliamentarians. Are they following an African agenda? No. But many black organisations see them as brothers. I see them as opponents because they work together with my oppressors. The only way that these black politicians could be my friends or peers is when they follow a strictly African agenda. But I bet you if a Black politician follows a strictly African agenda in German politics – he/she wouldn't be a parliamentarian.

glokal: We can imagine that people from the Diaspora appeal to you and say: 'We want to strengthen our communities.' What do you advise them to do?

MYM: Yes, they do, but we do not want to be consultants for African affairs. We want to be a multiplier, for a pan-African agenda of solidarity. The basic message from PEACE is unity. As an activist within The VOICE, within African communities, I always follow Black people: I have the honour - if not, even condemned - to work with Black people. What I am optimistic about: Is that, within the next generation, we will create a united understanding of how oppression works on us all; and how we as the oppressed globally would identify with global struggles worldwide and the different collective forms of oppression. This is not just an African affair. Exploitation hasn't got only to do with Africa. But you cannot talk about exploitation globally, when you don't identify your own exploitation locally. And this is one of the things that we are trying to talk about: You can't talk about oppression outside, when you don't know exactly, how you're being oppressed inside. One of the ways or the weapons of our oppression is our mind. To be specific, the diaspora is a very important stakeholder for PEACE and for the development of our continent: There is a war of exploitation and neo-colonisation going on, at times we interpret it is as a disease. There are different ways, to cure the disease; there are different remedies to this sickness. PEACE wants to see Africans in the diaspora as medicine or vaccine. Africans in the diaspora are weaker forms of the disease since western cultures are internalised in them. If an African is coming to continental Africa or wants to help Africa, he or she should be actually a weaker dose of that disease, an antigen that induces an immune response to the attack of the disease. And for us this is something that should be seen by diasporans also, because Africans in the continent have less experience dealing with the West, than Africans in the diaspora. Those in the diaspora should really understand exactly, what the treatments of this disease are, that when they come to Africa, they should actually induce a defence mechanism of this disease itself.

I say this particularly because we are moving into a phase that is perhaps even more devastating and destructive, than enslavement and colonisation: We have it already now within Africa, that you see Black people, who are actually fulfilling the white agenda. They, for us, are actually the more

dangerous part of the disease. The more dangerous part of the virus, that even needs to be destroyed before the white virus comes. And if Africans in the diaspora don't act as vaccines, then they are not welcomed in Africa.

One of our elder said: *“The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organise a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you'll get action.”* The first thing we should do is to wake up ourselves first and then our communities from slumber. The same elder said: *'We should be very careful the way we bring the truth to an African, because this African would have lived in lies his or her whole life, that the moment you bring the truth it's like an attack to his/her very self.'* I think PEACE plays an important role here. Even if we decide today that Africa should change and be self-reliant, self-determined, independent, self-conscious, civil society needs to be prepared for it. And that is exactly what PEACE does.

glokal: Thank you for this interview.

Contact info: info@peace-int.org.

website: www.peace-int.org - www.thevoiceforum.org