

*„Why my heart sank when I read  
Magnus Linklater's commentary on the appearance of  
Robert Mugabe at Thabo Mbeki's Inauguration Ceremony  
in The Times” –*

**a Textanalytic Essay**

**Birgit Englert**

President Mugabe appears at the Inauguration Ceremony of President Mbeki in South Africa. The crowd gives him an enthusiastic welcome. Especially journalists from „Western” countries have difficulties to believe what they are witnessing and try to come to terms with the experience by writing loads of articles which bring the topic Zimbabwe which has recently somewhat lost prominence in the international press again to the fore.

For the purpose of this analysis let me stick to one article, which appeared in the British „The Times”. There, on May 05, 2004, Magnus Linklater wrote under the title *„Why my heart sank when Africa rose to cheer the tyrant Robert Mugabe”* basically about his own inability to fathom that President Mugabe had been given such a cheering welcome by the large majority of the South African audience. The article throughout serves as a great reminder that colonialist thinking has not got out of fashion.

The first paragraph of the article, apparently in an attempt to create the atmosphere of an ideal world, describes a scene which could have been part of a novel written by a retired colonial officer. Anyway, these are Linklater`s own words anno 2004:

*„Under the African sun in Pretoria last week, we sat on pristine white chairs and admired the hats. This was the inauguration of the South African President, and you could judge its importance by the style of the headgear. Turbans are being worn bigger this year. Zulu hats are taller. One lady won admiring looks for a confection in peach-coloured silk that measured a full 3ft across and threatened to cause severe damage to her immediate neighbours each time she turned her head. As each delegate sashayed in to take his or her seat, we judged their standing as much by their sartorial extravagance as their place in the world order.”*

The African sun has probably always been the biggest pro of the African continent for the British and the chairs are not only white but pristine white. The use of the

plural suggests that the author was in company and serves to underline that he is not all alone in his opinion.

The author seems to have thought of hats of extraordinary sizes as a domain of the British as his apparent amusement about the African headgear suggests. Huge hats are a symbol of civilisation – this should be something to be taken as a good sign. The importance of clothing as an indication of the degree of civilisation is developed even further when he writes that the „sartorial elegance“ of the delegates played just as much a role as „their place in the world order“. But the positive atmosphere, which prevailed in the beginning of the description of the Inauguration ceremony was misleading.

„Presidents and prime ministers began to arrive. African heads of state, on the whole, aroused more enthusiasm from the crowd than Western leaders. John Prescott, who was there representing Britain, got a decent reception, but the United States, which had sent its Housing and Development Secretary, was received in embarrassing silence, as, surprisingly, was France. And then Robert Mugabe walked in.“

The next paragraph starts with the relatively neutral comment that „African heads of state, on the whole, aroused more enthusiasm from the crowd than Western leaders.“ Somewhat relieved he then notes that the representative from Britain got at least a „decent reception“ but the one offered to the US-delegation was „embarrassing“ – embarrassing for who? For the audience, who did not show at least some signs of hospitality to a Super Power? At least it did not seem to have surprised the author to the extent as did the cold reception offered to the French delegation. He might have been less surprised had he considered the way the ban of the Muslim veil in French schools has been received not only in the Muslim world but also in other countries, which are increasingly fed up with Western display of cultural hegemony. But the much bigger surprise was yet to follow.

„I knew, of course, that the tyrant of Zimbabwe, the man who has ruined his country's economy and trampled over the human rights of his opponents, was viewed differently in Africa. I had not expected that he would receive a standing ovation. All around us, people rose to their feet, cheering and clapping. Only a little clutch of Brits, ourselves included, sat stolidly in our seats. As the applause died down I turned to a white South African sitting next to me, and asked him: why? He shrugged. „It's pay-back time for 360 years of colonialism, I suppose.“ Because Mugabe is judged to be standing up against Britain, still seen as the colonial oppressor, he is accorded hero status. That didn't make much sense, but other explanations seemed just as

unsatisfactory. „He's a bad boy, and Africans like a bad boy,“ said one diplomat. „It's purely racial, it's black against white,“ said another.”

In order not to make himself seem as naïve as he obviously is, the author emphasises that he had been aware that Africans did not share his view of „the tyrant of Zimbabwe” – a choice of words which does not leave any doubt as to whose view is the unacceptable one. He nevertheless has to assert that the welcome given to Mugabe has taken him unexpectedly. Obviously, despite his awareness of the wrong opinion Africans hold on Mugabe, he did not expect them to express it that openly – especially not in front of all the dignitaries from other countries. The only ones who did not participate in this lunacy were „a little clutch of Brits” to which he counts himself and his friends. Unable to find an explanation for what he had just witnessed, the author shares with the readers his attempts to find one. It might have helped to ask one of those who had been „cheering and clapping” but this was obviously not possible as he was seated in the small enclave of Brits among who there must have been at least „a white South African”. Thanks to his „South Africanness” the author seems to have considered him the best possible informant, but unfortunately he did not fulfil his expectations. His answer „It's pay-back time for 360 years of colonialism, I suppose” „didn't make much sense” to the author who therefore turned to diplomats, whose origin is not closer identified, for a better explanation. While the first answer he got „He's a bad boy, and Africans like a bad boy,“ is purely racist, the second answer „It's purely racial, it's black against white” demonstrates an, especially for a diplomat, frightening lack of understanding of the background that led to the situation of crisis in Zimbabwe and the way the British and Americans tried to negotiate it. The author finds it sufficient to deem both answers „unsatisfactory”.

„Later, I was able to ask the President of South Africa himself. Thabo Mbeki has been much criticised in Britain for taking too soft a line against Mugabe. His response has always been to claim that he can bring more pressure to bear on the leadership in Zimbabwe by diplomacy than by indulging in hostile rhetoric. His view is that Britain has to understand the very different attitudes that exist in Africa towards the white ownership of land. He argued that, by continuing to attack Mugabe, Britain was merely reinforcing black African opinion, and thereby shoring up Mugabe's position.”

Lucky enough the author did not have to satisfy himself with such unqualified informants but got a chance to ask the President of South Africa himself why his people behaved in such a way. Stressing that he is someone with access to talk to the President, the author underlines his own importance. In his attempt to sum up Mbeki's opinion the author is very much concerned to distance himself from it as the

phrases chosen to start his sentences indicate: „His response has always been to claim“, „His view is that“, „He argued that“.

The argument given by Mbeki that „by continuing to attack Mugabe, Britain was merely reinforcing black African opinion, and thereby shoring up Mugabe's position“ conveys however as little sense to the author as the explanations he had got before.

„I am a friend and admirer of Mbeki. What he has achieved in South Africa in the past five years is remarkable. But I still find this approach hard to accept, just as I find it impossible to agree with Bob Geldof, who suggested yesterday that building Africa's economy might have to take precedence over human rights and democracy.“

Before making his disagreement with Mbeki explicit the author claims his friendship with him by stating: „I am a friend and admirer of Mbeki.“ One wonders whether Mbeki would also consider himself as „a friend“ of the author? The exclamation of „friendship“ with someone is a strategy, which allows the expression of criticism to a degree, which would otherwise not be possible.

While he asserts that Mbeki's approach is „hard to accept“ - a rather timid expression which leaves it open whether one eventually accepts it or not - he brings in, even in the same sentence, another person who is much easier and less controversial to criticise: Bob Geldof who just happened to make a statement the day before, which, in the opinion of the author seems to come close to President Mbeki's opinion. Mbeki however, cannot say so because he is the President of the economically and politically most important nation on the African continent and highly dependent on goodwill and financial assistance from the US and other Western countries – and for exactly the same reasons the author cannot claim him to be the radical he seems to see in him. So Bob Geldof just came in on a tablet.

„Surely the African response to cruelty and oppression should be just as intolerant as anyone else's. This is not about blacks and whites, it is a moral issue. More black Zimbabweans have been driven off the land than white farmers; thousands of them have become refugees in South Africa's crowded squatter camps. The treatment handed out to Mugabe's opponents is every bit as bad as the harshest policies of apartheid.“

The author now comes closer to the point he had been building up throughout the text: a moral statement about what is right and what is wrong. Africans do not seem to have fully understood the basic lecture in civilisation studies - despite century long efforts on the side of colonialists and Western hegemonists: that cruelty and

oppression are wrong. Probably it proved an obstacle that the very same, cruelty and oppression, often served as teaching tools.

The author then points out that for him black and white are not the dimensions at play. The argument the author uses to underline his statement reflects not only a very awkward understanding of history but also of statistics: „More black Zimbabweans have been driven off the land than white farmers; thousands of them have become refugees in South Africa's crowded squatter camps.” That black Zimbabweans who used to work on the estates owned by white farmers outnumber the latter in numbers and were therefore more affected by the consequences of land occupations, which in their radical and politicised form started from the year 2000, is not further surprising - just as it does not really come unexpected that the number of white farmers who have ended up as refugees in South African squatter camps is zero. They have rather found their way to Great Britain or settled on a new farm in neighbouring Mozambique (which led a real advertisement campaign to welcome the farmers that Zimbabwe did not want anymore) or – for those fed up with Africa - on a farm in Australia or elsewhere in the world. So does the fact that black Zimbabweans have been affected in higher numbers and to a worse extent suggest anything else than that the more powerful ones managed to shift their power base more successfully than „their” dependants?

Ignorant cheering South Africans are then served with a comparison which they should understand: „The treatment handed out to Mugabe’s opponents is every bit as bad as the harshest policies of apartheid.” By equalling the system of Apartheid with „bad treatment of the opposition” the author intends to revoke emotions, and he certainly does. Whereas the treatment of the opposition in Zimbabwe is undoubtedly bad, it is something very different in nature from the institutionalised racism that constituted the system of apartheid.

„Of course, Mbeki is acutely aware of black opinion in his own country, where land ownership is every bit as emotive an issue as it is in Zimbabwe. Hundreds of white South African farmers have been attacked and even killed by their black workers. It is a potentially volatile situation which needs the most delicate handling. But that should not preclude taking a robust and public position on the side of justice and democracy, both of which are absent in Zimbabwe - not least because the softly-softly approach has achieved so little.”

The author then makes a turn in presenting President Mbeki’s attitude as something somehow understandable in the light of „black opinion in his own country where land ownership is every bit as emotive an issue as it is in Zimbabwe.” However, he does not mention the highly unequal distribution of land and the deep poverty in

which big parts of the South African population are living - the unresolved legacy of centuries of discrimination. What he does mention is one of its manifestations: the attacks and killings of white South African farmers by „their black workers“. The use of the possessive pronoun indicates a certain irritation by the author as to the lack of feeling of belonging on part of the black farm workers who apparently seem to perceive the lines of alliances differently.

While the author acknowledges the difficult political situation in which South Africa's Mbeki finds himself, he asks him to take a clear position and does not leave any doubt to which would be the only acceptable one: on the side of justice and democracy. These are values, which are hard to contest and thus always useful in making an argument indisputable. The author adds that after all the approach chosen by Mbeki has „achieved so little“ – without of course does mentioning that the approach chosen by Great Britain and what is usually termed „the Western“ world achieved just as little.

„There is, too, a strong, pragmatic reason for taking a tougher stance. Yesterday Tony Blair chaired the first meeting of his Commission on Africa; finding solutions for the economic crisis facing so many African states is one of its aims. That must mean convincing Western investors that there is a measure of stability on the continent; that Africans are just as keen to build democracy and modernise their economies as any Western nation. So long as Zimbabwe is supported rather than condemned by African nations, the West will continue to question just how sincere they are in their intentions.“

For all those who still long for more arguments the author now turns to the economic reasons. While he seems to be at least aware that what he terms „moral issues“ might be principally open to debate, economic arguments must even convince the most stubborn African. The article as a whole seems to be rather directed at those Africans who dared to cheer Mugabe than to the Times reader as it seems to be written from the presumption that readers of The Times hold an opinion which does not vary considerably from the one held by the author.

Right now as Tony Blair is chairing „his Commission on Africa“ – again it is the use of a possessive pronoun which does not leave any doubts of who is the agent in this scenario – Africans should not be so stupid as to undermine the efforts by the leader of one of the most important nations in general and with an interest in the Southern African region in specific.

Tony Blair and „his Commission“ do not aim at anything less than „finding solutions for the economic crisis facing so many African states“. But instead of being grateful and happy that Africa is finally considered important enough to be worthy the formation of an own Commission headed by the Prime Minister of Great Britain

himself, Africans do not want to play the game – a game whose rules are, as it always was, determined by the players in the „West“. At least the author’s reading of the process does not suggest that Africans have much agency in the process to be put in place by the „Commission on Africa“.

The only way to lift African economies out of their misery are Western investors, who only come if Africans pull themselves together and behave nicely – and let history be history.

The West is taken as the measure of the game when the author advises Africans to show that they are „just as keen to build democracy and modernise their economies as any Western nation.“ I do not want to comment much about the way the author makes use of the words „democracy“ and „to modernise“ but there is little doubt that he has not thought about a possible heterogeneity in meaning and alternative perceptions of these terms. The use of these terms in development discourse has been criticised by more than one author. And especially in the case of the term „modernisation“ criticism of the linear conception of development which it carries has become commonplace.

Towards the end the message is again made more explicit: African nations do have to condemn Mugabe, then they might hope to be taken serious by Western investors, which is the only way to save their economies. That it was intervention in the form of imperialism and colonialism and continued unequal treatment on the „open markets“ in the post-colonial period, which actually brought them into crisis, is gentlemen-like concealed. Under the prevailing neo-liberal paradigm, which is wonderfully reflected in the writing by people such as Linklater, it is at best considered as naïve to take a more historical perspective on issues such as the crisis in Zimbabwe. In conclusion the author urges „black Africa“ to make up their mind on Mugabe, not without adding what the correct choice has to be:

„Compromising with dictators is neither morally right nor politically sound. It is time for black Africa to make it clear where it stands on Mugabe. And that cannot include rising to its feet and applauding him.“