



## Summary

### Tales of Freedom - Tsitsi Dangarembga from Zimbabwe

**Background:** Writer and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga is considered one of the most influential voices on the African continent far beyond her home country of Zimbabwe. In her books and films, she breaks the silence on social taboos and raises universal questions of justice. In doing so, she describes the challenges faced by African women caught between tradition and modernity and the constraints of ethnicity, age and social class. This year, Tsitsi Dangarembga received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for her diverse artistic work and her courageous political commitment.

Against this background, the German Africa Foundation, the Association of Friends of the Ethnological Museum, the Humboldt Forum Foundation at the Berlin Palace and the Ethnological Museum Berlin invited to a reading of Tsitsi Dangarembga's works followed by a talk with the author at the Humboldt Forum.

#### Highlights:

- Zimbabwe had achieved political independence, but this was due to the practices and ideas of the former colonial powers and the new nation state had not been able to fulfil the hopes of the population.
- Even today, many people are still in a state of insecurity and uncertainty, caused by oppression and exploitation, which is reproduced by the logic of the global economy, among other things.
- Global society still shows different reactions to and sympathies with traumatic experiences - depending on the origin of the people who experienced the trauma.
- Storytelling, which enables communication between individuals, is central to international understanding.

#### Welcome Remarks

**Prof. Dr. Lars Christian Koch,**

Director, *Ethnological Museum Berlin*

**Dr. Uschi Eid,**

President,  
*German Africa Foundation*

#### Reading

**Abak Safaei-Rad,**

actress

#### Talk

**Tsitsi Dangarembga,** Winner of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade and

**Prof Dr Manfred Loimeier,** Professor of African Literatures in English,  
*University of Heidelberg*

#### Closing Remarks

**Christine von Heinz,** Deputy Chairwoman of the Association of the *Friends of the Ethnological Museum Berlin*

After Abak Safaei-Rad had read a passage from Tsitsi Dangarembga's book "*Nervous Condition*" - the first part of the trilogy of novels about the adolescent main character Tambudzai, who is searching for female self-determination and her place in the (post-) colonial society of Zimbabwe - Prof Dr Loimeier spoke with Tsitsi Dangarembga about her works and her artistic work.

Prof Dr Manfred Loimeier first discussed the temporal context of the individual books: The colonial period (*Nervous Condition*), the period of the struggle for independence (*The Book of Not*) and the period of post-independence (*This Mournable Body*) of Zimbabwe. Tsitsi Dangarembga explained that in choosing this time period, she did not want to reflect Zimbabwe's history and progress at all in the character of her novel character Tambudzai, but rather to portray a typical Zimbabwean woman who tries to live a good life but is confronted with numerous social, societal and economic challenges. She chose to set the story in the period from Zimbabwe's colonial to post-colonial era because of the dramaturgy of the setting, which gave particular expression to the story about oppression, self-determination and how to deal with it. The effects of the chosen period can still be seen in Zimbabwean politics and society today; much of the hope that sprouted with the gaining of independence has since faded, Dangarembga said. So far, the new nation state has not been able to fulfil the hopes of the population for a better life. Although Zimbabwe had achieved political independence, this was also due to the practices and ideas of statehood exercised by Western colonial powers over decades, Dangarembga stressed.

### ***Nervous Condition***

With the title of her first book, *Nervous Condition*, she picks up on this very circumstance, Dangarembga explained further. The title alludes to the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who defined Nervous Condition as the will to submit to the promises of colonialism. She agreed with this, Dangarembga said, adding that a Nervous Condition generally describes the condition of indigenous people; a condition that is uncomfortable and causes both physical and psychological stress, a condition full of uncertainty and insecurity, where one's well-being is at risk. Unfortunately, Dangarembga continued, this condition still describes many parts of the world today, especially those once colonised by Western colonial powers. This is reflected, for example, in the global economic system, where the exploitation of some parts of the world for profit is still common practice today.

### ***This Mournable Body***

In the following part of the discussion, Prof Dr Loimeier elaborated on the metaphor of the wounded body that runs through the trilogy of novels: Tambudzai's cousin Nyasha who suffers from bulimia/anorexia in the first book, the sister Netsay who loses her leg in *The Book of Not* and finally the title of the last book, *This Mournable Body*. Tsitsi Dangarembga explained that the trauma of the bodies Loimeier had listed was symbolic of the trauma of the Zimbabweans caused by the colonial powers. Trauma is the central theme of her books, shown through the wounded human body, which determines how life - and trauma - is experienced. However, her intention behind *This Mournable Body* is not to talk about the trauma experienced by the body

itself, as is often assumed, but about how (global) society reacts to the traumas of different people. In doing so, she wants to show that there are still drastic differences in the perception of and sympathy for experienced trauma - depending on the origin of the person who has experienced the trauma. At the same time, with the choice of her main character Tamudzai, whom she herself would describe as a rather unpleasant character, she wants to make it clear that all people, even those who may be perceived as difficult, have the same value and deserve to be mourned.

### **Art as a central means of international understanding**

Tsitsi Dangarembga's artistic work and commitment extend far beyond her novel trilogy; she is also a filmmaker and promoter of art and culture. With the *Institute for Progressive Arts* founded by Tsitsi Dangarembgas and the *International Images Film Festival for Women of Harare*, Prof Loimeier addressed only two forms of her socio-political commitment. When asked what goals she pursues with her work, Dangarembga replied that for her, the focus is on giving people the ability and opportunity to tell stories - whether in the form of books, plays or films. For her personally, storytelling is the most important way of communicating across borders and cultures. Nowadays, stories have the power to carry individual experiences, impressions and perspectives into the world and to share them with other people. This kind of communication - at the level of individuals and not at the level of government between states - is central to mutual understanding and can thus make a key contribution to international understanding. This kind of communication is all the more important in view of the fact that the self-interests of state representatives are often in the foreground at government level.