

## “Embracing Opacity” Interview with Ntone Edjabe (Chimurenga Magazine)



Ntone Edjabe is the founder and editor of **Chimurenga**, a literary magazine produced in Cape Town focusing on contemporary African politics and popular culture. The title Chimurenga refers to the Shona word for 'struggle' as well as to a popular music genre in Zimbabwe. In this conversation on July 14<sup>th</sup> 2011, Edjabe looks back at the **first decade** of publishing Chimurenga and speaks about the **philosophy** underlying the publication. His current project, The Chimurenga Chronicle, takes on the form of a newspaper backdated to the week of May 11 – 18 2008, the period marked by the **outbreak of so-called xenophobic violence in South Africa**. In an effort to shift the perspective away from the confines of nation-states The Chimurenga Chronicle is produced in cooperation with independent publishers **Kwani?** in Kenya and Nigeria's **Cassava Republic Press**. The newspaper will be released on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, the day known in South Africa as **“Black Wednesday”** since the historic day in 1977

when the apartheid regime declared 19 Black Consciousness organisations illegal and banned two newspapers. Subtitled **“A speculative, future-forward newspaper that travels back in time to re-imagine the present”**, The Chimurenga Chronicle engages with the call of theorist **Achille Mbembe**, to “imagine new forms of mobilization and leadership, to create an ‘intellectual plus-value’ based on a ‘concept-of-what-will-come’”.

**The first edition of Chimurenga was published in 2002. Approaching your 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a literary magazine, what are some of the changes and continuities characterising the Chimurenga publication?**

There was no clear strategy behind the project in the beginning, and I think that is perhaps one of the reasons why we are still here. Initially, Chimurenga was conceived as a single book. I was working as a journalist and together with a couple of journalist friends I was producing a lot of material without having a platform to print it. In print, there was simply no space for longer features, more analytical and more reflective writing. Since I was and still am very involved in music, I asked some of my friends as well as some of my favourite writers in the music scene to submit texts that related to music and politics. The nexus of a lot of my work is where politics and popular culture intersect. In that sense Chimurenga is essentially about music and politics.

At first it was a completely personal initiative. I collected the texts and put them together. We called it “Chimurenga – Music and Politics. Music is the Weapon”. However, because there was no clear strategy behind it, everybody received it differently and some people thought it would be the first edition of a magazine. Since I distributed Chimurenga myself, at concerts and in a couple of bookshops, many people started sending their own writing, saying ‘I want to be in the next Chimurenga!’ By the time we ran out of copies of the first collection we already had enough material from readers for a second edition, “Chimurenga. Volume 2”. Back then, the strongest piece of writing related to the idea of self-anthropology: re-discovering home and re-examining ones’ own home base, so we chose “Dis-covering Home” as the title.

By that time we started to realize that we couldn’t always wait for people to respond to our publication so that we could in turn respond to them. We therefore decided to plan four

editions in advance and although we were practically functioning like a magazine for the first two to three years we did not consider Chimurenga to be a magazine in a strict sense. This approach set the tone for how the publication was and still is. It was very organic from the beginning. Now, after doing it for ten years, it has clearly become a strategy and a philosophy. We however always tried to remain as reflective as possible, to still be able to see what's working and what's not working, what's important and what's not.

**Your current project, The Chimurenga Chronicle, is conceptualized as a newspaper set in May 2008. For a newspaper it will however be quite heavy in size. Comprising close to 300 pages it will appear more like a manifesto. Did you want to work with the medium of the newspaper to deconstruct it?**

The newspaper is one of the aspects. The other aspect is our relationship with time. Whether time is perceived as linear or secular, depending on whatever philosophy one adheres to – my own sense is that we seem to be caught in these perspectives and that we don't engage with them enough. We wanted to play with the idea of time travelling, and we wanted to use the tool that is specifically invented to mark time and space, the newspaper, to then use that very tool to deconstruct both, the tool and our sense of time.

Although we created a newspaper which is set in 2008, and will be released in October 2011, we decided that we were not going to do a retrospective. We are saying instead, 'It is 2008, we are physically in 2008 and today we are producing the news of 2008 to engage with the colonial project of the newspaper'. Our sense of history, our sense of what is important and our sense of record are all marked by that medium. So yes, the project is partially to deconstruct the newspaper but not exclusively.

It is also about language. Newspapers contribute so much to the invention of language. For example, how we speak about a lot of issues is already predetermined by what newspapers decide to make an issue in the first place. Another aspect that we wanted to engage with is the crisis of May 2008 which spread across the African continent. For me, this event was much more significant compared to how it was being reported or analysed.

**The statistics of the pogroms in May 2008, initially targeting Zimbabwean refugees in Alexandra, Johannesburg, and then spreading rapidly, are rather well known. About 60 people died and 100 000 were displaced in the course of very few days. On the other hand, the reasons usually offered for the outbreak of violence still appear to be obscure. Which new perspective can the Chimurenga Chronicle offer in this regard?**

We wanted to go back into the moment to report and analyse not just the events themselves, but everything that was going on around the world which in some way contributed to what happened in South Africa. In this sense we didn't want it to be a South African newspaper. Creating a South African newspaper would trap us again in South African parochialism. We wanted to create a newspaper which dislocates itself, whereas most newspapers tend to locate themselves. The Cape Times is the Cape Times, the New York Times is the New York Times. They see everything from Cape Town or from New York. We wanted to create a newspaper which looks at everything from an analytical place, an ideological place and a philosophical place – not a physical place. This is in itself very contradictory because newspapers are in their foundation made to mark time.

Because our newspaper aims at both, dislocating time and space, we decided that it should have at least three different bases. Not in the sense of having correspondents but in the sense that the newspaper should be as relevant in Lagos and in Nairobi as it is in Johannesburg or in Cape Town. That is why we have an editorial room in Lagos as well as an editorial room in Nairobi. In the end, how we are going to read the newspaper here and how they are going to read it there, especially concerning aspects like slang and referencing,

is going to be challenging but that is the challenge of the project. I, nevertheless, think that 20 years into the era of the internet we should be better equipped intellectually to deal with ideas outside of the trap of place and time.

**While some commentators have called the events of 2008 a watershed moment for post-apartheid South Africa, others emphasize the persistence of everyday violence. How can the Chimurenga Chronicle keep the balance between emphasizing the exceptional and the structural nature of what happened three years ago and now?**

That is precisely what we are trying to do. If I can sum it up, for me, the Chimurenga project is about embracing complexity as opposed to the drag that is required of African thinkers, intellectuals and producers of knowledge to simplify things. The relationship with knowledge produced by Africans is always somehow towards simplicity because we are trapped in a logic of emergency. When there is always famine, misery and war it is impossible to think about going to the moon. As a matter of fact you can't think at all. Essentially, what Chimurenga is trying to do is to liberate us from this shut hole of relevance. But how can you do that when you also exist in that very demanding place? Because the crisis is not fictional, there is indeed famine and war. But there is also life. There is also innovation, thinking, dreams, all the things that make life. It's complex and our project is to articulate this complexity.

Now, it's probably difficult to articulate complexity without coming out obscure. I do however find courage in the work of people like Edouard Glissant. He spoke of the right to opacity and to me that is a very liberating idea. Although we have been publishing the magazine for some time before I engaged with his work, he certainly set a new path for what we are producing. We have started to embrace opacity, not running away from it. We do not always try to overexplain, overclarify and always justify our existence and say 'Well, the reason why we do this is because we are trying to liberate the mind' – No! Not that this would be a bad thing, but there is no absolute necessity for us to know why we are doing what we are doing. We are doing it primarily because we are alive. That was a very liberatory idea for us and it kind of canalized the ideas behind the design and the writings we take on. It made us better understand this kind of semi-obscure, our market strategy and our reluctance to be visible and not to be invisible either – because it's not about being invisible.

**Compared to academic journals and literary magazines, the newspaper format is a more accessible medium. Is the intervention of the Chimurenga Chronicle also an attempt to engage with a greater public?**

The newspaper is sometimes more accessible and sometimes less so, because it has commercial implications. But at the level of ideas and at the level of intent it is still a platform that is essentially public. Because it is sold on the pavement and not in a specialist bookstore a newspaper creates a very direct contact with the public. For example, when you are walking on the pavement and you see a newspaper poster. We wanted to engage with that aspect and we will have a whole poster campaign as part of the project. We are going to produce newspaper posters and put them up in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Lagos and Nairobi, one a month before the newspaper appears. The Chimurenga Chronicle will eventually also be available on the street when it appears. It will lay next to the Star, the Cape Times and the Nation in Nairobi so that we can really work with that public space.

**What will the slogans on your posters say? The term xenophobia, for instance, is still very contested in the South African context, leading to the sceptical formulation of 'so-called xenophobic violence'. How do you approach this challenge of language?**

I think there are a couple of things related to this matter. Firstly, this is a society where racism is institutionalised. Here you either have more access or you have less access to

institutions. It's not a historical matter and it's not necessary a legal one either but it's functional. In this context one has to be able to identify the specificity of xenophobia – and I think it does have a specificity. Over the past three years the South African state has put a lot of effort into cancelling the term xenophobia out of its language and out of public and critical discourse. It has tried to emphasize the criminal elements of the attacks and by doing so it has depoliticised the issue. It has become more of a class concern with the rhetoric being one of 'poor people behaving like poor people'.

I, however, think that in this context there was a clear identification of the Other – recognizing him or her through language, practice and history. That practice is linked to racism, of course, and it is linked to colonization and to how people were marked by it. All of that is not a particularly South African issue. Therefore, in dealing with this theme we can't deal with it as a South African newspaper. Because what does it make of Côte d'Ivoire? What does it make of the Biafra war in Nigeria? What does it make of Kenya? We can use xenophobia as an umbrella theme but we could just as well use tribalism or racism. The question I am asking is, 'Can we move away from semantics and really deal with the common denominators between the situations?'

Lastly, although xenophobia is the main theme of this newspaper, the word xenophobia is in fact very seldom used. Among the 350 000 words published in this Chimurenga edition xenophobia is probably used five times, because that is not the issue. The themes that we explore are themes of borders, mental and physical borders. We will also look at aspects like the business of migration. For example, what are the major conglomerates – whether it is Western Union or the Visa system – which actually make money out of all these people, who leave their homes and go? We have not yet explored these issues, we just tend to talk about the poor migrant that dies in the Sahara. But when we talk about the desperation of refugees, who is actually making money out of them? What is that industry behind it? Somebody has to investigate these issues so that we can talk about them and move outside of the logic of emergency and the state.

**Up until today South Africa's history is often told as a story apart from the rest of the African continent. Is The Chimurenga Chronicle intended as a statement against this narrative?**

For me, the event of 2008 was South Africa's official entry into the postcolonial. That is what this newspaper attempts to mark, essentially. The argument of South African exceptionalism has absolutely no basis any longer although the South African parliament will still understand itself as a very exceptional and hyperdemocratic space – but on the ground it isn't. We want to record the moment South Africa officially became an African country. Later we can argue about that, but we have to be able to mark this moment and to mark it strongly enough so that we can have broader conversations. Then only we can really speak about what is going on in other African countries as opposed to superficial debates along the lines of 'What is wrong with these Ivoirians, why can't they accept their president? And what is wrong with these Nigerians, why can't they find a job?'

We are not trying to do another bodycount or to show how bad South Africans are. As far as I am concerned they are not any worse than anyone else. What we continually try to say to South Africa is, 'Give up your super-human status, you are not super-human! The world convinced you that you are different from anyone else and now you got this image of yourself, but a super-human? No you are not!' After 2008 people asked themselves, 'How could it happen here?' I say 'it will happen here because you are part of the world, because it is happening everywhere!'

**There is an ongoing debate around alleged attempts from the ANC to limit the rights of the press by introducing the Secrecy Bill. How do you perceive this debate and what do you think of the current state of journalism in this country?**

There is some kind of paranoia concerning the press in South Africa. The newspaper here has for a very long time been dominated by a few groups on a cooperate level, but also by very few schools of thought. The whole idea of the fourth estate has given the newspaper powers that it never actually had. Now that ANC politicians are coming out, behaving like politicians and not like revolutionaries, there is an emerging paranoia with everybody suddenly talking about freedom of expression.

My sense has always been that in this country, no concept of the idea of freedom has been developed beyond individual freedom. Every time there is a crisis the first flag the intellectuals raise is this issue of individual freedom. At the same time there is no concept of communal freedom being developed. Freedom is been reduced to the individual level where everyone is equal and can do whatever he or she wants, whether you live in a township like Khayalitsha or in a suburb like Gardens, but that is nonsense.

The Chimurenga Chronicle is a way of dealing with this paranoia. When the ANC started threatening newspapers, the media started coming out and saying 'Oh, now you are behaving like African dictators, you want to control the press!' At the same time, in countries like Burkina Faso and Cameroon, there are far more stringent press laws in place. But in these places people find ways to participate and to subvert that system. I don't want to romanticise these cases but I want to rather highlight the fact that people there are not marching on the street shouting 'We want help!' – instead they are too busy finding ways to deal with the repression. It is in this tradition that we can find the emergence of the satirical press across Central and West Africa since the mid 1990s. That is where people started publishing subversive ideas in the form of cartoons and comics.

In South Africa, on the other hand, because there is such a thick conservative notion of how serious the press should be, when the tabloids started emerging five years ago, the response was 'you can't take these people seriously they are talking about witches!'. To me, that is completely backward and is not in any way an attempt to deal with reality. In this context we wanted to come out with a newspaper which is serious and therefore can't be dismissed as a comic, but which also deals with the ideas that these comics and satirical papers engage with.

**In contrast to Johannesburg with its popular reputation as an 'Afropolitan' metropolis, Cape Town still appears to be somewhat reluctant to embrace its identity as an African city. How do you position yourself with Chimurenga in this particular place?**

In a way we are both inside of Cape Town and we are not. Chimurenga would not exist outside of this building here, the Pan-African Market. That is very clear to me. In the first place, it was important for me to almost create a sort of an island mentality. We are both right in the middle of the city and at the same time we are outside of it. Here we have created a reality where brothers and sisters from the rest of the continent can come, play and be ironic with this construct. Here they can sell millions of reproductions of masks that are produced in factory style and imported into a space where there is a deep irony about this.

Secondly, it was important to find a way to make a living out of that and do it right in the middle of the city. Yet, we are still somewhat aside and we insist on speaking a different language. We are almost trying to drive it down the throat of this city that they are going to engage with us on our terms. We do not try to become a part of the Cape Town cultural

scene but at the same time we participate in it. There is so much transformation that still needs to happen here. The moment you set comfortable in this place you're lost.

**Questions by Moses März**

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