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SCHILLER

I first came across Schiller and his work in the aftermath of the revolution in Zanzibar in January 1964. Among the victorious insurgents was a left-leaning group called the Umma Party. There is a long tale behind the formation of this group and its aftermath, but in this context it is important to relate that members of the Umma had received military training in Cuba in the early 1960s, right under the eyes of the British colonial administration. The connection with Cuba meant that Umma had friends and supporters in the Soviet block of nations. After the revolution, the group had a very powerful influence in the new power-balance in the government, and it was no doubt through its influence as well as through expediency, that the post-revolutionary government invited or accepted the fraternal assistance of the ›socialist‹ group of nations.

So, very soon afterwards the newly-created army was wearing Cuban-style forage caps and marching the Soviet goose-step, ancient Soviet tanks were disembarked in our tiny harbour and their tracks tore up the tarmac roads through the town on their way to the army barracks some miles away. The People's Republic of China provided us with medical personnel, maybe doctors, in any case people especially trained to provide some kind of medical care, though they did not all speak a language anyone understood.

The British teachers, who were usually the privileged occupiers of secondary school teaching posts – presumably local teachers were not thought skilled enough for such demanding work – were all asked to leave, and in that scary time they were no doubt all happy to do so. When our schools re-opened some four months later than they should have done, we found that we had new teachers: from Ghana, at the time still ruled by Kwame Nkrumah, another friend of the socialist group of nations, from the German Democratic Republic, from Czechoslovakia, from North Korea. They were all of them kind, elegant people, but not all of them fluent in the languages most of us understood, Kiswahili and English.

The GDR contribution to our well-being did not stop with teachers. They also took charge of the security department with predictable results, restricted travel and identity cards. But they also opened a library, with hard-cover

gold-embossed titles by, among others Schiller, which was where I met the great man for the first time. I wish I could tell you which edition it was, or which translation, or even the title of the collection, but I was fifteen years old, and bibliographical details like that were not even visible to my untutored eye, let alone that they might be important. I can tell you that the cover boards were a beautiful metallic grey, and the title on the spine was gilded, and in that volume I read for the first time the poem ›Das Geheimnis‹, translated into English as ›The Secret‹, and which stayed with me until I came to write *Afterlives* 53 years later.

I had no idea when I first came across Schiller that I was encountering a figure of great fame, both in Germany and in other parts of Europe and North America. It was many years later that I came to understand that at certain historical moments Schiller was much more than a writer. He was a symbol. This event is in some senses a demonstration of that.

Nor was I aware at the time that there was some kind of rivalry to claim Schiller. National Socialist propaganda required him and his work to do service for ›the New Germany‹. In the meantime he continued to be seen as a representative of a German cultural ideal. Then he was also seen as a voice of resistance to a feudalistic social order. It is not a surprise then that I ran into Schiller's work in a library of the GDR information service, to whom he was already seen as a writer of revolutionary change. After all, he wrote ›Ode to Joy‹ in Leipzig.

But Schiller was not the only great poet I made acquaintance with at that time. We were playthings of the Cold War, and the United States of America also had its own mission in Zanzibar, headed by a diplomat who it was rumoured was part of the CIA and US government plot to murder Patrice Lumumba, then the Prime Minister of the Congo Republic. While there is no question of the existence of a government order to carry out such a plot, Frank Carlucci, the diplomat in question, has vehemently and successfully denied his involvement in it. What we know without question is that Frank Carlucci, the US Consul in Zanzibar in 1964, became Secretary of Defense for President Ronald Reagan in 1987.

Whatever else he did, he was, I suppose, the formal patron of the beautiful small library in the US Consulate in Zanzibar, which also housed bound and gilded volumes of poetry and prose, among which I came to read the work of Emerson, among others. I had not heard of this poet before, or of his many achievements as a thinker and activist. I confess that what I first found compelling about him was his name, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Someone with a name like that was bound to have something to say to the world, but it turned out he had a great deal more than a powerful name. His poetry and later his reflective

writing made a powerful impression on me, and I had the happy opportunity to study and teach his works in the years to come.

But of course Emerson was not the first American that I was coming to know something about. Nor was Schiller my first knowledge of Germany and Germans. Both Americans and Germans had been with us before.

The first stories I heard of what I have now come to know as Deutsch-Ostafrika were from my grandfather, as we called him. He was not really my grandfather, he was my mother's uncle, but we tend to be generous in how we name our relatives. Cousins become brothers or sisters etc., and it is not easy to find a term for my mother's uncle in Kiswahili. Much nicer to call him my grandfather. In addition, my real grandfathers on both sides of my family were gone by the time I was awake enough as a child. So he became our grandfather.

According to his story, and he was a slippery and resourceful man, he was conscripted as a carrier to the *schutztruppe*, the German askari, their African mercenary army. It is probably necessary to explain that all the mercenary armies in the 1914–18 conflict in this part of the world employed human carriers to transport supplies because the roads were not adequate to move supplies and weapons. I remember in particular his description of a train ride from Tanga on the coast to the interior, which was so heavily packed with people that the carriers travelled on top of the coaches rather than inside. Most memorably, he had many stories of the ferocity of the African mercenaries and the brutal discipline of their German officers. His were not the only stories of these brutalities, and in later years it was only too common to hear these stories repeated and to read them in the few sources that were available.

Deutsch-Ostafrika only existed from 1888–1918, a mere thirty years, but years of almost constant conflict between the German administration and native people, culminating in the Maji Maji rebellion in 1905. The official estimate of that rebellion was that 75,000 civilians died from famine and starvation. Even worse was to happen a decade later, during the 1914–18 conflict in Deutsch-Ostafrika. It is perhaps no longer possible to come up with an accurate figure of lives that were lost, of histories that were broken and extinguished and of agonies that were left behind in that time. It is regrettable that it is a historical episode which is little known about in the countries which orchestrated the worst atrocities that occurred in it, Britain and Germany. If we cannot arrive at an accurate figure of the devastation, we can cite an approximation.

According to official figures, 95,000 porters in British service died – nearly twice the number of Australian, Canadian or Indian troops who were killed in the entire war. In German East Africa, where figures were not kept, at least 300,000 African civilians are estimated to have died as a result of the conscrip-

tion of labour and the levying of food supplies, resulting in mass starvation among parts of the population. These people perished as a direct consequence of the authorities' conduct of the war, and exclude those conscripted for carrier service. This was an even higher death toll than that inflicted by German colonial troops during the suppression of the Maji Maji rebellion a decade earlier.

Much has been said and recently has been shown in Germany about the atrocities committed by the imperial German administration against the Herero and Nama people in South-West Africa. It is indeed regrettable that the tragedies inflicted on the people of East Africa as a result of European rivalries are belittled and forgotten, and the historical responsibility for these events is not accepted. I do believe that accepting responsibility for wrongs is the first step towards both understanding and reconciliation.

I grew up under British colonialism. Our rulers flashed past us in the streets or appeared in the feathery regalia they liked to wear on ceremonial occasions. In a sense, they were a fact of no significance in the life of a young person, just the source of dictates and regulations from a distance. Perhaps it felt different to people of my parents' generation, some of whom would have been children when the British came to take charge of our lives. When I came to meet them in person, briefly, it was as teachers for a year or so before independence, and as I mentioned earlier, the revolution sent them home the following year.

But whereas the British were this everyday presence, which grew increasingly intolerable as we grew up in the decolonising uproar, the German presence in our historical imagination occupied a different space. Whereas the British were with us in their quotidian fullness – knee-length stockings in the heat, grim faces even at the cinema, a tone of voice, when you heard it at all, that expected submission, senior police officers with their swagger sticks and coppery moustaches – the Germans were a myth, and their absence made the myth even more potent.

What was the myth? I am sad to say that it was a myth of implacability and cruelty, and I don't think it was one generated by the British when they replaced Deutsch-Ostafrika with their colonial dispensation after 1918. I have wondered about this, and I am sure many of you have done too, how the history and experience of German colonialism in Africa was so ferociously brutal. This wondering was one of the impulses behind my desire to write about the episode I have been talking about, the conflict in Deutsch-Ostafrika over the period 1914–18, which resulted in the novel *Afterlives*.

From a long time ago, even before I had published my first novel in 1987, I knew that I wanted to write about that episode in our history, when the Germans came to our part of the world and left us with such terrible memories.

It took me a long time to learn enough to be able to do so in a sensible way, and in the meantime there were many other matters to attend to. When I did so, Schiller came to mind and the experience of reading his poems when I was a teenager. In particular, I remembered ›The Secret‹ and its lament against the materialist ascendancy in human life but also its echoes of amicable melancholy, a bearable sadness which had resonance in the recall of conflict. The poem enabled me to advance matters in a practical way in the machinery of the narrative, but it was also a way in which I could remind myself and anyone else who bothered to read my account that myths are often an elaboration of a more complicated reality.

This has some bearing on the way I imagined the German officer in *Afterlives*. When people are required to be in the service of a cruel ideology, and have a sense of the meaning of the enterprise they are engaged in, and feel divided about what they are doing, this uncertainty may not be enough to make an individual make a stand. To do so would be to take sides against your community, against a common social identity or the social institutions which both protect you and sanction you. In this context, the division might be at odds with decades of self-representation and the representation of the object of an aggression, the European and the African. Late 19th-century European colonial practice in Africa had this in common, the racist differentiation between legal practice and colonial practice, where the colony was a police state governed by decree, and wherever expedient, by violence, so what was illegal in Germany was not in South-West Africa and Deutsch-Ostafrika. German colonial practice in Africa took this to an extreme.

I wanted the German officer in *Afterlives* to be this figure of silent inarticulate division, for whom even the mildest repudiation of the national duty was not possible, but he could not resist recognising the humanity of the young askari he took under his protection. As a way of signalling this, I made him a lover of the poetry of Friedrich Schiller, and as a way of signalling this further, I made him boast that he would teach the young askari German so he too could read Schiller. To connect him more firmly with Schiller, I gave him the home town of Marbach, which is also Schiller's, and where I am happy to be this morning.