

Interview: Professor Wamba dia Wamba

Professor Wamba dia Wamba (WdW) is a person well-known to CODESRIA, not only for having been the President of its Executive Committee from 1992 to 1995, but also for his scientific contributions. In recent years, several members of the African scientific community have been wondering about the motivations that encouraged this distinguished scholar to get involved in politics, and worse in rebellion. In the next few pages, we are reporting the interview that Professor Wamba dia Wamba, while very sick, granted us at his home in Kinshasa on 08 September, 2010. This interview was conducted by Noël Obotela Rashidi and Bernard Mumpasi Lututala.

In the interview, Professor Wamba dia Wamba defined the motivations that drove him to the rebellion, the role of the academic and researcher in African societies. He believes that beyond the analyses they make of society, the academic or the researcher has civic obligations. They should not be limited to describing, poverty for example, while watching helplessly the misery of the poor. Instead, they must engage in the dynamics of the movement, change, improvement of the situation. It is up to them to think about society and not politicians. And they must also convince policymakers of the necessity of the University and of Research in the governance of our states. Based on his experience in the rebellion, Wamba dia Wamba, noted that it is not by being involved in politics that a researcher could contribute to such a dynamics, but rather by creating structures that can influence politicians, including the university, think tanks, etc.

The key question was to know whether armed struggle was, for him, part of his “structures”! To this question, Professor Wamba responded that he had not ignited the rebellion and that with the agreement of people like Mwalimu Nyerere, he was rather seeking how to direct it to negotiations, the rebellion was a fact and it needed to be managed.

Interview conducted by
Noël Obotela Rashidi*
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Question: *Professor, the African scientific community, that includes most of your friends and colleagues, has for long been raising questions about the reasons for your active involvement in the “rebellion” in Congo from 1998 to 2002. For the continent’s academia, an intellectual of your standard could not contribute to such an undertaking. Would you please enlighten us and thus dispel their worries?*

WdW: Thank you very much for the opportunity you have offered me to reconnect with the community of researchers who are members of CODESRIA and others through this discussion. It is true that I had actively taken part in the rebellion against the ruling regime in DR Congo. Before talking about it, I must express my reservations about the attitude of an organization like CODESRIA. I expected CODESRIA to send researchers into the field to conduct investigations on such an involvement and the motivations for that rebellion. This would have helped us. But this was not done and, frankly, I felt like there was some hostility towards me. Yet, scientists such as Herbert Weiss and many others came to conduct research on the movement while I was in the rebellion. Weiss stayed in my house in Bunia.

Now let us come back to the question regarding my involvement in the rebellion. Since high school, I have always had a sense of political organization. When I arrived in the United States for my university studies, I was an activist in such organizations. In 1981, I returned to Congo (then Zaire) to conduct research on opposition movements in the years after 1963. After searching my luggage at the Beach Ngobila, security services found a text that I had written on “The Authenticity of Neo-colonialism: Ideology and Class Struggle in the Congo - Kinshasa”.

For them, it was a dangerous document which proved that I wanted to found a political party; which was not compatible with the standards of monolithic power of Mobutu. I was immediately arrested and taken to the underground prison at Camp Tshatshi in Kinshasa where I spent three months. This is where I understood the violence of the Mobutu regime. Those arrested were treated like animals. The interrogations were unimaginable torture sessions.

A lot of pressure was exerted from abroad for my release. I would note pressure from the United States, Great Britain and Tanzania. One of my professors in the United States, Francis Peter Drucker, was a friend of President Reagan whom he would phone every week to remind him of my case. In addition, pressure was also exerted by President Julius Nyerere on Mobutu.

Released three months later, I was not allowed to leave the country and was constantly watched. In the face of such harassment, a Black American working in Zaire gave me the recipe for the noose to loosen around me. Despite this, I still could not leave the country. Taking advantage of Mobutu’s visit to Arusha, President Nyerere asked him why he had kept me under house arrest while exam papers were awaiting correction. On his return, he kept his pledge to Mzee Nyerere to let me go.

The day of departure, I experienced my last hindrance at the N’Djili International Airport. My papers were seized by security services that seemed to ignore the exit permit that was issued to me. Several interventions failed to resolve the problem. A Major in the Army who arrived at the scene snatched the papers, took my luggage and led me into the plane, recommending me to stay in Dar es Salaam without returning to Zaire. Now I regret I had not taken the identity of this major.

From 1982 to 1991, I could not return to my country. In 1991, I went to Brazzaville. Mrs Sophie Lihau Kanza (May her soul rest in peace!) sent me an invitation to join her in Kinshasa, reassuring me about my safety. Her goal was to entrust me with

the post of Secretary General of the Party she had just founded. I declined the offer for non-compliance of procedure.

I returned to Zaire in July 1992 and I remained there until December 1992 as guest of the scientific world at the National Sovereign Conference (CNS). I largely contributed, with other faculty colleagues, to the coherence, the drafting of the basic texts and I prepared three important documents, including those relating to national reconciliation, to secessions and to the rehabilitation of Pierre Mulele. The CNS failed. After this forum, I went back to Tanzania.

The Rwandan genocide occurred in 1994 and things began to move in the Great Lakes region. But I felt, for the first time, the irresponsibility of the academics that we are. Indeed, we hustled at the University of Dar Es Salaam (UDSM) to produce a statement on the genocide in Rwanda. Yet, this statement was made public not on behalf of a UDSM organization, such as UDASA, because then Tanzanian Prime Minister was reluctant to support such a statement, according to colleagues.

In 1996, I was in Denmark when the rebellion by Laurent Kabila began. The latter was not on good terms with President Julius Nyerere, for he kidnapped two American students and demanded ransom for their release. Nyerere believed he was not serious.

On 16th November, 1996, former Prime Minister of Tanzania, Rashidi Kawawa, the stepfather of Kazadi, an aide to Kabila, brought the latter to Butiama to meet President Nyerere. He needed the support of the latter. There, Kabila explained to President Nyerere that his struggle was aimed at chasing Mobutu from power. He gave the impression of being sincere, and Nyerere was impressed by his words, because the region was tired of the intrigues of President Mobutu.

Friends, at the request of Nyerere, asked me to write a paper on how to quickly reach a peace agreement so that there might be no bloodshed in Kinshasa. I asked them to tell Mwalimu to invite, through the person of a Tanzanian Cardinal, Msgr. Monsengwo, who understood the situation better. Yet, Kabila urged Mwalimu not to arguing that he was also a Mobutist. The course of events might have changed if this personality had come to discuss with him. And in December 1996, I returned to Dar es Salaam. There, I

often saw Mwalimu. He urged me to be a candidate.

In late June 1998, Jacques Depelchin, then Cabinet Director of Deogratias Bugera, Board Member of the ADFL, came to DSM, I introduced him to President Nyerere. He briefed him on the real situation on the ground. Following this briefing, he stressed the need for both of us to go to Kigali where opponents were gathering. We left and I was mandated to pass through Kampala to see President Museveni to obtain necessary regional involvement so as to avoid the mistakes of the first rebellion. I asked Jacques Depelchin to precede me in Kigali while I stayed in Kampala awaiting the meeting with President Museveni, then on tour in northern Uganda. I met his Minister of Security. Meanwhile, things moved quickly. And I soon got to Kigali, from where I was taken to Kabuga, where Congolese opponents were holding a meeting. From the first meeting, I was elected moderator. A memorandum of understanding had been developed. And on this basis, the board of RCD was to be elected. After withdrawing, I was elected unanimously by members present. Previously, Vice-President of Rwanda, Kagame had allegedly convened all his security staff in the presence of two Congolese, Kamanji Emmanuel and Bizima Karaha. During this meeting, he allegedly said that I was his candidate because I belonged to western Congo, and because of my academic reputation, my being married to an American woman and the support of former President Nyerere.

The first steps of the Movement were marked by several dealings. We had to go to Lusaka, via DSM Airport where we had to meet Mwalimu, because Zambia, which was assuming the vice-presidency of the Commission on Defense and Security in the SADC, objected to military intervention, while Zimbabwe, which held the presidency, was committed to it. It was also to discuss with the Secretary of SADC. From Lusaka, we went to Pretoria where I met with President Nelson Mandela for a one-hour tête-à-tête. His recommendation consisted in promptly ending the war.

In December 1998, at the OAU meeting held in Ouagadougou, I met several Heads of State. Then I went to Tripoli where I had two successful meetings with Khadafi and sought his intervention in order to urge Kabila to come. The latter arrived in Tripoli the next day with Yerodia. Kabila refused

to meet the rebels abroad, but asked Yerodia to meet me. In my turn, I refused this option. Finally, Bizima and Yerodia held a meeting that went wrong. Bizima adopted a haughty manner and expressed himself in English instead of French. The two weeks spent in Tripoli were unsuccessful.

The Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) was to experience an internal stir. I made an end of year speech which displeased those I called the people who ruined the country and it caused discomfort. To dispel this atmosphere of unease, we were asked to go to Kampala to reach a compromise. Reading the text of the speech translated into English, President Museveni found interesting elements in it. He decided to send us first to Kigali. Before going there, he addressed the leaders in these terms: "Do you think the region which made Mobutu quit will tolerate again another Mobutist in Kinshasa?"

Under the leadership of President Bizimungu, the Kigali meeting lasted from 2:30 pm to 7:00 am! Kagame attended it until midnight. I was reconfirmed in my position as chairman.

Back in Goma, at the meeting of the members emerged the idea of a possible transfer of the headquarters every time we advanced in the country and we thought of Kisangani. As Jean-Pierre Bemba wanted to settle there, I was sent to Kisangani to meet him to negotiate an agreement on compliance with occupied zones. From Kisangani, I made some decisions that displeased and fueled the tension in Goma. Indeed, after learning that some members had bought villas in Kampala and opened accounts in the US, I decided to ask members of the Movement to state their assets. I commissioned an international financial audit and informed Kampala and Kigali. I decided the retention in Kisangani of a percentage of the income raised from our territory instead of sending it to Goma. I also decided to transfer the headquarters of the movement to Kisangani, taking into account the sentiment expressed at the last meeting of the members that I chaired and which re-elected me unanimously. And I appointed an acting deputy Secretary General of the Movement.

Another point of contention was around my close guard. I wanted it to be made up only of Congolese. Bizima objected saying I had to consult James Kabarebe beforehand. Three options were proposed,

namely a guard made up only of Congolese, or Congolese and Rwandans, or Congolese, Rwandans and Ugandans. I chose the first option and it displeased Bizima who then recommended I ask James Kabarebe to help me. As I went to Kisangani on Kampala's proposal, I was to have a guard made up of three trends (Congolese, Rwandans, Ugandans, under the leadership of the latter). The guard that came with me, as it was composed of Tutsis, refused to be under the leadership of the others. They deserted, supposedly on the recommendation of Commander Buki. Following their departure, seen as a dismissal by myself, I was accused of being anti-Tutsi. I was strongly criticized by Nyarugabo. I had to go and explain the situation in Kigali, on Museveni's recommendation.

After being successively received by Kagame's Director of Cabinet, Wilson Mazimpaka and Patrick Nyanvumba, the head of military security, I was taken to Kagame. I remained steady and sincere, stressing the fact that criticizing a Tutsi did not mean criticizing the Tutsi community.

Question: *Ultimately, what was your mission within the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD)?*

WdW: I found myself in the RCD with a regional mandate to promptly reach a peace agreement. This mission was supported by Nyerere, Mandela, Chiluba, Mkapa and Chissano. Unfortunately, within the Movement, there were some problems as a result of inadequate analysis by the political leadership. Politics was not perceived as a well thought out matter. We wanted to get to Kinshasa quickly and the rest would follow. I was for political rather than military victory at any cost.

Moreover, there was the problem with the Rwandans who actually intended to control the movement and did not seem to support separatist stances and later with some Ugandan officers, too interested in supporting not the movement as such, but selected Congolese; and they seemed to support the idea that the Congolese on borders (people from the east, Mbusa for instance) understood problems more than those coming from the interior. Some were interested in the resources. Congolese who could bribe them were more tenable. My group was opposed to that.

With a view to forming a national army, I wanted to prepare our soldiers at

Lumumba College in Kisangani. Without my knowledge but with the permission of Gen. Kazini of Uganda, Rwandans entered the college to find the so-called "genociders". This was aimed at incriminating me to be in cahoots with the Hutu genociders and find a reason to kill me. They could not prove it. In Bunia, I wanted to bring all former soldiers of Zairian Armed Forces scattered in the Ituri forest area and those who were in the gold mines to reintegrate into the army which was being trained. The Ugandans did not want this category of members.

In Kisangani, relationships with Goma had deteriorated. The Six Day War in 1999 had begun with the antagonism between the RCD/Goma (Rwanda) and RCD/Kisangani (Uganda). We must acknowledge that South Africa had played a dark role on this issue, especially by its Foreign Minister, Mrs Zuma, regarding for example the investigation report by Silwamba which claimed that RCD/Kisangani no longer had popular support.

Question: *As a scientist, what is your perception of such a situation?*

WdW: I believe that academics have civil obligations. In such a situation, when they see that they have the opportunity to help end the war, they must commit themselves. I thought, naively perhaps, that a region having a revolutionary tradition could have calibrated people on the ground. None of this happened. I thought there would still be people thinking beyond the war. From a cultural standpoint, there was an absence of structures capable of enabling people to organize themselves for society to cope with the crisis in time. I thought a lot about cultural traditions about how the "Justice and Peace Committees" set up to end the so-called ethnic war, should have operated.

Question: *Don't you think that you joined the rebellion with outdated ideas of 1960? Haven't these ideas failed because they are inappropriate today?*

WdW: While not in the same pattern, most people committed without a specific project and programme. Actually, we did not engage in rebellion with outdated ideas. Which one for example? Mulelist did not fail because it lacked political ideas, as he said, but a core military capable of confronting Mobutu's rabble army. People failed to take account of the experiences of the 1960 rebellions. I will give the example of Kabila who remained long

in the rebellion, but could not formulate a coherent vision. The Tanzanian security service put me together with him, with the idea to formulate something like a vision. We spent four hours together, with no output. Each time, he would reply: "This is a moment's notice." Maybe he did not want to do it at that time. Then Nyerere came to Congo, I had arranged the visit with the people of the ADLF, including Bugera. Once back, Mwalimu said that what they thought by supporting Kabila was not borne out. "Nobody was born a statesman. With the support of the region, we can help him become one." This was the basis of the support. I consider that our project to (1) bring Kinshasa to the negotiating table, and 2) organize an inter-Congolese dialogue to politically resolve the crisis, was successful.

Question: *How do you see the Congolese society today?*

WdW: The Congolese society must develop. Because of its potential, it must reach the top. Scientists should reflect on it. Intellectuals are the eyes of the Congo onto the world. It is through a *think-tank*, for example, that we can organize a concerted action of intellectuals to be able to exercise a beneficial influence on the country's management. In our country, the academics fail to help change the world because they fail to convince policymakers of the necessity of the University, for example; that is to say, the necessity of their intellectual work. Without a true and financially fed research program, what is the worth of a university? In a sense, too, a society that is unable to maintain an accumulated wisdom, because the elderly die early or are made homeless and do not write, will not go far. Today is it wisdom, rather than intelligence, that will help us solve global problems.

Question: *If so, how do we persuade politicians of the importance of research?*

WdW: It is not by doing old politics, but by creating structures that can influence politicians. However, with no voice within the system, nothing can work. Scholars pit their strengths against scholars, and politicians pit their strengths against politicians (*nganga na nganga; mfumu na mfumu*). However, it is necessary for the academic agenda to have an autonomy vis-à-vis that of politicians, without resulting in a situation where we do research in a boat that capsizes. The remaining question is: how to politically put science in power of society? A double

scientific supervision of the people and politicians. Scientists have the obligation to guide the Nation, and the society. To do this, they must be in the dynamics of change, make the national vision more contextual. They are expected to respond to the concerns of society and bring appropriate responses. In our country, the scientific considerations are not involved

in the structuring and organization of work, especially political work. And yet, it is necessary for the process to be influenced by scientists. Hence, the need to establish think-tanks, among other structures, which facilitate knowledgeable debates. The country is not out of the heart of darkness yet, alas!

Notes

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