

We almost take art for granted

Emily Achieng Akuno, born in 1962, is Professor for Music at the Technical University of Kenya in Nairobi. She is the president of the »International Music Council« of UNESCO. For 30 years she has been researching how the arts bring about social change. She is currently a guest researcher at the Department of Cultural Policy at the University of Hildesheim. At Kulturcampus Akuno shared knowledge in the field of arts education together with further researchers from Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria and 20 doctoral students from UNESCO Chair in »Cultural Policy for the Arts in Development«. They are working in an international network on the question of the effects of the arts for society and what frameworks the arts need to fulfil its task.

By Isa Lange (Interview and Photo)

72

DIE RELATION



What changes do you want to make through your work?

The creative industry in Kenya has a lot of young people, who are not trained in the creative subjects.

For most of them, their level of General education is also pretty low. So I'll be working on ways of getting them from their basic level to get some formal skills and knowledge to improve their output and thinking.

This will allow them to be creative and to benefit from the outcome of creativity. I want to ensure that arts – all the creative subjects – play an important role and are recognized in the country as equal players in the economy.

That does not always happen. But the creative sector employs so many young people – they have new ideas. But they don't have a channel through which their work can be improved or developed and packaged, so that they can live on it. In Kenya we are used to musicians and artists dying poor. We don't want that anymore. My focus at my University in Nairobi is to have opportunities to make sure that the generation of young artists knows how to do their art but also knows their rights. They can put a price on their work and defend themselves against inappropriate payment for what they do.

You are working together with researchers from the Department of Cultural Policy at University of Hildesheim.

Together we want to strengthen the academic exchange about cultural policy, cultural management and arts education.

A medical doctor can heal people, an architect can build houses. What role does an artist play? Are artists merely entertainers? Can society, whether in Germany or Kenya, renounce artists?

THE GREATEST MEDICINE THAT WE ALL HAVE IS THE EXPRESSION OF OUR EMOTIONS, WHICH THE ARTS ENABLE US TO DO. THOSE WHO ARE TRAINED IN THE ARTS ARE TRAINED NOT TO BOTTLE IN NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND FRUSTRATION. WE HAVE TO FIND WAYS OF USING THAT HUMAN ENERGY. IN A WORLD CHARACTERIZED BY SEGREGATION AND STRIFE, MUSIC CAN RESTORE SANITY AND CREATES COHESION.

In my country music is so abundant, there is so much of it, that we almost take it for granted. Unfortunately we don't realize how important music is. The medical doctor repairs people physically – the artist does the same on multiple spheres, especially emotionally. We as humans perhaps give more value to what we can see with our naked eyes. The artist repairs people. In a world characterized by segregation and strife, music can restore sanity and creates cohesion. That is healing that goes beyond »a person«. The greatest medicine that we all have is the expression of our emotions, which the arts enable us to do. Those who are trained in the arts are trained not to bottle in negative emotions and frustration, but to find ways of using that human energy. That is one of the significant effects of the arts which is totally underrated and downplayed.

Which challenge will you work on next?

We have not focused sufficiently on training of artists. In terms of economic empowerment: How many young uneducated people make their living from medicine, nobody! How many young uneducated people make their living from theatre? Thousands! The qualification matters. We need to recognize that a general training in the arts is important for the general population. Additionally there should be a specialized education for professionals in the arts. There is a need for training performers, creators and innovators in the expressive art forms, specifically music, theatre and film. Training for arts business and planning is also needed. One example of the innovative things and ways of the youth can be seen in a popular comedy show filmed live in various locations. Young people present song, dance, comedy, short skits, a mixture of art forms. Today, even smartphones are used to capture footage for short films. Similarly, students of design generate games and animation from seemingly very basic equipment.