Congolese Medal Cross in Gold for two Professors

For the first time the highest civil distinction of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been awarded to a German and to his Congolese project partner: Gerhard Bringmann (Würzburg) and Virima Mudogo (Kinshasa) are honored for the foundation of a world-wide unique cooperation project.

It is the "Médaille du Mérite Civique 1ère Classe" (Civic Medal First Class) in Gold of the Congolese People. For the first time this high distinction has now been awarded to a German-Congolese team: to Gerhard Bringmann, holder of the Chair of Organic Chemistry I of the University of Würzburg, and Virima Mudogo, chemistry professor at the University of Kinshasa and alumnus of the University of Würzburg. The gold medals were donated last Friday in Kinshasa, by the Chancelier des Ordres Nationaux, Général Shulungu Nembeso Otoko.

The Congolese State President honors the professors for a cooperation project whose core entity is the Excellence Scholarship System BEBUC. By this program, outstanding young Congolese are being supported at schools and universities. The scholarship program gives hope that now, for the first time after long years, there will be a rising new generation of young excellent Congolese professors. These shall give a strong impact on the renewal of the universities and on the reconstruction of the country.

Start of the Collaboration

Gerhard Bringmann and Virima Mudogo have known each other for nearly 20 years. Their scientific collaboration started out in January 1993. A few years before, Bringmann had come to Würzburg as a young full professor of chemistry, while Mudogo had just left Würzburg: After his PhD thesis in physical chemistry with Prof. Friedemann Schneider, he had returned to his home University of Kinshasa.

Initially, their collaboration only focused on the search for bioactive compounds from tropical plants. From this, many joint publications resulted, even a first German-Congolese patent. Together, they even discovered a new plant species in the Congo. They named it Ancistrocladus ileboensis, after the site of its discovery near the Congolese town of Ilebo. Today, these joint investigations are imbedded in the research network SFB 630 ("Agents against Infectious Diseases"), of which Bringmann is the coordinator.

First Cooperation Contract in 2003

A new dimension came into the collaboration in 2003, when Bringmann and Mudogo initiated the first cooperation agreement between the Universities of Würzburg and Kinshasa. They rapidly put life into it - with joint teaching, scientific symposia, the donation of books and scientific instruments (more than 40 tons!) and their expedition to the Congo.

“All this, however, could not be sufficient to address the certainly largest problem: the unfortunate blend of over-aging of the academic staff, the sinking quality, and the hopelessness at Congolese universities”. To break this vicious circle, he initiated with Mudogo in 2008 a privately financed excellence scholarship program, BEBUC. It shall give outstanding young people in the Congo the chance to study rapidly and in depth and to pursue an academic career.

In the Beginning just four Scholars

The scholarship started out gently and modestly, only with bachelor scholars, exclusively at UNIKIN, and only in two subjects, chemistry and pharmacy, and initially with just four scholars. But rapidly it proved most successful: The scholars developed well, and first personal, direct sponsors could be found who agreed to finance complete scholarships, so that in 2009 already BEBUC could be extended to further subjects and to 16 scholars.
Since 2010, the German foundation Else-Kröner-Fresenius-Stiftung has been supporting the scholarship system. Meanwhile reinforced by numerous partners, Bringmann and Mudogo could extend the program to all subjects of the UNIKIN and could, furthermore, include a second university, the Catholic University of Graben in Butembo in the East of the Congo – now with a total of 24 scholars.

Re-Entry Scholarships of Particular Importance

A year later, in 2011, the whole scholarship 'pipeline' was completed: For 31 scholars (27 in Kinshasa and four in Butembo) there were now bachelor, master, PhD, and even re-entry scholarships. The latter are an essential part of the scholarship concept, to prevent the emigration of scientists and the bleeding out ('brain drain') of the Congolese universities.

In 2012, finally, the scholarship system was extended to eight Congolese universities, and, in addition, to three secondary schools and a primary school. All these twelve institutions have, since then, become contract partners of the University of Würzburg. So there are at present nearly 70 BEBUC scholars from all subjects and from all steps of an academic career – school, bachelor, master, and PhD studies, and the re-entry. It is Bringmann’s and Mudogo’s vision and concrete plan that by 2018 the program shall be extended to the entire Congo.

A Non-Profit NGO Organizes the Program

The scholarship system is organized by a non-profit NGO (www.foerderverein-uni-kinshasa.de). It was founded three years ago and has already ca. 550 personal and nearly 20 institutional members.

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