

THE FEVER

„The insanity of colonial legacy“
Süddeutsche Zeitung

A FILM BY
KATHARINA WEINGARTNER

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2019

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Press kit

THE FEVER

**A FILM BY
KATHARINA WEINGARTNER**

A 2019, 99 min, English, Luganda, Luo, Mandarin
with Engl. subtitles

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World premiere: DOK Leipzig International Program

dasfieber.com thefevermovie.com



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The Fever

***The Fever* portrays the fight against malaria in East Africa as a case study in greed, courage and self-determination.**

Covid-19 has put the world on hold. But with malaria, which has killed more people than all other diseases and wars on Earth combined, it's business as usual, or even worse: Deaths are expected to double due to the lockdown in African countries. Black lives apparently don't matter.

What if there was an herb that could defeat the deadly malaria parasite and save a thousand lives per day, *every day*? One you could grow in your backyard, which costs next to nothing, and could be easily available for everybody in need?

Sound good? Not everybody thinks so. Big pharma corporations fear for their profits. Donors like the Gates Foundation capitalize on high tech science. They prefer the old colonial ways, exploiting a continent already ravaged by poverty and death. And in the Global North nobody, including the experts at the World Health Organization, seem to believe that Africans have their own solutions.

In *The Fever* three East Africans reject this dispossession. They counter the spectacle of Black suffering, which Western documentaries often perpetuate and show how local solutions could save millions of lives – from malaria and possibly other pandemic diseases as well.

Interview

Bert Rebhandl with Katharina Weingartner

How did you decide on the complex themes which are addressed by The Fever?

On a journey to Saigon I found a passage in the guide book about *Artemisia annua*, a plant from the same family as mugwort. It said this was a Chinese herbal malaria remedy that could well have been the reason Vietnam won the war. If that's right, I thought, then this is a good subject for a movie. But I had no idea where this idea would take me.

How did the project develop move on from there?

At the start we were interested mainly in the relationship between tropical medicine as military medicine and colonial wars of conquest: Would the colonisation of Africa even have been possible without quinine? The European soldiers, missionaries and farmers died in huge numbers from malaria while the local inhabitants were semi-immune from the age of five. The parasite possibly was an important defence against



invaders and also an immunity trainer. From there we moved on to the current situation in Sub-Saharan Africa – and the millions of children dying there year by year. We realized the crisis is too urgent to do a historical documentary.

You also discovered just how significant malaria is to international politics.

Mao and the Americans were locked in a decades long arms race in malaria research. Ho Chi Minh asked Mao for support during the Vietnam War, but he didn't ask for weapons, he asked for malaria medication. In 1972, the later Nobel Prize laureate Tu Youyou and her team extracted the active ingredient artemisinin from the herbal compound artemisia. It is still the most effective malaria medication around. But the West was not ready to allow China to cash in on these drugs. Too much profit could be made from malaria. At that time people already knew about resistance to the most common medicine, chloroquine, and that it was only a matter of time before a huge epidemic broke out. Before 2000, many millions of Sub-Saharan African people died, nobody knows the number.

The film keeps coming back to its core theme of artemisia as a herbal alternative. What is so special about it? Artemisia is a herbal remedy employed all over the world,



and is used for lots of purposes in China. A closely related medicinal herb, *Artemisia afra*, is found across Africa, and is also an ancient malaria medication. It basically grows in any location, no matter how barren. As herbal expert Rehema Namyalo so eloquently explains in the film, artemisinin is just one of 240 active ingredients in *Artemisia*. The parasites that survive contact with artemisinin develop resistance because they have only been exposed to one active ingredient. Compared to 240 ingredients that's child's play for malaria parasites. Novartis knows this very well, and denies it. The WHO knows it, but claims there is still no resistance in Africa and blames it on *Artemisia* tea, which is scientifically not proven. There is going to be a medical catastrophe in the near future because there is still no other medicine.

Another problem seems to come from the underlying pattern of West African politics relating to health: it is too technocratic.

The great downfall of technocratic institutions is that basic health services are decimated. And the research contracts go to the West, while African researchers are only allowed to contribute material. "We are nothing but field workers, porters. It's a form of neocolonialism," says Dr. Richard Mukabana, Professor of Biology at the University of Nairobi.



Why have you had your sights on Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation for so long?

We had originally planned to interview Bill Gates. He and his money are the secret rulers of the malaria world. As the biggest private donor to the WHO, he determines global health policy in a truly anti-democratic process. In 2008, the Gates Foundation boasted at a press conference that malaria would be wiped out by 2015. There is no longer any trace of this promise on the internet. Science simply laughed about it. Nobody is laughing anymore, because there is no way of avoiding Gates any longer. Eventually we realised that we were no longer interested in these big words, even though the media is full of it. We wanted to unambiguously be on the side of the people who actually live with malaria, battle against it, unseen and unheard by the world. They should be allowed to shape their own fate. So we felt it right to simply present silent images of the robotic world of glass palaces, funded by the sufferers of malaria and their dead children. The Novartis Campus in Basel is, like the Gates Foundation in Seattle, almost made for the camera, to show this contradiction.

Why did you decide against telling the story from a western perspective, as your German and Swiss coproducers wanted to force you to do?

You still see the same old postcolonial patterns in most documentary films: Africa is used only as a backdrop for the deadly combination of suffering and adventure. With a complex subject like malaria, the temptation was to concentrate on all the scandalous global interrelationships. This is what the Global North is used to seeing, but the people impacted by malaria would once again would have been seen as mere victims and statistics. Its absurd that 90% of research money stays in North America and Europe when 90% of actual cases are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Those affected by the disease are rendered voiceless and refused the medicine they need. It was important to us that our protagonists were presented as self-reliant empowered actors who are able to battle the illness by themselves.



Protagonists

The single mother of three kids runs a little clinic in her hometown. She works relentlessly to spread the knowledge about how everyone can grow the herb *Artemisia annua* at home and prevent their families from getting malaria.

“When the majority of the local community uses Artemisia to treat themselves, the government will not get taxes, like they do with imported drugs. Because there are non charged on herbal medicine.”



Rehema Namyalo
herbal practitioner in Masaka,
Uganda

After studying mosquitos in the Netherlands and the US, Richard returned to Kenya in order to find ecological and local remedies against malaria. However, he soon realized that research grant donors like the Gates Foundation have no interest in supporting community based low-tech solutions and African scientists in general.

“We are nothing but field workers, porters. It’s a form of neo-colonialism.”



Richard Mukabana
professor of biology at
the University of Nairobi, Kenya

Patrick conducted a clinical study on a flower farm next to Lake Victoria with over a thousand workers about the efficacy of the herb Artemisia taken as tea. The result: malaria cases were reduced by 85%. He has proven that Artemisia could save millions of Africans - if Big Pharma would finally stop pressuring the WHO in banning its use.

“When I started this study about malaria prevention I was warned by many people. That I might get killed by those who profit from the drug.”



Patrick Ogwang

pharmacologist at Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Uganda

Almost all the kids in his class have lost a family member to malaria. He educates them in prevention methods but financial struggles in many families make it impossible for lots of students to take care of health problems.

“We don’t have enough food. Most of the children suffer from malaria, but their parents would rather look for something for them to eat than take them to hospital.”



Paul Mwamu

teacher in Nyabondo, Kenya

The Fever

A 2019, 99 min

with: **Rehema Namyalo, Richard Mukabana, Patrick Ogwang, Paul Mwamu**

Written and directed by: **Katharina Weingartner**

Producer: **Markus Wailand**

Assistant Director: **Weina Zhao**

Director of Photography: **Siri Klug**

Sound: **Patrick Becker, Richard Fleming**

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Story Consultant: **Monika Bernold**

Text: **Noviolet Bulawayo, Pat Blashill**

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Color Grading: **Gregor Pfüller**

Sound Design: **Peter Braeker**

Sound Mixing: **Florian Beck**

Poster Design: **Karl Ulbl**

Accounting: **Susanna Harrer**

Production Assistant: **Natascha Gertlbauer**

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Katharina Weingartner

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Katharina Weingartner is a filmmaker and radioproducer, currently living in Vienna after many years in New York. She creates films and radio programs, books and exhibitions about urban culture and politics, feminism, pop- and consumer culture.

- 1989 *Lips. Tits. Hits. Power? Popkultur und Feminismus*
Folio (book edited with Anette Baldauf)
- 2001 **too soon for sorry**
feature length doc about the US-prisonindustrial complex
and the War on Drugs
- 2001 *shopping*
exhibition at Generali Foundation, Vienna (with Anette Baldauf, Dorit Margreiter)
- 2003 **Knock Off. Revenge On the Logo**
45-minute doc about life in the glow of global superbrands
(with Anette Baldauf)
- 2008 **Sneaker Stories**
feature length doc about streetball and sneaker culture
- 2010 **The Gruen Effect**
60-minute doc about the architect who invented the shopping mall
(with Anette Baldauf)
- 2019 **The Fever**
feature length doc about the fight against malaria in East Africa