

LEARNING BY DOING
Building a Black Library

BEATRACE ANGUT OOLA
IN CONVERSATION
WITH MILLICENT ADJEI

BEATRACE ANGUT OOLA:

What was the original impulse to found ARCA (Afrikanisches Bildungszentrum, African Learning Center) and the Fasiathek?

MILLICENT ADJEI: We founded the non-profit association in Hamburg in 2010/11 focusing on empowerment and critically questioning the term ‘integration’. We asked ourselves whether integration really meant participation—or whether it was more about assimilation into the majority society. We developed various formats such as discussion rounds, political events, and exhibitions that addressed these very topics so that people could actively participate. We also collaborated with other African organizations and initiatives in Hamburg. Within the framework of the UN Decade for people of African Descent (2015–25), we sought to break through the dominant historical narrative with our own

perspectives. The initial idea was to create a Black archive—a Black authors’ library in Hamburg. In the beginning, we had neither the financial resources nor our own space. But we started systematically collecting books by Black authors and spreading the word through our personal networks. In 2020, the opportunity arose to use a space in the fux cooperative (formerly Viktoria-Kaserne). Funding remains difficult, but thanks to the support of volunteers and certain groups we were able to build the archive.

The Fasiathek is a low-threshold reference library that strives to be accessible to all. We deliberately focus on Black perspectives and alternative systems of knowledge instead of reproducing the classic categorizations of conventional libraries. Our collection includes books in many European as well as African languages, and we value the diversity of formats: novels, non-fiction, multimedia works, translations.

What is central to us is making Black histories visible and tangible from within—without having them generalized, objectified, or narrated by others.

BEATRICE: How do you work with memories, cultural heritage, biographies, and everyday knowledge in the Fasiathek? What role do oral tradition, artistic practices, or collective remembrance play in your formats?

MILLICENT: It makes a decisive difference whether I tell my own story and represent my own perspective or whether someone else does it. That is precisely why it was important for us to make Black perspectives visible and present. Much of what I learnt from a white-European viewpoint about Black histories was either inaccurate or incomplete. With the Fasiathek, we created a space in which Black, Afro-diasporic, and African voices are at the centre. Anyone can come, read, compare, and engage with Black perspectives. Our collection reflects the multilingualism of the African continent and its diasporas. Many Black authors write in French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, or German—languages shaped by colonial history. At the same time, more and more works are being translated into, or written directly in, African languages. We find this especially important: to be able to read in one's mother tongue opens up new pathways to knowledge.

We also consciously refuse the classic categorizations of conventional libraries since Black authors often weave knowledge into novels or hybrid literary forms. Instead, we organize the library solely by author, setting a clear signal for an alternative system of knowledge.

Beyond reading, oral transmission and artistic practice play a central role. We host readings and poetry, music, and storytelling events. We see podcasts as a modern extension of oral tradition: people narrate and record their stories and these are then made accessible to others. What matters most, however, is that not just a single voice is heard, but many different ones. That way it becomes clear that we are heterogeneous and yet share common ground. In this way, we resist the danger of the 'single story', as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has described it. Every story is subjective and unique and it is precisely in this diversity that the strength of Black memory culture lies.

BEATRACE: How does your work connect with practices of memory and archives on the African continent or in other diasporas, and what forms of knowledge circulate between these spaces? How do they influence your work in Germany?

MILLICENT: It is especially meaningful when authors whose lives and socialization are rooted in the African continent visit us in Germany and engage critically with historical and current themes. These voices are absolutely invaluable. They inspire us, open up new perspectives, and remind us that none of us are free from the influence of our own socialization here in Germany. It is vital to make many voices heard and create spaces for multiple narratives. It is not the single voice that counts, but all of them together. The strength lies in listening, in mutual inspiration, and in collective storytelling. At the same time, we aim to disrupt the widespread prejudice that people on the African continent are not interested in their colonial history. That is simply not true. Anyone engaging with literature by Africans quickly sees that there is intense critical reflection as it pertains to these histories. And yet this false narrative persists. We must also recognize that people live under different conditions. Someone who is hungry cannot occupy themselves with politics; they are focused on survival. This holds true everywhere. So it is natural that not everyone has the same level of knowledge or the same urgency to engage deeply. But this is precisely why our work is so important: we create spaces where different perspectives are heard, voices that tell more than the official, generalized stories that appear in schoolbooks or are validated by supposed authorities. It is not easy work—but it is our motivation and our stance.

BEATRACE: What structural hurdles do Black institutions face when they engage in remembrance work and what would need to change so that Black, Afro-diasporic, African memory work is taken seriously and sustainably established?

MILLICENT: Every time we invite authors from the African continent, it becomes evident how strongly systemic inequalities operate. While some people can travel without difficulty, others face immense barriers: expensive visa applications, complicated bureaucratic procedures, and often the visa is denied in the end. The money is lost. For me, this system is an expression of a capitalist mechanism that preserves inequality. As an institution, one is constantly forced to position oneself to perform and to prove one's legitimacy in order to be taken seriously. The core issue is this: the assumption still prevails that only the voices of those with certain academic titles count. This automatically devalues other perspectives. If, for example, a housewife's opinion is dismissed because she is 'only' a housewife, that is unacceptable. For she, too, can contribute political arguments that are deeply relevant to society as a whole. Every voice that shares experiences or suggests new ways forward is important and enriching. This denial of value is what we must break.

It is of course easier to stick to what has always been done: Professor X has done this research, therefore only his results count. But we know very well that every piece of research stems from a subjective standpoint—a thesis to be confirmed or challenged. I can find books that support my thesis, and others that contradict it. That only one position is then treated as objective and thereby validated is deeply problematic. It denies individuals outside the academic system their knowledge, their experience, and their authority to interpret. It implies that we are incapable.

I believe our experiences, perspectives, and narratives to be immensely valuable. They continue the tradition of oral storytelling, which is a central element of African knowledge systems. Knowledge is not only passed on through books or lectures but also through storytelling, through sharing lived experience—sometimes in everyday situations, like sitting peacefully under a tree, or during casual conversation.

And this is where an interesting rupture in narratives emerges: In the past, Africans were disparaged as ‘lazy’ for sitting under trees. Today, I read in management magazines about how vital it is to take breaks, to pause, to practice *niksen* (Dutch for doing nothing) in order to think clearly again. What was once devalued is now hyped in the US or Europe. This example shows how knowledge systems are hierarchized and distorted, and why it is so crucial to take our own forms of knowledge and experience seriously and make them visible.

BEATRICE: What role does decolonizing public space play in memory work?

MILLICENT: Decolonizing public space is both vital and necessary. Renaming streets can serve as a beginning, as a visible sign that reflects the diversity of society. At its core, it is about shifting perspectives. The communities concerned must be actively involved in this process, since they carry knowledge and lived experience. In doing so, the remembrance of anti-colonial resistance fighters can be honoured and made known.

For example, an information plaque should be installed that explains what the street was previously called, why it was renamed, who is now being commemorated, and who initiated the renaming process. Such visible markers ensure that everyone—including visitors and tourists—has the opportunity to engage with this history, to ask questions, and to continue their own research. Street renamings signal that society is willing to confront its colonial past and its present critically. They demonstrate responsibility, accountability, and recognition. For the communities affected, such acts can also bring a measure of healing on multiple levels. As Paul Gilroy, the British sociologist and cultural theorist, has noted, renaming streets can be understood as a form of *symbolic reparation*, sparking political and historical consciousness and encouraging broader awareness.