

RESEARCHING HISTORICAL
BIOGRAPHIES

Anton Wilhelm Amo & Kwasi Boachi

Workshop by
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The workshop 'Research on Sites of Learning and Remembrance of Colonial History' explored approaches to reassessing the German colonial past through sites of remembrance. It examined questions concerning the formation of cultures of remembrance and the visibility of colonial history in the public sphere. The workshop aimed to reflect on different approaches to reassessing the history of colonialism and on the challenges of presenting it within public institutions.

At the centre of the workshop were two Afro-German figures: Anton Wilhelm Amo, one of the first African philosophers in Europe, and Kwasi Boachi, an aristocratic civil rights activist who has been honoured in Germany as a pioneer of the rights of Black people both in Europe and in a colonial context. Andrea-Vicky Amankwaa-Birago provided insights from her research into their lives and reflected on the importance of an associated culture of remembrance. Both individuals were presented as key historical figures whose contributions have received sufficient recognition. Participants discussed ways to develop public commemoration of these figures and to secure their place within the broader culture of remembrance.

Sankofa and Collective Knowledge

A guiding concept in these discussions was *Sankofa*, a symbol from Akan culture that represents looking back to the past in order to shape the future. For Amankwaa-Birago, Sankofa serves as a metaphor for the process of remembering and learning. She emphasized that remembrance work should not just be based on institutional archives or official initiatives but should, above all, focus on the histories of the communities directly affected. A decolonial approach requires context-sensitive access to knowledge, as it is historically determined and inherently linked to the participants' positionality.

Remembrance and Representation:

The Challenge of Homogenization

The representation of colonial history was at the centre of the discussion. Amankwaa-Birago explained that research on sites of remembrance is not merely historical reconstruction but represents a transformative praxis. She emphasized the risk of a homogenized approach to remembrance in a decolonial context, which fails to do justice to the complex experiences of the affected communities. An important term

in this regard was ‘biographèmes’—an approach to biography that recognizes the fragmentation of life stories and the reconstruction of historical events.

New Sites of Learning and Remembrance: Practical Examples

The practice of renaming streets and squares was cited as an example of new sites of learning and remembrance in Germany. The renaming of a street and a square in Berlin after Anton Wilhelm Amo was highlighted as a successful instance of realizing an active culture of remembrance. Amankwaa-Birago also discussed projects such as the Library of Africa and The African Diaspora (LOATAD) in Ghana which serves as a platform for transnational cultures of remembrance and promotes resistance to the homogenization of history. These initiatives were presented as examples of the successful integration of decolonial perspectives into public remembrance culture.

The Politics and Economics of Remembrance

The discussion also emphasized the connection between the politics of remembrance and the economic conditions that shape remembrance culture. The role of Afro-diasporic archives and collective initiatives, which generate new spaces for remembrance and challenge the homogenization of historiography, was highlighted. Such initiatives are not just academic projects but also forms of activism that encourage society to question and change existing narratives.

Research Processes and Practices: Research as Resistance

Amankwaa-Birago explained her approach to research, which involves not only collecting archival material but also cooperating with others in order to gain a new perspective on the past. While researching Amo and Boachi, she encountered numerous fragments and historical gaps, which prevented her from developing a clear, unified narrative. This complexity was ultimately seen as a strength—an opportunity to develop a more differentiated culture of remembrance.

Report by Raphael Steinwandel

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd