

ELEVEN FACES OF WEDDING

THROUGH
THEIR STORIES,
LABOUR AND
ENDEAVOURS,
THEY ARE
CONTRIBUTING
TO MAKE
WEDDING
BERLIN'S
FAVOURITE UP-
AND-COMING
DISTRICT!



A MISSION OF JUSTICE

Justice Mvemba leads walking tours to share the grisly, real story behind Wedding's African Quarter. By Wanda Sachs

"I was shocked," recalls Justice Mvemba of the first time she visited the African Quarter in the Southwest of Wedding. "I expected Afro shops and African restaurants and that it would feel quite homey. But instead, people were looking at me like, what are you doing here? It felt very hostile." The 31-year-old is a petite woman with a buzzcut, a large smile and a mission to expose the colonial underpinnings of this area through a walking-tours project she launched earlier this year.

Mvemba came to Berlin in 2014. She spent her childhood and teenage years in a small village in South Germany after her family relocated from Congo in the early 1990s. Life in the province wasn't always easy. "We were the only Black family," she recalls. "It's other kids calling you the N-word and teachers not saying anything or using it themselves for 'illustrative purposes'. It's starting to be interested in boys only to realise they want nothing from you because they think you're ugly. That's the pain you'll always feel."

Berlin offered new possibilities. Mvemba took part in a friend's empowerment workshop for BIPOC refugees that concluded with a trip to the city's Afrikanisches Viertel. "I thought this would be a really nice way to end this workshop, maybe we would even have some African food," she remembers thinking that day. Instead, Mvemba was confronted with the unsparing remnants of Germany's colonial past, as the group was guided through Togo-, Otawi- and Kongostraße. The tour finally took on nightmarish dimensions when a local resident called the police to report a large group of Black and Brown people loitering in the streets. "It was shocking! I felt less welcome than in any other place in Berlin. I know that Marzahn or Lichtenberg are quite racist, so I try to avoid them. But to feel hostility in the African Quarter was completely unexpected."

"Then my brain started rattling: it's called African Quarter, but there are no Africans here. Did it use to be an area where people from African countries were brought? I kept thinking about what this place could actually be." She discovered that the quarter had been planned as a place to exhibit people from

Germany's colonies. This human zoo never came, but its legacy is still visible in street names like Togo- and Kameruner Straße and garden plots called 'Kolonie Klein-Afrika' and 'Dauer-Kleingartenverein Togo'. "As long as it's still legitimising and glorifying colonial crimes, especially through these three street names and the *Kleingärtenanlagen*, it's just not for us," Mvemba says. The streets Lüderitzstraße, Nachtigalplatz und Petersallee are named after the colonial perpetrators Adolf Lüderitz, Gustav Nachtigal and Carl Peters, who committed horrendous crimes and killed thousands of Africans.

After that first visit, Mvemba realised there were major gaps in her colonial knowledge and began conducting her own research. "Sure, I learned a little bit about colonialism in school, but this only ever concerned the English, American and French colonies. Germany's role was heavily downplayed, when, in fact it was the third largest colonial power on the African continent in terms of territory." Mvemba decided educating herself wasn't enough – she needed to educate others, too.

"I tried to work with associations that already did these tours but didn't put much effort in marketing them very well, which meant they were hard to access. That was all very complicated, so I thought, I'm gonna do it myself!" A friend put Mvemba in contact with Black Art Action Berlin (BAAB), who let her guide her first tour in October 2021. "The test run was successful, so I knew I could do it." In March of this year, she set up a website where people could book her tour. Since then, Mvemba has been helping Germany take a step towards coming to terms with its colonial past. "So many people who live here don't know the history of their neighbourhood. I'm hoping that at one point, enough people will be aware of the history that the issue can't be ignored anymore," she says and grins. "You know, education is power." ■

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