

Final Report: The Broken Crown – A Memorial for Bilille Ajame (Machbuba)

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Executive Summary

This report presents the final proposal for a new memorial project in at BTU dedicated to Bilille Ajiamé, also known as Machbuba. She was an Ethiopian girl, who was enslaved in the 19th century and was brought to Germany where she died when she was very young. Her story is almost forgotten, yet it represents a hidden history of colonial violence and racial oppression in Europe.

The proposal is called “**The Broken Crown**”, that addresses the memory, anti-racism, and new forms of public engagement with difficult history. The memorial is a pavilion shaped like a broken crown, surrounded by a field of stone blocks of different heights. The broken crown represents Machbuba’s false story, where she was portrayed falsely as a princess, but her real life was made of of displacement and suffering.

The report contains:

- The historical context of Machbuba’s life.
- The theoretical framework of memory culture and anti-racist urbanism.
- Comparative analysis with other memorial projects.
- The conceptual design, public involvement, and educational strategies.
- A financial plan and timeline.
- Reflections on anti-racist aspects

and long-term sustainability.



Figure 1: Conceptual image of *The Broken Crown*.
Source: Author (using GROK AI)

This project is not only a monument but also a **space for reflection and community dialogue**, engaging civil society, schools, and cultural organizations.

Introduction

All over Europe, you can see that cities are only slowly starting to face up to their colonial pasts and the racism connected to it. In Germany this has been even harder, because so much of the focus has been on the Holocaust, which of course is important, but it also left other parts of history almost invisible. The stories about colonialism, or about the Africans and others who were brought here as slaves or servants, usually don't show up in the streets or public spaces. If you look around most German cities today, there are still hardly any places that talk about African histories in Europe, and that silence says a lot. (Zimmerer, *German rule, African subjects: State, civil society, and colonialism in South West Africa.*, 2020)

The story of Machbuba is significant because it connects Cottbus to this broader history. She was taken from Ethiopia as a child and ended up as the servant of Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau. She died in 1840 at the age of about 17, and was buried in the cemetery in Muskau. For many years her grave was the only sign that she had ever lived in Germany. Today her grave is known, but there is still no public space that explains her story in the city.

This report proposes to create such a space. The “Broken Crown” memorial will not only commemorate Machbuba but also invite the public to think about how memory, racism, and silence are connected in our society.

Historical Context of Machbuba

Machbuba, whose Ethiopian name was Bilille Ajame, was born around 1825 in the Oromo region. She was captured during a period of war and slave trading and eventually ended up in Cairo (Miers, 2003). There she was purchased by Prince Pückler-Muskau, who brought her to Germany in 1837. Pückler described her in his writings as a kind of exotic companion, presenting her as an “Abyssinian princess,” though this was untrue.

In reality, she was a teenage girl, uprooted from her culture, placed in a foreign environment, and forced into a role she did not choose. Within three years she fell sick, most likely with tuberculosis, and died. She was buried in Muskau with an orientaling gravestone inscription that romanticized her story (Savage, 2021).

Her short life tells us so much about how Africans were perceived in 19th-century Europe, not at all as human beings with rights, but as possessions, curiosities, or symbols. Her memory was neglected for generations, was teased according to the people's like, made into a fairy tale to whom it benefited but recently activists and researchers have called for more public acknowledgment of her fate (Geary, 2018)

By creating a memorial, Cottbus has the opportunity to take responsibility for remembering Machbuba not as an exotic object but as a young beautiful woman whose life was marked by injustice.

Theoretical Framework: Memory and Anti-Racism

The theoretical background of this project is grounded in the concept of **cultural memory** and in the need for **anti-racist urban practices**. As (Assmann, *The Holocaust—a global memory? Extensions and limits of a new memory community.*, 2010) points out, cultural memory is not just about keeping old facts, it's really about how we build our identity today. What a city decides to remember, and just as much what it chooses to leave out, shows clearly whose lives and stories are treated as important and whose are left in silence.

In Germany, the Holocaust is remembered everywhere and in many ways, which is of course necessary, but because of this the country's colonial history and the racism tied to it were for a long time barely talked about. Only in the last years has this started to change a bit (Zimmerer, 2020, pp. 43-63) To think about Machbuba's story, then, is not just about remembering her as one person, but also about confronting this bigger issue of selective memory in society.

When we talk about anti-racist urbanism, what we mean is that cities need to take a hard look at the spaces they build and maintain. These places are never neutral; they either reinforce exclusion or they open up room for new voices and new forms of recognition. Urban planning and monuments can either reproduce stereotypes or offer opportunities for new understanding (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (S. Corcoran, Trans.). Duke University Press., 2019). A memorial for Machbuba cannot be simply decorative, it has to encourage reflection on the structures of power and exclusion that shaped her life and continue to shape society today.

The "Broken Crown" design reflects this theory. The crown is broken because memory itself is broken: her life was presented falsely as a royal story, yet the truth was one of exploitation. The brokenness symbolizes the need to confront illusions and to repair them by telling the truth. At the same time, the surrounding stone field creates a tactile and collective space, echoing the famous Holocaust Memorial in Berlin but scaled differently, to invite intimate engagement.

This project follows the approach of what (Assmann, 2010) calls **dialogical memory**, where monuments are not closed statements but open invitations for discussion. By involving civil society and schools in its programming, the memorial will ensure that Machbuba's story is not remembered passively, but actively integrated into the city's cultural life.

Comparative Case Studies

In order to develop the Broken Crown memorial, I studied other examples of how difficult and often painful histories have been addressed in public space. These comparisons highlight how architecture, storytelling, and civic involvement can reshape memory.

1. The Jewish Museum, Berlin

Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum is one of the most important examples of how architecture can embody loss and trauma. The building itself is designed as a jagged, fractured form, with "voids" running through it that represent the absence of Jewish life after the Holocaust. The museum does not simply display artifacts but forces visitors to experience disorientation, emptiness, and rupture (Libeskind, 1999). This approach influenced our pavilion: the broken crown is not only symbolic but also spatial, forcing visitors to confront fracture as part of memory.

2. The Nantes Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, France

The memorial is dedicated to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, which uses an underground corridor and glass inscriptions with the names of ships and protestor texts. It connects the local port city to global injustice, making visible histories that were often silenced (Vergès, 2010). This informed our strategy of linking Dresden to Ethiopia through Machbuba's story, showing how local and global histories are intertwined.

3. Indian Parallels – The Story of Mallichand and Rassundari

During the colonial period, several Indians were also displaced to Europe under exploitative conditions. For instance, records show that in the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian servants and slaves were taken to Britain and Germany, sometimes presented as "exotic" attendants in aristocratic households (Chatterjee, 2012). One striking example is Mallichand, an Indian servant brought to Prussia, who was paraded in livery as a sign of prestige but lived a life of dependency and cultural uprooting. Similarly, Indian women like Rassundari were subjected to forced domestic servitude in colonial households, often romanticized in Orientalist art but deprived of their autonomy (Seth, 2009).

These parallels remind us that Machbuba's story is not unique. She represents a larger pattern in which individuals from Africa and Asia were commodified as cultural symbols while their humanity was ignored. Including these comparisons broadens the memorial's scope: it is not just about one girl, but about a global history of racialized displacement.

4. Bristol's Toppling of the Edward Colston Statue, UK

When protesters from the Black Lives Matter movement pulled down the Colston statue in 2020, it showed very clearly how ordinary people can step in and change what a city chooses to display. That one act forced a shift in public memory. Instead of walking past a monument that praised a slave trader, the focus suddenly turned to the people who had suffered because of him, and their dignity became part of the story in the city space. (Andrews, 2021). It demonstrated that memorials are not neutral but contested, and communities have the power to demand change. This influenced our decision to actively involve local communities in Cottbus in the design and programming of the Broken Crown memorial.

Together, these cases illustrate that remembrance today is about **fragmentation, participation, and confrontation with uncomfortable truths**, not about glorification.

Conceptual Design: The Broken Crown

Current Scenario

The current site of the project has a plaque with the story and memory of Bilille Ajame, (Machbuba), which seems very hidden because of the trees and bushes and doesn't have an emphasized and welcoming entry. Because of which people are not even aware if such memorial even exists.



Figure2,3&4: Current site images few meters away from the current site. (Source: Author)

Proposed site:

The site for the project should be moved a few metres away in a more open area to mark it entry and visibility.

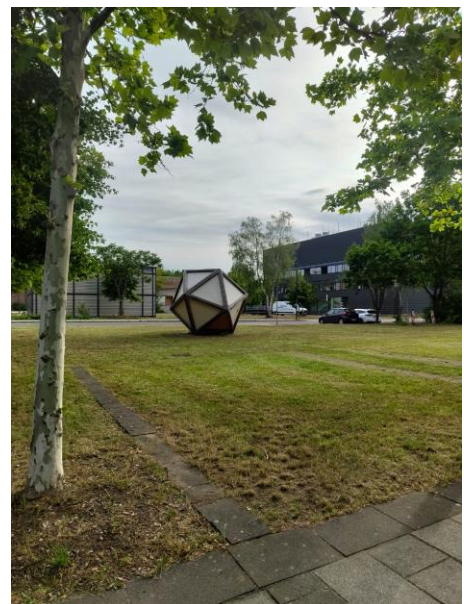
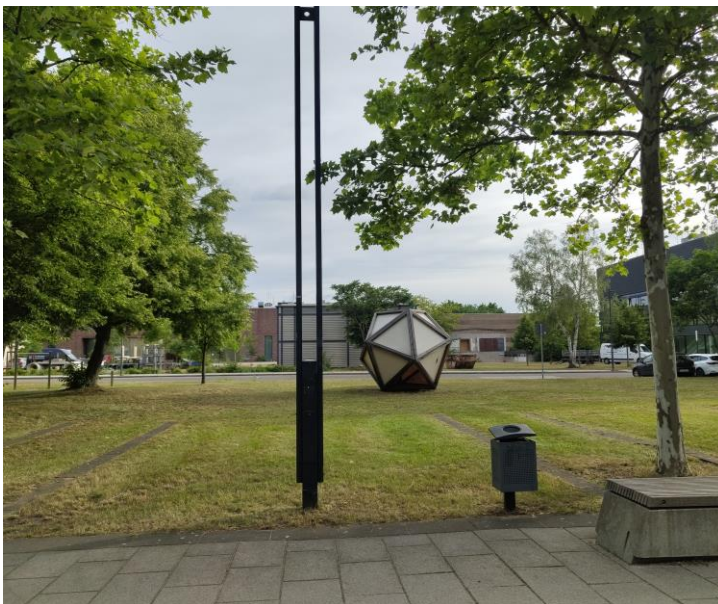


Figure 5, 6: Proposed site images few meters away from the current site. (Source: Author)

Proposal

The central design of the memorial is a **pavilion shaped like a broken crown**. From a distance, it looks like a fragmented circular structure rising from the ground, one story high. It is a two layered structured with outer façade with ornamentation and few swords to show the fake fairy representation and the inner soft façade to show her soft soul and inner resilience and where the sound echos with engraves fragments of her story. This represents the broken narrative of Machbuba's life: the false royal image given to her, and the painful truth hidden beneath.

Inside the pavilion, the space is calm and soulful. Walls are inscribed with fragments of text, her Ethiopian name, dates of her life, passages from letters, and testimonies about her in Amharic, German and English. The texts are not arranged chronologically but in fragments, symbolizing the gaps in her story. Visitors move between light and shadow, reflecting the contrast between myth and reality.

Crown's Material: The Broken crown will be made with corroded bronze or darkened steel bring the darkness and the corroded past.

Stone field: Surrounding the pavilion is a **field of stone blocks** of different heights, not higher than 800 mm. The stones create a landscape that people can walk through, sit on, or play around. They invite both reflection and interaction. The varying heights signifies the uneven voices: some stories rise, others are low and almost hidden, together forming a collective memory field. On the stones, there will be memory plaques, with the names, date and fate of African individuals enslaved, trafficked, or exploited in Europe while some stones will be left blank to represent the unnamed and unknown lives, who were exploited.

Night lighting: At night, there will be subtle light coming out of the edges of the inner façade, depicting the light from her soul and a warm glow that suggests her presence even in absence. The broken crown becomes visible as a silhouette, sparking curiosity and drawing people to the site. Even the brass plaques will be installed with lights underneath, to signify that the none of the lives are forgotten even in the dark.

In the stone field there will be **audio sensors** with different voices and stories of the unsaved lives with **QR coded** plaques linked to a digital archive with the whole real stories.

Seasonal changes: The whole place is a living memorial that changes with season and time. The crown's material changes colour due to oxidization throughout the year along with the stone field which reacts with nature (rain pools in crevices, leaves gather around stones and snow falling from above) symbolizing time, memory and erosion.





Figure 7: Conceptual sketch of the Broken Crown pavilion

Figure 8: Conceptual sketch of the Broken Crown pavilion with stone field and brass plaque and night light of the surrounding. Source: Author(made using GROK AI and photoshop)

This design ensures that the memorial is not only a static object but a living place that attracts people, encourages dialogue, and remains integrated in the urban environment.

Civil Society Involvement and the City's Approach

For the Broken Crown memorial to succeed, it must be rooted in civil society, not imposed from above. The involvement strategy includes:

Workshops with schools

The idea is to work closely with local schools, not just to tell students about Machbuba's life but also to bring in topics like colonialism and migration in a way they can connect to. It's not meant to be only lectures; kids should be part of it. For example, they can come up with inscriptions or small artworks that get added into the stone field. That way the site has their voices built into it, which feels more alive.

Migrant associations

Groups from African and Ethiopian communities around Cottbus will be invited in, because it wouldn't make sense to make a memorial like this without them. They can bring oral stories, cultural elements, and their own view of history. This is important so the memorial isn't just about Machbuba as a "symbol," but about people who are actually here now and part of the city.

Artists

We also want artists of color, both from Germany and abroad, to use the pavilion for performances or temporary pieces. It could be music, theater, or visual work. This way the place won't feel finished or "done," but will keep changing over time.

City role

The city of Cottbus has to be involved in the boring but necessary stuff permits, money, and linking the site to the city's other cultural events. The memorial should appear in the official remembrance calendar, and also work together with museums and cultural centers so that it becomes part of something bigger rather than just a lonely project.

This participatory approach ensures that the memorial is not static but remains responsive to public dialogue.

Financial Plan and Implementation

The estimated budget for the Broken Crown memorial is **€2.5 million**, covering design, construction, programming, and maintenance over five years.

Breakdown:

- Pavilion construction (materials, labor): €1.1 million
- Stone field (fabrication, installation): €400,000
- Lighting and electrical systems: €200,000
- Landscaping and site integration: €250,000
- Educational and artistic programming (first 5 years): €300,000
- Public relations and documentation: €100,000
- Maintenance fund (5 years): €150,000

Timeline:

- Phase 1: Public consultations and design competition – 6 months
- Phase 2: Technical planning and permits – 6 months
- Phase 3: Construction – 12 months
- Phase 4: Launch and first cycle of programming – Month 24

The financial plan includes funding from the city of Dresden, federal cultural programs, and private foundations. A fundraising campaign will also be launched to involve civil society.

(Note: The estimated budget is made with the help of AI according to the market data present on the web and the actual data might differ according to the present market rate.)

Public Relations and Educational Outreach

A memorial doesn't really work if it just sits there quietly. It has to reach people, invite them in, and get them talking. For the Broken Crown project, this part public relations and education is not something extra, it's really at the heart of how it will succeed.

1. Communication Strategy

The city will put together a campaign that speaks in more than one language—German, English, Amharic, and Arabic—so that different communities can connect to Machbuba's story. There will be posters in schools, museums, and buses, but also short videos and podcasts that explain the idea behind the Broken Crown. Online, younger people will be reached through social media, with things like Instagram reels or TikTok clips that use creative storytelling.

2. Guided Tours and Educational Packages

Like how the Jewish Museum offers school tours, this memorial will work with teachers to create lesson plans and worksheets that go with visits. These materials will be aimed at classes from grade 8 to 12 and will not only tell Machbuba's personal

history but also connect it to larger themes like colonialism, racism, displacement, and how societies remember.

3. Annual Commemoration Day

Every year on August 30, which is the day Machbuba died, there will be a public event at the pavilion. It could include music, readings, and open community discussions. This way, the memorial doesn't just stay as a structure but becomes part of the city's calendar, something living and shared.

4. International Networking

The project will also connect to wider remembrance networks, such as the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR). By linking the Broken Crown in Cottbus to other projects in France, the UK, or even beyond Europe, the memorial will show how memory and anti-racism are not only local issues but global ones.

Evaluation and Sustainability

A memorial should not only be built but also maintained and evaluated over time. We propose a **five-year sustainability plan** for the Broken Crown memorial.

1. Evaluation Metrics

- Number of annual visitors
- Number of schools and civil society groups using the site for workshops
- Feedback surveys from participants
- Media coverage and public debates generated by the memorial

These metrics will be analyzed yearly by a committee of city officials, civil society representatives, and academic advisors.

2. Sustainability Measures

- **Materials:** Upcycled material, Durable, low-maintenance stone and metal will reduce the costs.
- **Energy:** Lighting will be LED-based and partially powered by solar panels will help in energy efficiency.
- **Civic Ownership:** Volunteer “friends of the memorial” groups will help with programming and guided tours, ensuring that the site is not abandoned after its inauguration.
- **Adaptability:** The pavilion interior will be designed to host small exhibitions, performances, or dialogues. This flexibility ensures long-term cultural relevance.

3. Integration into Cottbus's Cultural Landscape

The Broken Crown will be included in Cottbus's official **city walking routes** and promoted alongside existing landmarks. Its story will thus become part of how visitors experience the city.

Conclusion

The Broken Crown memorial is more than a structure. his memorial is meant as a shared act of remembering, but also as a way of stepping into the debate about how history gets told in public space. By choosing to honor Machbuba, a young Ethiopian girl whose short life was marked by being taken from her home, exploited, and later misrepresented, the city of Cottbus is not only admitting to a past that is uncomfortable but also showing it has some duty toward a fairer future.

The main idea of the design is a crown that looks broken, set in the middle of a field of stone blocks. The broken crown shows both damage and strength at the same time, and the whole installation is meant to feel both striking to look at and heavy with meaning. It takes inspiration from ideas of cultural memory and anti-racist practice, but in a way that can be experienced by anyone who visits. By involving local groups, schools, and community organizations, and also by having a clear plan for funding and upkeep, the project is built to be something that does not fade away but stays alive and in use.

By drawing parallels to similar figures from India and connecting to international memorial practices, the Broken Crown situates Dresden within a global conversation on racism and remembrance. It is a project that acknowledges wounds but also builds bridges, reminding us that memory is not only about the past but about shaping the present and future.

As Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 2004) argued, “to remember is to do justice, through memory, to another.” The Broken Crown seeks to do justice to Machbuba and, through her, to all whose voices were silenced by history.

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