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“Black is the Ocean” exhibition opens in Zentralbibliothek Moment of silence held for refugees drowned at sea

Monday's opening of the exhibition “Black is the Ocean – History of (Forced) Migration and Flight”, which FilmInitiativ is showing as part of the AFRICAN DIASPORA CINEMA series in Cologne's Zentralbibliothek, included a moment that moved participants and festivalgoers alike. At a visitor's request, the programme was interrupted for a minute's silence in tribute to the countless refugees who have drowned in the Mediterranean. The 150 people in the tightly packed crowd rose from their seats in the library's event room. Many of the attendees were themselves from African communities or refugees who only recently have ended up in Cologne, and were invited by FilmInitiativ to the diaspora film series.

At the start of the evening, Zentralbibliothek director Dr Hannelore Vogt explained that events such as the exhibition presentation on themes of refugee flight and migration – which are also supported by the “No one is illegal” initiative and the Katholische Bildungswerk – belong to the concept of a “library open for all”. This manifests itself in events such as the “Intercultural Library Forum”, which will re-open on 31 October 2015 and is intended to provide a meeting and event space by and with refugees. She invited those interested, including all initiatives – notably refugee welcome initiatives – to collaborate.

FilmInitiativ's **Karl Rössel** pointed out that the cooperation with the Zentralbibliothek in the last two years has led not only to the presentation of exhibitions related to Africa, which reached numerous students of all ages, but also the “positive side effect” of the library having acquired for its collection more than 50 films by African directors, recommended by FilmInitiativ, thus comprising “a collection probably unparalleled anywhere in Germany, which anyone can rent”.

Togolese-French artist **William Adjété Wilson** arrived from Paris to share his large-format fabric paintings, which were the initial inspiration for the “Black is the Ocean” exhibition. They depict themes ranging from the (colonial) history of the slave trade to the current routes taken by refugees fleeing their homelands. He said that his works followed West African traditions, to preserve the memory of historical events (mainly royal dynastic imagery) for posterity with the assistance of paintings on cloth. **Serge Palasie**, of the Migration & Development department of North Rhine-Westphalia and curator of the exhibition, has added explanatory text placards and an accompanying brochure to the images of the cloth paintings. **Palasie** noted at the vernissage that many of the reasons refugees leave their homelands today can be traced to the fact that Africa was for centuries devastated by raw material export to Europe and thereby prevented from a self-determined economic development.

The spontaneous moment of silence was triggered by the film **ASMAT – NAMES IN MEMORY OF ALL VICTIMS OF THE SEA** from Ethiopian filmmaker **Dagmawi Yimer** and featured the director himself, who fled his homeland through the Libyan Desert and over the Mediterranean via the Italian island of Lampedusa. In the film, through associative imagery of the ocean and faceless bodies, Yimer calls out the names of 368 refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia, who travelled by boat and perished in one of the greatest tragedies that have occurred just off the shores of Lampedusa. A fitting musical complement was provided by Eritrean-born musician **Samson Kidane** and his band. These moments underlined the reasons why people from his homeland are forced to flee, in the face of situations that include inhumane conditions in prisons for members of the political opposition.

*The exhibition is on display until 10 October in the 3rd floor of the Zentralbibliothek.
Opening times: Tues & Thurs 10-20:00, Weds & Fri 10-18:00, Sat 10-15:00. Entrance free.*