

A library holding worlds

Georgina Collins reports on literary activism, language and translation in Côte d'Ivoire

Down a small, sand-scattered street in Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire, lies an innovative new library, 1949. This unique 'reading room' is the brainchild of literary activist Edwige Dro, who is an award-winning Ivorian writer and translator.

I met Edwige on my first visit to this West African country. I was carrying out literary translation research, and translation is a natural part of Edwige's life: she is multilingual, speaking Dioula and Yacouba (both Ivorian languages), standard French, *le français populaire ivoirien* (the country's lingua franca and very different from the French of France), and some Nouchi (Abidjanais French slang). She is also fluent in English, having lived for a number of years in England, where she studied English literature at University College Northampton. Edwige is therefore constantly moving between languages – both in her everyday exchanges and in her professional spheres – and she translates both into and out of French and English.

In addition, she'd already featured in *Africa39*, a collection of short stories by the most promising authors under the age of 40 from sub-Saharan Africa and the diaspora; she had been brave/crazy enough to do a TEDx talk on Literature and Development, and she was a co-founder of Abidjan Lit, a literary collective organising events across the city. However, plans for a library were still just a seed of thought when we first met.

A literature that reflects reality for Ivorian readers

Literacy rates have been historically low in Côte d'Ivoire and here, as elsewhere, technology means that fewer people are reading literature, and independent bookshops can struggle. In addition, for many people, books are simply too expensive, which is one reason why the slim Adoras romance novellas, published by Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes (NEI), are so popular: they are cheap enough for many people to afford.

Edwige's dream was to create a library that would focus on the literature of women from Africa and the Black world, while developing the language and reading skills of local children and cultivating the desire to read literature amongst adults; books that reflected the reality around them – which, she points out, wasn't the case for many of the books she herself read as a child. 'How



could I see myself in the white youngsters wearing woolly jumpers in the snow?' she asks. She wanted something different for Ivorian children and adults today. In 2020, she was finally able to achieve that dream by transforming her childhood home into the perfect literary escape – Bibliothèque 1949.

The year 1949 was a highly significant one in contemporary Ivorian history. It was the year that an estimated 2,000 women, including female politicians, marched against French colonial rule and the political imprisonment of eight men belonging to the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) party. The role and strength of women – and the feminist movement – at this time (and at others) in seeking postcolonial freedoms are often downplayed, but this period has roused and encouraged many Ivorian women of today in their

own endeavours, including Edwige. She says the aim of the library is to 'unearth and amplify the contributions of African and Black women to inspire present and future generations', so the library is continuing that feminist march. It is highlighting the female word and work of the past and present, both source texts and translations.

Diversity and representation on the shelves

Visitors to the library can browse the shelves to find something that calls to them, then take a seat amongst the books and spend minutes, hours, days enjoying the calm of this rare space. (Library membership is only 10,000 CFA francs, around £13 per annum, half that for children – and free if you reach 100!) At present, books have to be read in the library itself rather than taken out.

The titles available to read are sourced from all over the world. On the shelves, you'll find the French translations of the Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith, and both the English and French translations of *La Bastarda* by Trifonia Melibe Obono. This last novel was written in Spanish and was the first book by an Equatorial Guinean woman to be translated into English. Edwige is also keen to promote lesser-known writers and publishers, and includes texts from Nuances, a new feminist Cameroonian publishing house focusing on romance. And there is a significant amount of feminist literature throughout the decades, beginning with the 1924 novel *Claire-Solange, âme africaine* by Négritude writer Suzanne Lacascade, right up to last year's *The Sex Lives of African Women* by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah.



Bibliothèque 1949 is highlighting the female word and work of the past and present, both source texts and translations

Edwige Dro, award-winning Ivorian writer and translator, set up this library to unearth and amplify the contributions of African and Black women

You'll also find a wide selection of Ivorian texts. Political academic books such as the recommended *La marche des femmes sur Grand Bassam* by Dr Henriette Dagri Diabaté sit alongside children's books like *La ceinture de madame Fourmi* by Michelle Tanon-Lora or graphic novel *Commissaire Kouamé* by Marguerite About. In the future, she hopes to expand to include African languages, (she's off shopping to find African language texts for the library as I write this article, but there are not very many available at the moment, so it's a challenge).

Marketing with a difference

Edwige describes herself not only as a feminist but also as a literary activist, and activism lies at the heart of everything she does. It's one of the reasons she returned to Côte d'Ivoire, along with her intent not to contribute to the 'brain drain', which is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa. She is determined to

encourage more Ivorians to read, write and learn languages, and she has a number of fascinating ways of doing this. For instance, swinging from a washing line outside Bibliothèque 1949 you'll find something Edwige calls '*titrologie littéraire*'. Essentially, book titles, summaries and biographies of authors are printed onto colourful A4 sheets and pegged onto a cord to attract passers-by. People will stop and read the titles (*faire la titrologie*), and if they want to find out more, they can head into the library and read the book. Literary extracts are also printed onto place mats (the library serves fabulous Ivorian food – home-cooked – and drink at reasonable prices), and books hang from coat hangers against the striking pink walls.

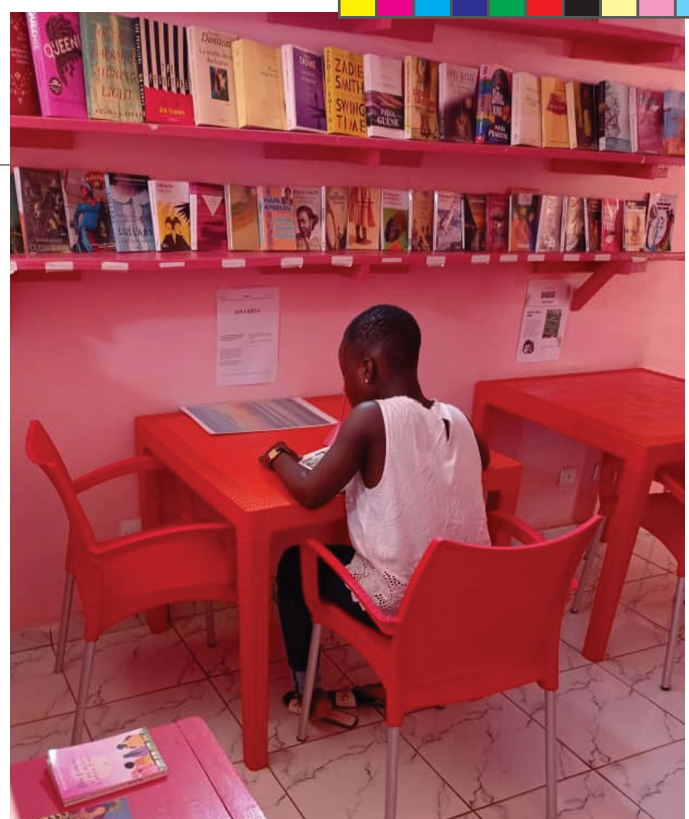
A place to while away the hours with a book

This all means it's easy to while away the hours in the library, which I do, grabbing *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett from one of the

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A new and innovative way to promote books



There's a wide variety of books on the shelves

shelves, before ordering grilled fish, boiled yam and salad with *sauce piquante*, a spicy Ivorian dip. The library's air-conditioning in the Abidjanaisian heat and humidity contributes to making this a little oasis, rendering it easier to read and work.

My own research in Côte d'Ivoire currently centres on literary activism and translation in Francophone West Africa as part of Professor Madhu Krishnan's wider European Research Council-funded project on literary activism in sub-Saharan Africa, based at the University of Bristol. The team has been working with organisations such as Bakwa Books in Cameroon, and people like Edwige in Côte d'Ivoire, who are changing the literary landscape in Africa through their writing, translation, publishing and mentoring, as well as creating new spaces where literature can be enjoyed and promoted to new readers. I am in awe of how much Edwige has achieved in the library alongside her many other projects: she is programme coordinator at Ayada Lab (a programme from the Goethe-Institut and Institut Français), which supports young cultural, creative and social entrepreneurs. She's also a Miles Morland fellow and has been working on a biographical novel about Marie Séry Koré (one of the women who marched in 1949), and she is a translator for the Commonwealth Foundation in the UK. All this takes place alongside residencies, literary judging roles, leading writing and literary translation workshops, publishing short stories (her favourite literary genre), and freelance translation jobs.

People like Edwige are changing the literary landscape in Africa through their writing, translation, publishing and mentoring

Popcorn and bissap, debates and discussions

Edwige's experience of residencies has also influenced the development of the library itself. Her intention is to host emerging writers there, who she will mentor, and who can contribute to workshops and events. In fact, Madhu and I are the guinea pigs in two refurbished rooms on the first floor above the library. 'Is there anything else you need?' she asks us. They are pretty much perfect already, each with a comfortable bed, writing desk and private bathroom. It reminds me a little of the Shakespeare and Company bookshop in Paris, where writers can develop their work in an inspiring space, sleeping amongst the books, contributing to the running of the shop and events. Then on the second floor, there is a terrace and function room, where Edwige hopes to host larger

literary events such as book launches and talks. Some have already begun in the library itself: themed debates and discussions on, for example, women's rights in Côte d'Ivoire and the role of literature in raising awareness; English language lessons for teenagers; film screenings; and the 'literary trip storytime' for five- to eight-year-olds, with popcorn and bissap juice to follow. I would love to be a fly on the wall and see how the children react to that event. It's free to attend, but hopefully it will also encourage those children and their parents to take up library membership afterwards.

The library is very much in its infancy still; developing it has been an organic process, and there are still changes to be made and ideas to be brought to fruition, including the library's new literary magazine entitled *Voix D'Abidjan (Et D'ailleurs)* written 'in French and the Frenches', the first issue of which is currently being compiled.

In terms of literary activism, language and translation, it's an exciting time for Edwige as she converts all her dreams into realities. I am looking forward to visiting again later this year to meet some of the library's first residents, watch as children benefit from the beauty of storytelling, *faire un peu de titrologie*, and select another book from the growing collection at 1949.

Follow @1949books on Twitter and Instagram, or find out more at 1949books.com.



Dr Georgina Collins is a PEN award-winning freelance literary translator (French to English) and marketing translator. She recently took third place in the 2021 Stephen Spender Prize for poetry translation with a piece by Cameroonian poet, Jean-Claude Awono. She is also one of this year's judges for the Society of Authors and Translators Association Scott Moncrieff Prize. In addition, Georgina works part-time as a literary translation consultant in West Africa for Bristol University. She specialises in Francophone African texts and has written a number of academic and professional articles in this field. Contact her at translation website, georginacollins.com.

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