

Vorwort

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It is a rare privilege to celebrate a scholar whose life's work defies the boundaries of discipline, geography, and personality—someone whose presence is not only intellectually formative but quietly transformative for those around him. Today, we mark sixty years in the life of Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Seesemann—a scholar of deep care, a builder of institutions, a quiet visionary, and, in the words of many, a truly remarkable human being.

This book is dedicated to Rüdiger Seesemann's becoming 60 on 19 July 2025. With this book, we gather words in honour of Rüdiger Seesemann, a person who has not been shaped conversations across continents, disciplines, and generations.

This book was composed and written in 6 weeks only. This pace would not have been possible if Rüdiger would not be the amazing person, scholar, friend, boss, and visionary to all of us. Because his colleagues care so much, they decided to make writing this book a priority in the midst of their most busy schedules. This is the love language that we wish to share, to show we care so very much about Rüdiger Seesemann. This is the love language we speak, in order to show our gratitude for Rüdiger Seesemann always being there for everyone.

Rüdiger Seesemann is a distinguished scholar of Islamic Studies with a remarkable command of languages and a deep commitment to the study of Islam in its global and African contexts. A native German speaker, he is fluent in Arabic, English, and French; possesses research proficiency in Persian, Turkish, and Kiswahili; and holds both the *Graecum* and *Latinum* qualifications in classical languages.

Rüdiger Seesemann's areas of specialisation include Sufism, Islam and modernity, Islamic education, Islamic knowledge traditions, Islam and politics, and Islamism. He is widely recognized for his ability to combine philological expertise with anthropological insight and historical depth.

Seesemann went to school in Gießen, completing his Abitur at Landgraf-Ludwig-Schule in Gießen. He began his academic studies in 1984 at the University of Marburg, where he pursued courses in Archaeology, Prehistory, and Ancient Near Eastern Studies. In 1986, he enrolled at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, where he completed his M.A. in Islamic Studies and Social Anthropology. He received his Ph.D. in 1993, also from Mainz, with a dissertation the founder on the Senegalese Sufi order, Murīdiyya. It's titled: "Ahmadu Bamba und die Entstehung der Murīdiyya: Analyse religiöser und historischer Hintergründe; Untersuchung seines Lebens und seiner Lehre anhand des biographischen Werkes von Muhammad al-Mustafa Aān".

From 1994 to 1995, Seesemann taught at the University of Khartoum and held a postdoctoral position at the University of Bayreuth within the graduate program Intercultural Relations in Africa. He completed his Habilitation at Bayreuth in 2004 with a major study entitled "Nach der 'Flut': Ibrāhīm Niasse (1900–1975), Sufik und Gesellschaft in Westafrika". This research was published in 2011 by Oxford University Press under the title *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival*.

Between 2007 and 2008, he was a Faculty Fellow at the Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL (USA). He returned to Germany in 2011 as a Heisenberg Professor at the University of Bayreuth (2011–2016), and in 2017 he was appointed to the Chair of Islamic Studies in the Faculty of Languages and Literature at Bayreuth.

Since 2019, Rüdiger Seesemann has served as the Spokesperson of the Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple" at the University of Bayreuth, one of the most significant research consortia in global African Studies. Under his leadership, the Cluster was awarded a second funding phase in 2025, further securing its status as an internationally recognized centre of scholarly innovation and collaboration.

Rüdiger Seesemann's research has spanned Senegal, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, and Mauritania, with a sustained focus on Sufism, Islamic education, and the moral grammars of knowledge. He is a committed editor and reviewer, serving on the boards of *Islam in Africa*, *African Studies Review*, *Islamic Africa*, and *Journal of African Religions*. His academic and institutional contri-

butions have made him a vital figure in shaping new directions for global, collaborative, and reflexive scholarship on Islam and Africa.

Across the years, Rüdiger has earned the deep respect of colleagues, students, and collaborators not only for his academic depth but for his political sharpness and unwavering ethical clarity. His leadership is grounded not in performance or power, but in a kind of steadiness that holds even under pressure – what some have called an unshakable poise, and others simply a form of integrity in action. He carries responsibility without spectacle, listens more than he speaks, and fosters trust not through declarations, but through example.

Many of us have known him across decades as a person who has always been where thinking meets lived experience. He has taught in Khartoum, researched in Senegal and Mauritania, and held conversations in apartments and under palm trees in Mombasa. One colleague remembers sharing fieldwork space with him in Kenya and recalls, with warmth, the combination of noise, intensity, and insight that defined those days—marked by his enduring love for poetry, teaching, and his students' growth.

What sets Rüdiger apart is the rare fusion of intellectual elegance and institutional courage. He is known for his research on Sufism, Islamic education, and knowledge production in Africa, but those themes are not just scholarly interests – they are reflections of his larger commitments: to epistemic humility, to the decolonization of knowledge, and to fostering scholarship across lines of power and difference. As one longtime collaborator observed, his capacity to think across doctrinal, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries is both admirable and quietly radical. He does not demand attention, but invites it through the calm force of his presence.

This same sensibility defines his role as Dean and Spokesperson of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence. Under his leadership, the Cluster did more than thrive—it became a model of global, collaborative research, grounded in a vision of African Studies that is truly transdisciplinary. He navigated the complexities of institutional life with clarity and compassion, guiding a diverse team through moments of uncertainty, including the Covid-19 crisis. Colleagues speak of his ability to create community in the midst of challenge, to facilitate without dominating, and to recognize talent without competition. He is, in more than one voice, described as the reason the Cluster not only worked—but endured.

And yet, Rüdiger's presence is never limited to the realm of leadership. He is also a friend, a listener, a team player on the football pitch, and—when

needed—a captain who knows when to slide-tackle the rules. His sense of humour survives even the snake pits of university bureaucracy. He is known to be thin-skinned in the best sense: attuned, responsive, never indifferent. Whether advising a young scholar on poetry or sharing long conversations by the sea, he remains deeply human—open, curious, and present.

He is also a father. To Tyron, Sascha, and Ibrahim, he is not the Dean or the Professor, but a constant presence, a source of warmth and wisdom, the root of the song that grounds their lives. His love, say those who know him closely, remains like a rock through storm.

From his origins in Gießen to the corridors of Bayreuth and beyond, Rüdiger Seesemann has built a scholarly life that resists easy summary. He is known for his work on Islam, but even more for his refusal to simplify Islam's complexity. He is known for his leadership, but even more for the way he carries leadership with grace. He is known for his intellect, but above all, he is remembered for his care.

It is no wonder that those who have shared this journey with him—whether for five years or thirty—speak not only of respect, but of affection. He is, as one contributor put it, a kindred spirit. And so today, we say simply: Ayekoo. Thank you. Be celebrated, Rüdiger. For you have been many things to many people, and your work, your presence, and your humanity have made all the difference.

Some Personal Notes of Gratefulness

"I have known Rüdiger for more than 25 years (when I started studying and he worked on his Habilitation). I think, I met him first at AASAB (Association Afrika-interessierter Studenten und Akademiker in Bayreuth), the only association of that kind in Bayreuth at the time (which became obsolete when BIGSAS started). We organized events, exhibitions and parties probably foreshadowing the later work in the cluster... Later, we met in Kenya when I conducted fieldwork for my PhD and (in my memory) he prepared his lectures for the Northwestern University in a noisy apartment in Mombasa and had discussions with Kenyan scholars, like Hassan Ndzovu. I also attended his wedding in Makindu in 2006, because I happened to be in Kenya at the time. I remember many discussions and good advice on the poetry I was working on: For me, Rüdiger was and is, first of all, a great scholar of Islamic studies and his works on Sufism and, education foremost in Senegal, and Kenya remain an important reference to me. And later, when he came back to Bayreuth, we ended up in the Cluster Africa Multiple. I am grateful for all

the various ways of relating to each other.”

جزاك الله خيراً على كل ما قدمت

(Clarissa Vierke)

“God is beyond description. Prof Sessmann Rudiger is unassuming. To understand him, one has to go beyond what is seen. When he expresses his decisions, they are often well thought out. When decisions are negative, one can almost hear him saying, If I had my way, I would say yes. His capacity to think across doctrines is admirable. His unassuming nature shows that, although he supretends over much, he proves nothing to no one. His person says it loud and clear; ‘take me as you see me.’ Prof. as you achieve this milestone, I wish you all the good things you wish for yourself.”

(Akin-Otiko Akinmayowa)

“Obgleich Deine Heimatstadt ja leider nicht das Glück hat, einen begnadeten Troubadour wie Herbert Grönemeyer zu haben, braucht man seine grandiose Hymne auf Bochum nur wenig abzuändern, um ein Hohelied auf Gießen zu singen:

Tief in Hessen, wo die Sonne verstaubt,
ist es besser, viel besser als man glaubt.

[...]

Du bist keine Schönheit, vor Arbeit ganz grau
Du liebst ohne Schminke, bist ‘ne ehrliche Haut
Leider total verbaut, aber gerade das macht dich aus.

[...]

Du bist keine Weltstadt,
auf deiner Königsallee, finden keine Modenschauen statt.

Singe oder summe dieses Lied, wenn Du das nächste Mal nach Gießen fährst.

Und wenn Du wissen möchtest, wie man Gießen genießen kann, dann guck in Dein großartiges Glossar – und zwar: unter G!

Herzliche Grüße sendet und alles Beste wünscht Dir

Ansgar Nünning (aus Gießen)”

"Rüdiger has a remarkably open mind to new ideas and approaches, showing great interest and a highly productive capacity for critical scrutiny. In all such encounters, he contributes insights both at a conceptual level and with attention to particular details. What is more, he has a strong communicative talent, reaching out to people in such a way as to invite a mutual exchange of ideas and inspire confidence in his judgment." (Michael Steppat)

"On Ruediger.

With this article, we would like to pay sincere tribute to an illustrious colleague: the Dean of the Africa Multiple Centre of Excellence, whom we have worked alongside for six years now as part of our research on Africa. Although dedicated to the study of the African continent and its diaspora, Africa Multiple has become a truly global player, bringing together researchers from all over the world, all specialising in Africa, for various scientific events.

The Centre's vision is to overcome the barriers inherited from history, whether geographical, economic, racial, disciplinary or other, in the production of knowledge. The aim is to produce truly transdisciplinary research results. Even if such an ambition may seem, today, to be an intellectual challenge—due to the 'post-truth' shift we are seeing in many parts of the world, marked by a resurgence of nationalist, racist, and anti-humanist sentiments that are reviving the hatreds and divisions of yesteryear in international relations—we fully endorse this vision, which Dean Ruediger Seesemann has embodied.

Setting up such a centre is a major challenge, particularly given its cosmopolitan nature. Running it is undoubtedly even more challenging, given the diversity of people, personalities, perceptions, and intellectual traditions that come together there. While Dean Rüdiger Seesemann has been able to count on experienced colleagues throughout his career, he has undoubtedly left his mark on the Africa Multiple Centre of Excellence. His leadership has been unquestionable, from the creation of the Centre to the renewal of its funding for a second seven-year period. His sense of compromise and openness have allowed him to keep a team of around 150 scientists together in the Africa Multiple Project."

(Yacouba Banhoro)

“Rüdiger Seesemann is probably best known for his work on Islam in Africa, particularly his insightful research into the Tijaniyya Sufi order and its historical and contemporary significance. However, I came to know and respect Professor Dr Seesemann for his passionate commitment to “reconfiguring” African Studies, which I encountered strongly during the International Conference on *African Studies—Multiple, and Relational*, held at the University of Bayreuth in 2017, to which he invited me. At that conference, I spoke about the work of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. Subsequently, I met Rüdiger at a Point-Sud conference on *Knowledge Production in and about Africa: Intersections of Moralities and Higher Education* that was held in Dakar in 2018. As Chair of the Multiple Cluster board, I have seen that passion at close quarters, as Rüdiger has navigated the different contexts in which African Studies is read and contested as well as acknowledged and appreciated. If African Studies thrives at the University of Bayreuth and beyond, if students and professors employ African knowledges in their work, Rüdiger Seesemann will be a significant part of that story. It’s been a pleasure to be on this journey with a kindred spirit. Ayekooo!”

(Akosua Adomako Ampofo)

“Rüdiger is a phenomenon. Resilient, stubborn in the best sense of the word, determined, and he never lost his sense of humour in the snake pits of university. Criticising is always easy, but taking responsibility and accepting the hardships and shit storms that come with it isn’t for everyone.”

(Martin Doevenspeck)

“I have known Rüdiger Seesemann since his early days as a postdoc in the Bayreuth Research Training Group ‘Intercultural Relations in Africa’. We played together in the GradKoll’s football team without winning the President’s Cup at the time. This has changed with the Africa Multiple Cluster. Rüdiger is a popular captain with ambitious goals and strict rules that he can explain clearly and embodies personally. He is thin-skinned, feels responsible for everything and doesn’t shy away in exceptional cases from risky sliding tackles against disliked opponents or spontaneous encroachments on players of his own team. All in all, he has managed to keep a huge heterogeneous squad together – that was the formula for success.” (Robert Debusmann)

"Prof. Rüdiger has always put scientific controversy at the heart of his scholarship. I think it is an ethos that strongly stimulated some innovative research among African members of Africa Multiple 1.0 and contributed to further enrich AM 2.0. Prof. Thanks for teaching us."
(Natéwindé Sawadogo)

"Meeting the man of character in reconfiguring African studies! Rüdiger Seesemann, you are a man with deep vision and leadership! Anytime I have a chance to discuss or engage with you, I can see how humble you are! Having known you in the academic circle has shown me your passion and fight for justice and for a just world within and outside academia. You are just a beautiful soul and I wish you all the best while you reach this beautiful age of 60! You are indeed a "gate keeper". I wish you success in this beautiful age full of health joy and laughter to you and your loved ones!"
(Eveline Sawadogo/Compaoré)