

African Studies in Bayreuth

On the History of a Connection

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Introduction

The extension of the Africa Multiple Cluster at the University of Bayreuth has given rise to great satisfaction.¹ This achievement testifies to the considerable work carried out by a team as competent as it is diverse. The whole university has been waiting impatiently for this extension for several months. It confirms the importance and necessity of strengthening African Studies at the university and in Germany as a whole. Today, African Studies is a veritable academic signature at the University of Bayreuth, that is perceptible through the various institutions and structures present on campus. Yet while this institutional recognition is real, the everyday experience of many scholars and students in the city, particularly those from Africa, is still marked by a feeling of strangeness, marginalization and even racism. Rising right-wing extremism in a Bavarian city unfamiliar with the history and diversity of the African continent is also feeding this growing unease.

These contrasting dynamics lead to a broader question: why and how did African Studies become such an important field of study in a small Bavarian town like Bayreuth? How is Africa perceived in the Upper Franconian region? The establishment of African Studies in Bayreuth is often associated with the political figure of Franz Josef Strauß, former Minister-President of Bavaria (1978–1988). Anecdotes still circulate about his links with Togo and about a

1 “Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence: Continued Funding Secured,” *Informationsdienst Wissenschaft (idw)*, <https://idw-online.de/en/news852640> Accessed 2 July 2025; “Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence Renewed,” University of Bayreuth, https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/news/2025/2025-05-22_Renewal/index.html, Accessed 2 July 2025.

hunting trip gone wrong which, it has been rumoured, sparked his interest in Africa. Whether fact or fiction, this story points to a deeper question: what political ideas and ambitions shaped the university's early engagement with Africa? And what does this reveal about the ways Africa was perceived, imagined, and strategically invoked within Bavarian academic and diplomatic projects?

On the occasion of Professor Rüdiger Seesemann's birthday, and based on archive research², I offer a brief review of the history of African Studies in Bayreuth—looking not only at how Africa has been studied at the University of Bayreuth, but also at how it has been presented. Celebrating Rüdiger Seesemann's birthday is more than honouring an individual. It is about recognizing his contribution to a collective history, his ability to think of African Studies as a network, to reform and reconfigure the field without erasing its heritage. He is both a reformer and an heir to the history he continues to shape.

Bayreuth, between Myth and Reality: The Story of my Arrival

It is not uncommon for Bayreuth to be confused with Beirut, the Lebanese capital. It has almost become a recurring joke among researchers working in the field of African Studies in Bayreuth. Any researcher or student who has ventured here could talk about their own first experiences with this city, which is both discreet and singular, and often known from afar. This harmless confusion reveals something deeper: the familiar strangeness of this Bavarian city, little known, too well known from afar, and whose name rarely evokes what it really is. For (African) researchers and students in African Studies, Bayreuth is

2 For this paper, I would like to thank the City Archive of Bayreuth and the University Archive for their support—especially Dr. Lisa Witowski, whose guidance was instrumental to this research. For example, the following archive records are available at the University Archive: Universität Bayreuth. Unterlagen der Zentralen Universitätsverwaltung (ZUV), 88–96, Universitätsarchiv Bayreuth; Forschungsberichte Institut für Afrikastudien, 1991/92, 1994, 1995. DokB 17; Pressespiegel 1970–1980. DoKP 178–180. Universitätsarchiv Bayreuth; Interview with Josef Lange, pp. 11–13, Einrichtung Afrikanologie. DokG 7. This paper also builds on the workshop “Afrika im Bayreuther Alltag. Geschichte und Erinnerungskultur” [Africa in Everyday Bayreuth: History and Culture of Remembrance], held last year at the Iwalewahaush and co-organized with Dr. Marcus Mühlwinkel (Institute for Franconian Regional History, IFLG), to whom I extend my thanks.

a familiar, almost mythical name. Bayreuth is often a place you hear about before you even know where it is on a map—a name that recurs in university corridors, between accounts of memorable experiences, stories of hardship and memories of academic adventures.

When I decided to come to Bayreuth to do a second master's degree, in parallel with my doctoral thesis, I had an idealized image of the city in my head. I knew it by reputation, through the enthusiastic testimony of colleagues and teachers who had stayed here. While I was waiting to defend my thesis, I applied to various further training programmes, including a master's degree in *Kultur und Gesellschaft Afrikas* (engl. African Culture and Society) with a combination of *Geschichte Afrikas* and *Entwicklungssoziologie und Entwicklungspolitik* (engl. History of Africa and Development Sociology and Development Policy), also with a focus on Africa. As a Germanist, my objective was clear: to broaden my academic horizons in an increasingly competitive environment, where stable contracts were becoming rare; to keep myself busy while I waited for my thesis's defence.

When I received my letter of admission, I felt a mixture of excitement and impatient curiosity. Bayreuth seemed to me to be a city apart, a place of passage for many African researchers. Many of my Senegalese teachers spoke of it with respect, underlining the difficulty but also the richness of their experience in this university setting. I was not the first, nor the last.

When I arrived in Bayreuth, my first impression was disconcerting. I expected a dynamic, vibrant, almost metropolitan city, worthy of the prestige conferred on it by its academic influence. What I found was a small, quiet, almost sleepy provincial town. A disappointment, at first sight. But as it is often the case with cities—and with human beings—it takes time to get over first impressions. In the process of getting to know Bayreuth better, its people, its intellectual networks and its memory, I realized that the richness of this city lay not in its appearance, but in the links it forged.

It was in Bayreuth that I discovered I wasn't the first Senegalese to venture here. In 1979, Léopold Sédar Senghor, the President of Senegal (1960–1980), went there at the invitation of Franz Josef Strauß, Minister-President of Bavaria (1978–1988). This trip to Bayreuth was by no means insignificant: as the official guest of the Bayreuth Festival dedicated to Richard Wagner, Senghor took advantage of his stay to support the young university, founded in 1975. This highly symbolic visit also illustrates Senghor's desire to promote dialogue between Africa and Europe, and to strengthen the legitimacy of African Studies in European academic institutions. During this visit, he gave

his backing to the establishment of a chair dedicated to African Francophone literature, a project led by Professor János Riesz, who had begun teaching in Bayreuth in the summer semester of 1979. As the most widely known African author in the German-speaking world and recipient of the *Peace Prize of the German Book Trade* (1968), Senghor's public support helped the project overcome its initial obstacles (Breitinger and Föttinger 1994, 64).

As a linguist, literature specialist, and holder of the Chair of *Romance and Comparative Literature – with a special focus on African literature* at the University of Bayreuth, János Riesz has, from the outset of the institution, worked to build scientific and socio-cultural bridges: particularly between Germany and West African countries like Senegal, Togo, Côte D'Ivoire, Benin; between Romance studies and German studies; and between Dakar and Bayreuth. It is thanks to him that a fruitful dialogue has been established and has been continued by figures such as Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink in Saarbrücken, Susanne Gehrmann in Berlin, Ute Fendler in Bayreuth, and Papa Samba Diop in Paris, among others.

Thanks to his decisive commitment to the development of what was then called “Afro-Romanistik”³ (Afro-Romanistic) in Germany, Riesz—supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and also DAAD—played a key role in bringing numerous intellectuals from diverse backgrounds to Bayreuth (e.g. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Georges Ngaly, Wole Soyinka, Clémentine Faik-Nzuj and Pius Ngandu etc.).⁴ These visiting researchers were invited for limited stays to deepen their work on the representation and perception of Africa and Africans. Many of them came from the African continent and contributed to the Collaborative Research Centre “Identity in Africa” (Sonderforschungsbereich Identität in Afrika). This effort aligned with broader foreign cultural policies of the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War. In this context, both the FRG and the GDR supported academic exchange as a soft-power tool. And particularly, the training and further education of African students was integral to these policies, with the aim of preparing future African elites who would contribute to the construction of socialist or liberal regimes on the continent and help meet the global demand for highly qualified labor.

3 Due to its neocolonial connotation, the chair was then officially renamed *Chair of Romance Literary Studies and Comparative Literature, with special emphasis on African literature* see (Riesz 1994, 64).

4 See: UBT ZUV 983 *Kulturabkommen mit Senegal / Dakar 1981–1986*, UBT ZUV 981 *Zusammenarbeit Elfenbeinküste, Abidjan 1981–1985*.

Pioneers, not just One: Interdisciplinarity at the Origin of African Studies in Bayreuth

Contrary to what popular belief sometimes suggests, African Studies at Bayreuth University is not based on the single figure of a founder. It is not a solitary endeavor, but a collective project, carried out since the late 1970s by a constellation of influential researchers from a variety of disciplines. Each, in his or her own way, brought a distinct disciplinary and regional focus that collectively shaped the university's unique interdisciplinary approach. Bayreuth became what it is today not solely through local initiative, but also through close collaboration with African intellectuals and direct support from African states. One early and emblematic example is Papa Samba Diop, who was personally recommended by President Léopold Sédar Senghor and the rector of the University of Dakar (Madani 1980) to join Janos Riesz's newly established chair (Breitinger, Föttinger 1994, 64).

Alongside Riesz stood Eckhard Breitinger (Arndt and Berndt 2007), a specialist in anglophone African literatures and an early advocate of cultural production as a lens into postcolonial African societies. He played a crucial editorial role as the long-time coordinator of the Bayreuth African Studies Series (BASS)⁵, publishing hundreds of monographs from emerging scholars, many of them from African countries. His academic focus included field-linked cooperation with institutions in Nigeria, Kenya etc. and he was instrumental in embedding African voices and scholarship within Bayreuth's research culture.

Gerd Spittler⁶, a renowned ethnologist, expanded the program's anthropological and sociological scope. Drawing from long-term fieldwork among pastoralist communities such as the Tuareg in Niger and the Hausa in Nigeria, he brought deep expertise in economic anthropology, material culture, and subsistence economies. Spittler helped solidify Bayreuth's reputation as a centre for empirically grounded African social science, often in collaboration with Breitinger on West African projects.

A complementary pillar of this academic constellation was Jamil M. Abun-Nasr (1932–2021), a historian and Islamic scholar of Lebanese origin who led

5 Eckhard Breitinger, *Bass*, https://www.ufb.uni-bayreuth.de/pool/dokumente/mitglieder/emeriti/eckhard-breitinger/3_bass-Eckhard-Breitinger.pdf, Accessed 7 July 2025.

6 "Prof. Dr. Gerd Spittler." *Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence*, University of Bayreuth, 18 Jan. 2023, https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/news/2023/2023-01-18-Prof_-Dr_-Gerd-Spittler/index.html, Accessed 2 July 2025.

the establishment of Islamic Studies at Bayreuth. With deep regional knowledge of Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and an academic career that spanned Oxford, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, Abun-Nasr's work foregrounded the complex historical entanglements between Islam, political authority, and social movements across North and West Africa.⁷

Equally foundational was Gudrun Miehe, whose philological and linguistic expertise helped define the early structure of African Studies in Bayreuth. Appointed to the Chair of *Afrikanistik I* in 1992, she institutionalized the study of African languages—especially Gur and Swahili—as a key component of Bayreuth's interdisciplinary vision. Through initiatives such as the International Swahili Colloquium (founded in 1996) and her leadership in major research networks, Miehe not only shaped the linguistic profile of the university but also mentored generations of scholars, anchoring Bayreuth's linguistic tradition in long-term partnerships with African researchers and institutions.⁸

These scholars shaped Bayreuth's international partnerships. Their region-specific cooperation projects laid the groundwork for long-term academic exchanges with African institutions. However, this collaboration was never primarily designed to integrate Africa on equal terms. Rather, Africa served German political and strategic interests—an instrumental logic that underpinned the founding of the University of Bayreuth and its focus on African Studies. Although African scholars were invited as guest professors and seen as *informants* or *cultural mediators*—offering a channel to include African voices—their role was often framed within a broader political agenda. They contributed to preparing German and European students as future *experts on Africa*, aligning with Germany's Cold War foreign policy goals: training elites to engage with the continent in ways that served either capitalist or socialist blocs. In this context, *Afrikanologie* at Bayreuth was less about partnership and more about strategic knowledge production. Africa remained primarily an object of research—its complexity filtered through German interests rather than shaped by African agency.

7 "Jamil M. Abun-Nasr Honoured as Founding Father of Bayreuth African Studies," Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, University of Bayreuth, 17 May 2021, https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/news/2021/2021-05-17_Jamil-M_-Abun-Nasr/index.html, Accessed 2 July 2025.

8 "Emeriti of Honour." University of Bayreuth, <https://www.uni-bayreuth.de/emmeriti-of-honour>, Accessed 6 July 2025.

Much like the development of its Africa-focused research, the university's creation was also not the vision of a single individual, but the outcome of collective ambition, strategic planning, and political negotiation. At a time of profound social transformation—characterized by educational expansion, structural support in rural regions and international upheavals such as decolonisation and the Cold War—an ambitious project was born: a university in Bayreuth in Upper Franconia, which until then had been perceived primarily as a city of culture. The creation of the University of Bayreuth was the fruit of the political will of several key figures. These included Hans Walter Wild, the city's former mayor; Professor Wolfgang Wild, former chairman of the Strukturbeirat (Structural Advisory Board) for Bayreuth in 1970; as well as the Bavarian minister-president at the time, Franz Josef Strauß, among others.

Wolfgang Wild, a theoretical physicist by training, was instrumental in transforming the vision into reality. As Chair of the Structural Advisory Board for Bayreuth in 1970; Vice President of the University between 1973 and 1976, and later President of the Technical University of Munich (1980), Wild helped design and institutionalize the foundational interdisciplinary architecture that still characterizes Bayreuth today. His later roles—including serving as Bavarian Minister of Science—attest to his long-term impact on science and education policy in Germany.

Hans Walter Wild—Bayreuth's second mayor after the Second World War—wrote at length about the beginnings of the university in his book *Denk ich an damals...: Bayreuths Weg zur Universität* (1995) (engl. Remembering back then...: Bayreuth's path to university). “Bayreuth university town! A crazy idea?”⁹ poses Wild at the beginning of his book (Wild 1995, 29). In it, he describes an ambivalent context: on the one hand, a desire shared by many Bayreuthers to provide their region with an institution of higher education; on the other hand, widespread resistance to the idea of establishing a university in a town still marked by its provincial dimension. But the project to expand Bavaria's university landscape dates to the 1960s. During that period, efforts were underway to determine where new universities should be established in post-war Germany. In an interview, Josef Lange¹⁰ (Kühnel 00:08:52) emphasized the recommendations of the German Science and Education Councils

9 All translations from the original texts into English are my own. Original quote: “Bayreuth Universitätsstadt! Eine verrückte Idee?” (Wild 1995).

10 Info: Josef Lange was then personal assistant (Persönlicher Referent) to the President of the University of Bayreuth and also responsible for public relations.

to create one million student places across the country. As mayor of Bayreuth at the time, Wild seized this opportunity to campaign for a university in his city. He describes how he put forward the idea of the university in political discussions, drawing the attention of Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt to the Bayreuth “university idea” in 1969, how he won over fellow campaigners, and finally overcame resistance (Wild 1995, 29). Wild combined emotional arguments—such as the fear of youth emigration—with pragmatic considerations of regional development:

It must not be the case that we build one school after another in Upper Franconia, that we build technical schools and that our sons and daughters, when they are educated, emigrate to Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Nuremberg or Munich because they can only find a job there that corresponds to their education.¹¹ (Wild 1995, 33)

The establishment of a university is legitimized as an instrument of regional development. The link between education policy and regional development is strategically emphasized. Wild mobilized every stage, every medium, every political relationship. He actively campaigned for the establishment of a university in Bayreuth, navigating administrative procedures and positioning the city among several candidates—including Bamberg, which, given its long-standing tradition in the humanities and social sciences, was also seeking to expand its academic profile. In addition to this conflict, there was also economic and political rivalry over the distribution of public resources, funding and infrastructure between the Franconian cities. Each city wanted to attract students, researchers, investment and cultural events, all of which were sources of economic development.

To avoid fuelling tensions with nearby academic hubs, various scenarios were considered for the future university in Bayreuth: transforming it into a partial university, creating a satellite extension of the University of Bamberg, or linking it administratively to Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. Another possibility was to focus the institution entirely on the natural sciences and medicine:

¹¹ Original quote: “Es darf auch nicht sein, daß wir in Oberfranken eine Schule um die andere errichten, daß wir Fachschulen bauen und daß unsere Söhne und Töchter, wenn sie ausgebildet sind, nach Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Nürnberg oder München auswandern, weil sie nur dort einen ihrer Ausbildung entsprechenden Arbeitsplatz finden” (Wild 1995, 33).

We should focus on the natural sciences for the University of Bayreuth; only they are sustainably viable. In the short term, not only researchers are needed but also teachers for secondary schools who lay the foundation for scientific education¹² (Wild 74).

Yet even within this science-focused vision, there was resistance to the idea of founding a university without a strong humanities component. Wolfgang Wild, then chair of the university's structural advisory board and later Bavarian Minister of Science, famously declared: "A university without the humanities is not a university" (Lange 2014, 11–13, file 2). Despite a strong political emphasis on the natural sciences, he and others stressed the need for a well-rounded institution. The medical faculty project was soon abandoned due to prohibitive costs, particularly the long-term financial demands of setting up university hospitals. At the same time, Hans Walter Wild strengthens Bayreuth's position by presenting the existing medical infrastructure (clinics, planned hospital) as an advantage. A similar fate awaited the proposal to establish a faculty of pharmacy: it was redirected to Regensburg, where suitable infrastructure was already in place (cf. Akten der Universität Bayreuth, Strukturbeirat Sitzungsangelegenheiten, Niederschriften 1973, Bd. II, Univ.archiv Bayreuth UBT ZUV 585, 10.10.1973). Next, biology was considered as a potential academic anchor for Bayreuth, but the idea failed to gain momentum (cf. Niederschrift über die 19. Sitzung des Strukturbeirates für die Universität Bayreuth am 17.10.1973 in München, Univ.archiv Bayreuth UBT ZUV 585). Even a proposal for a dentistry program was abandoned, largely due to budgetary constraints (Akten der Universität Bayreuth, Strukturbeirat Sitzungsangelegenheiten, Niederschriften 1974, Bd III, Univ.archiv Bayreuth UBT ZUV 586). One after another, these plans were rejected by Munich — not necessarily on academic grounds, but because of broader political calculations and the desire

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- 12 Original in German: "Wir sollten für die Universität Bayreuth auf die Naturwissenschaften setzen, nur sie seien langfristig gesichert. Gebraucht würden kurzfristig nicht nur Forscher, sondern auch Professoren für die Gymnasien, die die Grundlagen für das naturwissenschaftliche Studium schaffen. Liest legt mir den Verzicht auf das Medizinstudium nahe. Forderungen in dieser Richtung würden Gründung und Aufbau einer Universität nur erschweren, weil die Mittel für die hohen Kosten der medizinischen Bildungseinrichtungen, insbesondere der Universitätskliniken, auf lange Zeit hinaus verplant seien. Beeindruckt von der Persönlichkeit dieses bedeutsamen Wissenschaftlers und ermuntert durch seine Empfehlungen eile ich nach Bayreuth zurück, in der Entscheidung bestätigt."

to avoid duplication of programs already concentrated in other Bavarian cities. So, Bayreuth was granted a teacher training programme, though limited to primary and secondary school levels—excluding Realschule and Gymnasium education tracks. This decision was also shaped by competition with other Bavarian universities, particularly Würzburg, Erlangen-Nuremberg, and Regensburg, which were already well-established in teacher education. But Bayreuth wanted more.

The solution, as articulated by Wolfgang Wild, was to “define a niche that others have not yet entered, but which has long-term potential” (Lange 2014, 12). Two options were considered: South Asian or African Studies. Africa was the obvious choice for several key reasons. Firstly, to avoid the mentioned tensions between Bavarian cities, on the issues of teacher education and humanities. While Regensburg (1962) created a classic comprehensive university—with a conservative structure and a strong medical profile—and Augsburg (1970) focussed on urban, modern social sciences and economics, Passau (1978) remained smaller and focused on the Danube region and cultural research. Bamberg, on the other hand, built on its humanities tradition. Bayreuth was deliberately conceived with a clear, internationally understood specialization and a high demand for innovation. This differentiation was not accidental, but an expression of political and strategic planning: each new university was not only to provide access to education, but also to reflect a specific regional and specialized profile.

Second, Franz Josef Strauß’s personal relations with the continent made this option more familiar and politically more strategic. In this sense, Hans Walter Wild pays tribute to the decisive support of Strauß. During the 1970s and 1980s, he championed international cultural diplomacy, including support for academic partnerships and higher education initiatives with African nations. While oral accounts often mention a hunting trip gone wrong and his link to Togo, one thing remains relevant: these stories—whether fact or legend—point to the symbolic role Africa played in shaping Bavarian international ambitions. They reflect how Africa was imagined not only as a site of partnership, but also as a stage for Bavarian soft power, where political figures like Strauß could pursue both diplomatic and personal interests. What matters here is less the historical accuracy of such stories than the way they reveal how Africa has historically been framed—as both opportunity and projection—and how such framings have influenced institutional decisions, including the founding of African Studies at Bayreuth.

Third, there was a real vacuum in southern Germany when it came to African Studies. In the north, universities such as Hamburg (heir to a maritime colonial past), Bonn (former seat of the Foreign Office), and Berlin (with its prestigious Oriental Languages Seminary and Humboldt University) had already developed considerable expertise in this field during the colonial period. The South, on the other hand, was largely devoid of such expertise.

Fourth, in a world marked by decolonization, the Cold War and the rise of new international players, Africa appeared to be a strategic zone for Germany's economic and diplomatic relations. It was therefore necessary to train experts capable of understanding its complex dynamics ("Afrikanologie an der Universität Bayreuth. Situation und Vorstellungen zum weiteren Ausbau" November 1978., UBT ZUV 92c).

It was in this spirit that a university was created that was resolutely international in scope, but also practical. The idea was not to limit to theoretical approaches, but to develop useful knowledge that could be mobilized within the framework of partnerships, cooperation projects or applied research. Given the diversity of African realities, a purely disciplinary approach seemed insufficient. From the outset, interdisciplinarity was encouraged: the idea was to cross disciplines—anthropology, economics, history, political science, linguistics, literature etc.—to gain a better understanding of the continent's contemporary issues (Afrikanologie an der Universität Bayreuth 1978; Letter from Dr. Lange to Herrn Stetzler 1977).

With this in mind, a number of researchers were invited to Bayreuth. The aim was twofold: first, to enrich the content of the newly created chairs; and second, to build a bridge between the university and the city through contemporary themes likely to resonate locally. The aim was also to highlight the importance of such a university institution in the development of the region. These researchers were able to build lasting bridges with African universities, fostering reciprocal academic cooperation long before the Africa Multiple Cluster was formalized. Since the 1980s, their work has given Bayreuth a unique profile in Germany, built around an interdisciplinary Centre for African Studies (Iwalewa-Haus¹³, then IAS¹⁴), international doc-

13 Iwalewahaus: A Cultural Institute of the University of Bayreuth, founded in 1981, dedicated to contemporary African art, visual cultures, and postcolonial research. See: <https://www.iwalewahaus.uni-bayreuth.de/de/index.html> Accessed 6 July 2025.

14 Institute of African Studies (IAS): Established in 1990 at the University of Bayreuth, the IAS coordinates interdisciplinary African Studies across faculties and plays a central

toral programmes (BIGSAS¹⁵) and a commitment to the joint production (and circulation) of knowledge.

This determination to anchor the project was also linked to the perception—and sometimes stereotypes—held about Africa in a Bavarian region unfamiliar with its history and diversity.

Local Reception and Perceptions of Africa in Bayreuth

Bayreuth's unique place in the landscape of African Studies in Germany often contrasts with the local perception of Africa. Outside the campus, in the city's social and media circles, Africa is sometimes confined to stereotypical images of poverty, exoticism and conflict. The reality of Africa, as discussed in the seminar rooms and conferences of the Africa Multiple Cluster, rarely finds a direct echo in Bayreuth society. The result is a kind of discrepancy, even tension, between the intellectual openness of the university environment and the relative social and geographical isolation of the rest of the city. This separation sometimes fuels mutual misunderstandings. On the one hand, African students can experience culture shock: insistent stares, awkwardness in everyday interactions, a lack of cultural references. On the other hand, the people of Bayreuth, who have little exposure to diversity, struggle to understand what a university programme devoted to Africa really means.

These tensions are not just theoretical. They take shape in concrete experiences. Dating back to 1980s, several African students have reported misunderstandings when looking for accommodation, subtle discrimination in administrative procedures and a feeling of invisibility in the city's cultural life. As African students and scholars began arriving in Bayreuth, many encountered subtle exclusion—from difficulties securing housing to restricted access to nightclubs and cultural life.¹⁶ The local population seemed to “fear” a repe-

role in research, teaching, and international collaboration. See: <https://www.ias.uni-bayreuth.de/en/> Accessed 7 July 2025.

15 Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS): Founded in 2007 as part of the Excellence Initiative, BIGSAS offers structured doctoral training in African Studies and promotes interdisciplinary research with a strong emphasis on cooperation with African partner institutions. See: <https://www.bigsas.uni-bayreuth.de/en/index.html> Accessed 6 July 2025.

16 This comes to light in this article: “Durch ihre afrikanologische Ausrichtung erfreut sich die Universität Bayreuth wachsender Beliebtheit als internationaler Tagungsort.

tition of the behavior associated with certain American soldiers—in particular accusations of harassing women or causing a nuisance at night. This situation reveals a form of *globalisation of the Black man*, perceived in a homogenous and stereotyped way, without distinction of origin or history. It also bears witness to a persistent colonial legacy, in which the figure of the Black man is still perceived as foreign, potentially destabilising, and therefore to be controlled, contained or even tamed.

In response to calls for better accommodation, Mayor Hans Walter Wild declared: “The university is a vital part of our city’s development. Whoever supports the university is also supporting Bayreuth.”¹⁷ Yet this appeal for civic solidarity stood in contrast to the lived experiences of many African guests—highlighting the gap between institutional ambition and social reality.

These incidents may date back to the 1980s, but for many international students and researchers—particularly those from the African continent—they

Färbige Studenten gehen an der Hochschule ein und aus. Doch für Bayreuther Hausbesitzer und Wohnungsvermieter ist dies alles noch längst kein Grund, sich von ihren Vorurteilen zu verabschieden. Menschen, die eine andere Hautfarbe als sie selber haben, sind ihnen offenbar immer noch ein Gräuel. Jeder afrikanische Student, der hierzulande auf Wohnungssuche geht, kann davon ein – unsere vermeintlich aufgeklärten Zeiten beschämendes – Klagelied singen, in das spätestens seit dem Wochenende auch Dr. Eckhard Breitingen mit einstimmen kann. Denn ihm, dem Organisator der Tagung über Commonwealth-Literatur, wurde seine Wolfsbacher Wohnung gekündigt. Wie er berichtet, kündigte ihm sein Vermieter, weil er, Breitingen, für die Dauer der Tagung den australischen Schriftsteller Colin Johnson zu Besuch hatte, der als A_{beroriginal} nun einmal nicht die vom Vermieter offenbar gewünschte weiße Hautfarbe besitzt. Aufgrund des Auftretens des Vermieters hat Breitingen, obwohl rechtlich nicht dazu gezwungen, die Kündigung angenommen. Denn, so sagt er, im Hause eines derartigen Vermieters möchte er nicht weiter wohnen.“ (Nordbayerischer Kurier 1983)

- 17 Full Quote in German: “Der Ausbau unserer jungen Universität geht gut voran. Im Wintersemester 1983/84 werden ihr wiederum 700 Studierende zugewiesen. Die Zahl der Studierenden erhöht sich dadurch auf fast 4000. Die Wohnungssituation der Studierenden wird dadurch erneut erschwert. Wenn verhindert werden soll, daß Studierende mangels geeigneter Unterkünfte Bayreuth den Rücken kehren, bedarf es daher weiterer Anstrengungen der Bayreuther Bürgerschaft. Ich appelliere an Sie alle, verfügbaren Wohnraum an Studierende zu vermieten. Bedenken Sie bitte bei der Festsetzung des Mietpreises allerdings auch, daß sich die jungen Studenten in der Berufsausbildung befinden und in der Regel nur über bescheidene Mittel verfügen. Die Universität ist ein wichtiger Faktor unserer Stadtentwicklung. Wer der Uni hilft, hilft somit auch unserer Stadt Bayreuth.” (Statement by OB Hans Walter Wild 1983).

remain relevant today, though often in different forms. While forms of discrimination may have evolved, they persist in more subtle or systemic ways. This is evident in more recent local debates, such as the controversy over the racially charged name of the *M-Apotheke* and the strong local response to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Public letters to the editor in the *Nordbayerischer Kurier* reflected the divide: while some community members defended such names as “tradition,” others criticized their racist implications (Tensing 2020; Kröniger 2020; Dünigfelder 2020).

Bayreuth-based scholars, including researchers in African Studies, actively contributed to these discussions. In a guest commentary, Stefan Ouma and colleagues explicitly addressed the lack of self-awareness in Germany’s reckoning with racism, calling for structural change within universities and public life (Ouma 2020). Earlier reflections by Aleo Susan Arndt had already highlighted how deeply embedded racism—often unreflected by *white* citizens—permeates everyday life, even in academic contexts (Arndt 2013).

Racism frequently manifests in subtle ways: through microaggressions, suspicious glances, or exoticising remarks. Yet, it also appears openly, for example during the search for housing or in everyday interactions in the city. Many African scholars and students report such distressing experiences, which can also hinder their academic work. In response, the Institute of African Studies (IAS) has formulated an anti-discrimination statement. Because conducting research on Africa is not enough—there must also be a critical reflection on the structural conditions under which such research takes place.

However, while the university has begun to critically address these issues, this shift also reflects a broader transformation in the perception and production of knowledge about Africa. Unlike former colonial powers such as France, Belgium, or the United Kingdom, Germany—especially in its southern regions—lacked both a structured colonial memory and a longstanding academic tradition of African Studies. As a result, the University of Bayreuth had to build up this expertise from scratch, by engaging in dialogues with African partners, welcoming researchers from the continent and gradually establishing a new centre of knowledge. Some of the testimonies evoke unexpected forms of solidarity: curious neighbors who engage in sincere conversations, local associations open to diversity, and lasting friendships born of intercultural initiatives.

Despite these complex dynamics, the African presence in Bayreuth continues to grow and diversify. The launch of the Africa Multiple Cluster of

excellence in 2019 marked a new stage. With the ambition of *reconfiguring African Studies* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023), this programme questions not only the objects and methods of research, but also the places where knowledge is produced. Africa is no longer just a field of investigation: it is becoming a centre of reflection, an epistemic actor. The partner universities, African Cluster Centers (ACCs), in Nigeria (University of Lagos), Kenya (Moi University), Burkina Faso (Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo), and South Africa (Rhodes University) are part of this reconfiguration, which is attempting to break away from the unilateral logic of research. Importantly, this network builds on long-standing collaborations. Over the years, Bayreuth has become a meeting ground for major African thinkers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Fatou Sow, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (Diagne 2021; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1987; Falola 2024), who have, among others, worked alongside German and international scholars to reimagine African Studies. This orientation—based on intellectual partnership rather than paternalism—has earned Bayreuth lasting respect across the African continent (e.g. institutions, scholars, artists etc.).

However, this openness is not without its limits. Despite the rhetoric of co-construction and the decolonization of knowledge, asymmetries persist. Access to programmes remains unequal, particularly for non-German-speaking African students and those without grants. Decision-making committees remain largely Eurocentric, and situated knowledge produced in Africa sometimes struggles to be fully recognized as such in mainstream scientific circuits.

The challenge therefore remains twofold: to anchor African Studies more firmly in the local university fabric, while at the same time encouraging the city to open up more widely to the plurality of African worlds. This struggle was initiated by the first generation of researchers in the field of African Studies, such as Riesz, Lüsebrink, Spittler and Breitingner, and continued by the second generation, represented by Rüdiger Seesemann, to whom this contribution is dedicated.

Rüdiger Seesemann—A Driving Force Behind the Revival of African Studies

Professor Rüdiger Seesemann's intellectual career embodies a significant transformation in African Studies in Germany, where the deconstruction of colonial frameworks of knowledge and the promotion of a transnational

co-production of knowledge have become academic imperatives. A specialist of Islam Studies in sub-Saharan Africa—particularly Sufism in the Senegalese and Sudanese contexts—Seesemann has built his approach at the crossroads of anthropology, religious sciences and African Studies.

After years of field research marked by methodological and human proximity to the Muslim communities of West Africa, he held various positions in Germany and abroad before joining the University of Bayreuth. There, he played a central role in repositioning the institution as a centre of excellence in African research, no longer focusing solely on Africa as an object, but also on Africa as a partner and producer of knowledge.

As Dean of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence—funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) since 2019—Seesemann has proposed a paradigmatic shift away from extractivist and unidirectional approaches towards a logic of multiperspectivity, interconnection and epistemic reciprocity (Seesemann 2020). His aim is to reconfigure African Studies within a shared global space, in which researchers from the African continent are no longer simply informers or collaborators, but full players in theoretical reflection.

His vision is in line with contemporary decolonial critiques, while maintaining a rigorous empirical approach and a rare field ethic. He argues for a break with neo-colonial logics of academic exchange, for example by defending South-South mobility, the cross-translation of local knowledge, and the valorisation of Islamic thought as an endogenous intellectual resource, and not just as a subject for study.

Finally, its work goes beyond the strict academic framework. Through Africa Multiple, it actively supports forms of public and artistic engagement, civic initiatives and collaborative platforms that challenge the traditional separation between research and society. In Bayreuth, this takes the form of partnerships with African institutions (universities, research centres, NGOs), but also with diasporic African communities in Germany, although the latter are still poorly represented outside the university context.

So, the celebration of his birthday should be seen not just as a personal acknowledgement, but also as an opportunity to reflect on the scope—and the limits—of the Bayreuth African Studies project. Asking the question of *African Studies in Bayreuth* also means asking to what extent the knowledge relationships forged since the 1970s and 1980s have really transformed the relationship between the university, (Bayreuth) society, and the African continent.

Conclusion: Challenges and the Future of African Studies

Africa is not an external object of study, but an integral component of the intellectual and social history of the university, and of the region itself. This integration has been perceptible right from the institution's inception, and is manifested through academic, cultural and civic initiatives that closely link the university to its regional environment. What I had initially perceived as a geographical error—confusing Bayreuth with Beirut—turned out to be a revealing misunderstanding: the richness of Bayreuth is not apparent at first glance. It is discovered over time, through the stories we share, the links we forge, the histories we write.

The project to build the university and establish African Studies was not driven by a single figure, but by a community of players convinced that understanding Africa—in all its complexity—required new approaches, original forms of collaboration.

This heritage must be defended with all the more conviction in the face of extreme right-wing populist waves and the rise of identity-based discourse in Europe. This calls for a broader program of action, aimed more at the general public. Although the Cluster's official language is English, talking about Africa in this region also requires more frequent use of the German language, to encourage better reception of the debates in the local public arena. This requires concrete initiatives supported by university chairs, in close collaboration with civil society and cultural institutions. It's no longer just a matter of teaching in the classroom, but of actively engaging outside the university walls: in schools, libraries, cultural spaces, local media, and within the city itself. Such engagement is essential to building a nuanced understanding of Africa, deconstructing the stereotypes still alive, and defending the university as an open, critical and inclusive space at the heart of the region.

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