

Ute Rösenthaler Obituary (1960–2024)

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Together with numerous colleagues in Germany and abroad, we mourn the loss of our highly esteemed colleague and friend Ute Rösenthaler, who passed away unexpectedly on 18 March 2024 at the age of only sixty-four. Ute was associated with the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, since 2009 as senior lecturer (Privatdozentin) and since 2014 as adjunct professor. She held a number of interim professorships, teaching numerous courses that were highly appreciated by students at the universities of Bayreuth, Frankfurt am Main and Mainz. She supervised many bachelor's and master's theses with great expertise and personal commitment. Her doctoral students also benefited from her friendly yet critical academic support.

Ute Rösenthaler was an internationally renowned researcher on material culture in general, on ritual practices and 'purchasable associations' in Cameroon, on copyright in Africa, on trade networks in the Global South and on various aspects of African entrepreneurship and advertising. She was fascinated by global product histories, such as those of green tea and cloth and, most recently, popular music. In addition to Cameroon, Nigeria, Mali and Ghana, her transregional and transcontinental fieldwork took her to China, Malaysia, and South Korea.

After studying social and cultural anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin (1980-86) and writing a master's thesis on African masks (1986), Ute Rösenthaler spent several periods of fieldwork with the Ejagham in southwest Cameroon. Her doctoral dissertation in 1992 was devoted to the arts and festivals of the Ejagham and published as *Die Kunst der Frauen* (1993). In her postdoctoral research, she expanded this topic to explore the emergence and distribution of purchasable cult associations in the Cross River region of southwest Cameroon and southeast Nigeria. Institutionally, she moved from Berlin to the department of anthropology at the Goethe University,

Frankfurt am Main, and conducted her West African fieldwork in the context of a research project supported by the DFG (German Research Foundation) (1998-2001). Following this project, she was employed as assistant professor in the Frankfurt anthropology department and continued working at her habilitation thesis (thèse d'état), which she submitted at the faculty of history and cultural studies at Mainz University in 2009. With its focus on purchasable cult associations, the thesis offers an innovative approach to the history of a previously under-researched region and makes a significant contribution to the study of pre-colonial trade networks in stateless societies.

Ute Rösenthaler's habilitation thesis was published in 2011 with Africa World Press (Trenton) under the challenging title *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria*, offering a seminal preview of the originality and creativity of her scholarship. Her reflections on the economy of Cameroonian cult associations and complex processes of cultural appropriation and diffusion attracted international attention far beyond the field of anthropology.

Already during her PhD fieldwork with the Ejagham on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon, Ute Rösenthaler was surprised that with them, as in the whole Cross River region, there was a lively traffic in associations and cult agencies that were 'owned' by communities or sometimes by persons and were 'sold' to other villages. This proved to be a seminal starting point for her post-doctoral research. It made her develop an original style of mobile research that allowed her, through a detailed overview of the entire Cross River area, to show how the buying and selling of associations could create a flexible but also tight network for trading and for government. Her research continued the interest of leading German social scientists like Max Weber, Heinrich Schurtz and Georg Simmel in *Bünde* and specifically *Geheimbünde* (secret societies, cult agencies). But her detailed fieldwork masterfully lifted the veil around the working of these associations.

The area where she worked was of old a challenging environment for this theme. From the sixteenth century, the European presence on the coast relatively quickly exerted a deeper impact on the hinterland, particularly through the ever-widening scope of the slave trade. The people of the Cross River area served as intermediaries in the trafficking of slaves from the plateaus further into the interior, notably the Grassfields, and on to the coast. However, in contrast to other areas of intense slave-hunting, in the Cross River area this did not promote state formation. On the contrary, in this area trade developed through a network linking independent communities. The emerging cult associations used their secrets to exercise the necessary control, imposing fines on traders who refused to pay their debts, providing protection for trading missions and settling disputes. Europeans, both traders and missionaries, were ill at ease with this form of mostly secret control, but until direct colonial rule was established towards the end of the nineteenth century, they were forced to respect the *Geheimbünde's* rules and demands. To single out just one remarkable achievement of Ute Rösenthaler's research, her chapter on the *Ekpe* society, whose hidden 'fetish' growls like a leopard, offers a most clarifying analysis of its origins and the way it spread over a wider region.

This is no mean achievement, since *Ekpe* has for a long time been one of the riddles of this area to outsiders. *Ekpe*'s regional role was severely undermined during direct colonial rule, but interestingly it has been coming back since independence as a hidden form of government and dispute-settling. Clearly, the cult agencies can have great resilience.

Precisely because of its impressively wide-ranging empirical basis, Ute Röschenhaler's analysis poses seminal theoretical challenges. It shows most eloquently that the functioning of the cult associations, and the way they worked with mystical power as a public secret, undermines conventional premises of social science. It is striking, for instance, that the very practice of 'owning' and 'selling' cult secrets – including their material expressions such as masks and cult objects – raises issues of intellectual property with implications that differ strongly from Western settings. In the Cross River area, the whole process of commoditization followed its own trajectory. It may have been triggered by the presence of European traders on the coast, but the key role that the associations played meant that 'normal' distinctions were erased. For instance, economy and politics cannot be separated; in many respects the trading associations assume the role of a government. But even more importantly, fundamental sources of enrichment are based outside production and plunder; instead, they come from culture or even magic. This is why *Purchasing Culture* is such a beautiful title for this challenging book, which will continue to serve as a rich source for theoretical debate in our discipline and in social science in general well into the future.

Cultural mobility, transregional trade relations and aspects of copyright in Africa were also at the centre of Ute Röschenhaler's research projects in the years following her habilitation. Added to this was her interest in advertising and product design, in which she returned to questions in art and media anthropology that had already occupied her in her master's and doctoral theses and in a postdoctoral project at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. These new research projects have resulted not only in numerous publications – for instance, *Africa's Agency in China's Tea Trade* (2022) and *A History of Mali's National Drink* (2022) – but also in exhibitions and a highly illustrative virtual museum on green tea.

In particular her two 2022 books on how Chinese green tea became the national drink in Mali illustrate the global possibilities of the style of research that Ute Röschenhaler developed during her study of cult associations in the Cross River area. One could say that she adopted a similar approach for these books, but now on a global scale, turning this project into an original exercise in world history. The *gren* – an informal get together of several men, mostly fairly young ones who leisurely prepare and sip their tea following a fixed ritual – may be an everyday scene in Mali, but Ute shows that behind this common event is a complex historical trajectory full of contingent convergences. The tea is green tea from China, yet it is very strong since it is brewed several times over and drunk with a lot of sugar. How did Chinese tea become so popular in everyday Mali? The two books together offer an intercontinental history of green tea: from China, via Portugal and England to Morocco, and from there on the Trans-

Saharan caravan roads to Mali and other Sahel societies. Again, these multiple trans-regional and transcontinental trajectories inspired Ute to adopt an extremely mobile style of research: she conducted fieldwork in several Sahel states, as well as in China, Britain, Morocco and even an East-Frisian tea museum. And again, she succeeded in building up an impressive empirical database, very detailed yet also well analyzed, to support her analysis of the global cultural borrowing that changed how the tea is consumed, both in its preparation and its social meaning. It is remarkable how, in her analysis of the history of green tea, Ute combines political economy with the cultural aspects, ranging from the changing design of pots and cups to the meaning the drink has for its addicts. The drink's present-day association in Mali with unemployed and potentially rebellious young men, spending their time in bitter jokes about the failure of the state and development, is quite new – a post-structural adjustment?

Ute Rösenthaller's wealth of historical examples from all over the globe shows that green tea is clearly capable of moving up and down social hierarchies, depending on the context. Her style of doing world history reflects her patience and interest in detail. These qualities, combined with analytical rigor and a comparative perspective, may well be the secret of the success of her approach. Ute rightly remarks that world-historical topics like tea have too often been researched in a binary perspective of European expansion versus the rest, focusing on a North-South axis of capitalist exploitation. Clearly, more fine-grained analyses are required to make meandering trajectories like those of Chinese green tea comprehensible. Ute's work has given us brilliant examples how such an analysis can be achieved.

Ute Rösenthaller's recent focus on issues of copyright in Africa led to numerous talks and publications, most importantly the seminal volume *Copyright Africa*, which she edited together with Mamadou Diawara in 2016. In early 2024, Ute was able to complete a study on the legal dimension of artistic practices in the Nigerian music industry and the popularity of African music in South Korea. By looking at both the listening habits of young people and their ideas of copyright, and by linking this to her earlier interest in the broader question of copyright in Africa, she added an entirely new and overdue dimension to research on popular music. She conducted this study as part of the Mainz-Frankfurt-based research project CEDITRAA (Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia). Focusing on Nigerian popular music, her project explored how cultural entrepreneurs deal with legal regulations and what solutions they find to sustain their activities. Thus, copyright is studied from the perspective of the daily practice of artistic creativity. CEDITRAA's focus on cultural entrepreneurs and their completely new possibilities of trade and communication in the digital age was heavily indebted to Ute's ongoing research on entrepreneurship in Africa and Africans in Asia. The findings of this and related research projects were published in a number of edited volumes and special issues (Rösenthaller 2020, 2023; Rösenthaller and Jedlowski, 2017a, 2017b; Rösenthaller and Schulz 2016, etc.). Further collective publications are still in the making.

Ute Röschenthaler was not only an outstanding researcher and scientific author, but also an impressive organizer of international research collaborations and conferences. At the Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, she worked for many years in the Cluster of Excellence 'Formation of Normative Orders' and in the project 'Afraso – Africa's Asian Options' at the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Research. Most recently, she was influential in the conception and implementation of CEDITRAA and became a key member of this joint research project between Mainz and Frankfurt. Among the many conferences co-organized and hosted by Ute in this context, the workshop on 'Afrobeats: Digital Encounters and the Global Mainstreaming of African Popular Music', held at the University of Lagos in September 2023, was certainly a highlight.

With her most recent DFG research project, 'African traders' agency on global cloth markets,' Ute Röschenthaler wanted to add a new facet to her innovative studies on consumer goods, trade networks in the Global South and cultural entrepreneurship, namely an exploration of fabrics and clothing in West Africa. She considered cloth both a fascinating medium for the representation of social differentiation and an object of complex international trade relations. Unfortunately, she was not able to continue this most promising research project. Certainly, we would have been enlightened and inspired by her new findings.

One of the secrets of Ute Röschenthaler's success as a fieldworker was her talent for relating to her colleagues. She was well-connected at many European and African universities and was always ready to help colleagues, especially those from Africa. Many of her publications and editorships testify to the productivity of her commitment to scholarly cooperation. She only started her research in China quite recently, but within a few years she became a highly respected colleague in these circles as well, as is clear from the condolences we have received from the CAAC (Chinese in Africa / Africans in China) network. She inspired and motivated many around her with her thirst for new ideas and enthusiasm for research, her innovative contributions and her unfailing collegial kindness. She will be sorely missed by us all!

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- For a more exhaustive list of publications, see Ute Rösenthaller's homepage at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz:
https://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/files/2022/04/Roesenthaller_Publikationen-und-Vortraege.pdf
- For Ute Rösenthaller's online exhibition on the rich West African tea culture see www.virtualgreenteamuseum.de | FB 07 - Institut fuer Ethnologie und Afrikastudien (uni-mainz.de).