

Tributes for Ute Rösenthaller (1960–2024)

Antoine Socpa

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It is with great sadness that I learned of the sudden departure of Professor Ute Rösenthaller. Since the 2010s, when we began to collaborate, she had become an academic and scientific ‘influencer’ for me. During our long period of collaboration, we carried out a number of research projects together, either individually between the two of us, or as part of exchanges between the Department of Anthropology of the University of Yaoundé I (Cameroon) and the Institut für Ethnologie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main (Germany). The tangible outcomes of this cooperation have become visible in many major projects – in the context of the research centre ‘Normative Orders’, AFRASO (Africa’s Asian Options), and a programme on African textiles – and included PhD sponsorships of three Cameroonian students.

For AFRASO, we jointly carried out field research in Cameroon on trade between China and Cameroon. This research resulted in the publication of an article entitled ‘The China challenge: Cameroonians between discontent and popular admiration’ (Rösenthaller and Socpa 2017). For the Normative Orders project, Ute asked me to identify two Cameroonian students to be offered funding for their PhD projects on issues of development anthropology. Later, she asked me to add a third student. One of the candidates (Afu Isaiah Kunock) was able to defend his thesis within the allotted period, and during his PhD thesis defence, Ute was the guest of honour of the University of Yaoundé I and served on the jury as an external examiner. The two other students (among them Brenda Mbonge Njinjoh) have still not finished their theses, but every time Ute was in Yaoundé, we had stimulating conversations with each of them. In all these meetings I was impressed by Ute’s courtesy, coupled with her firmness in supervising our joint students. During some of her stays in Cameroon, despite her busy schedule, she generously accepted the invitation from the anthropology department to conduct seminars with master’s and doctoral students.

In our joint research, too, I was impressed by her dedication to her work and her great clarity in defining her aims and approaches. I came to admire her mixture of friendliness and directness, which made her style of collaboration most productive for myself, other colleagues and anthropology students. Ute was a modest person, but ambitious in the goals she was setting for her projects. This made her a most inspiring colleague and friend to work with.

During her research stays in Cameroon, my family welcomed Ute to our compound. She and my wife became good friends. When I announced the news of her death, my family was very sad. On behalf of my family, teaching staff and students of the anthropology department of the University of Yaoundé, I implore the Cameroonian ancestors – from this country that she loved and chose as one of her research fields – to intercede with Almighty God so that her soul may rest in peace.

Brenda Mbonge Njinjoh

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I got to know Professor Rösenthaller through my university professor Antoine Socpa, who used to work with her in education and on research projects. She needed two good students from my university to work with her in research projects, and I was selected as one of them for a research programme on textile production, sales and imports by local dealers in various textiles in Cameroon. I started working with her in January 2023. The information about her passing away was shocking and sad for me, not just because of the textile research I carried out for her, but also for the fact that I met her in person when she came to Cameroon last year and accompanied me to some of the textile dealers I was working with. Our travels didn't end there, as I went with her to Cameroon's Southwest Region and returned with her to Yaoundé. She was such a modest person in character, good at instructing and guiding students. She could interact so easily with people of different cultures and traditions, which also made my interactions with her so easy.

Professor Rösenthaller has become a role model, and I was looking forward to learning a lot from her, without knowing that the spirit of death was very close by, waiting to separate us and put an end to my long-awaited dream of submitting the research I was doing to her. Her image remains a mark on my face, and her good deeds remain permanent in my heart. May she rest in peace.

Afu Isaiah Kunock

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Getting to know the late Professor Ute Rösenthaller transformed my life forever. I came to know her in 2009 through Professor Michaela Pelican and Professor Antoine Socpa when I was about to enrol in the PhD program. Through her I was granted a scholarship for my PhD in Cameroon. In the course of my programme, she offered me all the necessary assistance and also proof-read the chapters of my thesis.

In 2014 she flew to Cameroon for my PhD defence, after which I was invited, through her influence, to present my research findings at the University of Frankfurt. While in Germany, she organized a workshop where we were taught how to write and

publish scientific papers. This was a turning point in my life, leading to the publication of one of my very first scientific papers in Germany. Ute also reviewed many of my publications, on which she offered tremendous insights. This provided me with a foothold from which I rose in my career through several other publications, until today I am an associate professor. During my stay in Germany she organized a surprised birthday party for me, a memory I have always cherished.

In 2023 Ute was in Cameroon, this time for a project on textile markets in West and Central Africa. That I picked her up from the airport and took her to the hotel room she had asked me to reserve for her really gladdened her heart. While in Cameroon, she gave a talk to the Department of Anthropology. Moreover, she visited my family, which left them with some dear memories. She asked me to join the project team, which I gratefully accepted, and asked me to write an article that will be a part of the project's collection. While still writing the article, I received the heartbreaking news of her demise. She shaped my world view of things and my critical mind as a scientist. What an irreplaceable loss!

Patrick Oloko

Department of English, University of Lagos

When I was informed about the passing of Prof. Ute Rösenthaller, I found myself asking that old, but unanswered and unanswerable question: if we were born to die, then why were we born?

I first met Prof. Rösenthaller in 2010 as a young scholar. On the recommendation of Prof. Karin Barber, Ute had invited me to Bad Homburg for a workshop as part of the 'Normative Orders' research project that she co-organized with Prof. Mamadou Diawara. While presenting her work on premodern copyright practices in Cameroon, I heard her mention words, with native speaker fluency, in the Ejagham language, which is spoken in both Cameroon and Nigeria. I told her that she spoke the language well, and thereafter began a long brother/sister, mentor/mentee research and scholarly relationship between us.

Ute and I spent September and October of 2023 organizing the 'Afrobeats' workshop in Lagos as part of the CEDITRAA project. After the workshop, we conducted interviews and focus-group discussions with textile traders, market administrators and government officials in the West African coastal cities of Lagos, Cotonou, Lomé and Accra. On some days we would walk more than twenty thousand steps without her feeling sixty-four. In the course of these interminable movements, we discussed and planned the outline for an edited volume on the textile trade in West and Central Africa, and she informed me that the volume would be her last production in that genre of scholarship. Thereafter, she would concentrate on producing books, using the voluminous data she was acquiring on her research trips. I learned many research skills while working with her. I still find it difficult to accept that, four months after we said

goodbye at Accra, Ute would be gone, never to be seen again, never to complete the edited volume that she had meticulously planned, never to use those voice notes that she had carefully collected as 'evidence' in her anthropological engagements. Indeed, if we were born to die, then why were we born?

From the limited ken of a literary scholar, I regard Ute as an anthropologist who took the discipline to new heights in the ways she influenced peers and mentees alike from other fields to graft 'ethnographic methods' on to their research methods. As neophytes like myself related to her, she would break down the complexity of the discipline in formal and informal talks, insisting on 'evidence' as the basis for any unpretentious interdisciplinary research. A high level of cultural understanding and humility seeped out from her relationships with people, as I noted from her interacting with people in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana. She will be remembered for many things by the many people she came in contact with. We have lost an irreplaceable colleague, mentor, sister, and friend!

Madou Keita

Bamako

In early 2005 I had the chance to meet Prof. Ute Röschenhaler in Bamako at Point Sud, a research center on local knowledge, created by Professor Mamadou Diawara and his Malian friends. After two weeks working together with Ute as guide and messenger, she rapidly recognized my courage and my ability to understand her work and adapt myself to it. She therefore asked me to act as her interpreter and translator. In three months, we succeeded in doing a lot of work together. When the three months were over, she congratulated me and encouraged me by asking me to continue working with her during her subsequent research visits to Mali. Her trust in me reinforced my trust in myself. Prof. Röschenhaler was a strong and courageous woman, rigorous in her work, but also humble and without attitude. Every time she returned to Mali, I was again impressed by her courage, her efficiency and resilience. At her side, I learned a lot: I came to a deeper understanding of what was happening around me. We worked together on a wide range of subjects from everyday life in Mali: what people drink (water, soft and strong drinks, traditional and modern ones), what they wear (the textiles and their designs – we often took pictures of those), and food products (vegetables and others). But our research came to focus on tea, notably green tea from China, and the rituals for preparing and drinking it.

Together we circulated through the city of Bamako, but we also travelled widely in Mali's interior: the North, but also Ségou, Sévaré, Mopti, Bandiagara, the land of the Dogon, Djenne and Timbuktu. In the last city, we visited its museums and the Ahmed Baba center. In Dogon land, we travelled the full length of its famous cliff. In 2012, also we visited Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso. However, in nineteen years of working together, we did so many things together that I cannot enumerate all of them. All the

time I have seen a woman who had consecrated her life to her studies in order to gain a deeper understanding of the people and the world around her, whether in Africa or in Europe – an exceptional woman, tireless and extraordinary.

I cannot hold back my tears every time I try to write some lines about Ute. She always considered me her younger brother. May God receive her in his eternal paradise!

Mamadou Diawara

MIASA, Accra; Goethe University Frankfurt/Main; Point Sud, The Centre for Research on Local Knowledge Bamako

Ute and I worked together for almost a quarter of a century. For more than a dozen years, we used to chat as friends about everything and anything as part of the seminar in the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Frankfurt's Goethe University. Ute and I largely shared the convivial aspect of scientific debate. How many pubs in the Westend district welcomed us on Thursday evenings with our guests, colleagues, students and researchers? Once in the restaurant, the ritual question was always asked at around 8 pm: 'What would you like [to eat, of course!]' A superb glass of red Montepulciano always managed to cheer her up, and off we went for a chat about the conference that had just been held, or about anything and everything at the same time, while waiting for the Thursday of the following week. Her eyes light up in the clamour of our discussions, punctuated by the beating of her left hand, as if to say, enough, enough, enough.

The sociability at the end of classes and in restaurants confirmed her great selectivity about where and what to eat. At Mensa time, when many of our colleagues went out to eat together, Ute was either at home or busy with something else, unless she had made an appointment with a few friends to explore a sushi restaurant. Mensa wasn't her forte, because eating healthily, without preaching it, was her credo. I used to tell her jokingly that she was afraid of being poisoned because the food served there was so dangerous. We who make it are vaccinated.

In Mali, this was always the case, even though I didn't pay much attention to it at first. Indeed, at breakfast, Ute, sometimes in the company of Matthias Gruber, aka Monsieur Mathieu, would taste the baguette of Bamako, but without sugar or milk. By dint of observation and questioning, I finally understood. As it happens, the usual sugar in Bamako is as white as snow, and the 'best milk', necessarily powdered, is Nestlé's Nido brand. Neither was on Madame's menu. Like any sugar, and rightly so, she tasted the country's delicious little bananas. What could be easier than to do without this milk substitute in a 'cattle-breeding country' that is so short of milk?

Dear Ute, your sense of loyalty, of health and good food will always be remembered.

