



*“At home,  
we didn’t even have a book  
about Africa.”*

Now and then: an intergenerational dialogue on African Studies  
at Goethe University Frankfurt

Founded as the “Institute for African Linguistics”, African Studies is meanwhile firmly established in the linguistics portfolio at Goethe University Frankfurt. A discussion between Antonia Fendt and Mary Ann McLaughlin, two African Studies students, and Professor Herrmann Jungraihtmayr, the doyen of the subject. Dr Anke Sauter chaired the round.

**Sauter:** Professor Jungraihtmayr, you are regarded as the founder of the Institute for African Studies. How did this come about?

**Jungraihtmayr:** I had accepted the professorship at Goethe University Frankfurt in 1985 on the condition that I could set up an independent institute here that had not previously existed. But then it indeed took quite some time. At first, I was responsible for African languages within what is now the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Then, in 1994, the Institute for African Linguistics, was founded, which was the original name.

**Sauter:** You didn’t come here with empty hands.

**Jungraihtmayr:** Without the premise of almost thirty years of African Studies in Marburg it would not have been possible. I took all my staff with me at that time, most of the library moved from Marburg to Frankfurt and is still part of the Institute of African Studies today.

**Fendt:** What were your motives for occupying yourself with African languages?

**Jungraihtmayr:** That’s a sixty-four-thousand-dollar question, the simple answer is: I don’t know exactly. I come from the small town of Eferding (Austria). At home, we didn’t even have a book about Africa. After completing my A-levels at grammar school in Linz, I met up with my school friend Otto Maschke. We both wanted to do something for Africa. He had read a lot about the former German colonies and got me involved. But then, when we met in Vienna, he said that unfortunately he couldn’t do it after all. His parents wanted him to study something useful.

**Fendt:** How did your own family react to you wanting to study a subject that wasn’t mainstream?

**Jungraihtmayr:** When I was already in the sixth or seventh semester, a friend asked my father: Max, how can you let your son study such nonsense? To which my father replied – and that still gives me a boost even today – “If you say anything like that again, it will be the end of our friendship.” So I had my parents’ support, but naturally it was quite naïve support. They were simple farmers and innkeepers.

**McLaughlin:** What made you decide to take in a linguistic perspective next to the ethnological one?

**Jungraihtmayr:** I asked myself: Why is ethnology only about culture and not about language as well? The secretary at the Institute for Ethnology in Vienna, Countess Hohenwart-Gerlachstein, drew my attention to the lecture by Professor Czermak at the Institute for Egyptology and African Studies. That’s when the penny dropped. Czermak was tremendous. He held a lecture once a week about Ancient Egypt, and that’s how I became an Africanist. But what about you?

**Fendt:** In our bachelor’s programme in Mainz, we both studied linguistics as a

## Off to a successful start

### THE NEW BACHELOR’S PROGRAMME IN AFRICAN STUDIES

Since the 2021/22 winter semester, there is a new bachelor’s degree programme in African Studies, offered jointly by Goethe University Frankfurt and Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Its title: “African Languages, Media and Communication.” It was prompted by Africanists working outside academia, says Professor Axel Fanego Palat, Africanist at the university. He says that there was a lack of knowledge about contemporary Africa. How do Africans, who are inherently multilingual, communicate in the European diaspora? What role do social media play on a continent with an oral tradition? And how formative are postcolonialism and migration? Knowledge about modern Africa opens up new career prospects for young people. But the new demand was definitely a challenge for the “small discipline” of African Linguistics. An “approach based purely on language description is no longer sufficient,” says Fanego Palat. In Professor Nico Nassenstein, an Africa researcher from Mainz, he found a partner who was also looking for a new way forward. Together, they have developed a degree programme which is

unique in Germany. This fits nicely into the strategic alliance of the Rhine-Main Universities (RMU), to which, of course, TU Darmstadt also belongs. Grants from the Initiative Funding for Research and Teaching were therefore made available. The new degree programme is also docked onto a new research project jointly carried out by the universities of Frankfurt and Mainz: the interdisciplinary international project “Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia” (CEDITRAA), which is looking at the consequences of digitisation for cultural production in Africa and Asia (see article on page 5). The new bachelor’s programme also gives students room to spend time abroad and is interdisciplinary. Students study two African languages as well as Africanist linguistic practice with content from sociolinguistics as well as digital and intercultural communication. Thanks to digital teaching formats, commuting is kept within limits and makes it possible to include teaching staff from Africa. Demand seems to endorse the concept: almost 40 young people started the programme in the autumn. **pb**



During a stay in Tangale Land, north-eastern Nigeria: Professor Jungrathmayr together with his language assistant Stephen Njengo (left) and master narrator Gabdo Bapi Gauti (centre).

core subject and ethnology as a minor and had to take two languages within the core subject. I've always been interested in history, geography, but also the flora and fauna of Africa, and thought it would be exciting to learn an African language because languages are known to open doors. I then first signed up for the West African language Bambara and later for the East African language Swahili. During my master's degree I then learnt Kinyarwanda.

**Sauter:** What fascinates you about African languages?

**Fendt:** What fascinated me was the diversity of the language and the language structure. For example, expressing *have* or *be*, which for us are common verbs, can be expressed quite differently in other languages.

**Sauter:** Can you explain that further?

**Fendt:** In Bambara, possession is expressed by means of various concepts, depending on what you own. This means that there is no direct translation

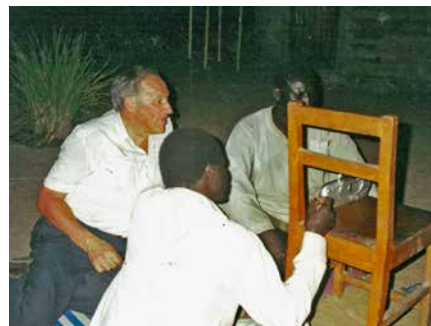
for *have*. Instead, *have* is formed syntactically via local postpositions, whereby a distinction is made between whether the possessions are concrete or abstract.

**McLaughlin:** It's more a description of how close something is to the respective person. If I own something, I say it's with me.

**Jungrathmayr:** That reminds me of my early studies of Ewe, a language of Ghana and Togo. In Ewe, there is no word for *bring*. *Bring* is an abstraction, it is made up of *go*, *come* and *give*. We can speak here of serial verbs, similar to the *verba coniuncta* in Nubian.

**McLaughlin:** How did you arrive at your later research focus, the Chadic languages?

**Jungrathmayr:** After Professor Czermak had died in Vienna in 1953, I continued my studies in Hamburg. When I suggested to my professor there that I could write a paper on the *verba coniuncta*, he said: There's no need to do that. Instead,



Herrmann Jungrathmayr with African staff during a nighttime recording of the Sumray language in Central Chad in 2001.

I should work on a manuscript written by a missionary. It was a dictionary with the grammar of Tangale, a Nigerian-Chadic language. That was how I started with Chadic.

**Fendt:** What fascinated you about it?

**Jungrathmayr:** The relationship between the languages of northern Africa and those of sub-Saharan Africa, then called White Africa and Black Africa, had interested me from early on. I wanted to know: This millennia-long encounter between the peoples, the languages, the cultures – how have these encounters possibly changed the languages?

**Sauter:** Could you please tell us briefly what exactly you discovered about Chadic?

**Jungrathmayr:** Chadic as a language world can only be explained by the immigration of people who originally lived in the green Sahara. About 5,000 years ago, they were obliged to look for a new home because of climate change. And they found it on the one hand in the Nile Valley in Egypt and on the other hand in the Lake Chad region in Central Sudan. I have dedicated my life to investigating what became of the originally North African language cultures when they came together in Central Sudan with Nigritic-African peoples and languages and developed together with them.

**Sauter:** And what happened?

**Jungrathmayr:** The essence was that the so-called Hamito-Semitic, Afro-Asiatic languages – Akkadian, Hebrew, Arabic,

## ABOUT HERRMANN JUNGRAITHMAYR

**Herrmann Jungrathmayr**, born in 1931, studied African studies, Egyptology and ethnology in Vienna and Hamburg. From 1956 to 1959, he was a lecturer at the Goethe Institute in Cairo and taught at Orman and Ibrahimiyya grammar schools. In 1957, he introduced the German language at Al-Azhar University. In 1967, he earned his postdoctoral degree (habilitation) at the University of Marburg and then worked as a lecturer there. After working as an assistant professor at Howard University in Washington, DC, he was a professor of African Studies at the University of Marburg from 1972 to 1985. From 1985 to 1996, he was chair of African Linguistics at Goethe University Frankfurt, where he founded the Institute for African Linguistics, now known as the Institute for African Studies.

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Berber, etc. – are indeed apophonic languages, that is, like in English with verbs like *sing, sang, sung*, the vowel changes. They were influenced by contact with original (autochthonous) African languages, in which the pitch usually changes. In Mubi, an ablaut language, you have *ewit* (he bit) and *uwaat* (he is biting) – perfective and imperfective are marked here by a strong vowel contrast. As little as 300 kilometres further west, the beautiful vowels disappear. In Masa, the perfective is *ât*, the imperfective *át* (pronounced with different pitch).

**McLaughlin:** Did you conduct any direct field research?

**Jungrathmayr:** Yes, of course, many times over 50 years. From 1956 onwards, I lived for three years in Egypt and taught German at grammar schools and at Al-Azhar University for the Goethe Institute. I wanted above all to learn to speak Arabic. Through students from Central Sudan, I gained access to their home villages. With my brother Alfred, I then undertook a first journey in 1958/59 to pick up the traces of the Daju language, which particularly interested me at the time.

**Fendt:** There are 150 Chadic languages. What drove you to explore more and more languages?

**Jungrathmayr:** Curiosity and enthusiasm for research. Many of these languages we didn't even know yet. Science is the art that creates knowledge. Each language preserves the Afro-Asian heritage in its own way.

**Sauter:** And what do the languages have in common?

**Jungrathmayr:** There is a core vocabulary that links them to the classical written languages of the Ancient Orient. For example, individual words such as the verb *paras* (to split) are found on Akkadian cuneiform tablets as well as in some eastern Chad languages. Moreover, these languages function in the verbal domain according to the basic principles of perfective and imperfective. Everything can be traced back to this basic binarity. This fascinated me, and over the years I proceeded from language to language and examined it.

**McLaughlin:** You have an overview of several decades of African Studies. What has changed during this time in your opinion?

**Jungrathmayr:** Today, the synchronic aspect of language studies is much stronger than the diachronic [*comparing*



The Africanist with his daughter Therese and the Emir of Kaltungo. The two were in the Nigerian town in 2009 for a book presentation.

*over time*]. We have learnt the historical view even more: How did a language become the way it is? Are there neighbouring languages which represent a more ancient type? To be able to examine this, of course, requires a lot of data. That is how the Chadic word catalogue came about, which was started in Marburg and continued in Frankfurt.

**Sauter:** You went to Africa as a European with this academic interest in languages. Was there such an interest in African countries as well?

**Jungrathmayr:** Difficult question. The interest in language at the universities at that time was still going in a different direction. First of all, materials were needed for teaching at elementary school. However, I was acknowledged several times for my work, perhaps without my research being received in detail.

**Sauter:** Are there linguists in Africa who work in a similar way to you?

**Jungrathmayr:** Yes, for sure. There are many colleagues who teach at African universities and meet us at international congresses, and who do it at least as well as we do. As native speakers and trained linguists, they naturally have great advantages. What is still largely missing is historical comparative language research.

**Fendt:** Are you still actively conducting research?

**Jungrathmayr:** And how! I'm working together with an Egyptologist in Constance. At present, we're describing a language together in Chadic, it's called Kwang. Yes, I'm still *in media res*, although sometimes I don't feel so fit anymore. But when I have support like this, it's fine. I still have such an infinite amount of material! (To Fendt and McLaughlin:) But can I ask you whether you would also be enthusiastic about research? Would you like to describe a language which hasn't been explored yet? Or would you rather undertake communication research with the help of the language you've learnt?

**McLaughlin:** I would certainly enjoy researching a language that has not yet been described. But I also found it exciting to work with the materials which can be found in the Africa Museum in Tervuren (Belgium), for example, where I was an intern. It houses many language policy records from the time during and shortly after colonial rule in the Congo which have not yet been made available to the world.

**Jungrathmayr:** What is it about, exactly?

**McLaughlin:** It was like this: missionaries landed in the Congo, learnt there the first local language, which they perhaps mastered quite well. Then they moved on to do their missionary work. In the process, they used this language as the standard language in other places, even though the local conditions were different. This led to language changes because completely different links and combinations resulted.

**Jungrathmayr:** So by using the idiom they learnt first as a language of communication, they carried elements further which then changed the other languages?

**McLaughlin:** Exactly. As a result, artificial languages were created. These languages still exist today if you look, for example, at the language Lingala. These mental assets are often kept in museums and could be made available to the public so that people can understand themselves why their language is spoken

today in the way it is. But many of these documents are in museums in Belgium, so the people in the Congo don't have access to them.

**Jungraithmayr:** Are there attempts to digitise them so that people in the Congo can also see them?

**McLaughlin:** Yes, this is now slowly starting to happen in the course of the debate about looted art. But it's not only about objects but also about many language documents because a large number of linguists also worked for the museums at that time.

**Jungraithmayr:** Digitising language material which exists in writing in Europe so that African communities can take note of it and possibly work on it on their own: that's an extremely important task. Practically all our publications would have to be included. Each of my books costs €70 or more. It's indeed paradoxical: when our institute moves to West-end Campus, many of our books won't be able to go with us because of lack of space, while there they are desperately needed.

**Sauter:** They would be put to good use in Africa.

**Jungraithmayr:** Yes, of course, but who is going to finance it? Just sending a little book costs €30.

**McLaughlin:** "Engagement Global". It's a service for initiatives that promote development projects. For example, you can use the transport cost subsidy to raise in-kind donations. One condition is that these donations are aimed at improving the living conditions of a disadvantaged population group, which is what books always do. We could submit an application to them, pack up all the duplicates and send them there.

**Jungraithmayr:** That would be great!

**Sauter:** Then our little discussion group has produced a really practical outcome!

The discussion was chaired  
by Dr Anke Sauter, science editor  
at Goethe University Frankfurt.

### ABOUT ANTONIA FENDT



**Antonia Fendt, 24**, originates from Idstein/Taunus. She completed her bachelor's degree in linguistics and ethnology and during this period learnt the West African language Bambara and the East African language Swahili. In addition, in the master's degree programme "Language and Society in Africa", with a focus on "African Studies – Social and Historical Contexts", she completed courses in Kinyarwanda. During her studies, her interest and enthusiasm for African cultures, music and literature have grown even further. She is a student assistant at the Institute for African Studies. In the future, she could imagine working in research and teaching.

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### ABOUT MARY ANN MCLAUGHLIN



**Mary Ann McLaughlin, 27**, grew up in the US and in the little village of Langweiler in the administrative district of Kusel. She studied linguistics in Mainz, specialising in African studies and ethnology and learning the Bambara und Swahili languages. She is now enrolled in Frankfurt on the master's degree programme "Language and Society in Africa", with a focus on "African Studies – Social and Historical Contexts" and has completed a language course on Kinyarwanda as well as a structure class on Lingala/Bangala. In terms of career, she could imagine working in development cooperation, but also in research and teaching. During an internship at the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium, she found the topic for her master's dissertation, which will critically examine colonial linguistics and language policy in the Congo.

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