



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the laying of the foundation stone
for the new Goethe-Institut building in Dakar
21 February 2022
in Dakar/Senegal**

“This simultaneous discovery of the Black African cultures and the German Sturm und Drang movement was, to my mind at least, of decisive importance for the emergence of the term negritude.” Léopold Sédar Senghor

What surprising thoughts! What a surprising admission by Léopold Sédar Senghor, back then in 1968. It was a turbulent time; there was unrest in Europe, also in Frankfurt, also outside the Paulskirche. And that was where Senghor, the great poet and philosopher, was to receive the most important German literary prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Something of a sensation at the time.

And Senghor’s speech, too, was striking. It was at once poetic and political. The speaker was not only the first honouree from Africa, but also a great statesman, the first President of independent Senegal. A man who, while a Nazi prisoner of war of all things, found time to delve closely once again into the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the German Romantics which he had first encountered in Paris. He was a man who regarded himself not only as a champion of negritude, but also as a champion of a future world culture, a man who recognised clearly how interconnected the world already was – long before we began to talk of globalisation. Senghor’s ideas were not uncontroversial. But they were incredibly modern!

My visit to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s house next door has left a profound impression on me. Gathering here today, we are, one might say, coming full circle. I could not imagine a better location for the new Goethe-Institut building than here in the immediate vicinity of the museum dedicated to that great poet and statesman. For us Germans, this is a great joy and a very special honour. As Federal President, I would like to thank you, Ministers Sow and Diop! Thank you very much

– also to you, Professor Lentz – for inviting me to this ceremony today. I am particularly pleased to be here because the future of Africa, the common future of our two continents, is an issue very close to my heart. As Federal President, I have made repeated trips to African countries: to Ghana and the Gambia, South Africa and Botswana, to Ethiopia before the outbreak of the civil war, and most recently to Kenya and the Sudan. Everywhere I have been impressed by the will for a new beginning and the will to engage in reform, by the endless wealth of cultural treasures and diversity, as well as by the creativity and optimism of the people I have met.

And I am looking forward to many more encounters and talks here in Senegal! This morning I had the pleasure of meeting President Macky Sall again, and our conversation was marked by the spirit of friendship which has developed over many years between our two countries.

Philip Küppers, you and the members of staff of the Goethe-Institut have lived this friendship day after day for over forty years here in Dakar, this fascinating, vibrant cultural metropolis – and for that I wish to thank you today. Your work and commitment plays an immeasurably valuable part in the cultural exchange between our two countries, between the entire region and Europe. Moreover, I firmly believe that this work is part of our shared future. Not only are more and more people learning German here – the language that already fascinated Léopold Senghor. But also, with your many projects, particularly in Senegal's ever so exciting and inspiring cultural and creative industries, you are opening up prospects for young people, for young artists and musicians.

Many people, also in Germany nowadays, are fans of Senegalese music in particular: the rhythms of Baaba Maal and Mansour Seck, both of whom are here today, Orchestra Baobab, Youssou N'Dour and Ismaël Lô are world music that links people across continents. It is world culture precisely as referred to by Senghor.

We have all learnt anew, not least in these difficult times of the pandemic, just how important culture is for a society, and how much we miss it when no performances, no concerts and no encounters are possible. And it is for that very reason that places like the one being built here are so important: it is a place that imparts knowledge, a place where people can learn. But it is also a place for encounters, under this magnificent baobab tree, in keeping with Senegalese tradition. It is a place where people from Africa and Europe, from Senegal and Germany, can meet and talk to each other about their everyday lives, or about a concert they have just attended. But also about the major issues facing humankind, globalisation, migration, colonialism and the return of cultural objects and, crucially, the fight against climate change – the biggest and most pressing task facing the whole of humanity.

The construction of this building is pioneering; it will be a building that combines traditional and modern and is environmentally

sustainable. Francis Kéré, I would like to thank you for your wonderful design. You live and work in both Europe and Africa, and you combine ideas and traditions from both continents. You are a bridge-builder in the best sense of the word!

I am quite convinced that we need many more such bridges between our continents. Just last week in Berlin I was visited by a group of young people from African countries who, having spent a year in a German company, are now going back to various African countries as young managers. They want to bring change, they want to take their countries forward. I was impressed by their commitment and passion, their optimism and creativity.

I see that same optimism and creativity here in Dakar. And that makes me optimistic that we, Africa and Europe, can together master the major challenges we are facing – if we tackle them together. I am convinced that we can learn a lot from each other here: we need ideas and experiences from both continents – and the new Goethe-Institut is a lovely example.

And that brings me back to the legacy of the great Léopold Senghor. May this place become one of exchange, of curiosity, of encounters and of understanding!