

## ANGEWANDTE RESEARCH DAYS 2025

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Projekttitel:

SPINNING STORIES – LIVING ARCHIVES: Continuity and Innovation of a Vanishing Textile Heritage

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## WIDER RESEARCH CONTENT

The invention of the string – a long, flexible structure made of twisted fibres – is dated to the middle of the Upper Palaeolithic, around 20,000 to 30,000 years ago. This development is called the “String Revolution”, because this simple item opened the door to an enormous variety of new things and tools. It could be used to bind, catch, hold, and carry things, which is why it is considered as a significant step in the path of technology. With the invention of spinning technology, the hand spindle also developed. It is older than the wheel, and undoubtedly the archetype of all rotating things. From prehistoric times to the Industrial Revolution, spinning yarn to weave cloth was one of the most important necessities of life and enabled women to develop the fibre crafts and contribute to the society through their textile arts. With the mechanisation of textile-making processes, hand spinning has lost its status as a necessity and also its societal value, making it difficult for us today to conceive the influence of the simple spindle on the development of complex and sophisticated technologies.

Between the 1970s and 80s – at the beginning of the oral history movement in Europe -, the term “living archives” was a widely used expression to point out the urgency of collecting the memories of those generations who were disappearing and taking with them entire worlds of knowledge. Since then, digital archives have transformed from stable entities into flexible systems. Living archives, dynamic archives or decolonised archives are examples of new conceptualisations around the meaning of archives. What they have in common is being open to change and dynamically creating new connections that adapt to today's society and culture. Digital archives become living archives when the material is viewed not only as a representation of the past, but as an invitation to reflect on possible futures.

## OUTLINING THE PROBLEM AND RESEARCH INTEREST

Even though scientists today are aware of the importance of spinning for the development of humanity, the associated knowledge, artistic skills, handicraft skills and forms of practice that were passed on from generation to generation over thousands of years, are increasingly vanishing. In both the Global South and North, there are only a few women left, mainly aged between 80 and 90 years, who have mastered the craft of spinning. Obviously, it is only a matter of time before their skills and life stories are lost along with them. At the same time we are facing the problem of the lack of a young generation who would be willing to take on this textile heritage. Our current, unsustainable, efficiency-driven economic system based on mass production does not provide space for such a time-intensive activity. As a result, sensitivity towards the quality of textiles and the understanding of textiles as a common cultural asset are also dwindling in our global society.

Living in the postcolonial era, dealing with vanishing knowledge, we need to value the potential of oral knowledge transmission, the sharing of experiences and textiles as “libraries”,<sup>1</sup> as coded history. Since an archive has historically been a place of silence in which dominance has been inscribed, we see the need to break with the lines of cultural power and authority and avoid Eurocentric forms of knowledge production that disqualify certain forms of knowledge and silence voices.

Another research interest lies in blending the territories of the textile and the digital. If there is no younger generation coming along who wants to learn hand spinning, could an AI take over this textile heritage? What exactly does it take to train these skills that have developed over thousands of years? What does it need to master a tool that has hardly changed since the Palaeolithic era?

## AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The project aims to create a digital and living archive of vanishing spinning practices, fulfilling a function of intercultural memory transmission and contributing to foster social bonds, communities and identities. It bridges traditional spinning practices in Ghana in the Global South and Austria in the Global North through the narratives of women, who were engaged in the process of spinning and textile production throughout their lives and whose skills were of great importance for development of their region, but may never have received recognition. These spinning narratives are intended to help understand the past through the remembered experiences, explore the position of “women’s work”, and integrate living heritage into a process of collective imagination and intergenerational creative exchange. Through documenting and sharing these practices, the project engages in decolonial and non-hierarchical knowledge transmission, fostering intercultural dialogues. Another objective is the set-up a transcultural learning community in close collaboration with local communities in Ghana and Austria to make vanishing knowledge accessible and adapt it to their specific needs.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The kick-off of the project was a Flax and Nettle Workshop as well as an Artist Talk with Allan Brown from Great Britain at the Angewandte in November 2024. These fibre processing and spinning activities involved students, who formed the first learning community.

In February this year, we started our research in Ghana. Our project research began in Tamale, in the Northern Region of Ghana. Our aim was to visit and interview two around 90 years old, who still spin cotton by hand. But when we arrived and called the chiefs of two local communities, we learned that both spinners had recently passed away. We are aware that this textile heritage is vanishing, but we didn’t expect it to happen so quickly.

After the initial setback, we met with a community organizer named Walisu, who has devoted himself passionately to preserving organic cotton farming and hand spinning. Sitting with him, we gained insights into the realities of farmers and spinners struggling to maintain this tradition amidst economic and cultural shifts. While cotton production was growing rapidly in the mid- 1970s, it has faced many challenges in recent decades, and today, almost no cotton is grown in Ghana. Walisu attempted to grow organic cotton with a small group of women. The area available to him would have yielded approximately 600 kg of conventionally grown cotton, but only 200 kg of organic cotton. And since there was no rain, they harvested 2 kg of organic cotton.

Through him, we met some of the few remaining cotton farmers committed to growing and harvesting cotton by hand. By speaking with these farmers, we strengthened our understanding of how cotton cultivation underpins traditional spinning practices and how essential it is to nurture every step in the textile chain.

Finally, we met with a few elderly spinners who generously hosted a demonstration of their methods. Observing multiple women work side by side underscored the communal aspect of spinning and how such hands-on gatherings once served as a vehicle for storytelling, knowledge-sharing, and social cohesion. This encounter reminded us that cotton spinning is more than a craft - it is a living cultural practice that thrives on collaboration and collective memory. Their major problem is that there are no young people who are willing to learn from them.

In July, we planned to interview women in the Mühlviertel region in Austria who still preserve the knowledge of flax spinning. Here, too, the women I had the pleasure of meeting three or four years ago are no longer alive or are in nursing homes, or simply too weak to give an interview. Finally, we found an 89-year-old woman and, surprisingly, an 88-year-old man who was spinning flax with his sister at the time. It becomes apparent that men also carry on textile stories, and perhaps the story needs to be retold.

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<sup>1</sup> „Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down.“ (Amadou Hampâté Bâ, UNESCO speech 1960).