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The Noma award at twenty

THE jury for the prominent annual award for African publishing. The Noma, set in Florence, Italy, late in September, around the time that two other significant conferences of cultural experts were meeting in the same city - first the Ubuntu Books meeting, convened in the outskirts of Prato, organized by the Beblagio Publishing Network whose sitting was set to 'find ways of giving strength to initiatives to African publishing books and humanities in Africa', a meeting which, itself was prelude to the wider conference of professionals in the field of culture drawn from across continental lines, organized by the World Bank.

City of Florence on the river Arno

<< Three laureates

Martinique, a writer and populariser of an innovative creolised French; Paulin J. Hountondji, notable African scholar and a rallying point for French and English speaking philosophers of African descent; Kenneth Yeang, Malaysian architect who conceived 'the green skyscraper' and whose architecture adopts avant-garde technology producing an artificial environment that gives off benefits such as natural lighting, natural air circulation and collects rainwater as well as generating solar energy.

Others are Cildo Meireles the Brazilian artist, Cheick Oumar Sissoko, Malian filmmaker, Pepetela the Angolan writer, Dessalegn Bahmato an Ethiopian sociologist, Tsai Chih Chung Chinese cartoonist, Claudia Roden an Egyptian culinary anthropologist and Juana Marta Rodas en Julia Isidrez a ceramicist based in Paraguay.

The ten awards were presented in December by the Dutch ambassador in each recipient's country with a special citation. Wole Soyinka read a citation on Paulin Hountondji of Benin Republic while a citation entitled 'The Ever-watchful Eyelash' was delivered on the writer Pepetela by South African novelist Mia Couto.

Winners in 1997 and 1998 have included the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, the Lebanese author Nazik Saba Yarez and London's free speech magazine, Index on Censorship.

But the significance of the last sitting of the Noma Jury exceeded the happy 'coincidence' of both venue and timing with the two other meetings with direct relevance to publishing and the African world. Florence marked the twentieth anniversary of the Noma award which this time attracted a total of one hundred and seven titles, from sixty-seven African publishers, in nineteen countries, and in ten languages.

And one more coincidence: the book voted as the winning entry for 1999 was from Les Nouvelles editions Africaines du Senegal in Dakar, publisher of the very first Noma award winner in 1980, Mariama Ba's Une si longue lettre translated as So Long A Letter in English.

Djibril Samb received the award for his scholarly study of interpretation of dreams in the Senegambian region. "Un rêve dans la région Senegambienne. Suivi de la clef de songes de la Senegambienne, de l'Egype Pharaonique et de la tradition Islamique" published in 1998.

The Jury cited the book as:

'An original innovative scholarly study, entirely independent of the culture-bound and narrow Freudian dream analysis. It is extremely well organised, with vivid examples, displaying a consistently high level of formulation. In its historical, inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-disciplinary coverage, the work exceeds all past and current writing on the subject. The scrupulous scholarship, formidable erudition, and captivating prose represent an impressive achievement, doing great honour to African scholarship. The book has demonstrative value for younger scholars in Africa, working under demoralising conditions.'

The work is a study of the structure of ideas and symbolic significance associated with the dream, the intellectual constructions derived from dreams and the symbolic meaning attributed to them provide the double perspective for the study. Focusing on dreams in the author's own Senegambian culture, the study is set in the context of the ideas held by the ancient Egyptians, by writers and thinkers of the classical world, Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition. The author advances, as the rationale for his retrospective approach and in common with Cheikh Anta Diop, the fact that ancient Egypt forms part of the African heritage of philosophical thought and religious expression. The heart of the book presents the dream as a presence in the lives of the populations of Senegambia, and discusses the different functions dreams fulfill in their lives.

The $10,000 award was presented at a special ceremony held on Friday 26 November 1999 in Perth, Australia, during the twenty-second annual and international conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific.

The Jury, chaired by Walter Bogoya of Tanzania a former diplomat and distinguished African publisher, and includ... >>
Noma award

Thandifea Mkandawire, head of the UN research institute on social development, Kole Omotoso of the university of Western Cape, a novelist, and Mary Jey of the African Books collective as members, also singled out Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull. (Johannesburg: Random House South Africa (Pty) Ltd. 1998) for Honourable Mention. Krog is a poet and journalist who reported on the South African Truth Commission. Through witness stories, interviews with psychologists, the Truth Commissioners, and others, she vividly offered an understanding of the Truth Commission, and through that, the new South Africa.

Former director of culture passes on

NIGERIA’S pioneer Federal Director of Culture, Dr. Garba Ashiwaju has passed on. He was aged 65. He died in the early hours of Monday March 13, 2000 in Lagos following a brief illness.

The death occurred shortly after his assumption of office as General Manager of the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) Centre. He was buried at a Lagos cemetery on Monday the 20th of March.

Dr. Ashiwaju will be best remembered for his tenure as head of the FESTAC International Festival Secretariat. His time as Federal Director of Culture witnessed the completion of the National Theatre complex in Lagos, the management of which fell on his hands for some years.

Also he was the moving spirit behind the well-known cultural journal Nigeria Magazine.

In a condolence letter to his wife Mrs. Aneliese Ashiwaju, President Olusegun Obasanjo paid tribute to a man who ‘brought to bear on his various assignments his immense scholarship and determination to situate culture at the centre of national development’.

Asmara conference on African languages

The first edition of the conference on African writers, scholars and publishers on indigenous African languages held in Asmara, Eritrea between January 11 and 17, 2000, was attended by over two hundred African participants, drawn from across the continent.

The conference Against All Odds (AAO) intended as a continuous forum for experts in the field of African languages and literature deliberated on the theme ‘African languages and literatures into the twenty-first century’ featuring scholarly panels, plenary sessions, book exhibitions, drama and performance of oral literature. The presiding chairs were Egyptian novelist Nawal El Sadawi, Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, Ghana’s former minister of state and dramatist Ama Ata Aidoo and South Africa’s Mbulelo Nazamane.

Declared open by the Eritrean President at the Asmara continental, one of the conference venues, the conference climaxed with a village performance session before an audience of over a thousand people.

Institute of Visual Art lectures

The Institute of Visual Art and Culture launched its lecture series under a year 2000 programme, set to ‘increase dialogue and exchange ideas in the visual arts and culture in Nigeria by inviting international curators, critics and art historians to be guest speakers’.

The IVAC co-ordinators are Bisi Silva and Sinmi Ogunsanya. According to Bisi Silva one of the motivations for the programme is to provide insight into art practices in countries as diverse as Japan, South Africa, Cuba and England.

The first in the series toured Nigerian cities - Zaria, Enugu and Lagos - during the third week of March, 2000. Speaker Katy Deepwell, a UK-based artist and writer, also editor of N. Paradoxa a feminist journal, spoke on the contributions of women artists to the contemporary visual arts.