

that fecundly revolutionary English poet warned that those who do not/cannot create their own system must be prepared to be enslaved by the system of others? Africa is not only a continent in the margin, but by every indication she appears inexorably, so fatally pleased to be there.

Just consider this: apart from the omnibus Noma Award which has come to be through the generosity and vision of a Japanese publisher, there was no single continental literary prize of substantial worth in Africa. This crucial lack must be laid at the door of a monster other than our perennial poverty. Or does one plead poverty in this regard in a continent where one country sometimes squanders several million dollars on hosting of a continental conference, a continent where a sit-tight dictator is so scandalously rich that he has been described 'walking bank account in leopard skin hat?' No, Africa's failure to institute her own literary prizes was due to monumental lack of vision by African rulers, their proverbial hostility to images and ideas of beauty, their rank philistinism, their eternal satisfaction at being 'movers and shakers' of the margin. No, the African strongman would rather build a prison for the writer than establish a prize for his/her artistic accomplishment.

But let us go back to our argument about foreign 'recognition' and the exogenous determination of the value of African literature and art. There are many reasons why we should not blame Africans who thank their prize-winning compatriots for bringing 'recognition' to the continent. Africa has remained for many centuries a victim of negation and absence. The accomplished writer from Africa is, therefore, regarded not just as a voice, but also as an antidote, a veritable medal to be waved in the face of a humiliating and relentlessly cynical world, a proof that we too have not come to the gathering of the world with empty hands. The book was a powerful instrument in the oppression and exploitation of the African; the book is also seen by many Africans today as a weapon of liberation. So whether they accept that mantle or not, modern African writers are regarded as warriors, the literary messiahs of a silenced and much-abused tribe.

To be sure and fair, foreign prizes and their attendant recognition have played a valuable diplomatic role in the lives and struggles of African literary ambassadors. But for pressures and outcry consequent upon their recognition abroad, Soyinka, Ngugi, Nawal el Saadawi, Abdilatif Laabi, Micere Mugo, Jack Mapanje, and many

others would probably not have come out alive from the dungeons of African strongmen. The 1988 Commonwealth Fiction Prize came as an invigorating poetic justice to Festus Iyayi, a fine Nigerian novelist and leader of Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), who flew to London for the prize only a few days after emerging from a prolonged and gruesome detention without charge, without trial.

So this essay is by no means another vulgar attack on foreign prizes and awards. It has nothing against recognition provided it is healthy, genuine, and unpatronizing. The thrust of its argument is that there is something essentially universal about the genius of human creativity, no matter what its provenance. No part of the world has a right to lay a monopolistic claim to that genius, and proceed to lay out parameters any yardsticks for the artistic estate of other places. The world is a wide, miraculous *mbari* to which every people bring their own creation. Let no one play master in that gathering. Let no one accept to play servant. Let no canons terrorise talents with arrogant booming.

Above all, Africa needs to discover her own name without making other continents anonymous; she needs to find her own centre without marginalising other parts of the world. **[CR]**

A Celebration of West African Writing

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Literature has come of age in West Africa. Trying to trace it back to its very beginning now would be a futile effort. Oral literature has always been a part of the people. This art form had reached a very high level before the art of writing ever came here. What about the dance drama, the famous griots among the Senegalese and several others.

It is not surprising then that the British Council organizers of the West African Writers Exhibition had to state that the exhibition covers only written literature in English language and those whose

English translations are available. Another clause: only those currently in print are included - a situation which the brochure preface written by Dr. Stewart Brown of the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham describes as 'One of the frustrations of the present exhibition.'

He also acknowledges the lack of adequate representation of drama in the exhibition despite its being 'the most vibrant, the most fertile, arguably the most effective medium of West African literature in English over the last forty years.' But that is drama in performance

rather than written. Playwrights have been finding it more and more difficult to get a publishers for their scripts in recent years.

Nevertheless here is an impressive collection ranging from Olaudah Equiano's work first published in 1789 through Negritude and other colonial era writings to the recent magic-realism writings in the novel, short story, poetry and drama genres as well as critical works and essays. The works cover a wide range of writers as well as well as publishers. **[CR]**