



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



20 Tannen im Beet!
12/15
Rosa D. de

Last month, the small German city of Bayreuth saw the first conference of the ALA, (the African Literature Association) on European ground. The members of the ALA are literary scholars, linguists, cultural scientists and africanists who work in places like Libreville, Yaoundé, Lagos or Johannesburg but also come from Oxford, London, Cambridge/Massachusetts or as far as Tokyo. They teach or work in universities such as Harvard, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ajayi Crowther University or Ritsumeikan.

Each year they meet to discuss the ideas and trends of African literature and their perspectives in a huge annual conference that is often held in the United States. According to their statutes it is to be staged on African soil every five years and will be hosted in Franschhoek, South Africa in 2016.

That the conference in Bayreuth marks the first conference in Europe is an astonishing fact as the analysis of the colonial past and its implications today are still the emphasis of most postcolonial studies. Many of its theorists studied in Europe. Achille Mbembe from Cameroon studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, his Indian colleague Homi K. Bhaba studied in Oxford and Bombay.

The organisers of this mammoth project are the African Studies department of the University in Bayreuth and they applied to host this important event. It seems that no other European institution has applied for this before. When you look at the programme it becomes clear what a huge effort it takes from the organisers and their large team to put together and to manage the vast number of events, talks, readings and discussions.

Starting at 08:00 and running until late into the night, there were countless events that often even happened at the same time. The extent of specialisation was enormous – even for literary scholars like us. There was a lecture about the idea of *Ubuntu* in the Western Sahara that was once claimed by the Spaniards. There was a lecture about the role of laughter in francophone African theatre. Panel discussions were held about the works of Chinua Achebe and Nuruddin Farah that offered even the specialists new insights and angles for interpretation of their important work.

A lot of writers also came to Bayreuth to introduce their work, to discuss with scholars and also to talk with an audience consisted of members of the public.

Ghanaian poet Nii Parkes and Botswana's TJ Dema rocked the stage and shared their passion and visions of continent's status quo and poetical ideas with an extremely knowledgeable audience. Bayreuth is no stranger to African writers, with the city being known as the centre of African studies in Germany and the Iwalewa Haus, with its African art collection and intellectual capacities, is a major venue to critically discuss trends and interpretations of African art and literature.

Besides the literary discussions and readings there was also talk about exciting ideas such as the role of science fiction in African literature, as well as readings by Nigerian Nmedi Okorafor and Malawian writer Shadreck Chikozi. These are the new young voices of an incredibly diverse and important genre today. Additionally, there was a film programme.

One of its highlights was surely Jim Chuchu's film *Stories of our lives*, a mix of journalistic chronicle, political protest and a gorgeous visual poem. This important film is an anthology of five mini-dramas with LGBT themes set in the homophobic Kenya of today.

Kenya's most important writer, Binyawanga Wainaina, who recently came out, later talks with the still shocked audience about how important filmmakers and writers are in the fight for tolerance and change.

Another exciting topic was how a culture that often is based on oral traditions is dealing with the digital age. The multitude of African languages, the difficulties in establishing a publishing culture in some parts of Africa or a culture of translation are some of the problems literature is facing in vast parts of the continent. The rate of illiteracy is still high and access to computers is still not provided in many areas of Africa. But in 2011, there were already more

than 500 millions users of cell phones on the continent and it seems that the tradition of oral literature is continuing through social media and new platforms on the Internet.

As books are expensive, book shops rare and more concentrated on selling American best sellers than local talents, mobile literature becomes the most important tool to bring literature and stories to the people. Mobile literature enables mums to read bedtime stories to their children from their cell phones and offers young people unprecedented access to the worlds of the word.

Mobile literature might become a tool to win more readers and audiences around the continent. Next year in Franschhoek maybe there will be some good news about how the predominance of the 'white literary world' can be broken. South African writer Thando Mgqolozana rightly feels that this will be changing with time and accessibility and will be cracked and changed into something more democratic and diverse.

Another amazing and important initiative that will change the South African literary landscape is the project 'Long Story SHORT', initiated by cultural activist Kgauhelo Dube. Long story SHORT is a literature vitalising production, which aims to celebrate and elevate African writers and their work by producing free podcasts. **CF**

