

1980

## Conferences

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## Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Anna, Conferences, *Kunapipi*, 2(1), 1980.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss1/21>

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## Conferences

### Abstract

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First Festival of World Cultures — Horizons 79, Berlin, 21 June to 15 July 1979.

Berlin, well-known for its international festivals, added yet one more to an already impressive list, namely the *First Festival of World Cultures, Horizons 79*. It was the organizers' intention, as Willy Brandt put it in his foreword to *Magazin*, the official programme of the Festival, to add the cultural aspect to the politico-economic dialogue between North and South. Whether the festival achieved this noble aim will have to be answered by those who participated: the many African artists and scholars and the German public. The opportunity was unique. Those interested in music could enjoy folklore, griots and jazz concerts; film fans had the opportunity of watching three films daily including all of Ousmane Sembène's productions; theatre groups from West, East and North Africa presented their plays, among them the Nairobi University Players directed by J. Ruganda with a Suaheli version of Brecht's play *The Good Person of Sezuan*, and The School of Performing Arts from Legon, Ghana, with J. de Graft's *Mambo*. There were a number of exhibitions, most notably one of paintings from Haiti and one of modern African art which included paintings, drawings, 'square' paintings, truck art, examples of Middle Art and wooden sculptures. Dancing and music groups from Ghana, Mali, Madagascar and Zaire presented yet another aspect of African culture. Finally, apart from several more exhibitions, there was a literature programme consisting of public readings by African authors and a workshop. Though much could be said about the Festival in general or about one or the other item, e.g. the theatre programme, I shall confine myself to a few remarks about the literature programme.

African literature in English, French or Portuguese is still little known in Germany. It is only recently that, after a lapse of many years during which Jahnheinz Jahn actively promoted African literature in this country, a small group of enthusiasts has taken up the challenge to introduce this literature to a German reading public. Among others there are two publishing houses, Hammer from Wuppertal, and Walter from Olten who have started 'Dialogue Africa', the publication of African novels — translated into German. The International Frankfurt Book Fair will have literature from Africa as its special feature in 1980. The invitation of some of the most prominent and well known African authors to Berlin thus was a must. Though it seemed doubtful at first whether it would be possible to have so many of them in Berlin for at least one week the idea of introducing writers such as C. Achebe, W. Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, M. Mwangi, B. Head, D. Brutus, N. Farah, C. Laye, M. Beti, E. Dougala, A. Kourouma, T. Salih, T. Lo Liyong and others in person to a German audience was exciting and fortunately materialized in the end. Not all the writers invited were able to attend, among them Ngugi and Philombe, Ousmane, Dadié and Awoonor. While the absence was regrettable especially

of those authors, who were not given permission to leave their countries, writers from Angola and Mozambique preferred to attend a literature conference in Africa.

The often precarious relationship between literature and politics or art and reality in Africa which these events indicate found its reflection in 'Politics and Exile', the most important topic to be discussed in the Writers Workshop which took place in one of Berlin's posh congress centres, the Kongresshalle, from 25 to 27 June. Other topics included 'Politico-Social Commitment', 'Language and Audience', 'Popular Urban Literature' and, last but not least, the ever recurring question whether African literature is élitist.

Writers as well as specially invited guests were perplexed about the organizer's idea of tucking the workshop well away from the public eye. There was no mention of it in the official programme and neither the media nor the generally interested public were aware of it. During the first two days a small student group from Frankfurt formed fifty percent of the audience. The writers had to organize themselves on the first day after an hour of waiting and a preliminary discussion about who was to blame and how to proceed since the organizer of the workshop was not present. It was proof of the organizational skill of D. Brutus, N. Farah, L. Peters and others that a programme was charted out within a short time and that discussion on 'Politics and Exile' started just before the first break of two and a half hours! All topics suggested were discussed during the following three days though, of course, ready-made answers, or solutions, new or original approaches and suggestions were hardly presented. For this the writers were least to blame, especially since they had expected an introduction by the organizer into the purpose and intentions of the workshop as well as into the special situation they confronted in Germany. On the whole discussions, though lively and controversial, remained rather academic and it happened only rarely that a participant directed the attention of the workshop to the fact that it happened to be taking place in Germany. Here again the organizer must be blamed since only a very few non-Africans were present, and how then is a dialogue between North and South to materialize when the North is virtually absent?

But to come back to the discussions. I would like to mention three points only. One of the most moving moments occurred right at the beginning when Bessie Head talked about South Africa as a hideous place to live in, a country which does not allow non-whites to go where they choose, to say what they want and to live a life of their own. L. Nkosi and D. Brutus expanded on this point in two directions; Nkosi by arguing succinctly and convincingly that African writing from the beginning until today had always been created out of a position of opposition, opposition against colonialism, racism and neo-colonialism. D. Brutus drew attention to the political aspect rather than the artistic one by asking the question in how far Germans were aware of the strong economic, financial and military ties between the racist South African regime and the Federal Republic. However, it seemed that nobody was really willing to follow up his argument, on the contrary, some of his French speaking colleagues were hesitant and unwilling to discuss 'Politics and Exile' from a general political angle but preferred to draw attention to the personal plight of exiled writers.

Differences between French and English speaking writers became even more obvious when 'Language and Audience' was discussed. It seemed, however, that misunderstanding was often caused by a lack of communication between the two groups. Thus while Lo Liyong, L. Peters and others argued that the resolution of the Dakar 1976 meeting of the Union of the Writers of the African Peoples (UWAP) to introduce Suaheli

as the African language might be a worthwhile discussion, M. Beti refused to entertain such a non- or rather anti-African idea for which he blamed the UNESCO. Still, the question of language continued to remain a controversial issue. A solution might perhaps be found in the reaction of the African audience to novels written in an African language, e.g. to Ngugi's new novel *Devil on the Cross* which is to be published first in Kikuyu.

The reaction of the African audience to literature written in English or French, finally, is at the core of the question whether this literature is élitist. In the workshop it appeared that this problem has lost nothing of its touchiness since it implies that each writer has to define for himself and his audience what it means to be an *African* writer and what his relationship to his own people is. Again, answers presented in the workshop were as many as there were writers present and the discussion of this final topic ended on a rather inconclusive note.

It is regrettable that only a few Germans had the opportunity of experiencing this because the usually ritualized performance of a public reading will not easily reveal this fact. Still, it is one way of confronting an author with his readers, and this was the intention of Künstlerhaus Bethanien which hosted BILT 79 (Berlin International Literature Days 79). Every evening for one week African authors read mainly from their published works starting, fittingly, with Achebe on 23 June. He was followed by — to name only a few — Laye, Peters, Dongala, Head, Brutus, Beti, Kourouma, Salih, Farah, and Lo Liyong. The programme ended with Soyinka's drum-accompanied recitation of *Ogun Abibiman* on 1 July. Though it was not easy to find one's way to Kreuzberg and Künstlerhaus Bethanien which is situated close to the Berlin Wall the response of the German public showed the great interest in African literature. The evenings usually started with a well-prepared introduction by U. Beier followed by readings of two authors and griot recitations. The excellent idea of juxtaposing written and oral literature, however, lost much of its charm because no explanation about or translation of the griots' songs was available. On the other hand written texts were not only read in their original language but also in German though these translations were available from a small bookshop outside the hall. Organizational clumsiness, unfortunately, again affected the programme and left little time for discussion with the authors, time which was usually spent by extracting some more information from them. Though BILT 79 must be praised for the attempt to introduce African authors to this country it also must take the blame for not really contributing towards that often quoted dialogue between North and South. Neither the workshop nor the nights in Kreuzberg left much time to the authors to ask their questions and voice their opinions about Germany.

Regrettably, many African writers and German participants of the literature programme left with the feeling that because of lack of perception, organizational flops, petty personal rivalries and commercial attitudes an excellent opportunity had not really been exploited to full advantage in the effort to contribute towards an exchange of cultural ideas between Africa and Germany. To expect this from a festival of the scale and nature of *Horizons 79* was perhaps wrong and a bit unrealistic.

DIETER RIEMENSCHNEIDER

## S.A.E.S. Conference, Poitiers.

On 8-9 May 1980, on the occasion of the annual Congress of the S.A.E.S. (Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur), the French 'Société d'Etude des Pays du Commonwealth', which is a member of ACLALS, held a seminar in Poitiers, with Anna Rutherford, from the University of Aarhus, as president of the proceedings. The first day was devoted to *A Fringe of Leaves* by Patrick White. A paper given by A. Dommergues (Paris X), 'Les Aborigènes dans *A Fringe of Leaves*', was followed by a talk from C. Roderick on 'Patrick White: From Aureole to Figleaf Time'. A debate ensued, chaired by Anna Rutherford, which extended to more recent works like *The Twyborn Affair*.

The next day was to be entirely devoted to *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi. J. Bardolph (Nice) treated the theme 'Fertility in *Petals of Blood*', stressing the continuity with the previous novels but also the new development of the vision. After this paper on the metaphors of germination, F. Albrecht (Paris X) chose 'Fire and Blood' as structuring images, with special references to religious symbolism. From a different angle, J. P. Durix (Dijon) examined the tension between commitment and retreat, in 'Politics in *Petals of Blood*'. A. R. Richard (Montpellier) and C. Abdelkrim (Paris III) complemented the reflexion on this aspect of the book with two essays on 'Time and history' and 'Recit, narration, histoire'. These contributions led to a long debate, in a round table chaired by J. Bardolph, on the problems raised by the optimistic ending, the narrative sequence, the conception of history, and, more generally, the evolution of the novel as a genre in present day Africa.

These papers will appear, in English, in a special number of 'Echos du Commonwealth', published by the Société d'Etudes des Pays du Commonwealth, to be issued next in Autumn 1980 (write to J. Leclaire, 35, rue Charles Lenepveu, 76130 Mont-Saint-Aignan (France)).

JACQUELINE BARDOLPH

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Jacques Alvarez Péreyre teaches political science at the University of Grenoble; Jeanne N. Dingome is from the Cameroons and teaches in Ibadan; Jayanta Mahapatra teaches at Cuttack University. He won the Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award, *Poetry Chicago* in 1975; Norman Talbot has published several volumes of poetry and teaches at the University of Newcastle, N.S.W; Les A. Murray, Australian poet who has just published a novel-poem, *The Boy Who Stole the Funeral*; Frank Moorhouse belongs to the younger generation of Australian fiction writers. His publications include *The Americans*, *Baby* and *The Electrical Experience*; Gareth Griffiths teaches at Macquarie University, Sydney; Zulfikar Ghose is from Pakistan. He has published several novels including *The Murder of Aziz Khan*; Yvonne du Fresne is a New Zealander of French Huguenot - Danish descent; Denis Hulston is a New Zealander and former student at Massey University; Michel Fabre teaches at Paris 111, the Sorbonne; Cyril Dabydeen is from Guyana and now lives in Canada; E. A. Markham comes from Montserrat and is on the editorial board of *Ambit*; Phyllis Shand Allfrey is author of *The Orchid House* and a former federal minister in the West Indian Federation; A. L. McLeod teaches at Rider College, New Jersey; Kirsten Holst Petersen teaches at Aarhus University, Rosemary Colmer teaches at Macquarie University, Annemarie Heywood was formerly at the University of Sheffield and is now living in Namibia; Sven Poulsen is a Danish author; Nelson Wattie is a New Zealander teaching in Cologne; Margaret Nightingale is an American teaching at Macquarie University, Yasmine Gooneratne comes from Sri Lanka, is editor of *New Ceylon Writing* and has published both poems and short stories. She teaches at Macquarie University; Veronica Brady teaches at the University of Western Australia Inger Hastrup is a former student of Aarhus University and Queen's University, Canada. She now teaches in Denmark; Bruce Clunies Ross is an Australian teaching at the University of Copenhagen; Dieter Riemenschneider teaches at the University of Frankfurt; Albert L. Jones is an American who teaches at Handelshøjskolen, Aarhus. He has broadcast on Rastafarian music on Danish radio; Hans Hauge teaches at the University of Aarhus.

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