Jury Report Africa Thesis Award 2013

Almost by definition, the discipline of African Studies has to be interdisciplinary in orientation and scope. African Studies is not the mother of any discipline, but a cousin of many. Anything and everything ‘African’ can be approached by various combinations or configurations of disciplines. Previous winners of the Africa Thesis Award did not always seem to represent this interdisciplinarity, yet were considered by the jury as masters in at least one of the constituting disciplines, be it history, anthropology or linguistics. They would probably have won an award in monodisciplinary contests as well. The jury always felt convinced that they were the rightful winners of those year’s Africa Thesis Award, and over the years we have been proud of the beautiful theses that we have selected for the ASC Award. The jury of this year’s Africa Thesis Award consisted of Ineke van Kessel (ASC), Alice Kubo (Child Helpline International), Wim Bossema (Volkskrant) and Jan Bart Gewald (ASC/UL).

This year’s edition of the Africa Thesis Award was different in many ways. First of all we didn’t receive as many theses to judge as we did in previous years. Notwithstanding the fact that we marketed the Award more than ever before, especially through the use of social media. Secondly, what we received, 17 theses, was a creative potpourri of genres, disciplines and combinations, very different from the last couple of years. Based on this stock of theses the jury unanimously agreed that the winners of the Africa Thesis Award 2013 certainly and probably more than ever live up to the interdisciplinary nature and expectations of African Studies: Coming from a more technical background in Landscape Architecture from Wageningen University and Research, the two authors try to integrate many disciplines and research methodologies that usually are not automatically considered part and parcel of their discipline, like a participative methodology and a partly heuristic interpretive approach. This interdisciplinary framework is used in their venture to develop a cyclone resilient landscape in Madagascar; an island that is prone to devastating cyclones. It is an honour and pleasure to announce that the winners of this year’s Africa Thesis Award are Esther Bergstra and Roxanne Hornman, with their thesis entitled ‘Cyclone resilient landscape. The case of Vatomandry, Madagascar’, supervised by Dr. Ir. Ingrid Duchhart!

But there is more to say about the interdisciplinary nature of this winning thesis. For one it is a visual spectacle not only to read the thesis in terms of page lay-out, but also in the way that Esther and Roxanne have translated all kinds of interesting data and information in visual displays, successfully transforming them into info graphics. Not a single page is the same and texts, images, pictures, info graphics, graphs, colours, lines, numbers, tables, maps, diagrams, cartoons and what not, almost tumble over each other in trying to convince the reader and seduce the accidental browser of their argument. Even if you don’t read the thesis, but would only browse it, the jury promises you that the thesis would still have an overwhelming and positive effect on you, this thesis rocks!

Amongst all the praise the jury does not want to hide the fact that they think that from various more mono disciplinary perspectives several contextualisations are considered a bit thin in terms of history, political manoeuvring and picturing the complexities and dynamics of the local community. The researchers do not address issues of formal and informal governance and thus neglect to explore how their recommendations could be implemented. Furthermore the English could do with some serious polishing.
Still, the jury is convinced that in terms of the Africa Thesis Award 2013, this interdisciplinary display is the rightful winner and is full of praise for the standard Esther and Roxanne have set of what interdisciplinarity can bring into African Studies.

Also this year there were serious contenders for the Award and we would like to mention the runner up: Anouk Evers for her thesis entitled ‘Barack Obama, back off!’ Framing Strategies and Postcolonial Discourse in Debating Uganda’s Anti-homosexuality Bill.

For the third place there is a tie-up, for the thesis of Markus Melck entitled ‘The Afrikadeutsch of Kroondal, 1849-1949’, and Robert Cruimings thesis entitled ‘Grande Hotel Beira Mozambique: Adjustment of a Vertical Slum in Mozambique to Improve the Living Conditions of the Current Inhabitants’. Undoubtedly, these theses deserve our admiration for their academic skill and appeal.

And finally, our thanks go to all of you, here, and out there, who submitted theses for the 2013 Africa Thesis Award. We look forward to receiving more theses in 2014, so please spread the word via your networks and social media! Thank you!

Harry Wels
On behalf of the seminar committee
November 2013