



ASAUK CONFERENCE 2024
Generation and Regeneration
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ASAUK Outstanding African Studies Award 2024

Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay

The ASAUK is delighted to announce that Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay are the recipients of the Outstanding African Studies Award for 2024. They have both have been active in publishing on Africa since the early 1970s (Walter Bgoya) and the early 1980s (Mary Jay).

Walter Bgoya, first working at Tanzania Publishing House and then at Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, a press based in Dar es Salaam that he established and is still flourishing today, published the work of major liberation authors such as Walter Rodney (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*), Agostinho Neto (*Sacred Hope*), Issa Shivji, Samir Amin and Micere Mugo. As a publisher in Swahili from the 1990s, Walter has made an essential contribution to Swahili Studies. He has published both literature in Swahili and the work of writers translated from other languages into Swahili, including Abdulrazak Gurnah (*Paradise*), Antoine de Saint Exupery (*Le Petit Prince*) and Peter Singer (*Animal Liberation*). Whilst debates about writing in African versus European languages persist, Walter has pursued a bilingual publishing strategy in Swahili as the national language of Tanzania and regional lingua franca, and English. It is hard to think of another publisher in the continent who has done this so extensively. Such a legacy matters for African language publishing today.

Bgoya was a founder publisher of the African Books Collective (ABC), active in its establishment from 1989. He chaired ABC's Council of Management for almost three decades until 2017. He has continuously engaged in the development of Africa's own publishing industries, trialling early print-on-demand technology in Tanzania in the

2000s, for example. He has given numerous conference speeches, including keynote addresses at the ASAUK conference in 2014 at the University of Sussex, and at the African Studies Association of Africa conference in Nairobi in 2019. He has written extensively on African literature and publishing, including 'Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day', in *Research in African Literature*, co-authored with Mary Jay (2013).

Mary Jay worked in African Studies publishing from the UK, initially at Hans Zell Publishers. She too was central to the establishment of ABC in Oxford (as a centre of international publishing), working for the Collective for over three decades until retiring as a director in 2023. For almost 35 years, ABC has made a wealth of African-published books available outside the continent. Hundreds of thousands of African-published books from over 150 publishers have been sold, including to university libraries with African studies programmes.

ABC has led on digitising African books through the decades. Whilst debates about the difficulties of distribution of African books go on, ABC has pursued a strategy to stake out and achieve what is possible. Digital strategies have overcome physical borders. No other organisation active in African publishing has done this. ABC has offered other supports to African publishers in the continent: from raising grants, to promoting authors, to advocating for their interests in international fora, at conferences and book fairs. ABC has itself been a key source of financial support for some publishers. From the 1990s, ABC put African publishing on the map. Much of that work was led by Mary Jay. She too has contributed to research on African books including publishing *The African Writers Handbook* and *African Scholarly Publishing: Essays*, co-editing a book on women in publishing, *Courage and Consequence*, and the delivery of a lecture at Stockholm University, Sweden in 2016 on 'African publishing in a globalised world'.

It is important that African writers and academics should have more routes to publication and be more central in shaping their fields globally. For this it is essential that they have institutional support and also outlets for their work. Achieving these goals has been difficult. One central issue has been the domination of publishing and distribution by companies outside of the continent. Publishers in African countries have struggled for many years to find the capital and support for commercial operations, to find broader international markets for the books they publish, and even to get commissions for educational publishing in their own countries. African authors, both of academic work and fiction, have had little alternative but to go through international publishers if they are to get an audience.

Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay have been key figures in addressing these issues for many years. They have both advocated strategies for African publishing, and successfully implemented some of these ideas. They took over as Chair (Walter Bgoya) and Secretary (Mary Jay) at an early stage the NOMA Award for Publishing in Africa,

sponsored by a major Japanese publishing house, focusing on books published in Africa. Running for nearly thirty years (1980-2009), it gave considerable profile to a number of important African authors whose work would otherwise have struggled to find an international audience. The juries included leading African academics and writers. The winning authors – across disciplines, languages and genres of writing – included Mariama Bâ, Meshack Asare, Paul Zeleza, Luli Callinicos, Niyi Osundare, and Elinor Sisulu.

Both Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay were involved in other initiatives to support African publishers and authors in African countries and beyond. This included connecting with international organisations, and helping to promote the Caine Prize for African Writing. Few other people have contributed as much to supporting, both in public engagement and in practical, workable initiatives, African publishing and through these strategies, many African authors. For these reasons they are eminently worthy recipients of the ASUK Outstanding African Studies Award.