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Against All Odds: A Documentary (DVD) Produced by the Audio Visual Institute of Eritrea (AVIE).  
African Books Collective/Michigan State UP, 2007. ISBN 1904855865-9781904855866.

Eritrea—from the Latin *Mare Erythraeum*, or the Red Sea—was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1952, when it became part of Ethiopia, to then become fully independent in 1993. From 11 to 17 January 2000, when the "Against All Odds" conference took place, the country was still beleaguered by armed border conflicts. Yet, 250 scholars, writers, and activists from twenty African countries and the Diaspora landed in the midst of turmoil in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, to bring a message of peace through the sustained growth and development of African languages and literatures. Braving all odds, Charles Cantalupo of Penn State University, Zemhret Yohannes, director of Research and Documentation for the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the doyen of Kenyan letters Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Egyptian writer-cum-activist Nawal El-Saadawi took up the legacy of the 1962 Makerere Conference to promote "African Languages and Literatures into the Twenty-First Century."

Although there were 175 presentations and performances as well as translation and public workshops in over a dozen African languages from Hausa to Zulu, the DVD covers only part of the original footing, focusing on, among others, Mbulelo Mzamane (South Africa), Abena Busia (US/Ghana), the Nigerian Akinwumi Isola, who writes in Yoruba, and the Kenyan Abdulatif Abdalla, who writes in Swahili, because African languages are "languages of being" rather than expression.

Reminiscing about his "Two Weeks in the Trenches" (after his 2003 work), Eritrean writer Alemseged Tesfai poetically converted a gory story about discovering a fresh heart on the battle field into an arresting image for writing, for "we say things from the heart." Senait Lijam, a female Eritrean ex-guerilla fighter, argues that "armed struggle" need not involve guns, for one can be armed with "a notion of social justice, steadfastness, or commitment." Having to choose between the gun and the pen is like asking her "to choose between [her] father [End Page 165] and [her] mother." Cantalupo, however, would concur that African penpoints, not gunpoints, are the most important source of change.

The Semitic language of Eritrea, Tigrinya, took center stage one evening when Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kikuyu play *I Will Marry When I Want* was performed in translation or when the whole conference was transplanted outside of Seghenyetti, 65 km from Asmara. Children held out olive branches to greet the newcomers and two female Eritrean poets, Saba Kidane and Mother Zeinab, performed in Tigrinya, under a huge sycamore tree, which soon became the symbol for this pan-African cultural coalition.

The conference culminated with the ratification of the "Asmara Declaration," around ten "commandments" for the linguistic independence of the African continent, which shows that the week-long conference had by then become "a movement." Sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, UNICEF, and the World Bank, *Against All Odds* also received financial support from the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the Alliance Française, and the British Council. Obviously, former colonial powers are breathing air into this experiment at "reanimating African languages and literatures." If, as Nawal El Saadawi wittily put it, African writers are "globalizing from below," Western countries continue globalizing from above.

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