

ASC Master's Thesis Award 2004

for **Casper W. Erichsen's**

'The Angel of Death has descended violently among them': A study of Namibia's concentration camps and prisoners-of-war, 1904 - 1908

Report by the Jury

The ASC Master's Thesis Award, to be presented in 2004 for the second time, encourages student research and writing on Africa, and promotes the study of African cultures and societies. To be eligible for submission, a Master's thesis has to have been completed on the basis of research conducted on Africa. The thesis, in Dutch, English or French, must be based on independent empirical research and thematically related to socio-geographical, economic, political, historical, juridical or anthropological issues, or focus on the humanities in Africa. The award consists of a prize of €1,000 and a stipend of €3,000, the latter to be spent on follow-up research.

The jury received 21 theses this year. Although this is slightly fewer than in 2003, the quality of most of them impressed the Jury very much. Of the 21, the Jury had to eliminate three theses as they did not fit the criteria. Of the remaining 18 theses, African students in Africa submitted five, Africans studying in the Netherlands submitted two, and European students wrote the other eleven. They covered a large number of subjects including self-reliance, genocide, war traumas, religion, haute couture, land titles, refugees, natural resources, climatic vulnerability, and mediation.

To become a nominee for the Award, a researcher and his/her thesis must have several outstanding qualities. In general, the nominated researchers dealt with very relevant subject matters. Concepts and methodologies had been worked out well and some showed their ability by using an original approach. The theses were well written and all were on subjects with a certain significance to development-related issues and would be of interest to the general public.

In accordance with the rules, the Jury first met to study the 18 theses and to draw up a shortlist. The following three theses (in alphabetical order) were selected:

- Casper Erichsen: *'The Angel of Death has descended violently among them': A study of Namibia's concentration camps and prisoners-of-war, 1904 - 1908*
- Arthur Molenaar: *Gacaca: Grassroots justice after genocide. The key to reconciliation in Rwanda?*

The author discusses how the modern Gacaca functions in practice, and whether this neo-traditional court system is likely to help in finding ways to deal with the past in a post-genocide country. It is a highly topical and relevant subject. This excellent thesis ranges from the political and institutional level to that of ordinary people's perceptions.

- Martijn Wienia: *The stranger owns the land but the land is for us! The politics of a religious landscape in Nanun, Northern Ghana*
The author deals with the way in which religious and political changes in Nanun influence the socio-religious position of the *Tiindana* (land priest) as custodian of the local spirits. Both the fieldwork, the account of the theoretical perspectives and the analysis of the findings about this relevant subject are impressive.

On 29th August, the Jury discussed the nominated theses. After extensive deliberation, it came to its conclusion and decided to present the 2004 ASC Master's Thesis Award to Casper W. Erichsen from the University of Namibia for his thesis entitled '*The Angel of Death has descended violently among them*': *A study of Namibia's concentration camps and prisoners-of-war, 1904 – 1908*.

The historiography of the concentration camps, which the German colonial regime established in the wake of the war against the Herero and Nama peoples in Namibia, has been deeply influenced by white settler racial mentalities and concomitant denials of their existence. This revisionist historiography penetrated Namibia's academic community, leading to publications – such as the work of Brigitte Lau – arguing that no genocide ever took place, something Casper Erichsen calls the Namibian version of the Auschwitz Lüge, the Auschwitz Lie.

Casper Erichsen's *The Angel of Death* offers a systematic overview of the existence of these camps in German South-West Africa and the atrocities that took place under German rule *vis-à-vis* the Herero in particular. He describes in detail practices such as the forced labour that the local population was subjected to in the context of Namibia's railway construction. The author diligently reconstructs this black page of Namibia's and Germany's history from a patchwork of different archival sources, thus ensuring that the dreadful events that occurred between 1904 and 1908 will never be forgotten.

The reasons that made the Jury decide to present the 2004 ASC Master's Award to Casper Erichsen are the following:

1. This Master's thesis is important for the historiography of Namibia and Germany, and for genocide studies in general. It is likely to cause a stir in the debate about the nature of the extermination of Herero and Nama peoples and about the extent to which the German approach in Namibia presented a prelude to the emergence of concentration camps during the Second World War.

2. The research is thorough, many-sided, ingenious and courageous. The author demonstrates scholarly independence in his critical reading of the existing literature on the subject. He offers wide documentation, while the use and analysis of old photographs helps the reader to better understand his argument.
3. A balance between passionate commitment and critical analysis marks the style. The thesis is well written and highly relevant, especially in the context of present-day calls for reparation and reconciliation with Germany's colonial past.

In conclusion, the Jury is of the opinion that Casper W. Erichsen's *'The Angel of Death has descended violently among them': A study of Namibia's concentration camps and prisoners-of-war, 1904 – 1908* represents a brilliant and original piece of work. It is, therefore, very pleased to be able to present him with the 2004 ASC Master's Thesis Award. Professor Leo de Haan, the ASC's new director, will present the award to Mr Erichsen during a ceremony at the Africa Studies Centre on 28th October 2004.

Chairman of the Jury

Mr Jos van Beurden

Members

Dr Rijk van Dijk

Prof. Sjaak van der Geest

Mr Mindanda Mohogu

Dr Klaas van Walraven

Secretary

Ms Marieke van Winden