

Renowned Ghanaian poet dies in Kenya debacle

Written by

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(GIN) – Africans on the continent and in the diaspora were in shock and grieving this week over the untimely passing of Kofi Awoonor, 78, from Ghana. He was one of the 68 who perished in the Al-Shabab-initiated assault at the 5-story Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi.

Michael Daly, a special correspondent with Newsweek and The Daily Beast, decried the senseless killing of the much-beloved poet by a terrorist group:

"The Al-Shabab attackers were only able to kill the mortal part of him that he had in common with everybody. His poetry survives, drawing on the African oral storytelling tradition, imbuing stark English with the ancient tones and cadences of his Ewe tribe... The likes of Al-Shabab and other death worshipers would be right to see their ultimate defeat in the faithful sentiments of this poem, which reads in part:

*And death, when he comes
to the door with his own
inimitable calling card
shall find a homestead
resurrected with laughter and dance
and the festival of the meat
of the young lamb and the red porridge
of the new corn*

Awoonor had been in Kenya to be part of the Storymoja Hay literary festival - a celebration of pan-African writing and storytelling. A professor at Stony Brook University (NY) until 1975, he later served as Ghana's ambassador to Brazil and Cuba and as a U.N. envoy and was a leading voice for economic equality and against apartheid.

His experience in the U.S. prompted such poems as *On Having Been an Experimental Sacred Cow for Four Years*, and *a Token African on Faculty*. His research interests were focused on the links between African vernacular traditions and the written literature emerging from the continent.

Brown University professor Okey Ndibe recalled Awoonor as "one of the most learned, most humble men I ever met. He was witty, passionate about literature, full of life, a renaissance man who capped it all with wisdom, a man of the world who had an abiding love of the earth where his umbilical cord was buried.

"Invoking the title of his extraordinary novel, *This Earth, My Brother*, ... May you continue to soar

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from beyond the grave. The indomitable Awoonor, enchant heaven with your songs!"