African Masks of Burkina Faso and Mali

A Trilingual Edition from the Collection of James Gaasch

Retired HSU professor’s latest release delves into the world of African masks in English, Spanish and French

By Heather Shelton
hshelton@times-standard.com

Retired HSU Professor James Gaasch recently wrote a book titled “Máscaras Africanas de la colección de James Gaasch.”

The Spanish language paperback — published by Humboldt State University Press in February — features text and interviews about, and photographs of, African masks and carvers representing the Bwa, Winiama and Mossi people of Burkina Faso and the Bamana and Dogon people of Mali.

A month after that book was released, Gaasch — who taught in HSU’s Department of World Languages and Cultures for more than three decades before retiring in 2006 — had a second book, “Masques Africains de la collection de James Gaasch” published, also through HSU Press. This one featured the same content as the first, but was in French.

“AFRICAN MASKS: FROM THE COLLECTION OF JAMES GAASCH” followed in May of this year.

In September, a fourth book — with the same content as the first three, plus a few additions — was published by HSU Press as well. The new edition, “African Masks of Burkina Faso and Mali: A Trilingual Edition from the Collection of James Gaasch,” includes text in English, Spanish and French.

“(It) seeks to reach a larger readership, a readership that includes scholars, museum curators and students of cultural anthropology, as well as a general public with an increasing interest in West African cultures and art,” Gaasch wrote in an email interview with the Times-Standard. “This readership is especially significant in those countries of Latin America where there is a growing, if belated, awareness of the important role played by their Afro-Latino citizens, and their African heritage.”

He added: “Of equal importance, this edition, now also in French, will be accessible to those who appear in the book, the mask carvers and dancers of Burkina Faso and Mali. In Burkina Faso and Mali, French is the official language — the language of formal schooling — one language in the mosaic of national languages and the lingua franca of many of the collective 40 million citizens of these two West African countries.”

The trilingual book — available through various online sources — includes newly added paragraphs under the heading “The Author’s Final Word for the Trilingual Edition,” said Gaasch, who explains the addition:

“I underscore the probability that masks (symbols of vital history for these traditional cultures) may soon no longer dance,” he said. “The old ways of Burkina Faso and Mali will be lost. Indeed, as I write these words, in these days of mounting terrorism and spread of fear among Malians and Burkinabè, in vast swaths of West Africa all aspects of religious tolerance are being effaced. The affiliates of Al-Qaida and Islamic State are operating in ever-increasing territories of the Sahel of West Africa. And traditional village celebrations, masking ceremonies, are no longer taking place. There is the wrenching sense that the disappearance of these masks has become a metric for loss, a metric that also includes the death of cultural diversity and secular schools.”

Gaasch — who now resides in Oregon — has lived and worked in Africa on several occasions over the years. During his stays, which started in 1992, he saw that masks played a vital role in the cultures of many West African villages, and started collected the handmade pieces as a way to gain a greater understanding of the people and their traditions.

Gaasch worked closely with HSU Professors Rosamel Benavides-Garb and Joseph Diémé, editors of the Spanish and French texts, respectively, on the book.
translations. Humboldt State University students were also involved in the process.

"In the early stages of the translations, when Rosamel and Joseph were meetings with their HSU students who were translating from English to Spanish and from English to French, I also met with their students to discuss specific passages that students were translating at that moment," Gaasch said. "These classroom and round table discussions often dealt with the linguistic and cultural difficulties that any such process must confront. Again, in their respective introductions, Rosamel and Joseph describe more fully this process and credit the significant role played by the students in the translation classes offered by the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Humboldt State University."

Next up, Gaasch — who has penned several other books as well — will talk about the African masks of Burkina Faso and Mali during International Education Week, Feb. 10 to 14, 2020, at Humboldt State University. He also plans to speak about this new edition of the book at the Alexander von Humboldt International and Interdisciplinary Conference in León, Spain, July 7 to 11, 2020.