He is no stranger to awards. But this seems special to the literary giant Prof Wole Soyinka, who won the maiden edition of the Obafemi Awolowo Prize for Leadership Award. The Nobel Laureate drew eminent personalities to the occasion.

Harbour Point on Victoria Island, Lagos too often hosts big events but this one stood out. To say it was colourful is an understatement.

Some of the guests responded to the old tunes produced by a live band. The camera footage showed the life and times of the late Chief Awolowo, reflecting some of his selected speeches that drew applause from the guests.

The daughter of the sage, Mrs. Tokunbo Awolowo-Dosumu played the perfect host.

Few minutes after the arrival of Vice President Namadi Sambo, who stood for President Goodluck Jonathan, the event started with the National Anthem. As everyone took their seats, Dr. Awolowo read her welcome address explaining the purpose for the awards.

She said the award is another step to actualising the mandate articulated in the founding philosophy including the aspiration to ensure Chief Awolowo’s deep concern for the nation.

She said the late sage was a leader whose major concern was the growth and development of the people.

“His actions even now inspired others to dream more, learn more, do more and without doubt, he has passed the final test of leadership because he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on,” she said.

Soyinka, Awolowo-Dosunmu said, has demonstrated over the years rare courage, doggedness and commitment to the best interest of the people on whose behalf he continues to advocate.

Shortly after, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who chaired the Selection Committee, extolled the virtues of Prof. Soyinka and listed the qualities that made him win the inaugural prize.

President Goodluck Jonathan hailed Prof. Soyinka. He said the honour was well deserved.

The President, who was represented by the Vice-President, Namadi Sambo, said the award came at a time the Federal Government was mid-wifing its transformation programme.

He said: “Let me say that Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who this award is instituted after, was a foremost nationalist and great patriot. Prof. Soyinka, who has emerged the first winner of the prize, is not only a literary icon and global phenomenon, but also blessed with immense leadership qualities.

“The inauguration of the leadership prize at this time in the history of our nation is very timely. The objectives of the prize tallies with my administration’s emphasis on quality leadership under our transformation agenda.”

He said Chief Awolowo worked tirelessly for the development of the country. According to him, succeeding generations have continued to benefit from this.

Jonathan congratulated the Selection Committee for making the best choice by selecting the literary giant as the winner of the award.
He said Prof Soyinka is an epitome of all that Awolowo stood for in his life.

“Throughout his life, he was committed to the greatness of the country and did not renege on those principles he held dearly to. This stood him out among his contemporaries,” he noted.

“As a political party leader, leaders of the opposition in the federal parliament and vice-chairman of the federal executive council, he demonstrated uncommon leadership. He served faithfully and today many politicians endear themselves to the philosophy he lived for by laying claims to his political philosophy,” he added.

The chairman on the occasion, Gen. Yakubu Gowon, described Prof. Soyinka as a worthy son of Africa who has demonstrated over time the quality for which he was honoured.

Citing the qualities that stood him out, he said like Chief Awolowo, who was in his cabinet during the period of national emergency, the literary icon has been on the side of the people in moments of great national challenges and has not let the people down.

“Like Awolowo, who was there during the civil war and ensured government did not borrow money to execute it, our literary icon has ensured that Nigerian masses are given what they desire by putting the authorities on its toes to wake up to its responsibilities,” Gowon said.

Prof. Soyinka wore Aso-Ofi top and trousers. He looked resplendent throughout the event.

Sambo presented the plaque to him before Anyaoku and Awolowo-Dosunmu also presented gifts to the literary giant.

There was a drama afterwards – some of the dignitaries struggled to take photographs with him, which evoked laughter from the gathering.

Soyinka said the event might make a Christian out of him.

“I was a beneficiary of the liberal educational policy – at the tertiary level – of the man whose memory we are here to honour, and now, today, I find myself a recipient of yet another largesse, an inestimable honour in the hands – albeit posthumously – of that same sage. As a small return therefore, in tribute to some of those qualities which, in varying degrees, many of us admired in him, such as the principle of forthrightness...,” he said.

Other dignitaries at the event included former Lagos State Governor Asiwaju Bola Tinubu; Governors Babangida Aliyu (Niger); Ibikunle Amosun (Ogun); Rauf Aregbesola (Osun); Kayode Fayemi (Ekiti); Olusegun Mimiko (Ondo) and Abiola Ajimobi (Oyo).

Others were Gen. Alani Akinrinade, Prof Adebayo Williams, Prof. Itse Sagay, Pastor Tunde Bakare, Mrs. Nike Akande, Dr. Kalu Idika Kalu, Chief Olabiyi Durojaiye, Dr. Fredrick Fasehun, Odia Ofeimun, Chief Bisi Akande, Chief Supo Sonibare, Prof. Ibidapo-Obe, former Cross State Governor Donald Duke, among others.