

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we have two poets. They could both be described as political poets but they could scarcely be more different. Poems by one of them are to be found in just about every anthology of Pan-African poetry that's been published in the last 20 years. He's the South African writer and political activist, Dennis Brutus and he's got a new collection of his poems just out from a publisher in the United States. I'll be talking to him in a moment.

But first let me introduce you to someone who's much less well-known. Okyeame Kwesi Akuffo lives in Ghana. He's been composing poetry for quite a few years and he seems to have found a niche for himself in Ghanaian public life. This is how one of his pieces goes.

POEM IN TWI

Well, that poem, very much in a traditional Ghanaian mould, was in the Twi language which Okyeame Kwesi Akuffo says is understood by three-quarters of Ghana's population. And Mr Akuffo told Davina Dougan that it's the sort of poem that he recites at big public gatherings.

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

What I was saying was calling the people of Ghana to mobilise themselves; calling the people of the old Ghanaian empire to rise to the occasion and mobilise themselves.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Now when you say mobilise themselves, in what sense do you mean? Politically?

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

I can say politically to rise up to the occasion, because when I perform I always perform in front of a very big audience. For example, we have these NAFAC shows - that's the National Festival of Arts and Culture - which are held every two years. I am the linguist who speaks or recites traditional poetry so when the regions file past I have to be able to recite some of these specially woven poems. I have to call, in fact, on every tribe or every people to rise up to the occasion - not to sleep and to work harder.

DAVINA DOUGAN

When you say the 'occasion', do you mean the present political situation here - that being the Revolution?

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

Oh yes! The present Revolution has made a great impact on the people. In fact the present government has been able to push our ideas further and they are encouraging us to do our work well.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Now you see yourself as a traditional poet and you've talked about telling the stories of your ancestors and things like that. Now, all these influences of modern present-day politics - do you think they've changed your poetry and maybe pulled some of the traditional feeling out of it?

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

No never! In fact there has been no change at all in the composition or in putting forward what I've created.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Can you tell me where in Ghana you're actually from?

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

I am from Akropong Akwapim, some 60 kilometres from Accra, here. My father comes from there and my mother comes from Tutu, in the same Akwapim area.

DAVINA DOUGAN

So where were you actually brought up?

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

I was actually brought up in Akropong, in the house of the paramount chief; because my father's father, my grandfather, was a paramount chief - the late Nana Akuffo. That old man - I mean my grandfather - he married about 62 wives and had a lot of children. In fact I grew up in an environment where I met many old men and old women who were good at incantations, appellations, historic and so on, and I'm the sort of person who can memorise most of these things.

DAVINA DOUGAN

So that's how your poetry actually started, by listening to all these people and their traditional incantations; and it was a natural gradual succession from listening to these people.

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

Yes, in fact when the late President Nkrumah started the Young Pioneers I was on the cultural side. I took interest in the talking drums, so most of the things I say come from the drum. From the beginning I never thought of becoming a poet but it came gradually. Later, for example, I came into the limelight when the former President Hilla Lemann was around. They discovered me at one of their get-togethers - that was at Koforidwa - and they picked me for their administration. So I was moving with them all over. Before the President spoke I would introduce him with this traditional poetry. I became a star at that time.

DAVINA DOUGAN

In fact very little of your poetry is actually written down, it's all stored in your head.

OKYEAME KWESI AKUFFO

Yes, at the moment I'm making an effort to put all of them on paper. I've taken it upon myself because I think it's an obligation to put nearly all of them down before I move away.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Okyeame Kwesi Akuffo, a man who has obviously engaged in some pretty nimble political footwork over the years.

In his opposition to apartheid Dennis Brutus has been a steadfast and belligerent campaigner over the years. He left South Africa in the early 1960's after 18 months detention on Robben Island, but ever since then he has engaged in a whole range of activities designed to bring pressure on the South African government - most successful, I suppose, was his leadership of the sports boycott against South Africa. But while engaging in these very public activities Dennis Brutus has continued to write poetry, and a new collection of his poems is just out from a publisher in the United States where Dennis now lives under terms of political asylum. The collection is called 'Salutes and Censures' and it brings together poems that he wrote some years ago with others that he's produced much more recently. When he was in London recently I put it to Dennis that his new anthology was an unremitting political attack on oppression. Is that what he wanted it to be?

DENNIS BRUTUS

Yes I think so. It has always been one of my principle concerns. What has happened, I think, is that it is now broader, so that I am concerned not only with oppression in South Africa but also in other parts of the Third World.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to give the impression that oppression is a monopoly of the West. Is that what you think?

DENNIS BRUTUS

Well it certainly wasn't intended. In fact one of the poems deals with the predicament of political prisoners in Africa and was read originally at a special event organised by Amnesty International in Chicago for political prisoners all over the world. Perhaps we could read a part of it.

EXTRACT OF POEM FROM 'SALUTES AND CENSURES'

DENNIS BRUTUS

It goes on, but as you can see it is concerned with political prisoners everywhere, and it ends in fact by referring to both men and women in the prisons. I think many male poets have a tendency to exclude women victims; I think it is important to include them as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Many of the heroes in your poems are what people would generally describe as Marxists, left-wingers, for example: Steve Biko, Agostinho Neto and Allende.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Well, even there you have a wide spectrum: I think Biko would have denied being a Marxist, Neto on the other hand was an avowed Marxist, and Allende was a Marxist to some degree. But I think you're right, that in the confrontation with oppression most of the challenge comes from the Left. Unfortunately - and this is the point where I would find myself in disagreement with the Pope for instance, who does not mind priests who collaborate with the oppressors but minds priests who form an alliance with the poor - it's just unfortunate that most committed resistance to oppression comes from the Left. But I should add that often a left-wing government in power can be guilty of the abuse of power as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I felt that your heart was crying out to reach those who are actually suffering in South Africa. I found one poem on Soweto, the tragedy of Soweto, particularly moving in that you referred to, at the end, the incident of a girl getting shot. It is very, very moving. What have you to say about that particular poem?

DENNIS BRUTUS

Well, in a sense I am trying to distance myself at the end from a very ugly experience of a young girl who is shot down by the police. In a sense I place myself at a distance from it by saying 'This was reported.' But also I introduce an element of doubt by saying that what was once a young girl is now no more than a heap of flesh. Let me read it.

POEM FROM 'SALUTES AND CENSURES'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, what then, Dennis, in your particular case is the relationship between private poetry and your public pronouncements?

DENNIS BRUTUS

Well I think there's several ways of approaching that. The one thing I'm very conscious of is not using poetry as a soap box. I don't want to get up and orate and use slogans in a way that is thoroughly false and mechanical, so I'm always walking a very thin line - I'm talking about public events like the killings in Soweto or the hanging of Solomon Mahlango, but at the same time I want to be able to make a genuine, intensely felt, personal statement, so that there's nothing artificial or false about it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How do you think your words will reach the oppressors? Do you think they read poetry?

DENNIS BRUTUS

I'm not sure that they read it but I know they fear it. We've seen poets and musicians jailed and murdered, in the East and in the West, so clearly we have some contribution to make towards freedom. And I think this is why we are feared.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Dennis Brutus, thank you very much indeed.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was talking there to Dennis Brutus about his new collection of poetry 'Salutes and Censures'. And that brings us to the end of this week's "Arts and Africa". Join me again at the same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.