

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in this programme we discuss the life and work of David Diop, a young West African poet who was killed in 1960, and we talk to the Ghanaian winner of a major photographic competition.

SIGNATURE TUNE

Well it's not often that someone is able to achieve a major reputation as a poet on the strength of publishing just one slim collection of verse, but that was the case with the late David Diop, a young French-speaking African poet, who was tragically killed in a plane crash off Dakar, Senegal, in 1960 at the early age of thirty-two.

Diop was born in Bordeaux of a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother. A great deal of his education was in France at the time of the Second World War. He went to the University of Montpellier where he started to study medicine but had to change to liberal arts because of ill health. He was very active in his opposition to the Algerian war and in 1958 he went to Guinea to teach at Kindia.

Well a young Sierra Leonean poet Mukhtarr Mustapha, who's now poet in residence at Michigan University in the United States, has recently written this poem dedicated to the memory of David Diop.

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA: Reads his poem dedicated to the memory of David Diop.

I feel the secret dialogue of David Diop is his death. I see the black turban bees as those people who finally embraced David Diop and I see the eight wings of the sun stretching itself into interminable spaces as those energies that were able to feel the various poles of Africa where he was read, where he was understood and where he was applied, and I tell the eyes not to see because if this was in fact a miracle, his birth and his death, who am I to say that I know, that I have any reason to claim to even write a verse for David Diop, and I ask myself did I disclose the crown mystery, did I write it, did I say it?

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Mukhtarr, you've written this poem in memory of David Diop and it's

a very, very dense poem indeed, I quite honestly don't understand a line of it! Now how is this descriptive of Diop?

MUSTAPHA:

Well, to my mind in feeling Diop, in understanding Diop, appreciating the quality of his works and the life style of David Diop. I believe that David Diop represents to me, and to a lot of other people the cornerstone of the protest movement which at a given time erupted in Africa. That is to say that as a child of the Negritudist movement he emerged upsetting the apple-cart and saying things are no longer at ease, the carnival is not yet over and we have yet to see something else develop, so I am within that circuit, I am within that relay team, and I see myself furthuring the battle where David Diop left it.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Mukhtarr, you said David was a poet of protest. What did he protest against?

MUSTAPHA:

Well he was protesting against French colonialism. He was protesting against the interruption of the continuum, that is to say the cultural continuum, what was in Africa, especially former French West Africa, where a policy of aculturalisation was being pursued. An African must be able to communicate in French language. He should be able to have a life style which would typify him as a black Frenchman, as it were. Somebody was trying to mess with his mind, to play some very expensive games with his mind. But he also saw the social order crumbling, whereby he was very much haunted by this system of betrayal. He speaks about the back-stairs betrayalist going fat on murder. He speaks about his own experiences in France, understanding how a friend of his could write certain lines, how he could be pursued into his own apartment and completely smashed up, and he also saw the ancestral stream being completely dislocated. He saw people who were writing, not in the tongue of what they believed, what they felt, what they experienced, what they simply assimilated in the universities of France. He saw this deluge approaching, and to understand what he was about maybe I ought to bring out this specific verse of his.

He reads part of "The Vultures" by David Diop

David Diop goes into the whole system of the coming of the missionaries, what he felt this transformation was about. Suddenly he found himself having to pledge his allegiance to Rome and hence the Pope, and then he tripped again into Swaziland to understand the dehumanising forces at work in South Africa, to understand and to grasp and to come close to what an African will feel under those minds in South Africa, being asphyxiated, dying under the weight of your burden, dying under the weight in a train taking you to dig diamonds, to dig more coals, which you have no right over, of which your pay was death.

This was David Diop, at the height of his creative powers.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

You mention this Negritude movement. Other poets like Senghior, probably he's the best-known of this Negritude movement, now how is this Diop different from Senghior?

MUSTAPHA:

Diop is miles and miles away from Senghior. In fact to my mind the only person I could see some sort of affinity with might be Aimé Césaire who in form and in fact gave a lot of fire to David Diop to take off. Where a Senghior might come out saying "New York, New York, black blood flows in your veins", which is quite an anti-colonialist stand, and to understand the actuality of those words and to understand what that particular poet is about now tells me that David Diop would have rejected him at this particular time as an alien transplant. That is why we see David Diop saying "I am no longer going to be that nigger, that poor suffering Negro who is always bound by some emotionalism which they heaped upon him." But I also have reason, I also have reason why I laugh, why I cry, why I want to be or why I don't want to be. I feel within myself that David Diop, having divorced himself from the Negritudist movement, found his way into Guinea, which of course has a different political stance from Senegal, and understanding what his education meant to him in Paris, understanding what his parentage is all about, and to know that David Diop emerged out of this curious background, coming out with the kind of words which he comes out with, which is near sort of caustic. He was to my mind the chief exponent of the poetry typifying revolt.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Mukhtarr Mustapha talking about the poetry of the late David Diop.

"Delightfully non-plussed" was the way Sidney Orleans Harding, a Ghanaian living in England, said he felt when he heard recently that he'd won the £500 first prize in one of photography's most valuable and prestigious competitions - the 1975 Fabulous Five Contest run by the British magazine, "Amateur Photographer". Sidney won first prize from a field of more than two thousand entries with a top class entry of five outstanding black and white photographs which you can see for yourselves in the February 11th issue of "Amateur Photographer". Rodney Bennett asked Sidney Harding how he started.

SIDNEY HARDING:

This was in 1967 I was sent doing music for a while. I studied music and then of course I dropped out of that and I became interested in photography. I've always been interested in it, but unfortunately, not in the practical side. But I loved watching pictures, going to exhibitions, and then I plucked up courage to attend evening classes to see how I would get on.

RODNEY BENNETT:

Well, you've obviously achieved that and you've now won this Fabulous Five Contest for which you have to submit five photographs, black and white photographs, and I gather there were two thousand other competitors, and you came out top and have got the rather handsome sum of £500 as a prize. Well in front of us we've got the photographs you took which showed some idea of the versatility of your work and looking at them they do seem to be versatile. First I notice what is really a picture of London, across the river with St. Paul's Cathedral, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in the background. Now that's a photograph many thousands of tourists and others must have taken, and yet you've managed to achieve something different. It's got a sort of silhouette effect. You've got the white bridge, Waterloo Bridge in the foreground. How did you go about achieving that effect?

HARDING:

Well, I mean I was on a train going to Charing Cross from my home and suddenly I saw the lighting effect from the train just hitting this bridge and St. Paul's and that really moved me and as soon as I got to Charing Cross I dashed back to Hungerford Bridge and then I just took my position and shot the picture.

BENNETT:

Then up above we have rather a different sort of picture. One you've called "Stop" - a man and a woman meeting in opposite directions in the street.

HARDING:

Yes. This was one of the things in photography which you have - a happy accident. I saw this lady. It was her attire, I mean the way she dressed that really affected me and she was just crossing the road when I saw her. She was hailing a taxi and looking through the viewfinder this man just came into it and of course I saw another picture.

BENNETT:

And next door we've got a nude, a rather original nude, a girl sitting by a lake, isn't it, with her back to us. Well that couldn't have been an accident?

HARDING:

No, of course not, it wasn't. This was during an outing with the camera club where most of the photographers went to the front to take the picture and suddenly of course this freak lighting came along.

It was a dull day and just hit the back view and caused this beautiful form and of course I was shooting from behind.

BENNETT:

So it's doing something different that's part of your success?

HARDING:

It is, yes.

BENNETT:

Finally, what are your future plans? Are you going to go on doing it as an amateur or might you perhaps turn professional?

HARDING:

Well this is something that has been on my mind for some while. I'm still pondering over it, to take it up professionally.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Rodney Bennett talking to Sidney Orleans Harding, winner of the 1975 Fabulous Five Contest run by the magazine "Amateur Photographer".

And that's all from this edition of "Arts and Africa". Join us again at the same time next week, but for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy James Taylor.

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