

Arts and Africa

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. We devote today's programme to an interview with Cyprian Ekwensi about his role at FESTAC.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Everybody knows about Cyprian Ekwensi, the famous Nigerian novelist and journalist. He has been described as being "as important to African literature as Kwame Nkrumah was to Africa's politics". No one can earn higher praise than that. He has written such famous novels as Jaguar Nana, People of the City, Lokotown, Restless City and City Gold, and Beautiful Feathers. Aside from his novels he is also a newspaperman, he's managing director of The NationDaily Star and four other newspapers. He writes a weekly column for The Daily Star and a monthly column for The Drum magazine. His latest novel, Survive the Peace, is due to be published shortly in Africa and we'll be talking to him about that in a later programme. But right now he has just compiled and published for Festac an anthology of New Nigerian writing and I asked him to tell us about it.

CYPRIAN EKWENSI

This is the Festac anthology which I went to produce in the USA. I was appointed director of Nigeria's literary participation in Festac in August last year and my programme consisted of 3 parts. One, to provide Nigerian participation in a series of encounters, literary discussions, two, to get Nigerian writers to read from their works and three to produce this anthology of Nigerian newwriting. I felt that since this anthology will live long after Festac is forgotten, I would put primary attention to the publication of this anthology. So I went to the USA where they do this kind of what's called "instant" publishing with these manuscripts, raw manuscripts, unedited. I didn't know the shape the book would take and in my first 3 days in the USA I edited and put the manuscripts in order and the book was printed in 9 days. So this book was produced in 12 working days.

and now it has been shipped to Lagos and I hope it is on sale right now, the Festac Anthology of New Nigerian writing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

How did you select the authors ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

The manuscripts were selected by an advertisement which appeared in The Daily Times, The New Nigerian and The Daily Star, inviting contributions. The scripts did not get to me until November and at that time I was still waiting for more scripts and so I couldn't put any final touches to the idea of what to do with the scripts. And again some of the scripts came from magazines published in the English Departments of the Nigerian Universities by permission, of course, of the literary departments of those universities.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now I have a feeling that Festac could prove very useful in encouraging African writing

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

..... thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

.... but I cannot put my finger on quite what Festac can actually do. Have you any ideas on this ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Oh, it is very straightforward. In the preface which I have written to this book, I have asked that this anthology of Nigerian new writing to be made into an annual affair. You see, the daily newspapers and the magazines do not really satisfy the creative instinct. There are a lot of budding writers looking for an outlet and this anthology, for the first time, brings the government squarely as a sponsor of African creative writing and it is a very welcome gesture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think it is a good idea, and this is my own view, that Festac should organise anything by way of a competition for young budding writers ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Well, I think so but the judging is going to be very difficult. You know that Festac is an off-shoot of the Organisation of African Unity and the OAU is nothing, if not political and therefore when we start judging a literary work on that basis it is going to be very touchy ! There will be other factors other than the literary !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

(laughter) Now since your aim in assembling this anthology is to encourage people, other African countries, to read about literary products from the continent

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

..... yes

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

..... you've got quite a few authors here in this book. Did you find any of them possessing outstanding talent ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Yes, I found quite a few. You know what I did was to, in my editing exercise, I divided the book into 8 parts. The first part is called Festac dealing with articles, poetry and sonon at Festac, the second part the African discontent, that is all the resurgence against foreign rule. The third part I call poetry and there you have the bulk of the contributions on poetic feelings about the world around us. The fourth part is fiction, this is pure fiction. Then the fifth part is criticism, criticism of African literature, exercises on critical writing. Then the 6th part deals with the civil war. The 7th part I have devoted to Nigerian places, there has been poetry and writing describing places in Nigeria and the last part, the 8th part, I called 'tributes'. A poet just likes to praise something so. I put all the praise poetry, what you might call praise poetry, in one section called 'tributes'. Under the section Nigerian places, there is a writer Chiddy Wilson Amutah who writes about 'Ife'.

QUOTATION:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That is very very short.

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Yes. Then under the section 'war' there is a poem there that just takes me it it called "Who will eat the vulture". As you know, nobody eats vultures in Africa.

POEM:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That's very clever, very good, very witty.

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Then under criticism there is a young man called Paul Theakaram who writes about criticism and his main theme, which I extracted from the article.

QUOTE:

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Now what he's saying is: you know there is a big controversy in university circles about who should criticise African literature. Certain people believe that only African critics can really appreciate African literature. But he is saying that literature is universal therefore any critic anywhere can criticise any literature anywhere. So that is one point of view and that is fresh and coming from a young man. There is a poem which I like very much by a young man called "Send in Your Resignation". This is an office story about a very precocious little girl who, because she is the mistress of the boss, behaves as she likes to everybody and she wants this young man as a lover but the young man is already engaged and doesn't want her. So she works so that he will be retired. He is told to send in his resignation, which he does and there is then a change of government and those people who were pursuing themselves get retired.

There are all kinds of poems beginning with Chinua Achebe and going right through those to the very young people who are just coming up. There is a short piece by a young man called Davidson Akanazu and it is called "A Gradual Suicide"

POEM:

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

You see, poets have this ability for speaking truth, for isolating truth. In the section under fiction again, there is a young man who writes about the adventures of a kobo. The kobo is the unit of Nigerian currency, I didn't really realise that he was writing about kobo until I came to the end and this is titled "A life of a black african money". Now I'll just read you a bit out of it.

POEM:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now I can see from the pieces you have read so far, that you are very keen on poetry. May I ask if you have written poetry yourself ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

No, I have not written poetry, but I have a feeling for it and I studies poetry at school although much of the obscure poetry going on now I really have nothing to do with. And for a time the fad of that thing kept me off it. But in my spare moments I read and enjoy poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I have noticed that Nigerians write prolifically and very little has come out of Ghana or indeed out of any other part of Africa to the same degree. Why is it that Nigerians are so productive ?

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Nigerians are productive of everything. Don't forget that we are claiming to be 80 million and when you compare the population of those other places, with all due respect to you Alex, the population of Ghana is 10 million. But this doesn't mean anything. It only means that when you begin to multiply an interest 80 times as opposed to 10 times, it is a different thing and Nigerians are very imitative, if they think something looks nice, they would like to do it themselves and you know all art is imitation, and when they have a champion whom they admire, they all want to do as a champion does. In other words Nigeria seems to be a nation of hero worshippers, to a certain extent, this is my analysis.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So much money has been spent on organising Festac. Some people have questioned whether it is worthwhile spending so much money when it is probably all about politics. Do you think Festac could prove useful in the way of culture.

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

Now actually in this anthology which I have put together there is an article in the section called Festac by a young writer called Fubara David West from the River State of Nigeria. The title of the article is "Festac must be Relevant". Here is an extract from it:

EXTRACT:

CYPRIAN EKWENSI:

As a young man he goes into this subject. I will not give you his conclusion. I want you to buy the book in order to find out ! But you see I would like to say that Festac is like public relations. When you make a public relations gesture you cannot really calculate what the benefit is in material terms. I consider this anthology as one of the benefits of Festac. Certainly the greater the consciousness of our cultural relevance and identity the more this new attitude will permeate in other fields of endeavour and bring out results that are not foreseeable. So I think Festac is relevant.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The famous Nigerian novelist and journalist Cyprian Ekwensi. He is great fun isn't he. We hope to be able to bring you more from him in the near future. But for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with the Festac anthem.