

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 304P

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to Arts and Africa.

ATUKWEI OKAI

Everywhere I go I make the point that I am a Ghanaian and I claim my Africanity. I don't stop there and I claim the whole world. Beginning with the bed. If I claim beyond the bed in which I was born, I take the room. I go beyond the room to the village, to the community, the town, then I go to Ghana to Africa, and I think why should I stop there. I'll go beyond the continent and go to the world, go to the universe. I am a citizen of the world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the well-known Ghanaian poet Atukwei Okai. Atukwei was recently in London on the way back to Ghana following a year's sabbatical in the United States where he was involved with the International Writing Program at the University of Idaho. And later he travelled widely throughout the United States giving readings of his own, and other African poetry. But now he is returning to his other life as a lecturer in Russian in the University of Ghana. Atukwei's poetry incorporates the traditional rhythms of African music, is powerfully expressive of African themes. His subject matter is often about the poor, the oppressed, or it praises African heroes. His work has been widely published over the last ten years with perhaps his best known works being "The Oath of the Fantomfrom" published in 1973, and "Lorgorligi Logarithms" published in 1975. Well, his respite from teaching Russian in Ghana appears to have been fruitful as he now has more poems ready for publication. It seems that one of the major themes in his new poetry is the Rhododendron. So we asked him to tell us about it.

ATUKWEI OKAI

The Rhododendron poem is really a marathon of a poem. It is a long poem in about twenty-one rivers instead of movements. I prefer to call them rivers . . .

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why rivers, why the change?

ATUKWEI OKAI

The reason for the naming would be linked to the nature of the major symbol in the poem. Now, the whole poem is about the plight of the creators in society. Creators are what I call the "flowers of humanity", the prime movers in society; and who are these? They are composers, artists, architects, social revolutionaries and all those who create, and I am saying that very often, more often than not, they end up being treated like "Rhododendrons in Donkeydom". Fine flowers in the kingdom of donkeys. The first river of the poem is called "Fanfare for Oduduwa". And here we have a creation piece. According to Yoruba mythology Oduduwa was the one at Ile-Ife who created the earth from the primeval ocean so water plays a major part in each movement, and in my case, is termed a river, so there are twenty-one rivers in the whole long poem.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Which river are you at now?

ATUKWEI OKAI

I would say I am on a few rivers, which means that I am not writing it in a chronological manner, but as the spirit comes. The spirit enters my being, my creative being; it runs into my groove and lets out the spirit that comes through me from the elements. So I think the first seven rivers have been created; then in the middle part three rivers, and then at the end four rivers. So this is how I am going about it, and Alex you must be careful, you are getting really into my laboratory and these are my secrets.

- Laughter . . .

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One would have thought that you had already been to America in view of the 'Kperterkple Serenade' poem which you wrote about America.

ATUKWEI OKAI

No I hadn't been to America before I wrote it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes I was wondering how the American audience, having read a poem like this, received you. I would just like to read an extract from that poem.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY NOW READS AN EXTRACT FROM ONE OF ATUKWEI OKAI'S POEMS.

ATUKWEI OKAI

I think it goes really to spell out a vital essence of the American reality, and the American readers say "Wow man, right on!"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it looks as if your poetry stands up best to loud reading. As far as I am concerned it also comes over well straight off the page. But I think you do better when you are reading it aloud. Do you have anybody in particular as your model for this kind of poetry?

ATUKWEI OKAI

Well, yes. My model is my own culture. You know we have our praise singers in our society, and you know it is part of our life. For instance with the GA people of Ghana, 'Sound' alone can be used to insult a person or to convey a certain feeling or a certain idea. Sound in its essence can be used to highlight, to underline a message, and so I exploit this in my work. So my beginning is my culture. I am very much rooted in my culture this is why it comes up. You know there is a saying of the GA people "Lala Wiemo" "poetry is half song, half music", and in the whole world it should be so. That is one of the main differences between poetry and anything called prose or non-poetry. You understand? It's a Ju Ju. It's magic, a thing of the spirit. With my type of rendition through the type of reading, you please the people; you clear the ground, and you invite the people's spirit into the groove and then you pour into their soul your message.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I think it comes up very well, especially as you start most of your poetry with incantations.

ATUKWEI OKAI

You are right. At the beginnings of the movements in the "Lorgorligi Logarithms" long poem, a poem of six movements, I am symbolically using the thing we have in our culture; Libation, the Libation formula. I clear the ground by calling all the names of the ancestors and our great spirits in whom we have belief. People who are examples for our society. And then I say a few things before I go into the poem proper. Movement six of "Lorgorligi Logarithms" is entitled Wangara Longumi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What does that mean? is that the name of somebody?

ATUKWEI OKAI

Yes. Literally Longumi means "Reduction sale". But it happens to be the name of somebody. So Wangara Longumi, in a way it's similar to 'John Doe' who was a faceless figure, a non-entity as far as certain high-society levels of society are concerned. So this poem therefore is dealing with the spirit of the common man, the man who is not fit to be counted for the purposes of census because he doesn't matter.

ATUKWEI OKAI NOW READS ONE OF HIS POEMS.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to be very fond of alliteration and some critics have attacked you. They say that you seem to be in love with words and sometimes you just roll them off.

ATUKWEI OKAI

Yes, I have heard that talk before. But as you can see yourself, it's not alliteration for alliteration's sake, it's alliteration being used in the service of the totality of the impact of the poem. In fact I even term my type of poetry total art, total art. This is it. You have the image, you have the sound, you have the music, you have the rhythm; everything my brother, everything.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

And there is a lot of sarcasm in your poetry which really makes the point you are trying to make.

ATUKWEI OKAI

Certainly you are right. One exploits all the various forms of approach to reality that one has at ones disposal, in order to get an idea across. And as we can see in the last part, of the movement I just read, how prophetic it was. And this was created in 1972. By the way we should point out 'Lorgorligi' is a GA word which means something that is not straight, crooked, zig zag. So in using this I was trying to categorise the nature of our reality in modern Africa. I was saying, and I am saying, that reality is so complicated, so unfriendly that it is like 'Lorgorligi Logarithms'. Therefore, it's a mathematical problem that you try and work out but you can never solve. In fact if you feed that problem into a computer the computer will blow up. So, that is 'Lorgorligi Logarithms'. The line is not straight. The common man has no chance. The dice is loaded against him. This is it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

And you have also been described as an experimenter. Do you think your poetry is a mere experiment, or has it now finally established itself as this type you want to write?

ATUKWEI OKAI

Yes they are right in saying I am an experimenter. But I was an experimenter and I am an experimenter. They say I am an innovator, I break new ground, I reach out for new moves and all in the service of the correct impact of the totality of art. You will see that I believe that a new reality demands a new form of expression, a new form of Art; and this is it, as shown in my work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

So we have not yet come to the final form your approach is going to take?

ATUKWEI OKAI

I would say more or less it has achieved its real structural essence, and this is what I am applying to all of my major poems. And yes, I found my Voice and I found my Form.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Atukwei Okai, thank-you very much.

And that's all from Arts and Africa for this week, we hope you can join us again next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.