

# Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to Arts and Africa. And in today's programme we approach the climax of six months of creative writing that's been going on all over Africa. The Arts and Africa Poetry Award was launched in May and ever since writers, young and old, well-established and just beginning, have been sending us their contributions. At first they came in a trickle and then, as the closing date of October 31st got closer, they came in a flood. In all we received well over 2,000 poems from more than 700 writers. And today we join the judges of the Award just before they start the final stages of their deliberations. Their task is to agree on one poem from one writer to win the first prize of £200 - and of course the winners of the second and third prizes of £100 and £50. By the way, there has been a small change in the make-up of the judging panel. The South African poet, Dennis Brutus got snarled up in some immigration formalities in the United States and has been unable to travel to London. To replace him, we were delighted to have available another distinguished poet and critic from South Africa, Cosmo Pieterse. So Cosmo has joined the Malawian poet Jack Mapanje and the British writer, broadcaster and teacher, Angus Calder in the daunting task of reading the poems and coming to a decision. Their verdict will be announced in next week's Arts and Africa and I'm sure we shall have a lot of anxious or expectant listeners tuning in then. But today we're interrupting the judges to find out what they think of the entry as a whole. Welcome Jack Mapanje, Angus Calder and especially Cosmo Pieterse. Hi Cosmo. Thank you for accepting this late challenge to come in.

COSMO PIETERSE

It's a real pleasure to be here.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We are very grateful to you. Now, how near to the verdict are you?

COSMO PIETERSE

I think I'll refer it to Angus and Jack.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who have been in longer than you.....

ANGUS CALDER

Well, we've now got about 40 poets on the table which is over 100 poems and we're making the final selection from that. So we've cut it down to about 5 percent, or perhaps less, of the original entry. But it's been very difficult hasn't it?

JACK MAPANJE

It has been very difficult indeed.....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jack, yes.

JACK MAPANJE

.....because of the range of poets, their age and experience as well as range in themes.

ANGUS CALDER

And I think, Alex, what makes it more difficult is that there are very many very, very strong entries, some really excellent material that is very different in many ways and so it's a question of putting one kind of poem against another and it's going to be a daunting task to make the final decision.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How have you set about coming to this final 40 poets? Jack.

JACK MAPANJE

What we've been doing is we've been passing scripts around and I have read a lot and then selected what I thought were the best and then I passed on, without telling Angus, I passed these on to Angus. And Angus made his own selection and having done that, these selected ones went to Cosmo. Cosmo brought up a list of his own selection and this is what we're working on now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From this system obviously there will be a few poems overlapping, Angus, did you notice anything like that?

ANGUS CALDER

Yes. The ones we're obviously going to pay special attention to are the ones where all three of us thought the poems outstanding. But in other cases each of us is going to feel quite strongly that a particular poet is outstanding and we're going to have to argue it through. (LAUGHTER)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That will be the most exciting part of it won't it? Now, going through such a hefty number of contributions that must have been really boring - I mean, unless they were really outstanding poems which you enjoyed. Did you find any amusing, any exciting, any boring, any special ones?

COSMO PIETERSE

Alex let me take up the question of boring. It was a question of 'boring', certainly, in the sense that one had to bore into poems (LAUGHTER) which were marvellous very often. They were rich, they were such an exciting variety from almost all the countries of the African continent. The subject matter was so different. The approaches, the themes that were used, the styles that were used, there was so much excitingly, extraordinarily original material and the approaches at such a combination that it was mind-expanding - one was smiling, one was laughing, one was crying. I write, you said earlier I'm a poet, I don't know that I will ever go on writing poetry again after this experience (LAUGHTER) of reading so many good things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Well Jack, what kind of entries did you get? From what people, what age group, what professions and what subjects did the poems go through?

JACK MAPANJE

Well, the poets range from journalists, university lecturers to students and to people who are working in government, public administrators and civil servants and so on. So the range of writers is so impressive, one would have expected in a competition like this probably a small group of people who would be interested in writing poetry. But this has not been so, the situation has been that everybody from every walk of life has entered.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes....I remember when I had a look at the entries I noticed one entry came from a houseboy which I thought was marvellous. Now did you find any particularly outstandingly funny entries, Angus?

ANGUS CALDER

Well, Cosmo said that he was smiling and laughing and in fact, one effect of the kind of sort of brilliant word-play that you're looking for in poetry is very often to make you smile. Although the word-play is often very serious and it's getting a very serious point across, you're pleased, you think: that's it he's got it and that's smashing, so you smile. I would say that in general the entries were pretty solemn. I seem to have read an awful lot of poems about Africa's sufferings, very much in general, which I got rather weary of after a time and I thought writers were stronger when they were talking about their own particular experience, in their own particular part of Africa than when they were, say, denouncing apartheid from Sierra Leone.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Cosmo, did you have the same.....

COSMO PIETERSE

Not entirely I'm afraid Alex. I think that one can write about second-hand experience but you should have experienced that second-hand experience at first hand. In other words, you should have done a lot of thinking and soul searching and reading and discussing about it either with yourself or with other people. I was deeply moved by some of the poems but there were, as Angus said, some that seemed to say 'well I ought to be writing about this' rather than 'I feel deeply about this' and this is what comes out.

JACK MAPANJE

In many ways this is what I was looking for myself. It's easy to tell a poet who really feels strongly about something because even choice of language, words and so on, is much easier, my flow of rhythms and sentences flow much more smoothly and so on. So as long as one is working from something that one feels strongly, it's easier to judge it, even.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now were the entries, Angus, were they in the formal mould, the formal English traditional verse mould, or many of them, indeed most of them, in free verse?

ANGUS CALDER

Very difficult to say. I would say though that most people who tried to write rhymed verse on the whole didn't do it very well. It is difficult to write rhymed verse well, it's difficult to get the rhythm and scansion right, a lot of people didn't seem to appreciate how difficult it is. There was a great deal of very impressive free-form verse and a good deal of verse which was impressive because it was, as it were, translating African traditional methods into modern practice in English.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jack, what part of the continent submitted the most entries?

JACK MAPANJE

Almost every part of Africa has contributed something. One interesting thing that I found was the contributions from the non-English speaking countries of Africa which have also contributed entries and a lot of them in English and they too have been quite interesting to read.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. But Cosmo were there any well established names among the entries?

COSMO PIETERSE

Luckily, I think, when we were judging we went by numbers only, so luckily we couldn't even be influenced by that, but I think there may be two or three people who are established as poets, who have published widely. We'll probably only know finally when the three top winners are chosen whether the well-known names are among them Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now one of the required qualities in this Award was technical competence. How did you judge that? Upon what did you base your judgement of technical competence?

ANGUS CALDER

Whether a poem reads well or not. You can't say this is the right way to write a poem. What you can say is when somebody has written a poem that works. And very often it works in an unexpected way that you couldn't have possibly predicted and you could certainly never teach people. But competence really means being able to say something interesting in an interesting way, whether it's free-verse or rhyme-verse or whatever and to use a verse form which is appropriate, or develop a verse form which is appropriate for what you want to say. Incompetent is much easier to define! (LAUGHTER)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, did you come up against bad punctuation? I often find that very, very difficult, I mean, a poem might be good but because the punctuation is so bad you can hardly read any sense into it and I've also noticed that some people try to get over this by refusing to put in any punctuation at all and leaving the sense to the reader. Did you find anything like that Cosmo?

COSMO PIETERSE

Very often, Alex, that is the thing that makes the poem very exciting. The poem moves on two or three levels. There are all kinds of things that open. This was delightful to come across. Some poems were marvellously punctuated and also made their point that way. The point that Angus raised, it's a question of how well this is maintained, how much point is being brought across. One might, for instance, say "No" and "Yes" and if the "No" and the "Yes" are sort of balanced in a particular

way, if there's no punctuation in between then one might read them as "No yes". (LAUGHTER) or "No yes-terday". You know, that kind of thing happens occasionally.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Jack you are itching to say something.

JACK MAPANJE

No. I was just saying that one should be very careful about talking about punctuation. For instance some poets deliberately try to experiment with not only the words and the language but also with punctuation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Were there any common themes which kept recurring?

ANGUS CALDER

Well there was a great deal of poetry that was more or less political, deeply concerned with problems like corruption and unemployment and that was very common. From West Africa there was a lot of poems about the Harmattan weren't there?

JACK MAPANJE

Yes, that's right yes.

ANGUS CALDER

Or do you pronounce it the Harmattan?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, the Harmattan. That's the dry wind from the Sahara. Was there anything else?

JACK MAPANJE

Well disillusionment with problems of Africa. One thing that impressed me about the political ones was the relationship between, say, African leaders and the masses and how the poet, as it were, comes in to talk for the masses. Then there were the problems of the ordinary man, the problems of the market, problems of food as well as the problems of drought. One impressive thing about all this was how the poet is still sensitive to the problems of his society.

COSMO PIETERSE

Interestingly enough ideas were very often fused with this great concern about political events, about public events and yet the poems, the good ones, never made the public event a purely sort of 'I'll take a soapbox stance' attitude. It was strongly personal and moving very often.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I read one poem which talked about the imperialist, the white man, I thought that theme was long gone?

JACK MAPANJE

Yes it's long gone. But when you have a young man who has never published before and wants to enter for the competition you can't constrain him, can you? He has every right to repeat these themes and you can still write a poem about the old times without necessarily it being a bad poem.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Jack Mapanje, Angus Calder and Cosmo Pieterse, many thanks. I know you have got a great deal more work to do on these poems and I wish you all the best that you will come out with something which is really exciting. But to maintain the excitement until this time next week, when the winners of the Poetry Award will be hearing their names announced in Arts and Africa, here's the Le Seigneur Rochereau et L'Orchestre African Fiesta National with "Kasala". And from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - KASALA