

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. I'm sure a lot of eager ears are glued to the radio this minute to hear the results of the Arts and Africa Poetry Award. We shall not keep you anxious for long. Before the results are announced, however, I'd like to make a few preliminary remarks. The response to the reward has been phenomenal. We received over two thousand poems from more than seven hundred writers of all ages and calling and from all parts of Africa and overseas. The task of selecting the winning poems for the prizes of £200, £100 and £50 has been enjoyable but far from easy. Listeners may remember from our last programme that one change was necessarily made from our original panel of judges. Dennis Brutus, the well-known South African poet, had difficulty making the trip from the United States to London for the judging and we were very pleased to replace him with the South African poet and critic, Cosmo Pieterse. We're grateful to Cosmo for accepting our invitation. Without more ado we meet the judges for the award. Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet, Angus Calder the British writer, broadcaster and teacher and Cosmo Pieterse. Gentlemen, what was your verdict? Angus ...

## ANGUS CALDER

Well it was a very, very painful one to arrive at. The BBC have been waiting anxiously for the 'puff of smoke to come up over the Vatican' and we have been fending them off all day. (Laughter) We found reaching this decision so painful but we do believe that the way we've done it, we've got a very objective verdict where all the poems appeal strongly to all three of us, very strongly, and we've also got three extremely fine poems.

The third prize winner is MARJORIE OLUDHE MACGOYE who is a publisher's representative in Nairobi, Kenya and her prize winning poem is "Shairi La Ukombozi", a poem in the Swahili mode which is a plea for the release of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer who you may remember was detained a few years ago. What struck us as exceptional about this poem was the way in which an indigenous African mode of writing, a highly elaborate and formal one, had been rendered in English. And at the same time how, partly as a result of this, the writer was able to combine a very strong feeling of commitment, very strong indeed, with a sense of distance and proportion so that the emotion did not get out of hand and the thing was not strident at all but immensely dignified. Here's the poem:

TAPE

POEM - "SHAIRI LA UKOMBOZI"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So the third prize goes to Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye from Kenya. How about the second, Jack?

JACK MAPANJE

The second prize goes to KOFI ANYIDOHU, a Ghanaian student now in the United States of America, for the poem "Akofa". One of the reasons why we liked this poem is essentially because of its originality in form, in tone and the dramatic impact it has on any reader. The poem is about the relationship between the young and the old and it gives a very thoughtful voice to an old lady and the poet has been very successful in capturing how an old lady can speak to the new generation. It's an old theme if you like but in fact, he does it up brilliantly.

TAPE

POEM - "AKOFA"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So the second prize goes to Kofi Anyidoho from Ghana. And now for the big moment, the winner of the Arts and Africa Poetry Award, and it is ... Cosmo?

COSMO PIETERSE

This award goes to EDISON MPINA of Malawi, a banker, who wrote a short but extremely powerful and beautiful poem. It's called "Summer Fires of Mulanje Mountain".

JACK MAPANJE

Your matronly face is  
blood-red like the flesh of a watermelon;  
Smoke is rising ascension-like  
through your hair ... you have  
become a burning field of neon

Skin to skin bonfires to  
awaken mountain shrines? No, for  
these are fires lit by angry heat ...  
power generated by summer

Unfailing reminder of  
agelong lomwe tribal icons,  
the fires paint veins of dried rivers  
and sculpt faces of dead relatives  
as they burn every summer.

COSMO PIETERSE

Now some of the reasons why we felt that this short poem was so strong is that it compresses into this little space a tremendous amount of material. It has images that are striking, fresh and although they seem to go against each other, they finally blend together. The "blood-red like the flesh of a watermelon" and then "smoke is rising ascension-like" and then later "burning field of neon" and these things form a complete picture of that burning mountain side. Then in the last stanza the kind of music of "agelong lomwe tribal icons" and "sculpt faces of dead relatives". There is tremendous power. The poem is a personal one; it's a landscape that is painted; it's also a political shape that we see, part of the African continent in many ways and what it's going through. These things strike on a number of levels to the ear, to the eye, to the emotions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it's a very short poem and I'm sure listeners would like to hear it again. "Summer Fires of Mulanje Mountain"

TAPE

POEM - "SUMMER FIRES OF MULANJE MOUNTAIN"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's from Edison Mpina from Malawi. Well, Angus Calder, Cosmo Pieterse and Jack Mapanje, thank you all very much. I would like to thank you very much on behalf of our seven hundred entrants for the long hours you have spent judging the poems. Warmest congratulations to our winners, Edison Mpina from Malawi, Kofi Anyidoho from Ghana and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye from Kenya. You'll all be receiving your prizes from us shortly. And indeed, congratulations to all who submitted entries but did not win. Don't be disappointed if you didn't come amongst the first three this time. You may have a pleasant surprise next week when the judges will be looking at the work of those they have chosen as runners-up. That will be in Arts and Africa this time next week. Meanwhile from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye for now.