

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. This is definitely going to be a bookish programme today - but more about the outside of books than what's printed on the page. Writers crave an audience and it's largely the publisher who provides the audience. After all, it's the publisher who provides the copies and, if the author's lucky, some publicity as well. But before we hear about the serious business of publishing, let's listen to this comment on high finance from none other than E.T. Mensah.

## GRAMS.

MUSIC EXTRACT - NO MONEY NO BUS.

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

E.T. Mensah and the Tempos' "No Money, No Bus". A much less lighthearted view of the economy comes from a poem by a Ghanaian poet and publisher, Atsu Dekutsey. Two years ago, the Ghanaian currency was devalued. Newly printed money was issued and in a period of two weeks everybody had to exchange their old cedis for new. Well, here's Atsu Dekutsey with his poem, "Cedi Concerto".

## ATSU DEKUTSEY

POETRY EXTRACT - "CEDI CONCERTO"

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Atsu for the graphic description of a very harrowing incident. Now I should tell listeners that you have been reading "Cedi Concerto" from a collection of your poetry and short stories that's published under the title: "The Loom of Life". Now I happen to know you're Editor of the Ghana Universities Press but that this little book which you've just been reading from wasn't published by your Press. How did you get it printed?

## ATUSU KEKUTSEY

Well, I happened to come to Britain last year for a training in publishing at the Oxford Polytechnic. Part of the course has to do with coming out with a book project so I decided to publish a collection of my short stories and poems for that project.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What subjects interest you most? "Cedi Concerto" is not the kind of thing people write about normally.

ATSU DEKUTSEY

You know I felt affected deeply about what is happening to people around me and so I felt I should put my feelings down on paper and the result is what you have just heard.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you've written a few short stories as well. I find your... themes highly original. They're not the sort of things people talk about everyday. I mean we know that these things happen but we prefer not to talk about them at all. For example, the case of this teacher falling in love with his pupil....

ATSU DEKUTSEY

Hmm. Whether they are important or not important is not the issue as such but then they must be themes that I feel strongly about.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The three stories you've got in this book are all tragic stories, tragedies.

ATSU DEKUTSEY

Ah yes. By nature I am a pessimistic man. Yes, I'm very intrigued with tragic stories.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now let's look at the publishing side of your life. You are the editor of the Ghana Universities Press, as we've already said. Now who decides what things you are going to publish?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

Well, in the first place, when the manuscripts come into the House, I make the preliminary decision. When I feel that that manuscript has a contribution to make, then I submit it to the Editorial Board. Usually what we do is to send the manuscript to an outside reader for a second opinion. If it is favourable we go ahead and publish it but if it's not favourable, then we return the manuscript politely, with thanks.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Now you take a rather gloomy view of publishing as a whole in Ghana. How many serious publishers are there in the country?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

Oh well, the serious publishers can be counted on the fingers. There aren't that many.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You don't think they're doing enough to publish works and books actually written by Ghanaians?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

I think they're doing their best but they are saddled with a lot of problems. You see there is a shortage of paper, of spare parts to make the machines run and so despite the efforts being made by the conventional publishers to bring out the books, because of the problems economically, it's telling on everybody.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you don't think there's a dearth of talent?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

No, no, no. A lot of Ghanaians are writing but the pity of it is that they're not getting published and so a lot of frustration is setting in. But then you see the kind of writing that they're doing is not the kind of writing that Ghanaian publishers are interested in at the moment.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So they won't bring any.....

ATSU DEKUTSEY

.....returns. Now if you are a publisher and you go into educational publishing, you make so much money. Now if you go into imaginative writing or fiction publishing rather, there the returns aren't all that great and so as a publisher you think twice.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So how do the writers actually get their works read?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

What is happening is that some of them are resorting to unconventional or unorthodox methods. They set about this by getting a typist to type their manuscripts then they duplicate the things, bind them. The result may not be visually attractive or appealing but then the most important thing is that their book comes out in one way or another and they help by marketing the books themselves. So local enterprise is being brought to the rescue.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what use are the publishers, the serious publishers I mean, making of the couple of international awards going round to encourage publishing, like the Noma Award?

ATSU DEKUTSEY

The Noma Award is something that every publisher in Ghana is interested in. I should imagine that some Ghanaian publishers submitted their books for adjudication last year when the Noma Award was introduced. In fact, we at the Ghanaian Universities Press also thought seriously about submitting one of our books, but it didn't come out at the time when we planned it, so we were a little late for it so we didn't submit it for that award.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Atsu Dekutsey thank you very much for coming along and for reading one of your poems.

And if you'd like to sit away from the microphone, David Sweetman is going to take your place and tell us what's been happening at this year's International Book Fair at Ife in Nigeria. Well David why do think so much attention is being paid to this years fair?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Largely because of the Frankfurt Book Fair in West Germany last year. You may remember, Alex, that I went to that and sent back a number of reports on it. The Frankfurt Book Fair had as its theme "Black Africa" and it brought together the largest grouping of African publishers and writers, and book trade people in general, that there has ever been. There was tremendous feeling in the hall that was set aside for the African book trade people that it was marvellous to be together. They saw the value of an international book fair for the first time largely because they are all, in their own ways, producing books, it must be said very often educational books, which are useful to each other. They're not specific to their own countries. There was a great feeling of pleasure as people went round to different stalls and said: "Hey, look at that! We could use that. Why don't we get together?" And, of course, if you do get together and you share what are called 'rights' in publishing, books are very much cheaper because you print more of them. The more you print, the more the price goes down.

There was some suggestion that a new big book fair should be set up in Nairobi. The reason for that is that Nairobi is very well organised for conference facilities. But that's in the future and until that happens, if it does happen, then the place that people will be able to get together is at Ife because the Ife Book Fair exists. It started off in 1976 largely as a Nigerian concern but there was some feeling that this year it would be much more international in an African sense because people would want to go to Ife because they had been to Frankfurt.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What then do you think will be the highlight of the fair this time?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Well apart from the seminars on this years theme, that's "The Challenge of the African Book Industry in the '80's", the most exciting event undoubtedly took place at the very beginning of the week when the second Noma Award for publishing in Africa was announced. You may remember that last year it was won by the francophone African novelist, Mariama Ba for her novel, "Une si longue lettre". That was announced here in Britain where the judges got together at Oxford. But this year it's being held at the Ife fair.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now David, what's the latest news from Ife?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Well, Professor Eldred Jones, who is chairman of the Noma Award Managing Committee as he was last year, spoke at the special ceremony and he announced, I think as perhaps we were guessing he might do because there are so many works of non-fictional, educational works submitted because that is the major output of African publishers and indeed it was one of those that won, it's a book entitled "Health Education for the Community". It's by Nigerian, Felix C. Adi, published by the Nwamife Publishers Limited of Enugu, Nigeria. The judges said of it that it was an excellent work by a Nigerian medical scholar with social significance for developing societies. But there was a special commendation from the judges for the latest novel by Ngugi wa'Thiongo, the Kenyan writer, "Caitani Mutharaba-Ini". This novel is published in Gikuyu, the language of the Kikuyu people which, of course, for writing in that language has caused Ngugi wa'Thiongo a certain amount of trouble in the past.

There were five books which received honourable mention. I won't list them all but they were books from Algeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroon and Kenya and they do seem to be a nice balance between fiction and non-fiction.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is there anything you think can be done to improve the quality of the fair?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Oh a great deal. In fact, it's interesting that it has managed to survive for this, its sixth year, with so few resources. It's paid for by the University of Ife Bookshop. It gets a grant from the Nigerian Book Development Council and it had a little bit of money from UNESCO last year. But its total external sources of income have, in the past, amounted to a mere 5,000 naira and I do think that that is rather shortsighted on the part of the government of Nigeria because book fairs make money if you invest in them. West Germany makes a great deal of money out of the Frankfurt Book Fair and I would add my voice to all those who have been calling on the Federal Government or indeed the Provincial Government to invest in the Ife Book Fair because, you know, it's such a positive thing. So many advantages come from it, not merely cultural, though they are very important, but financial too and I think this is a very good argument. You do make money, as the West German does, out of hotels, out of people staying there and so on. So it really is from every point of view to the advantage of all concerned to see that this thing grows and prospers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thanks for bringing us up to date, David, and you've brought our programme to a close, except, that is, for a few more moments with E.T. Mensah and his Tempos Band. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for this week and hoping to meet you again this time next week. Goodbye.