

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa.

Many of you, especially if you're budding writers, will recall the pan-African poetry competition that we ran in "Arts and Africa" in the second half of 1981. In December of that year we announced that the three principal prizes went to Edison Mpina from Malawi, Kofi Anyidoho from Ghana and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye from Kenya (and indeed you may have heard them speaking about their work in last week's Arts and Africa). The judges who made the awards were Angus Calder, Jack Mapanje and Cosmo Pieterse, and as we promised at the time, they also made a selection of poems from the total entry for publication in an anthology. Well now that anthology is available from Heinemann's in their African Writers Series. It's called "Summer Fires" from the title of Edison Mpina's winning poem, "Summer Fires of Mulanje Mountain" and it contains some eighty-two poems by forty five writers in thirteen different countries. But what are they like and what do they tell us about the present state of poetry in Africa? Well we sent the anthology to the South African poet and critic, Dennis Brutus. You may remember that Dennis was to have been one of the three judges but at the last moment he was unable to leave the United States. Now he has read the poems and he sent us this assessment of "Summer Fires".

DENNIS BRUTUS

Poetry is alive and well in Africa, certainly in Anglophone Africa. The evidence is in "Summer Fires". As the cover notes, the competition attracted some three thousand entries from over seven hundred contributors who were told that the judges were looking for originality, imagination and technical skill. These qualities are seen in abundance in this admittedly uneven collection. It begins with poems from the prize winners, Edison Mpina of Malawi, Kofi Anyidoho from Ghana and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye from Kenya. Ranking is a difficult and often invidious task and readers might well consider other poems in the collection at least as good as the first three. I should also add that there is little evidence of what Chinweizu called the 'Hopkins Disease' in his book 'Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature'. He was talking about the excessive influence of poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins but also others like Yeats or Eliot or Pound. There are echoes, however,

DENNIS BRUTUS

And then something from another poem I enjoyed. This is one from South Africa by Morena Monareng called "Metamorphosis".

"METAMORPHOSIS" BY MORENA MONARENG

I have seen
Someone I know
Stabbing stone-dead
Someone I knew

But brother
That day

I saw
Someone I don't know in canouflage fatigues
Shooting to death
Someone I knew

And brother
That day

I flew
A flag.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Not surprisingly many of the poems are from the countries with large populations such as Nigeria and South Africa. Equally unsurprisingly the themes of political corruption and racism occur frequently in the poems. Here is one by Amin Kassam from Kenya writing about Angola. This is part of the poem.

ANGOLA, AUGUST 1981 BY AMIN KASSAM

christmas came to angola
early this year
in gusts of 'copter blades
and the clank
of treads

salvation came
unexpected
in a stutter of guns
huts set alight
like candles
on a huge cake

lucust swarms
saviours in camouflage
seeking
to make blood-brothers
of all men
with pure-skinned bullets
that slew only the guilty

ANGOLA, AUGUST 1981 CONTD.

and no angolans died
on the flaming cross

christmas came early
hot and bloody
and in its womb
stirred the hurricane
of its destruction

DENNIS BRUTUS

And here's a portion of an effective poem by Peter Stewart,
writing in Lesotho and with, perhaps, a stronger political element.

"A BLANKET ON THE FLOOR" BY PETER STEWART

Stars of gold, the fascist thugs,
The powers gold-flood the rules
The bombers, private empires, the class-drugged functionaries
Flow vast, molten

Like the sad man whose glasses
Make him seem more naked
As he dreams of frustrations
Cleaner than his waking struggle

In this remote area,
With poverty and roadside trash
The mild morning air brings
Distant hills of grey bright light.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Although there is a great deal of political material worked into the texture of the poetry so that one does not feel it is artificial my suspicion is that in the future we may see even more poets in Africa addressing themes like post-Independence corruption and neo-colonialism, disillusionment and disenchantment. Already of course these themes bulk large in the fiction of contemporary Africa. I expect we may also see in the future a greater reliance on the prosody of the African oral tradition particularly the use of repetition in cadences for musical effect. I've referred to poems which have echoes of people like Pound and Eliot and Okigbo and perhaps to be fair I should at least point out just a few. Of course the poem called "For Chris" by Jo Okome of Nigeria is obviously not only dedicated to Christopher Okigbo but also influenced by his own writing.

"FOR CHRIS" BY JO OKOME

He plucked at the word
 The word sang in the EAR
 He dug up the word
 For the weaverbirds
 To hear

Say.....
 The flame foresaw
 The invasion of dusk
 The flame.....
 Blackout in the sun

The NOVICE
 Foresaw the coming
 And cried.....

I am wrapped
 In the feathers of the Songbird
 For the things that close my mouth
 The shots that tear
 Through the haze -

I am wrapped
 In the feathers of the Songbird
 In the face of our yesterlives
 And the ripples
 In our calm.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Then in the case of John Desmond Phillips of South Africa in a poem called "Interrogation" he seems to me to be influenced by perhaps South Africa's finest poet, Kenneth Nortje or Arthur Nortye as he subsequently signed himself.

"INTERROGATION" BY JOHN DESMOND PHILLIPS

slowed like the shadow's hump-backed crawl
 on a mountain cut and inlaid with gold
 stole the night on his face making caves
 of his eyes and sigh of his soul.

DENNIS BRUTUS

It is clear that the creative and lyrical impulses are strong in Africa and this collection is delightful and exciting evidence of the strength of those impulses. The book seems to me to give an excellent introduction to contemporary African poetry both in terms of the forms that are used and in terms of the themes that particularly occupy them. The familiar basic themes, of course, are there, like love, birth, death, suffering and bereavement. All these occur as one would expect; they are the stuff of human existence. But there are special African concerns, I think, which also come through very strongly in the poetry - the preservation of elements of African culture, the struggle to achieve true independence as opposed to a kind of symbolic independence. But above all someone coming freshly to the literature and the thought of Africa would benefit greatly from a collection like this because of the insights it gives us into writers in Africa today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Dennis Brutus, the South African poet and critic with his view of the anthology "Summer Fires".

And how do you get hold of a copy? Well let me give you all the publication details. It's called "Summer Fires: New Poetry of Africa" edited by Angus Calder, Jack Mapanje and Cosmo Pieterse, and it's published by Heinemanns in their African Writers Series. The price in the United Kingdom is £2.50. The anthology will be on sale in Africa's bookshops.

And that's all for today. From Arts and Africa and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey goodbye.