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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with a warm welcome to "Arts and Africa". It's just three years ago that I announced the winners of the "Arts and Africa" poetry Award. Well, the other week I had the pleasure of meeting one of the winners - Kofi Anyidoho, whose poem "Akofa" came second. We had a long conversation at the microphone and he read me some of his other work. But I'd like to preface this and begin today's programme with the opening passage from "Akofa" read by one of the judges, Cosmo Pieterse.

POETRY EXTRACT

"Akofa" by Kofi Anyidoho, read by Cosmo Pieterse from the anthology of poems from the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award: "Summer Fires".

TETTEH-LARTEY

When Kofi Anyidoho submitted that poem to our competition he was studying in the United States at the University of Texas. Since then, as we'll be hearing, he has returned to his home country, Ghana, and he's now teaching at the University of Ghana at Legon. It was the launching of a collection of his poems entitled "A Harvest of Our Dreams" published by Heinemann that brought him to London at the end of last year. (So I should point out that when Kofi refers to "last year" in our interview he's talking about 1983.)

Kofi Anyidoho is fascinated by linguistics - the study of language - as well as by literature. He's taught both English and his first language, Ewe, and some critics have heard the evidence of this in his poetry. I asked him to read a poem from "A Harvest of Our Dreams" for us and this is what he chose.

POETRY EXTRACT

"Seedtime" written and read by Kofi Anyidoho from his collection of poems "A Harvest of Our Dreams" published in Heinemann's African Writers Series.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Kofi, this is a new anthology. When I call it 'new' it's the most recent one you have had issued. Does it contain all new poetry?

KOFI ANYIDHOHO

Not all new. The book actually is a combination of two separate collections. The first collection entitled "Elegy For The Revolution" was published in 1978 in the United States. The new collection is what in the book is published as "A Harvest of Our Dreams".

TETTEH-LARTEY

So I take it that the Dreams are the revolution and the Harvest is something that we have sowed and we are now reaping?

ANYIDHOHO

Yes in a way but not necessarily reaping. The various dreams of prosperity, of wealth that we have always nurtured from independence, maybe from before independence, they are hopefully to be realised - not necessarily now - but hope is what I'm expressing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now from the poem you just read for us I had a feeling that there was a sense of non-fulfillment of the dreams.

ANYIDHOHO

Yes. That is in fact what is in the background and the point of the book is first to call attention to the fact that these dreams must continue to be sustained because in moments of crisis it is so easy to give up.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What are the dreams really?

ANYIDHOHO

In very broad terms, as a people, we want a life of fulfillment. We would like our various economic projects to succeed for instance - I mean very down to earth practical terms. Last year (1983) Ghana saw, perhaps for most people, the worst season of hunger. And of course we would not want this to be repeated.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Were we looking for solutions to the problems, our dreams, from traditional sources?

ANYIDOHO

From traditional sources as well as from contemporary sources. You can't really separate the two. If the contemporary arrangements ignore the traditional ways of our being, there is very little chance of things working out.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Perhaps if you read us a poem from the revolution - the Dream period - I'll be able to find from you what the new thrust is in the present.

ANYIDOHO

One poem from the first collection "Elegy for the Revolution" is "Ghosts".

POEM

"Ghosts" from "A Harvest of Our Dreams" written and read by Kofi Anyidoho.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what can we distinguish between the period of Dreams and the present Harvest?

ANYIDOHO

Most of the poems in "Elegy for Revolution" were written in the specific period of student confrontations with the government of Acheampong and I was a student at the time at the University of Ghana. It is an attempt to recall or record - because they were written while these things were still going on - an attempt by a section of the population to stand against what was clearly a case of oppression and official policies and actions that were leading to a point of breakdown in national life. It is that point where an attempt is being made to silence them, that is why the poem ends: "My voice my voice! Do not put me to sleep my people." The students were trying to raise a voice in a moment of oppression: political and economic oppression. And a determined attempt was being made to silence them.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now the present "Harvest of Our Dreams", is there any section of the poem that you read which will show us at what point we have arrived?

ANYIDOHO

What I read was just part of the poem. The harvest proper may not in fact have begun but there are indications that the harvest could be brought in provided we reorganize ourselves.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Then it's a hope?

ANYIDOHO

There are key lines in here which recall an emphasis on maintaining the hope: "We will not die the death of dreams. We will not die the cruel death of Dreams". And what I read earlier: "There is no curse on us!"

We should not confuse ourselves by thinking that because we have failed, and failed again, it is an indication that we will never make it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can I ask you about the state of poetry in Ghana? You are an established poet along with the likes of Kofi Awoonor. Are there any young hopefuls coming up?

ANYIDOHO

Yes. Ghana, some people keep insisting, is a nation of poets. Many of us have taken it for granted that there is a large body of poetry there in oral form but if we are talking specifically of poetry that is written for publication there is so much in Ghana. Only two or three weeks ago a new book of poems was launched in Accra. It was a big literary event. This is a collection of poems: "The Man Who Died" by Kobena Eyi Acquah. And again picking up on what I have just expressed about "A Harvest of Our Dreams", the title poem in Acquah's collection is "The Man Who Died", the man who got too fed up with the silence around him in the face of oppression and decided to speak and then died knowing that his death will be a gateway to a new life.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Do people who are not looking for publication in a large way circulate their poetry amongst themselves?

ANYIDOHO

The most important means of publishing poetry for us in Ghana now is through public recitals, a process which was tremendously helped by the influence of Atukwei Okai. He came on to the scene, he came with the feeling that poetry can only come into its own when it is presented to a large audience, and that has, in fact, picked up. There are many poets in Ghana today. Everybody knows them as poets even though they have not published a single collection.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Kofi, you've just returned to Ghana where you are based. Has that fact had any effect on your outlook as far as poetry is concerned?

ANYIDOHO

Yes it has, but as often happens it takes a little while for the experience to sink into that level where you can begin to bring it back in a creative form. I haven't written a whole lot since I've been back but I do have a few things and it would seem to me that this is a 'homecoming' exercise - because I came home at a time when everybody assured me that I was crazy to be going home at that point. I had to spend a day here in London and the immigration officer detained me and my family for several hours because she said she couldn't understand how I could give up a job in the U.S.A. and go back to Ghana. Then I got home and fortunately for me and for all of us I have not starved to death as I was assured I was going to. It seems as if that alone is a situation to celebrate.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I'm sure that you are going to reap a very happy harvest. I'm sure that's your hope as well.

ANYIDOHO

That's definitely my hope and my dream.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much indeed. And I was talking to Kofi Anyidoho.

Some Ewe music seems appropriate. This dance is the Atsiagbehokor and it will begin the moment I've said goodbye. I'll be here again with more of the arts of Africa next week. For now, from Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.