

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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POETRY COMPETITION

British Airways/Commonwealth Poetry Prize 1985

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey introducing "Arts and Africa". And for poetry-lovers and especially for people who write poetry I have some good news. I only have to remember the overwhelming response to the "Arts and Africa" Poetry Award of 1981 to know that poetry competitions are welcomed enthusiastically by African writers. The British Airways/Commonwealth Poetry Prize for 1985 is offering very substantial prizes indeed and later in the programme we'll be hearing about the details of entry. The competition is open only to all published poets but those who qualify will certainly want to jot down the details. So, while you're finding a pencil and paper we'll get on with today's programme.

The School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana teaches many modern performing skills and traditional ones as well. Joseph Kobom who comes from the Dagarti people of northern Ghana plays and teaches the xylophone. It's an instrument that's specially loved by northerners but at the University Joseph Kobom finds he has students from all parts of Ghana and from Europe as well. When Aida Brako met him at the School he introduced himself like this.

MUSIC: Joseph Kobom playing his signature tune on the xylophone.

JOSEPH KOBOM

Every musician in this world has his own way of playing and starting his music. It depends on how you come up with the music - and everybody is very proud of it I know. I feel I must have my instrument. I can start with something different from my fellow musicians but it will definitely be based on traditional rhythms. So this particular tune is my signature tune.

AI DA BRAKO

I know that in Northern and Upper regions of Ghana traditional xylophones are used. Is there one particular xylophone which is common to all the tribes in Northern and Upper regions of Ghana?

KOBOM

The Dagarti, Sisala and Lobi are the only people who use the xylophone in this our mother country, but I can say we have two different kinds of xylophone. We have a pentatonic xylophone that is being used by the Dagarti and Sisala. Then the other one, this.... one, two, three, four..... fifth key has no calabash - it has an 'off' tone, so that if you are playing a particular rhythm you normally jump that place. The Lobi use that particular xylophone and the Dagarti use the pentatonic one.

BRAKO

Would the Lobi tribe's xylophone be the same as yours?

KOBOM

Yes, they have the same fourteen keys but with a different tune altogether.

BRAKO

How is yours tuned?

KOBOM

Mine is tuned the pentatonic way....

MUSIC: Kobom illustrating the pentatonic scale.

KOBOM

This one, and this one, you'll see they're all very much on one note, but the Lobi they don't have it that way.

BRAKO

So you're talking about the.... one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..... eight key xylophone?

KOBOM

Yes.

BRAKO

When is the xylophone used?

KOBOM

The xylophone is used on so many occasions like funerals when somebody dies. In my society we say the xylophone is second to the human being because the xylophone is used during our funerals, fetish shows, harvesting and at churches and other things. We use it day and night for our ceremonies and for everything.

BRAKO

Would you like to give me a funeral tune?

KOBOM

O.K. Now I am going to play some music entitled "Lamentations of an Orphan". It's music about an orphan who doesn't have relatives, and we should try to help each other.

MUSIC: Funeral music played by Kobom on the xylophone.

BRAKO

This is a funeral tune. Now, how would a wedding tune go?

MUSIC: Wedding tune played by Kobom on the xylophone.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Some time ago a visiting Frenchman so much admired Joseph Kobom's skill as a xylophone player that he arranged for him and his xylophone to spend some time with him in France. And as a way of showing his appreciation, Kobom composed this tune and dedicated it to his French friend, M. Gourey. He insists that he hardly speaks any French but nevertheless he's given it a French title: "Monsieur Gourey, Bonsoir" - "Good evening, Mr. Gourey".

MUSIC: "Monsieur Gourey, Bonsoir"

BRAKO

How different is this particular music from the funeral song you played?

KOBOM

This particular music has a very fast left hand movement and with the funeral songs you have to reduce the speed of your left hand so that people will really pick up the memories from the left hand. As I was saying, the funeral music is the one that brings the tears. Feeling comes from the left hand and if it goes into you then you begin to weep, yes.

BRAKO

Well how was it different from the wedding music?

KOBOM

The wedding music is an entertainment one so that we all enjoy it. But with the funeral one you get it from the centuries past. We still play and base ourselves on that one. When our ancestors were manufacturing the xylophone they hid it from their women because this thing is a kind of spiritual instrument. If they had allowed the women to know of it they would have gone and exposed our spiritual face to other tribes. So it was one midnight, the women and everybody else were asleep and these men went to the bush and constructed this instrument with some kind of spirit sacrifice. They sacrificed some animals and other things. Before it was fully morning they brought this xylophone back and played it with the women just looking at it. And they say the men asked them to dance, to just create something, and they created that sort of dance that we have been doing today, the Bawa and the funeral dance.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I really like the effervescence of "M. Gourey, Bonsoir". Joseph Kobom playing and talking to Aida Brako.

It's getting on for six years now since Gabriel Okara was a joint winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize with his collection called "The Fisherman's Invocation". Another African prizewinner is better known as a novelist but with his collection called "Beware Soul Brother" Chinua Achebe was a joint winner the year the prize was first awarded, 1972. As I hinted earlier this year's Commonwealth Poetry Prize is something quite out of the ordinary. Poetry is often the poor sister of the arts so it's exciting and surprising to hear the announcement that the prize money for this year's competition totals eleven thousand pounds. Ronald Warwick has come along from the Commonwealth Institute to give me the details and to explain where all that prize money has come from.

Well Ronald, where has the money come from?

RONALD WARWICK

Well we were very fortunate in getting sponsorship from British Airways who have given us a three year commitment which will cover the prize money and the cost of administering the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a bit of a surprise isn't it, coming from a commercial source of that nature? Now previous prizes were never this large were they?

WARWICK

No they weren't. The previous Commonwealth Poetry Prize was an award of £500.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Are more poets qualified to take part this year do you think?

WARWICK

Oh yes, because for the first time we are allowing poets to compete regardless of how many times they have published before. We are also including poets from the United Kingdom, and we are also including poets who publish in languages other than English.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now that's rather odd, should I say, because eventually whoever wins will have to go before an international panel. How will the panel understand the language and the feel of the vernacular?

WARWICK

This is one of the most difficult questions we have had to face in formulating the new rules of the Poetry Prize. It was felt that the idea of English being the unquestioned lingua franca of the Commonwealth is becoming less and less tenable so any officially recognised national languages are eligible for judging. But those who wish to submit poems in languages other than English are requested to submit also a translation into English.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Do they need any special qualifications to enter?

WARWICK

Anyone who has a published volume of poems published within the year from the 30th June 1984 to the 1st July 1985 can enter for this year's British Airways/Commonwealth Prize Award.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now can you for the information of listeners give the address to which they should send these poems?

WARWICK

If the listeners are in Africa the address to which they should send the poems is:

Professor Lewis Nkosi
University of Zambia
School of Education
Department of Literature and Languages
PO Box 2379
Lusaka
ZAMBIA

The panel of judges will meet in each of the regions and decide on the regional prizewinner so there will almost certainly be a prizewinner from Africa this year. Then the regional winners have their volumes sent into London to a national panel to decide the overall prizewinner. The overall prizewinner will win £5,000 and the regional prizewinners will win £1,000 and there's an additional award of £2,000 for a best, first published volume of poems.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Ronald Warwick for coming along to give us this exciting news. I'm sure we're all hoping that there'll be more than one name from Africa on the eventual list of winners. And please note: the entry deadline is June 30th, which isn't long now.

For the present though I'm looking forward to next week's "Arts and Africa" when I hope you'll join me. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.