

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Good news travels fast". And this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey helping some good news on its way in 'Arts and Africa'. The other day the winners of the 1986 British Airways Commonwealth Poetry Prize were announced and in the evening in the theatre of the Commonwealth Institute they read some of their work to an enthusiastic audience. Among them was the winner of the African region prize, Niyi Osundare from Nigeria, who was then proclaimed joint winner of the overall prize of £6,000 which he shares with Vikram Seth of India. And to give some idea of the competition they faced, we were told that 500 new books of poetry from 49 Commonwealth countries had been considered by the judges. Niyi Osundare's collection of poems that earned him this distinction is called 'The Eye of the Earth' and it is dedicated to 'OUR EARTH and all who struggle to see it neither wastes nor wants'. His poems speak of the beauty of the natural world and how man's greed from colonial times today put the wealth of the natural world at risk. When Osundare addressed his audience before reading some of his poems he had to explain the limitations of performing his poetry in London.

NIYI OSUNDARE

I must say right from the beginning that what I am going to be doing tonight will be a kind of skeletal performance. I compose with the idiom of the drum at the back of my mind and the poems in 'The Eye of the Earth' are a kind of experimental harmonization of the sounding of the word and its meaning. What this means is that I do not have my orchestra here, I don't have my drums, but you are going to join me in singing a few songs! I will take the solo, you will join me with the chorus. I will say ...

N. OSUNDARE

Recites an excerpt from one of his poems.

A TETTEH-LARTEY

As a university lecturer (he teaches at the University of Ibadan) who writes for the press (he has a column in the weekly magazine 'Newswatch' and an experimental poetry column in the daily 'Tribune') Niyi Osundare is concerned at reaching the widest possible audience and the multi-national audience at the Commonwealth Institute certainly did as he commanded and 'opened their ears'. Just before the formal event he discussed his poetry with Florence Akst for 'Arts and Africa'.

FLORENCE AKST

Niyi congratulations. It's a great pleasure to be talking to you on the day you hear the news.

N. OSUNDARE

Thank you very much.

F. AKST

I wonder whether 'The Eye of the Earth' is a collection of poems that are typical of your output up to now or are they in any way special?

N. OSUNDARE

Well, I think they are special in a way. It is in this collection that I have been able to actually experiment with the harmony which has been in my head for quite some time between poetry as sung and poetry as idea. I think 'The Eye of the Earth' is special in a way. I would say that it marks a turning point, stylistically, in my career.

F. AKST

Do you mean anything to do with the instructions at the top of the first poem 'Forest Echoes' when you say "With flute and heavy drums"? some of these poems you say want to be accompanied.

N. OSUNDARE

Yes, I composed many of the poems actually with a kind of orchestra in my head. Some of them have to be accompanied by thunderous drumming, others by flutes, still others by all kinds of other musical instruments. Then the repetitive pattern of the poem, too, I think is something which comes very close to our literature particularly that aspect of our literature which deals with the song. I think I'll take an example from 'Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed'.

F. AKST

At the front of the book there is a picture, a drawing of a view of the earth from outside as a spaceman sees it. How is it that you have come across this vision of the earth and wanted to put it into poetry because, in fact, you are also very close to a very particularly little bit of the earth in Nigeria.

N. OSUNDARE

Yes, I grew up in Ikere-Ekiti in the western part of Nigeria. At the time we were growing up the rain forest was thick and green and healthy but as time went on all kinds of despoliations started and right now all these forests are no more. So every time I go back home I view the little that now remains of them with a lot of nostalgia. So I actually feel the forest, the rocks, the animals and so on as lasting monuments of the earth and I see them being destroyed and I see this as a metaphor for the over exploitation of the natural resources, myths, exploitation actually of the natural resources of the country and, in the wider perspective, I see earth being threatened. In our own part of the world it is a kind of improvident squandering of earth's resources. In other parts of the world say like Europe, it is the nuclear armageddon.

F. AKST

This is a modern, contemporary problem and yet there is the feeling in your verse of traditional attitudes towards land and the heritage that we have entrusted to us in our lifetime. You don't use outwardly traditional form, for instance to start with it's in English, but particularly in the first poem 'Forest Echoes' I think there is an echo of a traditional praise song I would call it. You actually address the trees as though they are kings or emperors. Before we talk about it could I ask you to read two passages about two different trees.

N. OSUNDARE

Sure. This one is a eulogy of iroko, what is normally called the African oak.

Recites poem.

F. AKST

This is obviously a poem of some importance because you put it at the head of the book. How would you convey the feelings you had when you wrote it? Because I was calling it a praise song, perhaps that's quite the wrong expression.

N. OSUNDARE

Well of all the poems in the collection it was the one I found most challenging. It was difficult for me getting the poem down because writing this was more or less like putting off the mask of adulthood and wearing the costume of childhood. Really descending into the innocence of childhood in Ikere-Ekiti. I made several journeys to Ikere-Ekiti but each time I came back to the University of Ibadan where I am a teacher and I discovered that each time I sat down to write I just could not capture the memory. Then I decided to explore the forests around Ibadan, too, - very early in the morning, late in the evening - and eventually I was able to recapture the feeling. I think that's why we have the poem as it is. There is an attempt to imbue these non-animate things, as it were, with human attributes, to raise their essence and to also cause a certain kind of shock for those who destroy our natural resources. And that the relationship between man and nature, the relationship between man and his environment, should be a regeneratively dialectical one: in other words, man acts on nature and nature also acts on man.

F. AKST

Has nature and your perceptions of nature featured in all your poetry?

N. OSUNDARE

Well, I would say yes, right from "Songs of the Market Place" which came out in 1983. I think each of my collections has had one section or another devoted to nature but it is in this collection that I've done what I would call the most expansive work so far on nature.

F. AKST

Your first language is Yoruba, you're writing in English, does Yoruba nevertheless have an influence on the way you write?

N. OSUNDARE

Well, it is not a matter of 'nevertheless'. I think the basic influence comes from Yoruba. Yoruba is very rich in 'soundings' so I am strongly influenced by the sound patterns of Yoruba. One has tried to match this with similar patterns in English such as alliteration for example. A word does not only carry its meaning as an abstract phenomenon. It may also mean by the way it sounds and also onomatopoeia and idiophones are very popular in Yoruba, that is sounding and meaning at the same time.

A TETTEH-LARTEY

Joint winner of this year's British Airways Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Niyi Osundare of Nigeria talking to Florence Akst. The prize was awarded for his new collection of poems 'The Eye of the Earth' which is published by Heinemann Educational Books of Nigeria and costs £2.95 in the United Kingdom. "Words are good for the ear" said a Jamaican poet. Another good reason for tuning to 'Arts and Africa' next week at this time. For today this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.