

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today we're looking through the lens of a camera in this edition of "Arts and Africa". The camera will be the means for a group of people to receive the Commonwealth Photography Award with a special section for Africa - more about that later on.

Kobina Asiedu Aboagye is one of the many Ghanaian poetry performers and his best known poem is "Aeeko to the Revolution". But this sequence of pictures of life in Ghana has the subtitle: "A Photograph of Ghana in Words". And here's how it begins.

POETRY

"Aeeko to the Revolution: A Photograph of Ghana in Words" - by Kobina Asiedu Aboagye.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The first verse or 'scene' of "A Photograph of Ghana in Words". Aboagye is one of a number of young Ghanaian writers and poets who give recitals of their poetry. As Aboagye has been telling Patrick Quarcoo, he writes for the audience sitting in front of him.

KOBINA ASIEDU ABOAGYE

You see, I do not believe in a situation where Ghanaians must write like the people who write in Britain because, you see, the circumstances are different, the level of literacy is different. Now people's appreciation of poetry itself is different and I believe that now I am one of the very few poets in the country today who can really deliver poetry that the people will understand, poetry that people really believe is true and it's touching their hearts and their needs.

PATRICK QUARCOO

One of the things that stands out most clearly in your poetry is the use of humour, the use of satire. Now how do you work that out?

KOBINA ASIEDU ABOAGYE

You see I have an historical or traditional setting which sometimes I draw inspiration from. This fact about story telling - you see in our local communities we use storytelling to advise the little children and teach them the norms and morals of their society. Now when these things are being told by our elders, they use mediums like songs. The stories are normally told towards the evening when the little children are feeling sleepy and so you must sustain their attention by introducing humour, introducing song. That's the only opportunity one can take to grab their attention, as it were. So I only use the traditional forms, translated into modern forms and expose them in a type of poetry.

PATRICK QUARCOO

Which is precisely the problem, because some of your critics say that what Kobina really writes is not poetry. Do you have a word to say to your critics?

KOBINA ASIEDU ABOAGYE

Well it is society speaking and nothing should surprise you about society. Every normal being would naturally resist a certain type of change. Now it is only after you have successfully established the change, that is when society begins to appreciate what you are doing.

PATRICK QUARCOO

Now your poetry has looked at the political situation in Ghana. Sometimes you have been very, very critical of the current regime and you have hit out at market women and virtually everybody who comes in. Now in terms of the political, has it put you into any trouble at all?

KOBINA ASIEDU ABOAGYE

Now basically I think I am social commentator, you could call me a social poet. But the social structure is such that you cannot isolate politics from social matters because when the people are hungry it is also a political affair in Ghana. When human rights are being abused it is first and foremost a social matter before it turns into politics. You see, in Ghana when you touch one person you have touched the whole family and so sometimes when commenting on social matters somebody says you are attacking him. I would always refer them to this song which says: "Who the cap fits, let them wear it". You see, as much as possible, I try to tell the truth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kobina Asiedu Aboagye talking to Patrick Quarcoo.

And after Aboagye's 'Photograph in Words', Noelle Goldman is here to talk about photography in the literal sense, about the Commonwealth Photography Award. Noelle I know you've been working on organizing this award for the Commonwealth Institute here in London. Thanks for coming along to answer some questions about this opportunity for Commonwealth photographers. First of all, can you make it clear whether the award is open to amateurs as well as professional photographers?

NOELLE GOLDMAN

Yes, it's very much open to all amateur and professional photographers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How much is the Award worth?

NOELLE GOLDMAN

Well it's worth quite a lot of money, it's worth £11,000 in prizes altogether, that's a prize of £5,000 for the overall winner, £1,000 for each regional winner which includes Africa, and £1,000 special merit award. We need six photographs which should be 10" x 8" or 15" . 12" or they should be transparencies. That means they could be black and white or colour, they could be a polaroid image or you can send us the transparencies.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now tell us more about the African region.

NOELLE GOLDMAN

Well we're looking for photographs that represent the country and the culture and the geography and the 'feeling' of Africa, something that gives you a feeling that you are actually showing Africa as you want it to be seen.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what's the purpose of the whole Award?

NOELLE GOLDMAN

The purpose is to bring together people working throughout the Commonwealth, to give them a feeling of relating to other countries. Photography cuts across cultural and language barrier, it's a visual medium.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now since this is open to both amateurs and professionals perhaps the amateurs might feel tha they are up against very severe competition. Now how is this going to be judged?

NOELLE GOLDMAN

We realise that people are going to have problems about access to materials and processing so really our aim is to get some wonderful photographs of Africa and of the people of Africa. So the judging will happen along the lines of looking for something that specially shows that particular feeling of Africa, though the technical qualities are obviously extremely important because we've got to use the images in the exhibition and publications.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And finally Noelle, where should these photographs be sent to?

NOELLE GOLDMAN

Well first of all you need to pick up your application form for the Award from any Standard Chartered Bank or from your British Council. The second stage is when you send the portfolio into your regional headquarters. You can either take your portfolios to your local Standard Chartered Bank before 1st April or you can post them to your regional headquarters which is:

Standard Chartered Bank, Zimbabwe, Ltd.,
P.O. Box 373,
Harare,
ZIMBABWE.

If you're wondering why it's to the Standard Charter Bank, it's because they have actually sponsored this whole Award, and they're doing it in collaboration with the Commonwealth Institute in London.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well they have very little time in which to move.

NOELLE GOLDMAN

That's right, but we don't want people not to put their portfolios in because they are worried about things not getting to us before 30th April. The important thing is that we want the photographs, so send them in and we'll be accepting them for a couple of weeks after 30th April.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Noelle Goldman very much for providing the information. We'll be repeating the details in our next programme.

Ladi Ladebo is a film-maker from Nigeria. He's based in Ibadan but began his film-making with Paramount Motion Pictures in New York in the 1970's. He began as a market consultant. Then he produced his own occasional films. But working in Nigeria has meant that he has directed his films as well as providing the resources. But he remains a businessman, a businessman with a plan to develop a large cinema-going public in Nigeria, a market for Nigerian films. He's been telling Florence Akst about his project.

LADI LADEBO

At the moment, in Nigeria in particular, we find that cinema ownership is still in foreign hands. You find the only Nigerian film-makers that have succeeded in beating the system in Nigeria are the Yoruba film-makers who, having developed audience for their stage play, instantly adapted them onto the screen and capitalised on the same audience and recouped their outlay on it very, very quickly.

FLORENCE AKST

But would you like to have more cinemas, and cinemas that are taking Nigerian-made films. How can you get that going?

LADI LADEBO

A lot of people have asked me about how they can get involved in the cinema. These are what you call modern, small to medium-sized businessmen with, maybe, ₦ 100,000 to ₦ 200,000 and my advice to them has been building the cinema structure and promising them to help them train those who can run it. But most of our businessmen (or what you'd call 'advanced traders'), they love to see the cash at the end of the day. So there is not the possibility of having a network of cinemas but I believe that in every major town in the next one or two years will find that there are individual cinemas in a lot of districts.

FLORENCE AKST

So, if I've been trading for a while and made a pretty packet, perhaps more than I'd expected to when I was young, and I want to invest it, you're suggesting that I should think in terms of building a small cinema and then you provide us with Nigerian films ...

LADI LADEBO

.... with Nigerian films and if you know I can provide you with films it's possible for me to come to you in advance and say: "Okay, I've got this film to make, here's the storyline and I need ₦ 5,000 from you as an investment because I'm going to get ₦ 5,000 from twenty or thirty people to make this film and once I get back with the completed film you will be the major distributor of this film for your district. The only way you can encourage Nigerians to get into the cinema business is to encourage them to be their own masters.

FLORENCE AKST

Right. What's going to get me to pay money to come and see this film?

LADI LADEBO

The same reason that gets any human to want to go for an entertaining evening. The television is good but in Africa we've not even started seeing ourselves on the big screen and when we film this shot, since it will be shot on location, I think the novelty of Nigerians seeing their own streets on the large screen is still there and you can capitalise on it.

FLORENCE AKST

What about your fellow film-makers, have you discussed this with them?

LADI LADEBO

Yes we share the same opinion and our frustration basically is with the government. If I want to make a film now, I'm not sure of what the law says about me being able to bring in the raw stock and send the exposed footage to London for Laboratory development and printing and

LADI LADEBO

then bring it back. It's possible that I have to go to the airport every time I have problems there and try to explain my way to the customs men who may say: "I don't know where this is in the book"!

FLORENCE AKST

So film-making meets bureaucracy?

LADI LADEBO

It does.

FLORENCE AKST

Have you thought about making a film about bureaucracy?

LADI LADEBO

Well, you know one of the things is I don't want to go to jail yet!
(Laughs)

FLORENCE AKST

Ladi Ladebo thank you very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it will be interesting to see whether Ladi Ladebo's ideas become a reality. He was talking there to Florence Akst.

A musician who's not only provided the background music for films but has featured in at least one made in his own country, is the blind singer from Cameroon, Tala Andre Marie and we're putting "Hot Koki" on the turntable at this moment while I invite you to tune in for more of the arts of Africa next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

"HOT KOKI" - Tala Andre Marie.