

THE 2009 NIGERIA-LNG PRIZE FOR LITERATURE REPORT OF THE PANEL OF JUDGES

This year's annual Nigeria Literature Prize sponsored by the Nigeria-LNG has now entered the second year of the second four-year cycle. The 2009 competition is dedicated to poetry. Discussions in the media show that by now the poetry-loving members of the Nigerian reading public have a general awareness of the goals of the competition. Two key factors underpin these goals: the first is the relevance of the competition to our cultural development, and the second is the need to recognize the literary competence and performance of candidates for the prize, and encourage creative writers.

The Literature Committee received 161 entries for this year's competition. This is the highest number of entries since the competition began six years ago. It is worth noting that although prose fiction is by far more popular than poetry, the 149 prose fiction entries for last year did not at all match this year's entries for poetry. The quality and significance of a culture's literary production are not necessarily reflected in literary statistics; but important questions can arise from such statistics.

The first question is the social or cultural significance of these statistics. There is now a widespread appropriation of a Nigerian poetic tradition that has become established since independence. The sheer volume of entries shows that the ideas and conventions of that tradition have taken root in the consciousness of the present generation of writers, and that these writers have become fruitfully engaged with the ideology and world view of their literary ancestors. The writers' appropriation of this cultural heritage has generated such an unprecedented production and reception of poetry, that there has been an appreciable increase in the number of indigenous publishing houses that are associated with the production and distribution of volumes of poetry, a genre that had never really attained genuine popularity. Many young writers will do well to take advantage of this encouraging presence of local publishing houses with access to highly specialized technology and editing skills. Quite a few of this year's entries were disqualified or devalued because they were poorly produced. New texts will continue to be poorly produced as long as authors do not distinguish between the two distinct, if complementary arts of printing and publishing.

The issue is important because it has literary, as well as economic and social implications in contemporary Nigeria.

The second major criterion for entry qualification is residency. This is based on the fact that, as a form of cultural production, creative writing thrives best when it is in direct and intimate contact with its native environment.

Residency – or physical presence - nourishes cultural knowledge and ensures its continuity. The entries on our short list reflect in different ways various aspects of contemporary Nigerian experience. Exile literature may have mitigating political or economic causes; but its unusual dependence on memory work, reminiscence and the imaginary clearly raises questions of commitment to cultural development. By contributing directly to the nurturing of the local literary culture the Nigeria Prize for Literature answers such questions in the affirmative.

The third major criterion for short-listing the entries for this prize is that of the date of publication. Entries that qualify are those that were published for the first time in book form within the last four years – the natural cycle for this prize. The book form makes poetry available to the general reading public, as distinct from publication in periodicals where individual poems make their trial runs and are accessible mainly to the specialist poetry-reading public. Texts published outside the four-year cycle are not short-listed, since they could, or should have been part of entries for the preceding cycle.

A disturbingly large number of entries were dropped at the initial stage of short-listing because of the recurrent problems of language and style. The judges wish to reiterate that poets should be the protectors of language and defenders of good writing. They should not run foul of grammar and spelling, since it is to the creative writer that we normally turn for examples of good and memorable writing. It is important for aspiring poets to begin their apprenticeship by mastering the language that they use. Mere inspiration and a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling are not enough to be short-listed for the Literature Prize.

Taken as a whole, the variety of subject matter covered by this year's entries implies that literary creativity is still an active "participant" in discourses over the state of the nation. In this sense, the poets in reference have worked within the "tradition" of social commitment that has been a defining feature of African and specifically Nigerian literary creativity. The entries for 2009

reenact the earlier concern of the poet with social commentary, satire, lampoon, and cynicism that formed the bedrock of disillusionment as a literary response to injustice. The presence of introspection and the recurrence of inner rumblings that are made to seem like irresistible impulses only make the poetic voice private or insular and less outwardly social or discursive. This inability to privilege the poetic voice, the tendency for the poet to be in and for himself partly accounts for the tendency of many of the promising poets to tap from existing poetic tradition without enriching it, especially in their appropriation of materials from the oral as well as the written tradition.

The nine poets on our short-list stand out from most of the others because they have, in various degrees evolved their own personal voice or poetic idiom. But there are similarities and overlaps of themes and even technique in their poetry. It is convenient to consider the place of these poets at this point in the literary tradition by placing them in two broad groups, although as creative individuals, poets do not like to be labelled and put in boxes.

Five of the poets – Barrett, Dasyuva, Ogbowei, Okpanachi and Uwaifo, have explicit political concerns, and the social setting is never absent from their consciousness. The other four, Ekwuazi, Maiwada, Nengi, and Okonyedo set out from the more intimate, psychological sources of the poet's inspiration and use the poet's medium to express these private impulses.

Most of the poets are concerned with the present. But two or three of the poets in particular foreground the consequences of history – of the past on the present. Lindsay Barrett's *A Memory of Rivers* and Omo Uwaifo's *Litany* are concerned with the continuing effect of our history on the present, but they show the different sides of the political coin, being concerned with external relations of the country on one hand, and its internal affairs on the other.

For Barrett, the Niger Delta rivers and their ultimate destination - the great sea, as well as the cultural residues that survived the contact with the West, are the great storehouse of Niger Delta history. To Barrett, it is the poet's responsibility to bring to life and record the great forgotten drama to which rivers, sea and cultural survivals were witnesses, and his poetic idiom is shaped by the fluidity of this memory. In spite of his evocation of the Niger Delta environment, time is the real setting of Barrett's experience. His history extends beyond his immediate spatial location into the slave past and

the making of the Black Diaspora. In effect, this poet inhabits the middle space between that past and this present.

In contrast, the whole of Nigeria's physical space is the political theatre for Uwaifo's history. His story moves from the mythical setting of a jeweled Eden through the rise and fall of Nigeria in historical time. He seeks the verse representation of virtually every key event and piece of geography in the nation's history. He thus lays the groundwork for a modern national epic, although he adopts the lyrical form rather than continuous narrative as the basis of his verse to enable him focus on key themes and events.

The long history that forms the basic subject of these two poets is only incidental to the more contemporary vision of G 'Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Song of a Dying River*. Ogbowei's poetry is directed at a highly literate and cosmopolitan readership, and one of the challenges for its audience is the global range of its allusions. But another of its key features connects it with the teasing, playful poetry of Ilagha Nengi and Ahmed Maiwada, and this word play is an unmistakable trademark of his verse. However, unlike these other poets, Ogbowei's verse is based on musical values; and the playful element is restrained when it is not harnessed to his satirical purpose and, some would say, his rather dark and pessimistic vision of Nigeria and the Niger Delta.

Ademola Dasylva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* also adopts a musical basis for the poetry, as does Ogbowei's collection. But behind these "songs" is a dark, uncompromising and almost vicious vision of contemporary Nigerian society, and the "songs" are vicious satires and lampoons of corruption and national mismanagement. If this volume celebrates anything, it is the freedom of the creative spirit and the implied relative freedom of traditional cultures from the kind of contamination witnessed in modern times. By its wholesale return to traditional oral culture for its model, this collection casts aside the contemporary realities of modern faith and its practice for the myths and customs of the traditional Yoruba culture.

Musa Idris Okpanachi's *Eaters of the Living* carries this practice of dark, satirical writing even further towards a tortured and cynical social vision. The cynicism is reflected in its distance from the everyday picture of its environment to a more alienating literary imagery. Its bleak vision blunts the incisiveness and poignancy of the verse, and the darkening mood moves the vision beyond satire into cynicism and close to despair.

The four other poets, Hyginus Ekwuazi, Ahmed Maiwada, Ilagha Nengi, and Odoh Okonyedo foreground a different poetic concern – the self as the starting point of knowledge and experience, with obvious consequences for the social vision. Their poetry is rooted in personal experience and consciousness. But since poetic communication requires an “other”, they return to that great theme of poetry, love – whether marital, sexual or platonic. There is, among this group of poets, a greater consciousness of the literary tradition and a greater appropriation of its resources than would be found in any other collection of poets. This consciousness of the poet’s resource and professional responsibility accounts for the central attention to the playful possibilities of the word and its implication for the relation of language to reality. These are the poet’s poets; they are often masters of word and form, and are useful models for younger writers.

Okonyedo’s *From a Poet to Its Creator* explores new expressions and fresh insights and shows a clear delight in punning and verbal association. Nengi’s *January Gestures* erects an impressive verbal architecture on a foundation of time, beginning with the first month of the year, while keeping the door open for further explorations into the months coming after January. This verbal exercise oscillates between serious subjects and teasing conversations with implied auditors. Its strong sense of irony and humour does not allow the reader to tell when the teasing will end and the earnestness begin. In Hyginus Ekwuazi’s *Love Apart*, poetry is the creating word that fills the expansive space of absence with thoughts and feelings and events. It keeps an even balance between the two contraries of absent love – the ardor and the pain. But the poetry is not escapist, and the poet is not locked up perpetually in the world of love and feeling. Love, specifically marital love, is the creative standpoint and point of view for confronting the problems of the world out there. A distinctive voice and uniquely personal diction appears in Ahmed Maiwada’s *Fossils*. This poet is not afraid to experiment by combining words and images in new ways in order to see the world afresh. He produces an intensely private vision through which the diligent reader can glimpse his ideas of the social world around him, but often enlarges their significance by grounding his metaphors in religious myths and rituals.

In summary, this year’s short list of eleven entries, two of which were disqualified on technical grounds, covers a large body of themes ranging from our common political concerns as citizens to the private experience of

the poet. Quite a few of the poets on the list have moved towards literary maturity in contrast to a significant number of those who entered the competition while still serving their apprenticeship. Many of those on our short list are willing to experiment with sound and sense in their poetry, and the results are often impressive. But from the evidence of these entries, the poets of the present time have taken advantage of, but have not really extended the resources available in the existing literary tradition. Their range of themes could be narrowed down to social criticism at one end, and the poet's private explorations of his psychological and vocational resources on the other.

This competition has now come of age, bringing with it critical expectations that match the standards of the competition. The Panel of Judges looked for a body of poetry of high seriousness and an all embracing vision that reaches beyond social satire and a private quest for meaning, and decided not to award this year's literary prize for literature.