

# Rereading **Beier**

Wole  
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## **The name Ulli Beier**

was well-known in the English-speaking and German-speaking worlds from the 1950s to the 1970s. Especially in the 1950s and '60s. It was invariably linked with that of Susanne Wenger, the Austrian artist who was his first wife. So famous was this man who had been working and residing in one West African corner of the British empire that when he left Nigeria in 1966 December for Papua New Guinea, no less a magazine than the TLS announced it. Among the Yoruba of western Nigeria, his name and Susanne's have entered folklore while he himself has been transformed into a fictional character in at least two African novels in English.

Indeed, so much was he on everybody's lips in Nigeria in those days that his second wife, Georgina, heard about him long before she met him. Living in the far-away northern Nigerian town in Zaria in the early 1960s, she had heard so much about him and had made it a point of duty to meet this man whose name was on everybody's lips whenever she went down south. In due course, she and her first husband took a trip to Lagos. Their car broke down in one of the obscure streets and as they were standing around not knowing what to do, two white gentlemen saw them and stopped to offer help. So eager was Georgina to seek out this man whose activities were well-known even in far away Zaria that she wasted no time in asking if any of the gentlemen knew 'Ulli Baya'. One of them smiled shyly and, rather apologetically, confessed that he was Ulli Beier. Georgina had been convinced that the man bearing that name could not be anything but a Nigerian!

Another anecdote is also worth retelling. Ulli Beier left Nigeria in 1966 December but came back for a conference in 1970. After the conference, he decided to pay a visit to Ede, the town in which he had spent three of the happiest years of his life, to see old friends. Ede had become a garrison town and soldiers were everywhere, driving recklessly. An army truck crowded in on him in the narrow street, brushed his tiny car and almost ran him into the gutter. However, Ulli was still able to drive the car to Ibadan, where he stopped to see Wole Soyinka. When Wole Soyinka and



**Ulli Beier**

his wife saw the car, they were aghast: what happened? Soyinka was horrified at the idea of Ulli coming all the way from PNG to be mindlessly killed in Nigeria: 'what would the rest of the world have thought if, God forbid, such a thing had happened?' He asked. Laide, Soyinka's wife answered this hypothetical question promptly: 'well, if he had died, people would simply have said that he knew his time was up and came home to die!' To Laide and the citizens of Osogbo, Ede, Ilobu, Ulli Beier was simply one of them.

I have started this paper by retelling these anecdotes to raise one issue that is central to my work on Ulli Beier, and that is the issue of identity. Who is Ulli Beier? What identity does he conceive for himself or who does he perceive himself to be? How have Nigerians, especially the Yoruba people among whom he lived, seen him? In these days of multiculturalism, of hybridity, of postcolonial, multiple, and even willful erasure of identities, these questions are important and Ulli Beier answers them in a unique, salutary way. In trying to deal with this question an Australian academic and would-be biographer formulated an answer in the early 1980s which by its very paradox goes to the heart of the matter: Ulli Beier, he wrote, is 'a German-born Yoruba. Ulli Beier may have renounced his German citizenship-I don't think he formally did this-but he remains a western man, a European proud of his European heritage.

I am going to try to show how Ulli Beier somehow managed to be more Yoruba than many Yoruba people-certainly more than most western-educated Yoruba-but without

'going native' and certainly without ceasing to be a European. I want to answer this question first by saying just a little about his life prior to his coming to Nigeria, and then concentrating on his associations, friendships and background activities in Nigeria from 1950s to 1966.

Ulli Beier was born in Glowitz, Germany in 1922. In 1925 the family moved to Berlin where they lived until 1933. The father was a medical doctor, but he was also a musician who played in orchestras, though as a hobby and not as a second profession. He regularly took his son Ulli to these performances of chamber music. He was also a lover of art who took his son to virtually all the museums of ancient art and exhibitions of modern art in Berlin. Ulli certainly imbibed this love of art from the father and has never missed an opportunity to mount an exhibition. Also, he has never from his childhood been able to sleep in a room without a painting hanging in it. All in all, Ulli's first eleven years were happy and sheltered. All that changed in 1933, when Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist party seized power. Although Jewish, the Beier family were not practicing Jews; culturally, the father saw himself purely as a German, and the rest of the family did likewise.

But when Hitler came to power, Ulli's mother was perceptive enough to see what was coming and she persuaded her extremely reluctant husband to let the whole family move to Palestine. So from 1933 to 1940, Ulli and his family lived in Palestine, not as Zionists but simply as refugees with the hope of returning to Germany after Hitler

would have been gotten rid of. Until 1941, life in Palestine was poorer, but still free. But from 1941 to 1947, Ulli was interned by the British as an 'enemy alien' - that is as a German! It was during this time, however, that he passed the B.A. General London University as an external student, at the end of 1947. He moved to London early in 1948 but, in December, stood in danger of being deported to Australia. He knew nothing of Australia, but did not want to go there. He had registered at the University of London to read for a diploma in Phonetics, the only course open to foreigners then. Ironically it was this opportunistic action that would set him on his road to Nigeria. From 1948 to 1950, Ulli taught in a school for handicapped and delinquent children. From 1949 to 1950, he had to also teach German Phonetics at London University as an evening course. Again, this position, taken reluctantly and after much pressure, facilitated his coming to Nigeria. He was walking along a corridor one day when he saw an advertisement for the position of Lecturer in Phonetics at the two year-old University College of London in Ibadan, Nigeria. He knew nothing about this outpost of the empire; but that, precisely, was its attraction: the advert was like a door leading to, not colonial adventures, but mystery; and it was beckoning him to come in and partake of that mystery. When he made known his intention to apply for the position, a sympathetic senior colleague and mentor advised him to wait a year, when a better position would be opened in the more civilised Gold Coast (Ghana). This advice decided Ulli, for he thought that a more civilised Ghana could only mean one thing: the university there would be more colonial than the one in Nigeria. He applied for the job and got it, and on October 1 1950, he boarded a plane to Nigeria. Thus, Ulli Beier's coming to Nigeria was purely by accident - he did not plan it at all, although, with hindsight, he now believes his life was from the beginning directed by Esu, the Yoruba god of chance and the crossroads.

## Ibadan

But he was quickly disaffected with the general situation of both his job and the university college. The college was temporarily located in an old army barracks not far from town. But as far as it was concerned, the big, chaotic but fascinating town of Ibadan might well have been two hundred miles away. There was very little town-and-gown interaction; many of the professors knew much about Africa, but were generally aloof and condescending in their attitude, and did not think much of African cultures. As for the students, they felt only embarrassment towards their heritage and thanked God for lifting them above the local people and their backward cultures. Whenever Ulli tried to make them see things differently, they always repeated the phrase 'we can't even make pins.'

As for the course in Phonetics, he quickly saw its pointlessness: were the students supposed to learn how to speak like English men? If so, one hour of practical a week was too small and two hours of linguistic theories too much. In any case, why should they have to speak English like the English? Were they to just to learn the theories of linguistic? In that case, two hours of theory was too small and the hour of practical just a waste. Ulli thought of changing to literature, but he found the same pointlessness, so he decided, half-way into his first year, that he would serve only a one-term contract and be gone.

But Ulli stayed sixteen years instead of three, thanks to two people. The first is Robert Gardner, a man from the then Gold Coast who was in charge of the Extra Mural Studies department. This man invited them to help give occasional talks to his classes in his spare time. Largely because the offer gave him opportunities to travel out of the campus and Ibadan, Ulli accepted. Very soon he started travelling to Abeokuta twice a week and eventually, he decided that if he was to stay, that department was the only one that would make it worth his while. By the end of 1950/51 session, he had fully transferred to the department.

The second person was a black American named Lorenzo Turner, then at Chicago University. Lorenzo Turner had come to Ibadan on a sabbatical, collecting folk materials to compare with the ones he had already collected in black communities in the southern states of America. This man spoke so passionately about the spiritual richness of these poor people and the tragedy of their lives that Ulli was moved. He lamented that in the absence of science and technology, and physical monuments, the only thing the black race had was their spirituality, and even this was fast disappearing. Ulli by now knew just enough of the society to feel the truth of this, and he assisted Turner in anyway he could, including travelling with him over the region. It was on one such travel to the neighbouring Dahomey (now Benin Republic), that Ulli discovered what he was truly in Nigeria for. Turner and Ulli parted in Meko, the one on his way to Ghana while the other slowly trekked across the border to Nigeria. He slept in a little village called Ilara, a village that had been by-passed by colonialism and the rush to modernise - a village that was still in the 19th century. There, Ulli realised what Yoruba communities might have looked like even just half a century ago, and he realised he had found a home. His spiritual exile and social isolation, which started in 1933 were finally over. He also realised that he was just one the threshold of a quest; he did not know where to begin and what he might find, but he knew that it was there within the society and he must find it.

Back in Ibadan, he wasted no time transferring fully to the Department of Extra Mural Studies. Mr. Gardner had reorganised and enlarged the programme to cover all the three



regions of the country, so Ulli was appointed teacher in charge of the whole of the then Western Region. He had a loan to buy a car, and, better still, he was free to live in any part of the region. As soon as it was practicable, he and Susanne moved out of the campus, not into the city, but to Ede, a town less than 100 miles north of Ibadan as the crow flies. He lived in Ede from 1952 to 1954, then moved to Ilobu, another town very close by, and finally to Osogbo late in 1955 where he lived for the next eleven years.

## Osogbo

The activities for which Ulli Beier became famous are: the founding of the seminal literary journal *Black Orpheus* and the club Mbari, both in Ibadan; the starting of the Osogbo Art Movement, his association with Duro Ladipo, perhaps the most famous of Yoruba travelling theatre dramatists; the translations of Yoruba oral poetry into English and, with Gerald Moore, the first anthology of modern African poetry in English. He was also, in association with his first wife Susanne Wenger, famous for his support of the Osun festival in Osogbo.

Ulli Beier has been modestly proud of whatever assistance he rendered to his friend Duro Ladipo while he attributes the success of the Art Movement to his second wife Georgina (who is also a wonderful artist in her own right); as for his connection with Osun Osogbo, he gives all the credit to Susanne while assigning his own contribution to merely that of doing his civic duties, as an important chief in the town. But I was shocked to discover that while he continues to cherish his life-long friendship with all the writers and artists with whom he worked on *Black Orpheus* and in Mbari Club, he does not think too much of both: these were things that had to be done and he did them while his real interest lay somewhere else.

What were these real interest? I have to go back a little bit to answer this question. The magazine *Black Orpheus* started in 1957 and the club in 1961. What was Ulli doing between 1951 (when he moved to Ede) and 1957? An account of these activities will not only explain the huge success of both club and magazine, as well as the direction they took, but in part also why they did not survive for long after he left.

When Ulli started travelling around as merely an enthusiastic assistant to Robert Gardner, he also started discerning some kind of beauty, integrity and dignity in the culture and people around him—precisely those qualities that the western-educated elite and students in the university college were fast losing, and which most of the expatriate staff simply did not see. He wanted to find out where these qualities came from. His first path was through the oral literature which, again, he stumbled on by accident.

While teaching *Macbeth* in Abeokuta one evening, a

student asked if the story dramatized in the play was true. The question suggested to Ulli that the student perhaps could not distinguish between fact and fiction; if so did it mean that the students generally did not know of indigenous literature? A quick probing revealed to him that though they knew of the existence of songs and folktales, they did not consider these to be literature at all—to them, literature was only that which the white man had written down in his own language! Ulli's way of remedying this cultural injustice was to start the then difficult and thankless task of collecting oral poems, initially and primarily for use in his class. Thus began his life-long fascination with Yoruba oral literature, and his promotion and translation of them. As he collected more, he discovered that they revealed a cosmology whose traces in everyday life were difficult to discern, but there nevertheless. This was 1951, long before African oral literature was known and given cultural/academic respectability. Indeed, that recognition and respectability was in part due to his pioneering efforts, for when *Black Orpheus* started six years later, he gave it a pride of place in the journal.

Ulli moved to Ede at the end of 1951 because he had earlier met Timi Laoye, the Oba of Ede and been impressed by him. Furthermore, when he and Susanne moved there, they did not live in Oke D.O. or any such isolated place, but right by the market square and therefore very close to the palace. For the next two years, Ulli went to the Timi's palace everyday, saw and chatted with the Timi everyday. To this day, he speaks of Timi Laoye as one of his mentors. It was the Timi who introduced him through this aunt the Iya Sango, to the Sango cult and other Yoruba religious cults. He also discovered that, apart from the usual carved palace posts, the Sango shrine in the palace housed many marvellous carvings, all hidden away and never displayed in public. He would later exhibit these images in Ibadan, Salisbury (now Harare), and Prague, with Timi and his palace drummers attending. Meanwhile, the three discussed all aspects of Yoruba culture and society daily. Whenever the Timi could not answer some of Ulli's difficult questions, it was the Iya Sango who came to their rescue. In this Ulli also discovered that the true position of women in Yoruba society was contrary to what met the eye—that they were neither the passive, pliant beasts that colonial administration wanted them to be, nor totally submissive to their men. When it came to what the Timi considered as sacred knowledge, he actually got Ulli initiated into the Ogboni cult.

This was also the beginning of Ulli's friendship with several Yoruba Obas: the Ataoja, the Ooni, the Ogoga, the Olowo, the Orangun, the Ogiyan, the Deji, among them. He was very intimate with the Timi, but that oba was a mentor; on the other hand, his intimacy with the Olokuku was that of two good friends.

The fiery-tempered Iya Sango in the palace at Ede had

started him on the road to a discovery of what Yoruba religion was about, and he followed this up himself by first familiarising himself with all the cults in Ede and surrounding towns, and then striking a deep spiritual friendship with the priests and priestesses of these cults. Thus, he would worship on every Ose with the Erinle people in Ilobu, attend all the Sango ceremonies in Ila-Orangun and Otan-Ayegbaju, or create time to be present at the Ogiyan ose in Ejigbo. As he himself has put it, these were his spiritual soulmates, people in whose company he felt most home and from whom he learned so much. So much did he find fulfillment among these people that he could still say, in 1995, that he was sure had he been born a Yoruba person, he would certainly have been a Sango devotee.

Two of his Olorisa friends are worth mentioning: Bandle of Otan-Ayegbaju and Ajofoyinbo of Ila-Orangun. The two were Sango dancers of extra-ordinary prowess and imagination, though of contrasting styles: the one in his dances depicted the legendary, deified ruler in his fiery masculinity; the other depicted his humanity, pathos and tragedy. These two dancers were Ulli's bosom friends and it was partly from them that he got his inspiration to write his own play *The Imprisonment of Obatala*. In short, Ulli Beier was in touch with the two most important institutions at the heart of Yoruba culture: the religious cults and the Oba institution. At the same time, he did not lose the common touch, for it must always be borne in mind that in both Ede and Ilobu, he lived near the market place while in Osogbo he lived on a street that led directly to the king's market. We must also remember that he made his rounds of extra-mural teaching, sometimes teaching in three different towns in one evening and not returning till late in the night.

Very soon, these intimate contacts began to be translated into action. By 1954, he began to organise conferences on Yoruba society, culture and history, initially through the auspices of his department at the university. It was at the 1954 conference on Yoruba culture and history that the idea of a journal was born. Within a year, the first issue of this journal, appropriately called *Odu*, was out, with Ulli Beier as chief editor and Saburi Biobaku as assistant editor. There are three significant points I want to make about this journal. First, it was conceived as a journal by Yoruba people for Yoruba people (that is, it was not published with an eye to a foreign audience). Second, and as such, it published some poems, articles and reviews in Yoruba. Third, some oba like the Timi, the Ooni, the Ogoga and the Ataoja actually wrote in it, just as they had attended the 1954 conference.

It was these experiences and knowledge of Yoruba society that dictated the cultural stance that *Black Orpheus* took when he started it three years later, even though the idea was conceived in far away Paris and with Jahnheiz Jahn in

1956. By this time, there had been a lot of wonderful writing coming from Francophone Africa but next to nothing from Anglophone West (and East) Africa. Thus although the idea was to stimulate the latter, Ulli believed that this literature would have to be built on oral literature, rather than on English models. This was the only way it could have a distinctly African voice, and thus integrity. Of course, he could not dictate what people should write, but he could gently stimulate a particular kind of writing by the kind of materials published in the early issues. And since, luckily, there were no writers on the ground, this was easy. Secondly, the kind of critical reviews published would also gently nudge the writers in this direction. As this was truly a new beginning, these aims were relatively easy to achieve. Thus, the early issues were filled with a lot of traditional oral literature and translations of Francophone (Negritude) writing. And when the new writings began to appear, the critical reviews stressed their debt to oral literature, praising them for their originality on this account. It is no exaggeration to say that African Literature in English today would not only have started later than it did without *Black Orpheus*, it would also have been very different—certainly, the maturity and distinctiveness it achieved so early would have been delayed.

As famous and seminal as the magazine was the club, Mbari Club, when it came later in 1961. Also started by Ulli, it had the same philosophy as the journal, giving exactly the same kind of respect and recognition that it gave to western-educated artists to local artists and performers. For example, the Yoruba novelist D. O. Fagunwa, and the much despised Amos Tutuola were invited to be honorary members. What I wish to stress about the club here, however, is one of its often neglected, or forgotten, activities. Mbari Club was as much an artists' club as it was a writers'. It exhibited popular and elitist artists, artists from Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Sudan, Germany, Australia, and the U.S.A. Artists from U.S.A., British Guyana also came there to work. I stress this because the art scene of the club was exclusively Ulli's and in many respects it was the most vibrant. Also, this aspect of Ulli's life is often not recognised, partly because of the international fame that some of the Mbari writers quickly achieved. But to conclude, I make the point that both journal and club were so successful simply because, unlike even his Nigerian colleagues who thought that traditional Africa was a dead past, Ulli believed otherwise. He believed that traditional Africa was a living present to be proud of, and capable of showing the way to the future. He lived it, knew its worth, and tried to make his western-educated friends and colleagues see its values and beauty. **GR**