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Mentoring and Art: A Bio-critical Engagement of Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo's Lives

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Abstract

Several studies on Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo have established that they were precursors in the development and preservation of aspects of Nigerian indigenous theatrical arts. There have been polemics arising from the critical opinions about the relationship that existed between these two artists and the implication of the influences they wielded, one on the other. Diverse forms of mentoring, an established system of a co-creative process, is identified as the informal but effective ideology that sustained and reinforced the Beier-Ladipo collaboration. This study bio-critically explores two biographical works, Wole Ogundele's *Omoluabi: Ulli Beier, Yoruba Society and Culture* and Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, Sola Olorunyomi and Abiodun Duro-Ladipo's *Duro Ladipo: Thunder God on Stage*. The paper engages their subjects beyond their lives to their creative passions that impacted Nigeria as well as the international communities beyond their lifetimes. The unmistakable significance of mentorship as agency in the Beier-Ladipo collaboration culminated in the emergence of two dramatists, the Duro Ladipo School and a historical form of the Nigerian operatic travelling theatrical tradition. Examining these antecedents is with a view to interrogating the contemporary value on mentoring relationships on the preservation of culture in spite of diversity.

Bio-criticism, Mentoring and Co-creativity in Concert

The complexity of conducting a concert and having the desired result is the metaphor I engage in interrogating biographical accounts of mentorship and the attendant co-creative enterprise in the lives of Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo. According to Celeste Snowber 'listening and mentoring are partners in a dance'

(Snowber 2005: 345). The harmony and flow that takes place in a successful mentoring relationship is the metaphoric element Snowber engages as concert in this context. This can also be regarded as the listening that occurs when an artist pays a piece of work close attention as it takes shape or form. The task of a would-be mentor therefore begins with listening for the purpose and passion that is inherent in the person to be mentored (2005: 345). This indeed

seems like a magnetic pull that draws persons of like purposes together. Just as an artist engages raw materials in creativity, a mentor is necessarily expected to introspectively work with an entire range of intricacies. This is inclusive of:

... human life filled with all its complexities, paradoxes and wonder to 'midwife' a deeper inquiry into teaching, writing, and living. The mentor's is not that different than the role of spiritual director, one who sits alongside others as he or she discerns life's choices (346).

Snowber recommending a realistic approach to mentoring, insists that mentors ought to take specific steps such as walking alongside students in the mentoring process and listening for cues which necessarily link them to their passions and callings. This apparently is the most crucial part of the creative process.

The recurrent motif of the artist serving the art is dominant in the writings of L'Engle. In her grandly written work, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Art and Faith* (1980), L'Engle observes that 'Inspiration far more often comes during the work than before it, because the largest part of the job of the artist is to listen to the work, and to go where it tells him [or her] to go' (L'Engle 1980: 149). It is expedient therefore to listen deeply to the self, other, and art in infusing mentoring and art-making.

While L'Engle upholds this position, Snowber summarily integrates "... autobiographical inquiry, narrative inquiry, and performative inquiry as research methodologies.... in mentoring re conceptualizing the act of mentoring and ...theorizing mentoring 'the act of

mentoring, but also as a way of theorizing" (346). This level of inquiry inherently reveals that 'Mentoring is a co-creative process that is dialogical. Both mentor and student are open into new understandings' when the process is complete particularly when a hospitable space is created such that the dialogical process of listening can take place (346).

Biographies are outstanding narratives that track, record and transmit life experiences that have absolute potential to transform lives: the lives of the biographers and the persons who read about the lives and times of the subjects of the narratives. Biographers fundamentally serve as active agents of the biographic transformative agency by bringing to the attention of society the lives of subjects who deserve such attention. Essentially bio-criticism is about biographical critics who read the works of a writer through his life and times; this includes the political and socio-economic indices that condition his life principles and choices. These tropes are engaged by biographers in deciphering the works or engagements of their subjects.

The influence of biographers on the telling of the lives of their chosen subjects and the impact of the experience on biographers themselves requires more than a cursory attention. According to Rachel Morley (2012), the totality of the experience is such that the biographer realizes that as the telling is being done, the narrator, like the subject, goes through a process of continuous transformation (91):

Realised in this way, it requires that we open ourselves up to the idea that beneath the surface story of the subject lies an important meta-story about the processes underlining the recovery. It means

recognising that far from being a mere foray into self-absorption, this story has much to say about our ongoing attraction and interest in the form (2012: 91).

Ostensibly, some practitioners' posture is that "the biographer's experiences (are) as back-ground noise, as self-indulgent or as unnecessary pencil marks on a finished canvas" (2012: 91-92). It is vital, crucial and very important that biographers portray and present their subjects with objectivity and scholarship. This is because the diverse opinions become the entrance into the interpretation and realizing of the world of the subjects. Wole Ogundele and Remi Raji-Oyelade et al do not only theorize but evolve new forms of biographical writing as they narrate the lives of their subjects. The structure and content of both biographical works are unconventionally yet appropriately structured.

Ogundele's *Omoluabi* (2003) for instance has an acknowledgement that deliberately gives the detail that necessitated the narrative on the significance of the subject. According to Ogundele, Prof Biodun Jeyifo had "had casually mentioned one small, little known but revealing contribution of Ulli Beier to Europhone Nigerian Literature" (Ogundele 2003:3). Wole Soyinka in the foreword succinctly describes the biographical work as a narrative that reveals:

Life-beneath-appearances of a culture that was trotted out routinely during arts festivals, Independence Day Celebrations, visits of dignitaries (military and civilian) and other superficialities of a robust culture that is lived today despite multi directional assaults, surprised to learn that an

'expatriate' plumbed the depths of this culture, fought battles on its behalf, and identified with its travails... For the one Ogundele's book will be an act of education, for the other, a feat of celebration (2003:9).

Omoluabi is a book of sorts. The author himself describes the form as a puzzle (14), a hypothetical work on a "remarkable somebody" who took up a ridiculously impossible name and who had attained a semi-legendary status. Ogundele claims that he could not possibly at the beginning have known where the materials he got would lead nor the form they would eventually take when finally shaped into a coherent whole. The biographer notes that he being able to track the subject's deep personal commitments, convictions and public interactions knew the conventional "full blown biography" was inappropriate (2003:17).

He at best was able to classify it as a "cultural biography." In Ogundele's words, "it combines some elements of a life with a highly selective history of a period, and with the literary cultural history of that period in Nigeria. Ogundele's shrewd intervention, he insists, does not seek to deconstruct Ulli Beier or the activities connected to him in any theoretical way" (17). It is, however, evident that he bi-critically engages the "intrinsic worth and significance of a life: a life whose full story it may be impossible to tell, but which cannot - and need not - be fully explained (18). Ogundele's presence in this biographical account is definitely not "back-ground noise" or a "self-indulgent"; nor is it "unnecessary pencil marks on a finished canvas".

Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi and Duro-

Ladipo's work is also an unconventional biographical work. The narrative begins with interrogations on his death rather than life well spent. These accounts coupled with those of interaction with the subject's wife turned curator – and later admitted as co-author of the narrative make up the kernel of the narrative. The authors also wriggle out of the conventional biographical template by affirming that:

Essentially this book is in part a homage to an enduring tradition of a spectacular variety of African theatre. It is also by force of available facts, a revision of certain unresolved information about the man Durodola, Durosimi, Timothy, Duroorike, Adisa Ladipo.... This narrative shall be remembered, experienced and emulated for the greater renaissance of the soul of the African art, performance and culture. Here also the reader will have firsthand information about some untold tales of a theatre legend (Raji-Oyelade et al 2008: vii).

Those who have fixations about the value of or the involvement of the biographer in participating in mentoring in biographical learning are countered by the very essence of biographical learning. Extracting from Alheit and Dausien (2002), biographical learning is:

a self-willed, 'autopoietic' accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively 'organise' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions. (Alheit and Dausien 2002: 17)

The elements of biographical learning which include reflexively organizing the totality of one's experiences are germane to this study. It is evident that three things concurrently take place while biographical learning occurs: the learner engages the biographical stock of knowledge (2002 15). The totality of the experience embedded in the memory exists as a crucial resource when people necessarily face and make changes in their course of life (15). These layers described by Alheit and Dausien as "a supraordinate structure of action and knowledge", are taken for granted and employed by many people unconsciously. Nonetheless this is often evident in the manner reflexive resolutions are retrieved at crossroads or moments of conflicts. Advancing this argument, Alheit and Dausien believe that the structure of biographical knowledge presents and enables "moments of self-education" whose reflexive resolutions very often come to the rescue. This sums up the reflexive nature of knowledge transfer that takes place in biographical learning.

Biographical learning in this context therefore completes the bio-critical concert of mentoring and art. Instructive is the fact that the two biographical narratives capture the mentoring and collaborative relationships that existed between Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo and the significance of these in Nigerian literary and cultural history.

Raji-Oyelade et al in describing Ladipo's relationship with Beier observes that the existence of:

A magnetic rapport with Ulli Beier led to years of artistic collaboration, a relationship which developed into a beneficial patron-performer connection (Raji-Oyelade et al 2008: 6-7).

More than any association, the Beier-Ladipo collaboration typifies a relationship marked with distinct cultural differences that yielded bounteous fruits in spite of cultural diversities. According to Frances Kochan "issues related to diversity in mentoring generally focus upon how these differences might impact mentoring relationships" (2013: 419). Diverse critical views are of the opinion that there must be common ground between mentor and mentee and this should consist of racial background, gender, religious and cultural (Davis 2008; Orland-Barak 2003). Others strongly believe that this may not be vital or crucial to the central success of the mentoring process and despite the fact that such indices are of great significance "mutual respect between those involved and willingness to work in a collaborative manner" is Johnson-Bailey's proposal for such fruitful engagement (Johnson-Bailey 2012: 155). The portraits of Beier and Ladipo in these biographical narratives reflect cordiality that tower above challenges that mark mentoring relationships across cultures particularly distinctly diverse national identities. From the narratives, both of them were conscious of and understood cultural mores and contexts within which they had to work. Beier in particular was keen on becoming a Yoruba and embarked on several quests to acculturate.

The energy generated by the mentoring engagement transcends the Beier and Ladipo relationship: the biographers are caught in the web of enlightenment at the conscious and unconscious levels. Mentoring is therefore an ideological framework that has become an established system of success in several enterprises having become acceptable in formal and informal settings. Bio-criticism an

approach that interrogates the biographical, critical and textual analysis engages the influence of both artistes on each other's literary output, creative energies and the creative and cultural agencies that emerged from these efforts as documented in the selected biographical writings. Duro Ladipo's art attained international acclaim within periods of association and collaboration with Beier.

Beier had also discovered a treasured tunnel with which he could further carry out his inquiries on aspects of Yoruba culture and arts. He within the contexts of this relationship adopted a pseudo name and became Obotunde Ijimere the playwright; he was the official translator of Yoruba plays into English Language; he also became the promoter and international ambassador of the operatic theatrical tradition. Ladipo's legacies remain sources of national and literary pride in Nigeria. Significant results of this relationship include the global success of Ladipo's theatrical art which still represents the Yoruba operatic travelling tradition and the preservation and presence of this and other such treasures in global spaces.

Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo

Kindredness may be the only way of explaining the attraction and continued friendship between Beier and Ladipo. Striking features of the personalities and temperaments of both artists include curiosity, willingness to learn, boldness and ingenuity. That both artists are friendly is an understatement, Ogundele in *Omoluabi* writes:

Ulli's relationship with Duro Ladipo started purely on a note of friendship. The latter came back to Oshogbo... in 1958 from Northern Nigeria where he had been

a primary school teacher, opened his Popular Bar and also managed Ajax Cinema. Initially it was just one of the three places where Ulli stopped by at night, on his way from his teaching rounds. But soon he lost interest in the other two. Their friendship deepened as Duro was a very curious man who piled his friends with endless questions (Ogundele 2000:160).

Beier himself describes Ladipo as such a "stimulating company" that made him lose interest in the other bars. Ladipo's interests ranged from local politics, Christianity, Yoruba History, the Cold War, space travel and so forth. His vast interest in multifarious issues and multisided dimensions to life established their friendship even more (Beier 1994:11). Ladipo was known to be a warm and a good natured fellow. According to Ogundeji, Ladipo was generally regarded as "a hardworking friendly, tolerant and honest person" (1988:109).

Beier's fraternization and identification with kings, *olorishas*, artists, young and upcoming intellectuals suggests that he also possessed a cheerful and friendly disposition. He acclimatized so much that he earned chieftaincy titles and a pseudo title of the German born Yoruba man. Other narratives that reveal the depth of the friendship of the Beier-Ladipo association include an account by Mrs. Biodun Duro-Ladipo of how she was wooed by Duro Ladipo and Beier's keen interest in the outcome of the friend's quest. According to her:

Duro's confidence must have been partly encouraged by his German friend Beier who had pronounced almost in a strange tone 'Duro, if Asake goes away, you are finished... (Raji-Oyelade et al 2008: 26).

She recalls that Beier and Ladipo collaborated and resorted into diverse antics to get her and her parents to consent to the marriage. On an occasion, Bakare Gbadamosi was sent with *aroko* to another King in her father's territory who joined the team in mounting further pressure on her father to consent to the marriage (2008: 26). Beier's keen interest in the love life and happiness of Ladipo reflects the depth of the friendship of the two men. One is also persuaded that this bond transcended the artistic creation and effusions of both artists.

Beier facilitated several of Ladipo's performances outside Osogbo particularly in Lagos and overseas. Worthy of mention is the fact that Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi and Abiodun Duro-Ladipo's (2008) *Duro Ladipo: Thunder God on Stage* has several pictures in which Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo appeared. These were part of the treasured artefacts contributed to the publication by Mrs. Abiodun Duro-Ladipo. Three pictures of Ulli and Geogina Beier in Berlin, one of Ulli Beier in the background in the post production dinner in Berlin and one of him with three other friends taking pictures with Ladipo when he was awarded the 1st Arts trophy to be given in Nigeria.

A story that remains remarkable is the narration of the send-off party given to the Beiers by the Duro Ladipo National Theatre on their departure from Nigeria to Papua New Guinea. The Beiers had gone up to Ilorin to meet them and the reception was scheduled after a Ladipo performance. According to Beier, it was the most emotional of his leave takings. Food and drinks were served, yet no one ate or spoke. Eventually everyone got up, hugged one

another and departed without touching the feast. (Ogundele 2000:179). Friendship and cultivating a deliberately friendly posture is a necessity in mentorship.

Mentorship Attitude: Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo

A striking feature from biographical accounts of both artists is their non-conformist posture and approach to issues and life. Beier, for instance, had defied the displeasure of the European community and their airs of importance at the University College Ibadan to wander freely in Ibadan town and mingle with the natives. He had also given up the more honourable job of teaching on the university campus in the city to delve in the suburbs as an extra mural teacher.

Ulli Beier was never a distant or disinterested observer; he was, in Ogundele's words:

more interested in and committed to the people who do things, be it ritual performance or painting, than to what scholarly knowledge he can gain from what they are doing (2000:28).

This qualified him, without having such an initial plan, to be a transformer, participant, an observer, a preserver, a recorder and a witness. Ulli Beier had the penchant to make things happen and mentoring others came naturally to him because he, by reason of his posture to life and the wealth of information in his possession, had the wherewithal to prompt others to take action in their areas of interest.

Ladipo, another non-conformist, had taken up teaching as a profession. He had been fascinated by the world of the *Eleguns* and

Olorishas. He had abundant zeal and energy and was a lay reader and choir director while teaching. According to Odunsi, Ladipo was the only "pupil teacher" who prodded him on for a need for the establishment of a theatre group in Otan, Ayegbaju when he was appointed Headmaster in 1946. In his words:

Duro brought an exercise book to my office as a gesture to challenge me to write a play that was how I was compelled to compose songs and write a play... Duro played the lead role... that was the breakthrough. The performance was memorable (Raji-Oyelade et al 2008: 36).

The Head Teacher went on to say a certain Alex Peters prompted Ladipo to go further into acting and directing. Ladipo always sought Peters' contributions in all his productions. This portrays Ladipo's penchant for being a consistent learner and follower. He did not only push his superiors to get results, he also placed on them a demand for their mentorship, and also walked in the consciousness of his own inherent potentials. His tutelage under Odunsi and Peters took place several years before Beier stepped into his bar.

Ladipo's unique posture to his beliefs is also reflected in him not considering any task *infra dig*. As a lay reader, he was a member of the choir; ready to experiment with indigenous instruments. As a teacher he readily took up a petty job at a cinema house. As a leader of a successful national theatre, he took up large scale farming to provide food to feed his troupe. For mentoring to be initiated at different levels the parties must possess or cultivate certain attitudes: the would-be mentor should have the wherewithal to lead, prod, guide, inform

encourage and advice. The mentored then ought to be receptive, enthusiastic, willing to learn, take correction and possess inherent potentials which when nurtured will become capabilities.

The first point at which Beier, who promoted every art he came in contact with, influenced Ladipo's work was after the Easter Cantata in Ibadan. Ulli Beier saw a play Ladipo composed. He thought Ladipo had much more potential and that his style of composition could be improved upon greatly. Beier's knowledge of Yoruba tradition and the depth and level of excellence of his friend's earlier cantata made him disapprove of this style of composition which had become common place. Beier was sincere enough to point this out to Ladipo who also took the observation graciously:

Once the details of the funding and the establishment of Osogbo *Mbari* was sorted out, Duro exhibited great zeal in opening the club and it was carried out in grand style. Beier's other contribution to this initiative was to give his friend a book, Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yoruba*. This book turned Ladipo's concept of theatre around, being previously ignorant of the existence of the work until it was presented to him. Years later, Ogundele would modestly acknowledge two great things he did for Ladipo:

one, he did his duty by being honest with him about his first dramatic composition, two, he gave him Johnson's book to read (Ogundele 2003:163).

One cannot but agree with Ogundele (2003) whose opinion is that the gift of the book was not to Duro Ladipo alone, but to the entire Yoruba race, the theatre: literary or travelling,

the Yoruba playwrights who employed the English medium and the entire nation of the Yoruba seeking identity. It was conscientization indeed. The rest of Ulli Beier's impact, in one's opinion, is his influence on the publicity of Ladipo's theatre locally and internationally as he had done in other instances where he had brought several talented artistes into prominence through his writings. There were electrifying bouts of literary and cultural activities but more and more possibilities opened as the two worked together.

Striking is the fact that Beier's other creative abilities became projected. The motivation and insights that accompany mentoring was unmistakable in the results he began to generate. Beier became a 'yoruba playwright' during that period of tremendous mental and creative activity. He established the Theatre Express. He also unofficially became collaborator and consultant of sorts: background director, adviser, translator and occasional co-writer, to Duro Ladipo National Theatre. He got more involved in the ceremonies and participated more in the festivals of the kings and *Orisa* cults within his vicinity. All these experiences brought a lot to bear on his consultations with Ladipo and his theatre.

His involvement with the Osogbo artists, sculptors and painters some of whom were members of cast of Ladipo theatre created an environment conducive for creativity. Some of the participant artistes who worked with Ulli and Georgina Beier either as sculptors or painters during the day time and who worked for several hours rehearsing as members of cast of Duro Ladipo's troupe agree that those moments were golden, largely because of the flow of mental and creative energies. This was

not euphoric in any way because the art works, sculpture, painting and murals as well as the vestiges of the discoveries of the time still radiates in contemporary times and thoughts.

The impact of the totality of these activities and prevailing mood culmination was that Beier who had no aspiration to be a playwright became inspired to become one. A need arose to translate and document the entire script of *Oba Ko So* for a German television production in Munich. It became necessary for Ladipo to script the play, first in Yoruba, and later for Beier to translate the same into English. The magnitude of the work was mentally stimulating and the experience resulted first in the publication of the *Three Yoruba Plays* by Duro Ladipo published by *Mbari* in 1964. These activities had triggered off mental energies which were followed by intellectual stimulation captured succinctly by Beier:

Working on the English version of Duro's texts had been an experience of great intensity. For weeks I lived with the store of delightful surprises of the Yoruba imagery. I even dreamt about it, and when suddenly it came to an end, I felt like a sprinter who had been stopped abruptly in his tracks. My heart was still pounding so fast I started running again (Ogundele 2003: 170).

The Imprisonment of Obatala is an expression of the mental energy that erupted coupled with the depth of Beier's familiarity with ritual, myths and the co-creative history of the Yoruba. His association with the kings, priests and priestess of Yoruba land made his perceptions about the deities he wrote to be as exact as a Yoruba man's should be. Aguru's

(2011) analysis of *The Imprisonment of Obatala* is an explication of Beier's understanding of theopanic visions, and imagery among the Yoruba. In this context, L'Engle's position on mentoring being a co-creative process becomes germane. The investments, time, energy and other resources become mutually beneficial particularly to the mentor who deliberately sets out to give.

Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo Inspiring the Next Generation

There is an extensive list of artistes, carvers, painters, playwrights, operatic theatres and operatic forms raised by the Beier-Ladipo collaboration. The Awada Tradition of Moses Olaiya popularly known as Baba Sala as well as Lere Paimo of the *Eda Onileola* fame sprang up from this collaboration. By reason of the Beier-Ladipo collaboration which includes Susan Wenger and Georgina Beier's efforts in arts, creativity and preservation of culture, Osogbo became renowned as the cultural capital of Yoruba land indeed and the city entered into a performative flow that was and became unmistakable.

Conclusion

The result of these outstanding endeavours could not be ignored by the national and international community. The critical mass of writings on the operatic theatre in Osogbo, the costumes, masks, props, drumming and dancing documented about this period have largely preserved the essence of the Yoruba operatic theatre.

Critics, scholars, and creative writers in contemporary times acknowledge the

significance of the life and times and association of these great men. Critical and bio-critical accounts of the lives and works of Ulli Beier and Duro Ladipo continue to reflect the enduring qualities that were harnessed and maximised by this great collaborative effort. Among these qualities are the intelligence and passion of Duro Ladipo, the faith and tenacity of Ulli Beier to physically and mentally engage history and performance as well as the presence of mind to preserve both without altering the identity of those he mentored.

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End Notes

¹By this I mean Beier had written several playwrights into prominence. Examples of these include Kola Ogunmola of the travelling theatre fame, Chief OviaIdah, a famous artist in Benin city, who claims Beier's writings on him and his art works made him, Idah, famous and rich. UlliBeier is also the first to write about the Onisha market literature and bring its depth and variety to world notice see Beier's article on introduction to African Literature.