

## **A guiding spirit who refused to be adored Ulli Beier passed away**

Ulli Beier died on 3 April 2011 at 88 years old in Sydney.

Born in Germany in 1922 in Glowitz, Ulli grew up in Berlin. His father was a German Jew but it was his mother, a German Catholic, who insisted that the family leave the country due to the rise of the Nazi regime. The whole family moved to Palestine as early as 1933. During the war the Beier's - being German - were for some time imprisoned by the British in a concentration camp. When the war was over, his parents moved back to Berlin but Ulli, somewhat uprooted, needed to take another path. He pursued a BA in phonetics in London and worked for some years in a school for handicapped children. In 1950 he met the then already renowned Austrian artist Susanne Wenger, whom he married soon after.

Ulli came to Nigeria in 1950. He joined the Extra Mural Studies Department at the University College Ibadan. During these years he traveled widely across Yoruba country, visiting many towns and villages and organizing English literature classes for willing participants.

After living in Ede and Ilobu, Ulli settled in Oshogbo in 1958, where he continued to eagerly learn about Yoruba arts and culture. He took part in Yoruba everyday and ritual life, collected stories and took photographs. In subsequent years he wrote a great number of articles and books on Yoruba culture. After some years he and Susanne Wenger, who later became high priestess of the Osun Groove in Oshogbo, now UNESCO World Heritage, split up but both remained good friends.

In 1957 he founded Black Orpheus, a literary magazine that was to become a most important journal, not only in Nigeria, but in Africa and the black world. It was in this magazine that many of the continent's leading writers first had their initial articles exposed to a wider audience. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, John

Pepper Clark, the late Christopher Okigbo and others had some of their first texts published by Black Orpheus.

Ulli later co-founded, together with Duro Ladipo, the legendary Mbari-Mbayo Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan which helped many an artist and writer of the time to get first recognition. Some might remember that Ulli wrote several texts, even plays, under the pseudonym Obotunde Ijimere. In the early sixties he was appointed Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife. Together with his second wife, Georgina, he organized dozens of art workshops in Oshogbo and gave artists such as Twins Seven Seven, Muraina Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele, Bisi Fabunmi or Jimoh Buraimoh.

In the seventies he was asked by the National Cultural Council of Papua New Guinea to found an Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. After buying a house in Sydney and opting for the Australian citizenship, he accepted the call in 1974. There, he co-organized, together with his second wife, Georgina Beier - in every respect his equal companion - the country's first art exhibitions featuring artworks by Timothy Akis and Matias Kauage. Ulli then created the literary periodical *Kovave: A Journal of New Guinea Literature*, which reproduced works by Papua New Guinean artists. His efforts were equally significant in facilitating the emergence of Papua New Guinean literature. While in Papua New Guinea he encouraged Albert Maori Kiki to record his autobiography, which Beier transcribed and edited. The book "Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime" was one of the first literary works of a Papua New Guinean.

Ulli returned to Germany in the early 80s to found IWALEWA Haus a centre for contemporary arts, mainly from Africa and Oceania, and part of Bayreuth University. He continued to play a role as an intermediary between peoples and cultures. With a brief interruption - and despite his age - he held this position until the end of 1996. During all this time he remained in close contact with his many friends from Africa, Australia, India, the Pacific and many other parts of the world who frequently visited IWALEWA Haus. It was a very fruitful time for Ulli, he published over a hundred brochures, articles, and books and curated dozens of exhibitions, workshops and concerts. He was a great facilitator, enabling hundreds of people from different cultural backgrounds to get to know each other, work together,

overcome prejudices. Thousands of visitors and guests have benefited from Ulli's work.

In 1995 and again in 1997 he was invited by Epeli Hau'ofa to take up the position of a guest professor at the University of the South Pacific in the then newly founded Oceania Center for Arts and Culture. He, together with his wife Georgina, spent his last years in his house in Sydney, writing and publishing.

In the early nineties, when I was Ulli's student assistant at IWALEWA Haus, he mentioned a Yoruba proverb that I have never forgotten since: *"If an old man dies don't weep, but congratulate his family for that his life has come full circle."*

Back then I thought of this as a bit weird. But, by and by, I learned more such things both from Ulli and Georgina. Interestingly, many of these thoughts were never articulated verbally. They just resonated in IWALEWA Haus – and they still do:

*"Try to live a full life, but try not to live against its circle. Try to find out who and what you are. Try to appreciate what you don't understand. Try to understand that understanding is not knowing. Try to learn, but try not to become a professional. Try to be proud about your achievements and appreciate that they are a gift of fate. Try to be aware that life will not last forever, but know that your physical and spiritual actions will have an impact."*

Ulli was my teacher, but never taught me. He was my mentor but, never sponsored me. He was my guiding spirit, but refused to be adored. His life had a deep impact on mine. Now his life has ended. Ulli went full circle. Even though during his last years, the world that he inhabited was maybe not quite the world that he lived in anymore.

His legacy? I honestly think he never really wanted to have one. Ulli's bibliography is amazing, but writing for him was not so much about making a particular career. Rather than academically reasoning about the people and cultures that he wrote on, he preferred to become a part of them, was enriched by them and influenced them himself. He once told me that life was about living it. His writing and curating clearly reflected that.

In Yoruba philosophy, physical death does not mean the complete cessation of a person's spiritual power. Especially those who die at ripe old age and who lived spiritually well on earth, continue to be around. The colorful and dramatic Egungun ceremony is a wonderful symbol for this belief.

I was many times most warmly received and accommodated by Ulli and Georgina in their home in Sydney. And even though today I feel more gratitude than pain, it is hard to imagine the house without him. Yesterday Georgina wrote to me that Ulli is now traveling between the stars. I guess that, from time to time, he will come back as a colorful, jolly, yet dramatic and mighty Egungun. I hope to see him again. Maybe sometime in Yorubaland...

My heart and thoughts are with Georgina, Sebastian and Tunji.

*Thorolf Lipp, cultural anthropologist and filmmaker, lecturer at Berlin Free University.*

*Berlin, April 2011*