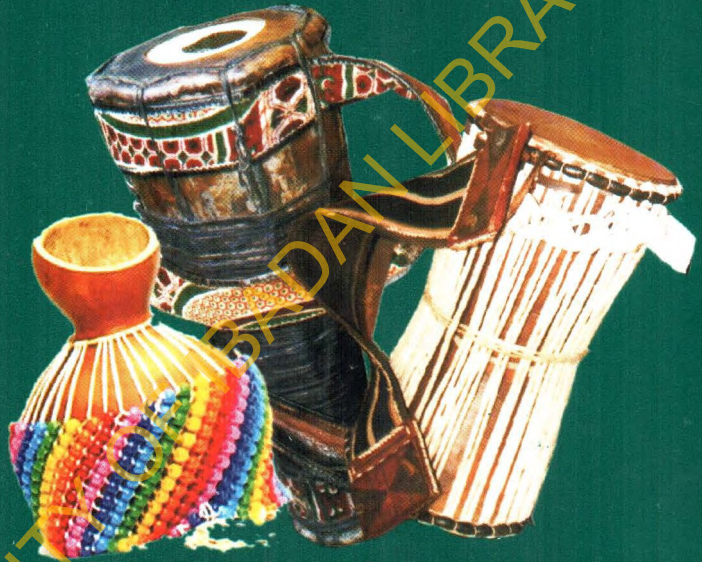


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(ETHNOMUSICOLOGY)



## AFRICAN NOTES

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# *African Notes*

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## SPECIAL EDITION

African Ethnomusicology

(In honour of Professor Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike)

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### Editorial Comments

*African Notes* is a unique forum for Africanist discourse and construct. The journal remains a platform for expressing cultural ideas in intellectual context and it is still widespread all over the globe. It has ever been intellectual in scope and standard.

Nothing spectacular has changed in the house style of the journal. Even though there was a mix-up in the covers of about three past volumes, there has been a “welcome back” to the original conception of the cover with artistic representation of African symbolic artworks.

This is notable in this current edition.

Logistics problems threatened regular and continuous “outing” and “outreach” of *African Notes* to our readers and subscribers alike. The Editorial Board wishes to impress on all that the problems have been solved and all the backlogs of *African Notes* are published with renewed vigour, vitality and heightened hope.

*African Notes* Vol. 30. Nos. 1 and 2, 2006 is already in press. The Editorial Board wishes to express gratitude to our readers and subscribers for their patience thus far. It is, indeed, a unique “welcome back”.

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*Review Article*

## **Decolonising the Mind: Issues of Politics, Identity and Self-Expression in Post-Colonial Societies**

Dele Layiwola

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The emergence of Ulli Beier's book in 2005 brought forth another milestone in the evolutionary history and research of old world cultures and identity indices. The book itself is indicative of a watershed in the foregoing or 'other' cultures, less popular windows on the mind of world civilisations. It is instructive to identify that the book instantly compels an identification with another book or the same title published two decades earlier by the Kenyan Novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The first was specifically concerned with Ngugi's concerns over the politics of language in African literature whilst this latter publication is concerned with the politics of creativity and self-expression in Papua and New Guinean Art. The two books, two decades apart, represent both sides of the same coin. They both underscore the process of self-expression, artistic creativity and the politics of day-to-day living and existence in post-colonial societies; societies that were locked into an old world order and who are now labouring to

re-invent themselves away from extinction.

The fact that these societies have sustained their respective denizens through momentous periods in their histories reveals that there is a validity clause, some 'resistant' fabric in their language, philosophy and creative self-expression worth investigating, exploring and re-affirming. The human agencies and animators in the nook under consideration are Ulli and, his wife, Georgina Beier. Their occasion for serendipity in Papua New Guinea is worth noting for two reasons: that Ulli and Georgina Beier re-discovered their mission and themselves in Nigeria, reminded that they have used that self-knowledge to de-colonise or liberate citizens on two post-colonial continents. Ulli's enlightenment mission has always Ulli's enlightenment mission has always engendered a tripod outlook built around ideas people and society.

We must bear in mind that in this part of Australasia, unlike in Western Nigeria, there exist



two levels of colonisation in regard to the language and culture. That of the Mother-country was completed especially by the British but that of Papua New Guinea is being actively accomplished by Australia itself. This informs the extent of the challenge of cultural conscientisation that is available to missionaries like Ulli and Georgina Beier. Peter Trist re-affirms this phenomenon in his foreword to the book:

As I had been a resident of 'that distant part of the world' since 1957, I could advise Mr. Willet that the Beiers would find little, if any, artistic energy surviving in Port Moresby. The Moresby Arts Council, established since the 1920s and only interrupted by the war, gave performances of musicals and plays for, and by the expatriate minority . . . Within weeks of the Beiers' arrival on the Campus they joined me in founding the student's Drama and Arts Society. Over the next few years, I worked with them on many drama projects (p. xv).

In Nigeria, Ulli had always argued the fact that a people must be able to relate themselves to their own literature and culture and that the opposite can only serve to alienate them as colonial subjects. He felt the same in New Guinea and had proposed to his Head of Department, Frank Johnson, that literature courses ought to relate to the culture of the people. That would enable them see their attainments and their problems rather than strain to relate to a foreign culture they might never experience. In other words, Beier had always been an advocate for the indigenisation of scholarship as an ideological policy. His students would later react to the fecundation by their prodigious creativity in written literature and representational art.

In the second of the eighteen chapters in this book, titled "In The Boys University", there appears an instant parallel with his 1993 article on the beginnings of University, "In a Colonial University", where he relived the mindset of colonialists and colonials alike. Incidentally, this

article on the University of Papua New Guinea reveals a deep understanding of the psychology of racism and colonialism. It grants an open window on Port Moresby and the plight of her workers, similar to what might be found in apartheid Johannesburg, Pretoria or Cape Town where indigenous men are just 'boys'. But it also grants us the privilege of seeing John Gunther, the Vice-Chancellor, whose mind and personality had surpassed the limitations of racism and discrimination.

We move to the second leg of that tripod-people. His lifework has always inspired personalities as well as personages and, in this regard, all who truly encountered the real Ulli Beier came off inspired and transformed by his disarming humility and his charming personality. He was unobtrusive. His leadership style was participatory and he was a lateral thinker. His activities and career as recounted in the book makes it partly autobiographical. His encounter with Albert Maori Kiki before the latter became Papua New Guinea's first Minister of Foreign Affairs was noteworthy. Much as the whole village of Orokol thought of him, he always has an ancestral presence with him – ever encouraging, ever soothing. He is a great, spontaneous learner and equally a great teacher much at home with mental patients at Laloki as with university undergraduates of creative writing. This is a repeat of his experiments with mental patients at Aro Psychiatric Hospital, Nigeria. In either terrain, he succeeds in kindling self-confidence in his students, colleagues and friends. He inspired and exhibited such international artists like Tiabe, Hape, Ruki Fame, Kauage and Akis of Tsembaga. He also helped to make such prose writers and a dramatist as John Saunana, Leo Hannet, Kumalau Tawali, Apisai Enos and Arthur Jawodimbari.

Ulli attempted to make Vincent Eri into Papua's first novelist but Eri, in addition to that, discovered his other talents as a diplomat and later as Governor General of Papua New Guinea. There



is a sense in which the process of decolonisation espouses both the benevolence of a missionary and the traumatic regurgitation of a deep-seated mindset; as well as the need for ideological somersaults, even a revolutionary reorientation. For instance, the book, in the seventh chapter titled "Finding Their Own Voice" recaptures the worst infliction of colonialism and de-humanisation:

Ever since the Germans, the British and later the Australians had ruled the country, they were expected to take orders and obey them. They had never been credited with the intelligence to form an opinion of their own. They were considered uneducable by most early administrators and missionaries, and it needed a courageous man of strong convictions like Rev. Charles Abel even to insist that Papuans could be trained as carpenters! (56).

The book eminently makes it clear, like the book by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989), themselves Australians that the right kind of education empowers the 'natives' to write or talk back at their erstwhile masters or oppressors.

Ulli and Georgina Beier have been able to use literature, creative writing and art as mediums of mental and ideological liberation for these subject persons under the yoke of colonialism. Education thereby becomes a therapy to cure mental and material subjugation. Where potentials and energies are liberated, humanity is the better for it since the sum total of our human experience will be enriched immeasurably. This helps to illustrate the fact that the whole project of re-educating Papuans in their own literature, art, language and other resources of their mind is a systematical process of post colonial disengagement which not only helps to discover a *voice* in addition to regaining a *tongue*. But beyond these templates, it will also help to establish an unshakeable *identity* (Layiwola 2001:xi).

The mission of *Decolonising the Mind* has complemented the practice of post-colonial studies with publishing and book making. There emerged

the journal KOVAVE – A Journal of New Guinea Literature which promotes indigenous Literatures in the English Language in Papua New Guinea. It emerged as the first literary magazine, which encourages young Papuans to creatively interact in their own idiom. The journal has since spurred other name titles like *New Guinea Writing*, *Bikmans*, and *Ondobondo*. This, reveals that it is a vision rightly propagated hence, the flourish of successors.

In concluding this short review, I shall like to briefly refer to two outstanding artists who became famous through the work of the Beiers in Port Moresby: The first is Mathias Kauage, male and the other is Marie Taita Aihi, female. I am focusing on these two because they emphasised certain theoretical instances in the post-colonial project. Kauage, incidentally, shares the dedication of the book with John Gunther, the first Vice-Chancellor of the Papuan New Guinea. The author of the book discussed the two artists with great sensitivity and one of them managed to reach his peak while the other retracted from what might have been a glorious career. In some respect, they both represent the antipodal twilight of the post-colonial world.

Kauage, a huge statuesque figure had grown up in the Chimbu Mountains where he left school very early when a teacher beat him up for helping a younger pupil with her work. When he attempted to return to school as an adult, his childhood memories of school depressed him. Thus, he distrusted formal colonial education. He also felt humiliated and fought shy of an education which allows one to be denigrated, or beaten, irrespective of one's status in his own culture. Georgina Beier puts her finger on it:

Every human being goes through the traumatic experience of growing up, but in a recently colonised country like Papua New Guinea, a man goes through this agony twice: he may be a man in his own culture, but he is a child in the superimposed foreign culture and he finds the prospect of another



“initiation” worrying and alarming (85).

The overarching power of the colonialist and his institutions were suspect. In the words of J.F. Ade Ajayi (1982:12):

They were impressed by the technology of the white man and regarded him with awe . . . but the people could hardly trust or confide in what they could not understand. They viewed the white man from a safe distance as an incomprehensible, irrational and uncontrollable force.

The circumstances described here have been excellently played out between two characters in the South African Play by Athol Fugard – *The Island*. In that play, the white jailer keeps referring to the black inmates as ‘boys’. The character named Winston is quite mindful of this when he, although a fully grown man, has to play the improvised role of a girl. This colonial situation looks down on the colonised as a nobody; a citizen without rights!

The heartening fact is that without western-style education, Kauage worked hard and became an accomplished artist who exhibited his works around the world and was honoured by the Queen of England with an OBE in 1995.

The second example, Marie Aihi represents that in which the colonial person regards his or her social condition as always subject to a *status quo ante*. A state of ‘primitive’ paranoia, which reminds him/her of an original foundation, *illo tempore*, where there is a presumed balance with a pre-existent reality. Beier himself has theorised this at the beginning of the twelfth chapter where he relates the murder of a ‘native’ by his kinsmen as all attempt to restore the social balance that once was. This social balance is the restoration of a social order with which the postcolonial finds familiar or ‘guaranteed’ peace in his or her psyche.

This young, talented artist was born in Waima, a Roro village in the central district. She was lucky to have been spotted as a talent with great potentials. She then came to work with Georgina

Beier. She became the first Roro woman to drive a car and produced exquisite prints and dresses. She became a near-celebrity and stood out from the rest of the Roro community in Port Moresby. However, a short visit home to participate in a festival became her undoing. That was the first visit home after a long interval. The book graphically described how she sustained a minor accident. Though no apparent damage was diagnosed, Marie became a victim of fear and depression. She was convinced that her minor accident resulted from witchcraft and that some old persons in the village had tried to harm her. She became paranoid and found a superstitious explanation thus:

In her perception, she had been called to order and punished for attempting to elevate herself beyond the other members of her community (113).

She sank deeper and deeper into depression and returned to her village. The next time she was seen, she was hawking coconuts in the market. She abandoned her students and training and returned to the ordinary life of a village girl.

This, for Ulli and Georgina, was a truly devastating experience at the sheer waste of talent and potentials. For how can a citizen with such urbane talents and uperb training throw them away with such ease? But a partial and well-meaning explanation can be found again in Ajayi’s paper:

As western education, science and technology spreads, the insecurity of life has bred superstition and the search for faith healers and prophets have similarly spread throughout every strand of society (1982:21).

The example of the Beiers is uncommon as has been replicated in two differing but similar locations across the globe; circumstances of post-coloniality. The pioneering efforts at Migila House and the personalities involved are infectious. The story is of empowerment and mutual, reassuring

trust in people and that of unparalleled optimism in the capacities of humans for creative expression. It is also the spiritual capacity of man to overcome his/her own limitations and obstructions. If there is anything, the lives of all those artists and personalities who have now become historical personages lend the truth to their illusionary country and art. It is left for us to congratulate Pandanus Books and the Australian National University for the courage to champion the cause of the post-colonial project.

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