



Georgina Beier (1938-2021): Tribute to a “Matron Saint” of Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Post-colonial Nigeria witnessed the emergence and development of contemporary Nigerian art. One of the key figures who catalyzed the evolution of modern art development across continents was British-born art pioneer Georgina Beier (1938-2021). Her talents developed in Osogbo, which she subsequently used to inspire a generation of artists. Her experimental workshops at the Mbari Mbayo Club, Osogbo, from 1963 to 1966 formed what later became known as the Osogbo Art School. Here artists who would later be renowned globally for their unique artworks were trained and mentored. Although still properly documented, Georgina's role and impact in contemporary Nigerian art cannot be overemphasized. The article is, therefore, not only a fitting tribute to a giant artist but a continuous exploration into understanding Georgina's contributions to the development of contemporary art in Nigeria and other climes such as Papua New Guinea, Australia and Iwalewahaus in Germany. In particular, the article explores her involvement and contributions to modern art development in Nigeria through intensive mentorship and training programmes organised for indigenous artists in places like Osogbo and Ile-Ife. The article, thus, fills an important gap in contemporary art development in Nigeria through the study of Georgina's impact and contributions.

Keywords: Osogbo Art School, Georgina Beier, Mbari Mbayo, Papua New Guinea, Ulli Beier



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Introduction

In the formative decades of contemporary art development in post-colonial Nigeria, Africa and the world, the contributions of Georgina Beier (1938-2021) are spirited, consistent and can be articulated as 'monumental.' During these formative decades, only a few artists could synchronise their works of art along mentorship in countries often regarded as 'primitive' given their culture and art. In this regard, Georgina occupies a commanding presence as an 'artist,' 'teacher,' and 'mentor.' Throughout her career, Georgina's works were fundamental to understanding indigenous and modern African art development despite the effect of colonialism and western civilisation on the African continent. Her works mirror indigenous and contemporary motifs, imagery and forms while she exhibits strong mentorship through intellectual engagements as an artist and teacher to artists in Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Sydney and Bayreuth, which occupies an important landmark.

Georgina belongs to a tiny group of European expatriates who supported indigenous art communities to develop what has been considered by earliest missionaries and colonial government officials as primitive and backward (Diana, 2018: 3-29). According to Howard Murphy, the earliest missionaries and colonial government officials pursued a reforming agenda to uproot indigenous communities' customs, traditions and languages (Morphy, 2000: 87). Niyi Osundare (2008: 108-112). contends that Georgina, alongside German author Ulli Beier. An Austrian artist, Susanne Wenger, were art catalyst who contributed significantly to Nigerian arts despite rapacious colonialism and its pursuit of cultural displacement by collaborators. Individuals such as Georgina believed in guiding the development of traditional artists, leading to their advancement into professional status and the evolvement of their cultural identity.

Under the Osogbo Art School, which emerged in Osogbo in 1964, Georgina Beier organised workshops for locals, provided them with art materials, and mentored them to develop unique art styles. Taiwo Olaniyi popularly referred to as Twins Seven-Seven, and one of the products of Georgina's workshop described the latter's contributions 'as unique.' This gesture, he claimed, was different from "Christian

missionaries who came with brushes in one hand and a bag of knowledge in the other" (Beier, 1991; Beier, 2005: 15). These artists replicated this gesture by creating artworks depicting indigenous and contemporary Yoruba traditional motifs (Ogundele, 2003: 194; Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 167).

The article provides a fitting tribute to a giant artist and a continuous exploration into understanding Georgina's contributions to developing contemporary art in Nigeria and other climes such as Papua New Guinea, Australia and Germany. In particular, the article explores her involvement and contributions to modern art development in Nigeria. However, while several studies have focused on the contributions of her husband, Ulli Beier (Ogundele, 2003), and fellow artists, Susanne Wenger (Osundare, 2008; Oyeweso and Raheem, 2022), a few existing studies primarily focused on highlighting her roles and contributions in the evolution of modern art development cross-continentially.

Pic 1: Georgina Beier (1938-2021)



Source: Ulli Beier Archive, CBCIU, Osogbo, Nigeria



Georgina Beier, Mbari Mbayo and Contemporary Art Circle in Nigeria

Georgina Beier, born in South London, began her educational career at sixteen when she enrolled at the Kingston Art School, London, having won a competition organised by a department store in Kingston-On-Thames (Troger, 2001: 10-11). After training for a year and being unable to afford the tuition, she withdrew from the Kingston Art School. She was similarly dissatisfied with the art programme because the formal school academic curriculum and atmosphere appeared to impede her personal development (Okeke-Agulu, 2013). Thereafter, she set up a mural contracting business and became a self-taught fashion designer and artist in London (Troger, 2001: 10-11). Georgina moved to Zaria, a city in the Northern region of colonial Nigeria, with her artist-husband, Malcolm Betts, in 1959. Malcolm was a teacher in the Art Department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 162). Her goal in Zaria was to immerse herself in the local art circles and extend the frontiers of art knowledge to the locals, which at the time was considered 'primitive.' At Zaria, Georgina gave private lessons and organised extra-mural art classes for cadets and neighbourhood children at the Military School, Zaria (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 162). She worked mostly on drawings, prints and outdoor sculptures in cement. This period marked what she described some years later as "a time of searching" with very unsatisfactory results (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 162). She would subsequently meet Ulli Beier, her future husband, who lectured at the University College, Ibadan (now the University of Ibadan). Troger notes that upon the need to relocate to Osogbo in 1963, Georgina destroyed all her works (Troger, 2001: 12).

Ulli Beier, a German-Jewish author had made his impact felt in the development of arts and culture in western Nigeria before he journeyed once again to Nigeria's Northern region (Ogundele, 2003: 59). Ulli Beier's journey to Zaria was influenced by his position as tutor in the Extra-Mural Department (University of Adult Education) which allowed him to undertake the kind of research and outreach activities that colonial educators took exceptions to (Ogundele, 2003: 59). Hence, Ulli Beier's position which involved travelling around western Nigeria to teach led to his journey to Zaria. Ulli Beier and Georgina met at an art exhibition and subsequently led to a lifelong partnership in art circles that transcended a significant turn in the latter's journey into the art community, which soon developed in Osogbo.

Before Georgina arrived in Osogbo, Ulli Beier and his first wife, Susanne Wenger, had already made significant landmarks in the art circles in western Nigeria. Since Ulli Beier arrived in Nigeria at the University of Ibadan in 1950, he has extended his works far beyond the perimeters of the University to indigenous communities of Ede, Ilobu and Osogbo

(Ogundele, 2003: 59). He pioneered the teaching of African literature and wrote widely on Yoruba art and society. In 1954, he started the journal, *Odu*, which published works on Yoruba culture, serving as an important platform for Yoruba poets, philosophers and kings to discuss their respective societies' local culture and traditions. Ulli Beier also edited and published articles in *Black Orpheus*, a publication he founded in 1957, among other pioneering literary landmarks.

Ulli and Susanne Wenger moved from Ilobu and settled in Osogbo in 1958. He organised literary and cultural seminars, workshops and exhibitions and published texts on local artists and their works. During this time, he met the playwright Duro Ladipo (1931-1978). In March 1962, he established a branch of the Mbari Mbayo Club at DuroLadipo's private residence, an offshoot of the Mbari Writers and Artists Club in Ibadan (Hassan, 1998: 28-33). The club was established with Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Es'kiaMphahlele and others in 1961 (Beier, 2005: 14).

Upon her arrival, Georgina relocated to Osogbo in 1963 and moved to Duro Ladipo's studio, where she conducted workshops for young artists outside the academic environment. She also immersed herself in the local art setting as she did at Zaria, holding annual arts workshops at the Mbari Mbayo Club, Osogbo, which later produced arrays of international artists. In Osogbo, Georgina focused on developing individual talents and originality while guiding their worldview. She was a gifted and versatile artist who actively mentored and encouraged others. She also attached importance to techniques and media whose output was influenced by the immediate cultural environment of the workshop participants. Before Georgina arrived in Osogbo, the first workshop in Mbari Mbayo was conducted under the direction of Julian Beinart and Denis Williams (1923-1998) in 1962, while the second was organised again by Denis Williams and the African American artist Jacob Lawrence in 1963 (Ogundele, 2003: 144-145; Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 154). Jacob Afolabi and Rufus Ogundele would emerge at the second workshop as frontrunners.

Williams and Lawrence's workshop contributed significantly to the awakening of indigenous artists to the beauty of indigenous techniques. Lawrence's workshop coincided with the opening of the exhibition of sculptures by the Ghanaian artist Vincent Akweti Kofi (1923-1974) (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 164). Georgina conducted the third Mbari Mbayo summer Experimental Art Workshop in August 1964 (Ogundele, 2003: 146). Ward (1973: 148) notes that Georgina's five-day workshop approach at Mbari Mbayo, Osogbo was similar to that of Williams, although Georgina was not present during the first and second workshops. At the workshop, she introduced her students to media and techniques which she considered more suitable to their



artistic temperaments and sensibilities. While describing her teaching method, she notes that it was “like hunting for the original element, trapping it and making it safe, before it gets confused with so many other, alien elements” (Beier, 1991: 68).

Georgina's Experimental Art Workshop drew over forty participants, including members of Duro Ladipo theatre and indigenous artists. Stable studio spaces were provided for these participants to practice and further guide their intellectual capacities. With her technical help, artists around Duro Ladipo created images that quickly attracted the attention of the Western art world. During her stay in Osogbo, she engaged her students in painting and created murals on the palaces of two Yoruba kings (Beier, 2005: 15). She also worked with Jacob Afolabi, Rufus Ogundele and Bisi Fabunmi, three of the six artists to emerge from the 1964 workshop, to design stage sets, design backdrops clothes and costumes for the Duro Ladipo Theatre Company (Troger, 2001: 15). For DuroLadipo's plays, Oba Koso in particular, Georgina organised training for the actors, dancers, and musicians and guided them to choose their motifs from the world of Yoruba tradition carefully. Her contributions to the staging of the creation of Oba Koso, which toured the world and became the highlight of the Berlin and Commonwealth Arts Festivals in 1964 and 1965, respectively, remain significant (The Daily Telegraph, 2011).

Under her tutelage, a typical style did not exist, as some works were abstract, others figurative, some black and white, and others explorations of colour. The Osogbo artists were, therefore, asked to go out and study the very subjects they depicted (Troger, 2001: 15). Within a short period, individual artists became visible and distinguishable with their styles and imprints. For instance, Twins Seven's style was easily identifiable by the dense, fish scale-like web of lines that covered every single space of the picture plane. Rufus Ogundele preferred bold colours, whereas Muraina Oyelami used a more subdued colour palette. Adebisi Fabunmi excelled in linocuts, while Jimoh Buraimoh experimented with coloured beads and mosaics (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 168).

Given the brevity of the 1964 workshop, it was impossible to work out a systematic *modus operandi*. Rather, it appeared more like a swift journey through the landscapes of the different participants' artistic imaginations (Okeke-Agulu, 2013:167). Ulli Beier noted that ideas at the workshop “grew in different directions at breakneck speed” (Beier, 2005: 68). By the end of the workshop, “several distinct artistic personalities” manifested and had grown close in this new context of art-making (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 167). The workshop also moved to the palace of the *Ataoja* of Osogbo, often described as one of Mbari

Mbayo's biggest patrons, where its impact was also felt in the community (Beier, 1991: 68).

These workshops offered Georgina the opportunity to follow and nurture the emerging artistic personalities of the young artists and also provided her with opportunities to participate in the lively creative environment in which her artistic imagination could derive sustenance (Okeke-Agulu, 2013: 167). From these workshops emerged a whole generation of highly successful original artists, which include Bisi Fabunmi, Rufus Ogundele, Tijani Mayakiri, Muraina Oyelami and Twins Seven Seven. They all produced remarkably original work in Georgina's studio and achieved international acclaim many years later (Ogundele, 2003: 194). Perhaps, what distinguished this workshop from others was that the participants – even with no previous formal art training – were virtually left to their own devices. The workshop encouraged them to awaken their hidden creative instincts. Chief Jimoh Buraimoh recalls in an interview that “Georgina sought to make us more independent from the outset... [and] only asked [us] to express what we had in our minds without being told exactly what to do and how to do it. We were only given brown paper, brushes and powder paints which we mixed with water” (*This Day*, 2011).

Pic 2: Georgina Beier





Source: Ulli Beier Archive, CBCIU, Osogbo, Nigeria

New Artistic Interventions in Nigeria: The 1970s and Beyond

Ulli Beier and Georgina left Nigeria in December 1966, briefly worked in Papua New Guinea from 1967 to 1971 and later returned to Nigeria. Ulli Beier was appointed a Research Professor and Director of the Institute of African Studies, the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), which attracted the couple back to Nigeria. At the Institute, Georgina directed a design workshop that revived traditional Yoruba textile crafts and adapted fashion styles for more contemporary use and also for the African-American market (Beier, 2005: 15, 16). They jointly established a museum of Yoruba pottery in Ile-Ife (Ogundele, 2003: 191). The poor representation of Yoruba influenced the pottery museum works at the Sylvia Leith-Ross Nigeria pottery museum in Jos. Ulli and Georgina travelled to major towns and villages of Yorubaland collecting pots from communities such as Ilorin, Ekiti, Akoko, Ishan Ekiti and Ogbomoso (Ogundele, 2003: 191). Their collections of pottery became an important component of the Fine Arts Programme of the Institute. After the collection grew enormously, they went on to secure the permission of Ekpo Eyo, at the time Director of Lagos Museum, to convert the old building used by archaeologists excavating the *IṣaYemo* grove, Ile-Ife, into a pottery museum. Having sought the necessary permission, they renovated, restructured and redecorated the building, which was subsequently used for a Yoruba pottery museum (Ogundele, 2003: 191).

Georgina also embarked on creative works and inspired a league of artists in Nigeria at Ife. She trained a young lady named Rebecca Ademola in *Al'adire* and *Al'aroto* produce tie-dye patterns on velvet. She also designed new fashion styles to keep the ancient embroidery craft alive (Ogundele, 2003:192). Georgina also converted part of their university home into a studio where she installed a textile printing workshop and trained apprentices in textile printing. Before they departed Nigeria once again for Papua New Guinea, Georgina was commissioned to construct a 10½ metre high iron sculpture in the courtyard of the Institute of African Studies (Ogundele, 2003: 207).

Despite their careers taking them to distant countries in Europe and Asia, Ulli Beier and Georgina continued to visit Nigeria to spend quality time with their friends and mentees. In the early 1990s, Georgina and Nigerian artist Nike Davies Okundaye established a professional relationship... Nike has been a globally renowned independent artist and designer in Osogbo for many years. She owns and coordinates the Nike Centre for Arts and Culture, where she teaches batik and mentors young girls and women in art. At the invitation of Nike, Georgina conducted seven workshops on textile techniques, fashion,



iron sculpture and furniture design for carvers. She introduced the craft of quilt making to ensure that the products could easily compete in sales in other climes. The first quilt workshop was held six weeks for fifteen students in January 1990 (Beier, 1997: 70). Kings Amao completed the first quilt-making product.

The second workshop conducted in quilt making and applique attracted seventy students (Georgina 1997: 73). She introduced new techniques and assisted the centre in penetrating market hurdles to increase their economic capability. Quilts and appliques produced in the workshops were exhibited at the Goethe Institute, Lagos. The iron sculptor workshop was conducted in 1992 and produced several iron sculptors like Rotimi Togbe and Mufu Ahmed, who went on to hold several successful exhibitions in Europe (Beier, 2005: 123). Ahmed comments on working with Georgina;

She can inspire your artistic work because she has confidence in you. She believes in you and makes you try harder. She knows so many different techniques. People are surprised. They say: 'A woman? And a white one? And she is a welder?' When she is teaching us, she is giving away all her knowledge because she wants everybody to feel happy and stand on their own (Beier, 1977; Beier, 2005: xvii).

Georgina contributed to Nike's professional quest in art and craft (Beier, 1997: 75). Some of her works were purchased for the collections at Iwalewa Haus. She was also commissioned to work for an exhibition in Augsburg, Germany, in 1991. This became a vital platform she used to establish herself as one of Nigeria's leading female artists. She was selected to represent Nigeria in the Second International Liffass Art Biennale in Munich in 1992 (Beier, 1997: 81).

Georgina Beier and Contemporary Art Development in Papua New Guinea (PNG)

In Papua New Guinea, Georgina played an important role in the development of local art. Christianity, and later the colonial government, significantly impacted the development of local art in the country. Georgina was a well-known and intensive artist whose works incorporate a great variety of artistic media, including painting, drawing, woodcuts, etchings, screen prints, welded iron sculpture, silver-plated copper sculpture, applique textiles, and screen-printed textiles and costumes for Yoruba masquerades (Greven, 2016). She gave tremendous impetus to the quality and depth of textile design and adapted village designs as book covers, notably for the Papua



Pocket Poets series, which Ulli Beier founded and edited. Diana Conroy (2018) recounts the contribution of Georgina to mentoring individual interest and growth in contemporary art using the case of Marie Taita Aihi, an artist from Roro Village in the Central District who was adopted by the Catholic mission. Marie Taita is said to have known little about art but was notable for encouraging the young women nursing assistants in her clinic to paint. Given Marie's interest in art, Georgina spent a week at the Yule Island Mission introducing the girls to local art of drawing tattooed animals, tie and dye and dyeing techniques. The Catholic mission later released Marie to Georgina in July 1988 in a cottage industry in Port Moresby called Hara Hara Prints, after which she started producing screen-printed textiles from local designs and sewing clothes from the textiles she had designed (Beier, 2005: 108).

Georgina provided mentorship and guidance to artists, sculptors, and textile designers in the studio behind their house. This was the beginning of what would later become the National Arts School, an icon of an era rich in artistic flowering. The Beiers also helped to foster the work of pioneer artists at the Centre for New Guinea Creative Arts and formed a close relationship with Mathias Kauage, who became the most original and prolific of all Papua New Guinea artists and brought contemporary Papua New Guinea arts to the world (Beier, 2005). Georgina also developed the raw talents of painters such as Mathias Kauage, whose acrylics have been acclaimed internationally. Georgina's artistic activities in Papua New Guinea led to the emergence of artists such as Albert Maori Kiki, Vincent Eri, Kumalau Tawali, Leo Hannet, Akis, Taite Aihi and Ruki Fame. These artists contributed to the cultural and artistic identity of Papua New Guinea during and after Georgina's exit from the country.

Conclusion

In 2011, Georgina Beier passed on with tributes published in news mediums from the places where her impacts and legacies were most felt (Raheem, 2021; Jackson, 2021). One of her legacies was the development of Nigeria's post-colonial art scenes in the 1960s heralded by the Osogbo Art School, some of whose members are still alive and whose legacies remain evergreen. To her credit, the Duro Ladipo Theatre attained local, national and international fame through her backdrops and designs, which beautified the playwright's stage performance and added so much colour to the stage. Like her husband, Ulli Beier, she never truly loved anywhere except her home in Nigeria among the Yoruba. This explains why despite their frequent travels and cultural and artistic border operations across the world, they always felt at home in Nigeria, where they often returned to connect with friends, collaborators and loved ones. She remains a



pioneer of contemporary Nigerian art and promoted new artists through her collaboration with Nike Okundaye. Many young men and girls who participated in her workshops in the early 1990s attained international fame. In his fitting description of Georgina's contribution to local and contemporary art development, Osundare(2008: 191) notes that:

No[.] one [can] ever forget the indelible imprint of Georgina Beier, fabulous artist and pioneering spirit whose canvas brims with cosmogonic influences – from Yourubaland to Papua New Guinea. She, like Adunni Olorisa, is one of the 'matron saints' of the Osogbo-Ede-Ife art circle. She, like Adunni, brought out talents that we never knew were there, prompted them, stimulated them, got them to live the full span of their imagination, taught them how to make a living out of their art, equipped them with a new confidence, an astonishing panache, gave them the exposure and international appreciation that brought them global fame and improved their material condition. She injected the art circle with an energy and purposiveness that were truly and substantially infectious.

Osundare's words are not only etched on stone but represent more than what Georgina embodied in her lifetime. The article is, therefore, not only a fitting tribute to a giant artist but one whose positive impact on indigenous arts will be felt for a very long time in the communities they were made.

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