

REVIEW

***Timeless Memories: Conversations between Wole Soyinka & Ulli Beier*, edited by Olufemi Abodunrin and Mogomme Masoga. Published by Wildeye Creative Solutions, Lagos, Nigeria. 90 pages.**

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It is not every day that one encounters a book containing conversations between two literary giants from Nigeria – one an expat and the other a son of the soil – about Nigeria’s historical, literary and cultural evolution. The book *Timeless Memories: Conversations between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier* presents just such conversations. Edited by Olufemi Abodunrin and Mogomme Masoga, this book emanates from the Timeless Memories Project in which these two professors were involved. In their Preface to the book, they state that the purpose of the project was to bring into public discourse important aspects of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) that Soyinka and Beier epitomize, for the benefit of younger generation audiences in Nigeria, South Africa and the world at large. *Timeless Memories* is therefore fittingly dedicated to POSTERITY. It is the birthchild of a humanitarian collaboration between the University of Limpopo, the University of Zululand, the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture – all based in South Africa – and Oludamola Adebowale the project curator from Nigeria. Significantly, the book was compiled to celebrate Soyinka at 87 years in 2021 and to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the passing of Beier. It is a gift to African scholars dedicated to developing African epistemologies, which is why it has a bold ‘NOT FOR SALE!’ sign on its copyright page. Its separation from commercialised publishing is also the reason why it lacks an ISBN number. However, its illustrious artwork on the cover and in-between the conversations more than make up for this.

Looking at just the title of the book as an outsider to Nigerian history and politics, I wondered: what is the link between a Yoruba man and a German, that they were having conversations that have been construed as timeless memories? My perplexity was soon resolved by the Preface which explains that “Ulli Beier’s home was Nigeria – specifically Yorubaland” where Beier lived uninterruptedly from 1950 to 1966 (8). As a result, he was deeply immersed in the religious and cultural

life of the Yoruba, and his affinity to the people and Yoruba belief systems seep through the pages of *Timeless Memories*. Not only do I, as a reader of this book, get to appreciate Beier's philosophical reflections on Yoruba cosmology, but also I get to draw on his expert knowledge, as he engages with Soyinka, to figure out for myself the problem with Nigeria today.

This book is an invaluable resource for research on Wole Soyinka's cultural, literary and philosophical oeuvre. These conversations between Soyinka and Beier are indeed timeless memories; they are not to be found anywhere else within South Africa and therefore form part of an important archival history of Africa's first Nobel Laureate. The book is divided into three parts. The first part presents a conversation between Soyinka and Beier on Soyinka's legendary play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. This particular conversation took place in 1993 at Iwalewa-Haus at Bayreuth University in Germany. The second conversation centres on the crisis of Yoruba culture and took place in May 1996, again at Iwalewa-Haus at Bayreuth University. The third conversation captured in this book took place earlier than the first two, in 1992 at Iwalewa-Haus, and it focalizes the two men's perspectives on Yoruba religion. The three conversations share commonalities in their reminiscing about an illustrious era in Nigerian drama and theatre, rejection of modern-day autocratic leadership in Nigeria, and projection of Yoruba values, philosophies and beliefs as critical to a postcolonial transformation of attitudes towards Africa's indigenous knowledges.

The works of Soyinka, whether in his plays, novels or memoirs, are generally cryptic and obfuscating for the average reader. Try reading *The Interpreters* (1965), or *The Man Died* (1971), with your first-year English students and see if they would not boycott your classes. Soyinka's language in his writing, both creative and non-creative, is often pitched at an intellectual level that is inaccessible for average readers. This is the first time I am reading Soyinka's expressions in a language that is understandable. And yet that simplicity of expression conveys weighty ideas. For example, in commenting on the role of the communicant crowd in ritual Yoruba theatre, Soyinka states simply:

That is for me the real meaning of the chorus in ritual Yoruba theatre. It's not just people repeating refrains and sympathizing and empathizing with the individual going through his travails. No, the chorus is in fact that force which enables an actor to become the embodiment of the role. (28)

In these simple words, the reader gains insight into the potency of the chorus in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The conversation mode of this book presents Soyinka to the reader in a manner that is appealing. Thus, the book makes Soyinka *epistemologically accessible* as one gets to understand indigenous African drama through his simple but profound expressions.

The conversations between Soyinka and Beier centre on African indigenous ways of being and relating to other human beings. For example, the conversation centering on Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, one of Soyinka's greatest plays, opens up spaces for understanding Yoruba cosmology. How the living, the dead and the unborn are linked together in a transcendental relationship is part of African indigenous knowledge that many can relate to, irrespective of their cultural difference. Beier, a German-born scholar in Nigeria, understood it; all it takes is an open and inquisitive mind. In Beier's conversations with Soyinka, he faults European misunderstanding of the play as promoting suicide, through the will of the Elesin Oba to follow his king into death. As someone who had lived in Yoruba society for long and had applied his mind to learning about Yoruba belief systems, he understood what other Europeans could not. He told Soyinka that Europeans had a difficulty understanding *Death and the King's Horseman* because "they cannot believe that the man actually dies by an act of will" (23). For himself, he states: "I have no difficulty with this at all. Having lived in Nigeria for so long, I know that people are trained to develop certain faculties of the mind, which our society has always suppressed" (23). Beier therefore separates himself from European ignorance of Yoruba beliefs.

Significantly, Beier and Soyinka talk about the differences between European understanding of death and Yoruba understanding of it, providing various anecdotes in which Yoruba men and

women prepare for their death with stoicism, knowing that death is only a transition from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. As Soyinka notes, “it is not uncommon for Yoruba people to decide on the time of their death” (25). The tragedy of the Elesin Oba in *Death and the King’s Horseman* is not his suicidal death in the end but his failure to accomplish a ritual death that had a meaningful purpose, and with this Soyinka gives Yoruba tragedy a meaning quite different from Greek or Roman tragedy. Soyinka explained:

It is true that tragedy in Yoruba mythology and culture is not perceived as the termination of existence. Yoruba tragedy exists in a world that believes very much in the interflux and almost equal partnership or collaboration between the living and the world of the ancestors. It believes that one world cannot exist without the other. If you have a world that accepts this totally, the word “suicide” is meaningless. The tragic experience then leads to a new sense of awareness. (34)

The compelling quality of Soyinka’s argument about tragedy in Yoruba mythology and culture, here and in other parts of *Timeless Memories*, puts his conversations with Beier at the centre of scholarly debates about the Africanisation of knowledge. Here is what the Africanisation of literary knowledge means: making sense of African literary texts from an African philosophical perspective. Reading Soyinka’s play, one has to know that suicide means something entirely different from a Yoruba context:

Suicide in European terms is a negative act. It is of no interest except for the individual concerned and it’s terminal. What we are talking about in ‘Death and the King’s Horseman’ is an entirely different kind: a widening of the horizon, a progression from one sphere of existence to another. (34)

Such a uniquely African understanding of suicide is necessary to interpreting *Death and the King’s Horseman* from a decolonial perspective. *Timeless Memories* therefore contributes to the advancement of African indigenous knowledge.

We are currently teaching African literature in a decolonial age and it is important for the literary arts teacher to engage students on what decolonisation means. This book is a useful tool in starting that conversation. It is heartening to learn from the book that way back in the 1990s, Soyinka and Beier were concerned about the ways in which colonial education negated African cultures and identities. The decolonisation movement was certainly a necessity for Beier, who tells Soyinka during their 1996 conversation: “The Yoruba people certainly must reassert their cultural identity but we must hope that they will not lose sight of the essential values of their culture in the process” (62). In the context of the conversation, Beier’s point was that Yoruba values of peaceful negotiation, honesty, humaneness and communality must not be sacrificed by the younger generation in the political quest for a Yoruba nation. This is a sounding warning to contemporary youth to also remember that their cultural values need not be transgressed in their process of decolonising education. How to strike a balance here remains a challenge for the decolonial project.

In their conversations, Soyinka and Beier acknowledged the disruptions that colonialism inflicted on Yoruba culture and nationhood, but they also acknowledged the corrupt practices of Yoruba leaders who contributed in destroying the Yoruba nation – disgracing it, in fact, in the face of imperial pressure. They lambasted political leaders who exploited the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970 to make profits for themselves. As Soyinka said, “War had become a business” (56). After the war, it was the pursuit of contracts that enriched these politicians, accompanied by bribery in which a certain percentage of the profit is always offered to the contract approver in advance of the contract being awarded. As Soyinka noted, “the famous 10% became institutionalized” (57). The corrupt practices of these government officials, which compounded the devastating effects of the war, led to the collapse of small businesses. In no time, “whole villages lost their land, selling under pressure

or seduced by their own greed” (57). Everything had become commercialised, and cooperatives no longer had funds to assist farmers. Music too became a commercialised affair where praise singing was no longer genuine but simply offered to ‘big men’ as a way of benefitting from their lavish display of wealth through the practice of money spraying. Where money spraying used to be a form of showing appreciation to the praise-singer for their talent, it now became, as Beier stated, “a form of self-display of the nouveau-riche: ‘I can spray more than you!’” (58). The practice had lost its ethical value. Most importantly, the Yoruba language suffered as the adulterated version being spoken by young people lost its rhythm the more the language was interspersed with English. Beier referred to this phenomenon as an “alarming symptom of the disintegration of Yoruba society” (58).

What Beier and Soyinka call the golden age of the Yoruba nation was lost as Nigeria advanced more and more into the postcolonial period. All that was beautiful about Yoruba culture, language, music, education and values was trampled on by the same people who should have protected it. Even western education was embraced with fervour as if it was the magic “that was supposed to solve all the problems of society” (65). As Beier said to Soyinka,

nobody thought of what the purpose of education was. What are we educating our children to become? What will they learn about their own society? Their history? The philosophy of the Yoruba? Where will their identity lie, when they have passed through that education? Will they learn anything at all about the other cultural groups in Nigeria with whom they will have to cooperate in forming a nation? (65)

The questions Beier poses here suggest that Yoruba people pursued western education to the demise of their own indigenous ways of education. These insights from *Timeless Memories* make decolonisation a complex phenomenon; it is not about singing the praises of a glorious African past but rather looking critically at that past and identifying what made it beautiful and what made it simultaneously ugly. Students of literature can then begin to decipher for themselves what decolonising knowledge would mean to them in practical terms. Such is the profundity of the conversations that can be had by seasoned scholars like Soyinka and Beier.

Timeless Memories presents an archival history of the development of drama and performance in Nigeria, giving readers first-hand insights into the early works of people like Kola Ogunmola, Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, the Orisun players, and the entire *Black Orpheus* team. Soyinka’s own role in developing drama and theatre in Nigeria comes out strongly in the book. So does Beier’s. The history of the Mbari Club which nurtured Yoruba theatre and other artforms is laid out in this book, forming a milestone in Yoruba cultural history. The Mbari Club was created by Beier in 1961 when he was working as a lecturer at the University of Ibadan. Talking about the Mbari Club in 1996, Beier and Soyinka reminisce on its instrumentality in bringing writers and artists together. Soyinka, who was a member of the Club, explains the pivotal role played by Mbari in creating and maintaining a community of practitioners:

Mbari cuts across the languages and the different arts. In Mbari we had the painters, the poets, the musicians, and the actors. And once people came into that kind of community, they simply absorbed the principles. And I as I said earlier: none of us at that time knew what a great thing we had, because we could not imagine what a terrible level of national disintegration we could reach. (51)

The disintegration of Yoruba society, which set in during the late 1960s, was compounded by the civil war, and later cemented by post-war corrupt politics. This was a tragedy for these two men, and reasonably so, considering the hard work they had put into developing the arts in Yorubaland. Comparing their 1992 conversation which centered on the dynamism of Yoruba religion and their 1996 conversation which is all about the deterioration of Yoruba society, it is evident that by 1996 these men had become very despondent about the political situation in Nigeria and in Yorubaland specifically.

The conversations between Beier and Soyinka project both men as deeply vested in the Yoruba culture. They understand it, embrace it, critique it, but at the same time love it. They appreciate Yoruba language and draw on its vivid imagery to convey their ideas, such as when Soyinka described the Oni of Ife, as captured in a photograph, looking at the crown, and said “It was like oju orolari!” (42). They explore Yoruba philosophy in relation to contemporary practices such as medical suicide, offering insights into the Yoruba ways of being. Despite their western education, they truly cherish Yoruba arts – music, theatre, poetry and dance – as well as its values. Their conversations construct them as patriots of the Yoruba nation. Such love for African culture can only be inspirational to young people who will encounter this book in their literature courses.

On the whole, *Timeless Memories* is a precious resource for teaching and researching African culture, indigenous drama and performance, African languages, as well as decolonisation. In closing his foreword to the book, Olu Obafemi makes the following apt appraisal of it:

Timeless Memories reincarnates and celebrates the peerless relationship of these two icons [Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier], their immersion with the culture and cosmos/pantheons of the Yoruba in all its manifestations and the enduring and illuminating education that they offer on culture. It must be read, as I have done with relish, by all culture workers, scholars, students, activists and enthusiasts in Nigeria, Africans, African descendants and Africanists all over the world. (6)

I must add that the book must also be read by decolonial thinkers as they forge pathways for Africa’s future.