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**Rezension**

Raheem Oluwafunminiyi\*

**Title:** The Mbari Artists and Writers Club  
in Ibadan

**Author:** Isabelle Malz and Nadine Siegert

**Editors:** Iwalewahauss, University of  
Bayreuth, Germany; Centre for Black Culture  
and International Understanding, Nigeria;  
and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,  
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The 1950s are regarded as a momentous period of great cultural re-awakening in Yorubaland, Nigeria. This cultural re-awakening continued into the early years of Nigeria's independence in 1960, when diverse modern artistic productions flourished. Much of what is known about traditional art was discovered and extensively documented by the European writers and colonial officials at the time. The Benin artefacts derived in the aftermath of the Benin Massacre of 1893 and the excavations carried out in parts of ancient Ile-Ife around 1911 and the following years brought knowledge of a once vibrant artistic industry across important centres in colonial Nigeria for the first time. Many of these artworks appeared to have been abandoned by its local inheritors, who had lost interest in them at that time. As interests waned, so did the knowledge, lore and histories of this heritage. With socio-political changes in the 1950s, the new educated African elite warmed themselves to western modernism, while also deriding the local culture. Notwithstanding, few individuals soon channelled their energies into preserving this lost heritage and reviving what had virtually disappeared through tireless dedication and promotion of the local cultures. It is here that the Mbari Club in Ibadan came to have a cultural meaning and expression.

The book 'The Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan' looks back at the history and significance of this club and focuses on two central issues. Firstly, written in English with a translation from the original German text, it examines its agency in Nigeria and the diverse artistic and literary transactions between 1961 and 1964. Secondly, the book offers interesting insights into the early years of the Mbari Club in Ibadan, which had opened in March 1961, and was founded by a German expatriate, Ulli Beier, along with artists and writers such as Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, John Pepper Clark, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe and Ezekiel Mphahlele (South Africa). The above are derived using documents and materials from the Ulli Beier Photographic Estate based in Iwalewaha, University of Bay-

reuth and the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding (CBCIU), in the context of the exhibition *museum global. Microhistories of an Ex-centric Modernism* by Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany.

The book observes that the idea of Nigerian modernism in arts and literature produced an oeuvre by artists and writers with direct links with the Mbari Club in Ibadan in the 1960s. Although these were mostly local writers and artists from Nigeria (and a few were from other parts of Africa), several expatriates, particularly from the United States and the Caribbean, were also associated with the Club. Like their Nigerian and African members, these expatriates enriched Mbari's activities through diverse artistic contributions and interventions, giving the agency a cross-cultural and trans-continental outlook. The Club, the book argues, became a site for these 'outsiders' to connect with their African roots on both spiritual and cultural plains.

As the book suggests, the activities in the Mbari Club exhibited a deep ambivalence and the material documents from the Ulli Beier Photographic Estate appear in variant forms, which explains why the focus is specifically on the Mbari Artists and Writers Club. By publishing the rich archival documents domiciled at Iwalewaha and the CBCIU, the book takes the reader to a period eagerly inclined towards a new art culture in a post-colonial setting. Also, the book brings together a collage of pictures of group and solo exhibitions in chronological order held mostly by the Mbari Club artists in its formative years. Through the documentation from the archive, an attempt is being made to visualise the Club's early history for the first time in book form. In addition to the pictures drawn from the Ulli Beier Estate, others were selected from *Black Orpheus*, the flagship journal founded by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn in 1957, later associated with the Mbari Club from 1961.

The book introduces each artist and writer's works along with brief biographical data including information on their respective specialities,

experiences and expertise with previous and current projects. These biographies detail the forms of training that would eventually influence the career path of each artist and their diverse artistic collaborations which later shaped their respective artistic biases. Also, the biographies suggest that some of the young inexperienced artists were encouraged by the Club to mount solo or group exhibitions of their work to help them acquire practical experience and further insights into their chosen artistic compositions. Hence, the Mbari Club served as a breeding ground for young artists to grow and later establish themselves locally and trans-nationally. The book also noted that the Club opened avenues for international visibility for these artists and writers by including their works in special issues of the *Black Orpheus* journal. The works of Demas Nwoko and Valente Malangatana, for example, featured prominently in the No. 8 and No. 10 editions of the journal, respectively.

That the Mbari Club placed strong emphasis on trans-cultural categories can be seen in the diverse exhibitions and works of the writers and works as documented in the book. Some of these artists and writers include Simon Okeke, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Ibrahim Salahi, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Valente Malangatana, Vincent Kofi Akweti, Georgina Betts, Ahmed Mohammed Shibrain and Skunder Boghossian. Others are Jimo Akolo, Dotun Okubanjo, Rufus Ogundele, Okpu Eze, Colette Omogbai, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Jacob Lawrence, Jacob Afolabi and Ru Van Rossem. The book also includes images of exhibitions mounted outside of the Mbari Club and by non-members of the Club who were only artistically connected with it. For instance, the book provides an image of a weeklong art exhibition by Makerere University's Department of Fine Arts at the University College Library, Ibadan, in 1961. The Mbari Club was very much renowned for collaborations that connected it with other similar artistic agencies such as the Extra-Mural Studies Department in Ibadan, which, in collaboration with the former, held series of exhibitions. Exhibition works were loaned to the Mbari Club as part of these collaborations through the support of the Nigeria Federal Department of Antiquities. An image of exhibitions of children's art and another image of an invitation to the celebrated Agbor Dancers from the old Western Region of Nigeria

are also included in the book. The diversity of artists on display illustrates the primal role trans-culturality played in the overall artistic transactions of the Mbari Club, which also influenced the artistic projects embarked by members.

The book also features ten images from the cover pages of back editions of *Black Orpheus* and another six images from books written by the Club's writers like Soyinka, Clark and Okigbo. The journal, the book suggests, served as a ready platform for the emerging literary scenes in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa with contributions from African and African American writers like Camara Laye, George Lamming, Gabriel Okara, Es'kia Mphahlele and Lenrie Peters, among others. The cover design for the first volume of the journal was made by a Nigeria-based Austrian artist, Susanne Wenger. The book provides a list of 20 publications by literary writers such as Ulli Beier, Dennis Brutus, Duro Ladipo and Alex Laguma, all published by Mbari Publications. The selected images as well as the list of publications are captured in the book to adequately explain local ownership and operations through Mbari Publishing, which set out to be the first publisher of African literature and art from the African continent. The images printed in *Black Orpheus* all featured in the book are sourced from the reproduction of artists' works and illustrate the emphasis on locality of place and strict utilisation of local contents.

The work has several merits. Though several studies exist on the Mbari Club, none has been able to bring together in a single publication a large repertoire of images, which highlights the pivotal role this agency played as a foremost site for artistic production, particularly in its visual and textual forms. The book provides readers with fresh perspectives on the modus operandi of the artists involved with the Club, based on the rich archives of one of its key founders. Although the Mbari Club was engaged in diverse activities, the book has focused on two very important categories – exhibitions and publications – capturing the alluring roles of the Mbari Artists and Writers Club for which the agency was known globally.

The book, nonetheless, is not without its shortcomings. Although the book's focus is on the Mbari Artists (who were mainly visual artists) and Writers Club, very little attention is given to the latter. The Writers Club was an important literary

category at the material time, which gave more visibility to the Mbari Club through the publication of several journal volumes and books. Remarkably, many of the Club's visual artists later published their works through members of the Writers Club who documented the life history of the visual artists and their new works in several Mbari publications. This helped the former connect easily with wider audiences and at the same time benefitted the artists, whose works now had far-reaching global visibility, in particular. In addition, the book could have benefitted from a clear demarcation of artists and writers based on their respective nationalities rather than lumping all of them together, which may suggest to the reader that all the artists and writers belonged to a single nationality. The non-inclusion of any material from *Art News from Africa*, a publication that began with the foundation of the Mbari Club, is a major drawback for the book. The publication, as the name implies, may have been useful in understanding those factors that influenced

the quest for African, nay, Nigerian modernism embraced by each artist associated with the Club through their visual and literary engagements. Lastly, several grammatical errors are noticeable in the book, which may have occurred in the process of translating the German texts into English.

In summary, however, the book constitutes one of the boldest contributions to the historiography of the Mbari Club Ibadan and an interesting insight into the then new artistic development among diverse agencies in early post-colonial Nigeria. The uncovering of images from Ulli Beier's Photographic Estate highlights the cosmopolitan and trans-cultural nature of the individuals associated with the Club in the early 1960s. It also illuminates how, in spite of its complexities, the Mbari Club positioned itself as a modern artistic space for transmitting trans-cultural and socio-historic knowledge and, at the same time, engendering a modern cultural awakening in Africa which had been in obvious decline in the closing decades of colonial rule.