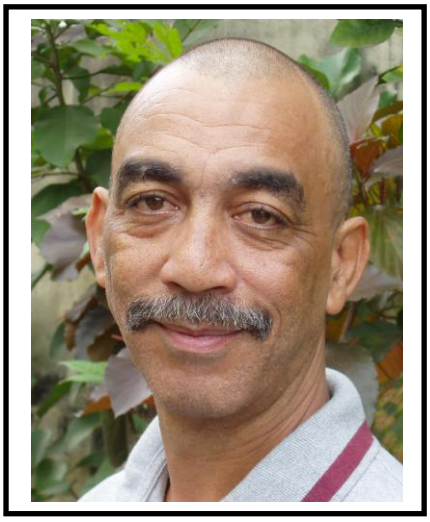
BORDERS INTERVIEW - AFRICANIST & GLOBAL

Adewale Maja-Pearce

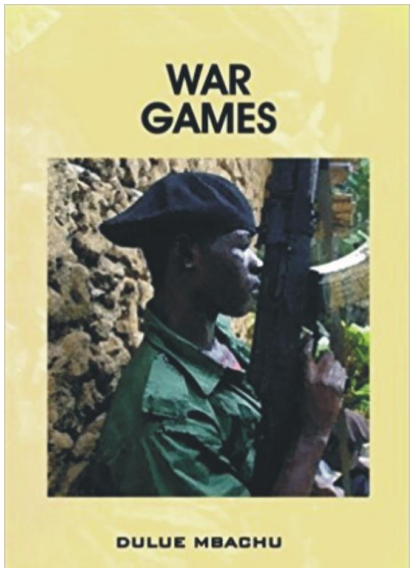


It is not for nothing that author, publisher and critic Adewale Maja-Pearce has gained a reputation for pulling no punches. And after what in public correspondence author Lola Shoneyin, described as the '*hatchet job*' Maja-Pearce undertook in *A Peculiar Tragedy* (2013), his biography of the Nigerian poet, JP Clark, it is not for nothing that she confessed to '*living in mortal fear of being Maja-Pearced*'. In January this year, I visited the redoubtable man in the house his father built in Surelere, Lagos. A stimulating, no-holds barred and, it must be said, very friendly - conversation ensued about a wide range of subjects, a notable one being his now institutionalised and very public war of words with Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, into which prominent members of Nigeria's literary community such as Ike Oguine, Olu Oguibe and Ikhide Ikheloa, have weighed.

[Disclaimer: Views and opinions expressed in this conversation are those of the person interviewed and are not necessarily the views shared by Borders: Literature for all Nations.**]**

You are the co-founder of The New Gong which your website describes as 'publishers of new writing and images' and, intriguingly, as 'an experiment on how writers could be useful to each other beyond drinking together'.

Talk to us about the origins of The New Gong



The idea for The New Gong began to take shape at the tail end of my career as Series Editor of the African Writers Series (AWS) at Heinemann in Oxford, UK. I saw that the imprint was coming to an end. Dulue Mbachu, a good friend, writer and IT expert, had what I believed was a very good novel in his manuscript *War Games*. I had a collection of essays that had been signed up for a publication that didn't materialise due to a falling out with the publisher. With Dulue as my partner, we decided it would be a good time to commit to founding The New Gong. We launched in 2005.

What about the vision driving The New Gong? In particular the vision behind the collective approach,what you describe as 'writers [being] useful to each other'.

First of all, we were determined to avoid the usual and costly problems of storage besetting conventional publishers. Amazon and technological advances have made that possible. The main thrust of the collective approach at The New Gong is to enlighten young writers who often have a misconception of what publishing amounts to and to provide resources for them. We provide them with an email address at The New Gong, along with editorial services and the process of loading up to Amazon, all of which they pay for. They can then target their constituencies by using the resources of the internet. However, we first encourage them to go and find a regular publisher which will publish their book for them and pay them royalties. That is much the preferred option.

What is the significance of the name?

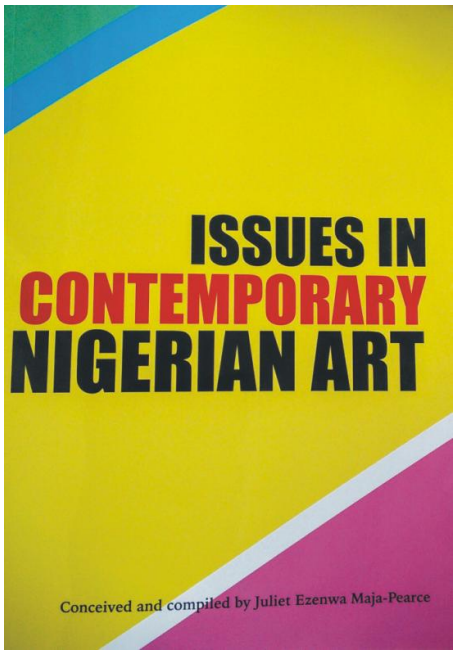
The New Gong was Dulue's idea. It evokes the village gong, town crier, that kind of thing.

12 years on, how has this "experiment" played out in practice, and what have been the main challenges?

The lack of distribution networks in Nigeria has been a major obstacle. There is no chain bookstore in the country like Borders in the US or WH Smith in the UK which will stock your books nationwide once you send the required number of books to their main centre. The infrastructure here – as in so much else – is poorly (or not even) developed.

What prompted the publication of The New Gong's* Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Art *by Juliet Ezenwa Maja-Pearce? And how - being an expensive enterprise to publish art books - was it made possible?

My wife, Juliet, who is a visual artist, simply asked The New Gong to publish her book! From that experience we have evolved into a specialist publishing house receptive to people with interesting ideas. The publication was made possible with funding from the Ford Foundation which Innocent Chukwuma leads. I have known Innocent since his days at the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO). He liked the idea of the book. Ford provided support for printing in the UK, distribution, marketing to university art departments and the launch. It was held here in the garden.



In his history of art book,* New Trees in an Old Forest, *Jess Castellote laments the lack of a corpus of art criticism in Nigeria to properly respond to the exploding production of visual art. What has been the reception to your book* Issues in Contemporary Art, *so far?

It has not been reviewed at all. Not even by academics at the various universities which have copies. We don't have a reviewing culture in Nigeria. It is my pet peeve. We don't have a culture of art or literary journalism. In the UK, there is very high level reviewing, not academic criticism, just plain reviewing, widely available. Journalism is in a crisis in this country.

And how challenging has it been to market a publication of this nature to a worldwide audience?

It's not a trade book. We're not looking for the general public to buy it. As I said, we are specialist and can target our audience. Aside from making hard copies available, we have loaded it onto Amazon so that people outside Nigeria can easily buy it as it's online. I can sit here in my office and reach everyone I need to reach anywhere in the world.

Having served as a member of the jury for the once prestigious but now discontinued Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, I thought you would be well-positioned to comment on the evaluation processes employed by Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Ltd (NLNG) for the Nigeria Prize for Literature.

What are your views, if any, about the way NLNG Prize makes its selections for the longlist and shortlist?

I don't know the ins and outs of the selection process. I think there should be a non-fiction category but not drama. It's very conservative to restrict the categories to just poetry and fiction and drama (and children's books, I believe). I find this incessant novel-writing is almost a cliché: you're either a novelist or a poet. It cuts off other areas of literature but I write non-fiction so I'm biased! (*laughter*)

But let's talk generally about prizes: I was on the jury of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa for two years. Sometimes it's difficult to disagree with the chair. One year a Zimbabwean woman writer, Yvonne Vera, died in Canada. She had published a novel, Under the Tongue, which I thought a good contender but the subject-matter – lesbianism – turned out to be an extra-literary problem. I thought it could and should have won. The quality of the writing was every bit as good as the one that won. On balance, I would have given it to her because of the subject matter. This is exactly the kind of space that literature *should* be working in. That's my own personal experience about judging a prize.

My feeling about prizes in general are that these things don't really matter. It's nice for the person who gets $100,000! As far as the NLNG Nigeria Prize is concerned, as I said, I don't think drama should be a category. Drama is active.

I digress but you mentioned contemporary literature earlier in our discussion. I wanted to say that I don't agree with the teaching of contemporary literature. I think it is a mistake, problematical. Because we are contemporary with it. We don't know what is important and what isn't yet. Time hasn't done its work. We know this writer who died 100 years ago is good because their work has survived. We can't make judgments about contemporary art or literature.

Isn't that what we are doing when we review a book? Judging? What of the beauty of the writing or the value of the issues?

Yes, but we are making transitory judgments. We are judging because we have to as reviewers. But our judgments are premature.

It's all too subject to fashion. And even the books we choose are based on fashion, public relations, which publisher is pushing their book. For instance, I was talking to a Nigerian who lectures at a university in America. I asked him which books his students are reading. Now, I happen to dislike *The Famished Road* and I have doubts about this beast called magic realism. It's a tricky area. It depends on language really, which is where *The Famished Road* falls down. A good example of that kind of writing, and a far better book, is Kojo Laing's *Search Sweet Country*. I told him I preferred *Search Sweet Country*. He said "*Absolutely*!" So I asked him, "*Why are you teaching The Famished Road, then*?" He said, "*Because you can get it easily in the bookshops!*"

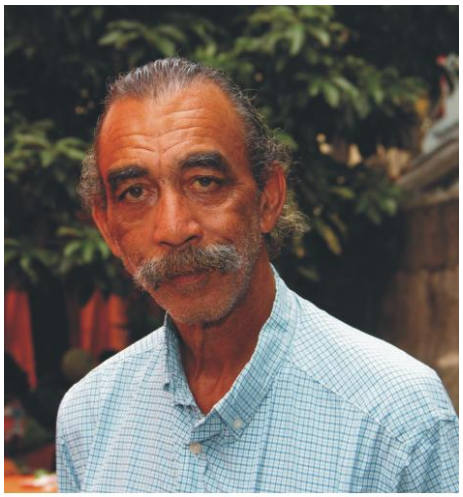
Of course, Ben Okri won the Man Booker Prize. It's true, that's what prizes do. They really help to market the book, and generate sales.

Exactly, they distort. They depend on the judgment of 2 or 3 people and they take on a life of their own, take up all the oxygen and subsume everything else that may be much better. In 50 years' time, I hazard that *Search Sweet Country* will still be there and *The Famished Road* won't be, but there I am making a premature judgment! The most famous writers of 19th century England are not for the most part the ones we read today. Prizes distract.

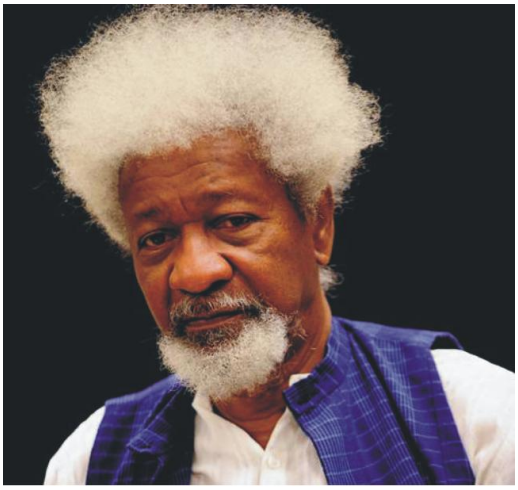
Let's go back to the Noma Award, the high points.

You fly Business Class, they put you up in a nice hotel, you eat and drink as much as you like. They don't pay you, but you get a stipend and they fly you to nice places. The only time in my life I've been to Switzerland. The company of the other judges was a lot of fun.

Your quarrel with the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, has been richly documented online. You have also generously provided a record of the rancour between you and the contributions of others to it, on The New Gong website under the title, "My Original Sin Against Soyinka". http://www.thenewgong.com/originalsin.html



Adewale Maja-Pearce
Anglo-Nigerian writer, journalist and critic



Wole Soyinka, playwright
Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1986

Tell us a little of the genesis and escalations of this 'battle' and how you believe publicizing it, to paraphrase your words, contributes value to Nigerian literature.

J. P. Clark, Nigeria's 'unofficial poet laureate' | *Wole Soyinka, playwright Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1986*

I'd written a review of his memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. I didn't like it and said so. I thought it was sloppily written. It was all over the shop. All celebrating Wole Soyinka. The value of writing a memoir is that you are an actor in a wider drama. It ought to have given us insight into the drama of Nigeria. It shouldn't be celebrating you as a person.

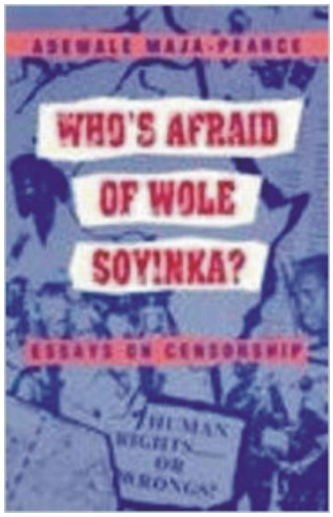
The first missile I got was when I ran into a problem with the poet, JP Clark, whose biography I was writing at the time. I didn't know Soyinka was seething over my review in the *London Review of Books* (https://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n15/adewale-maja-pearce/our-credulous-grammarian).

I wrote to him to ask him to share his thoughts on his highly publicised fight with JP. I wanted clarifications about a remark he had made in *The Man Died*, his prison memoir, regarding JP spreading a rumour about his health at the time of his imprisonment, largely in solitary confinement. There was concern at the time that the military government wanted to get rid of Soyinka and Soyinka accused JP of going around the world claiming that he – Soyinka – was suffering from syphilis. But all I got in return was this abusive email. It took me by surprise. He was a lot more concerned about the review than about the whole JP syphilis saga. From then on I got a lot of abuse from him. At JP's 80th birthday celebration at University of Lagos, in his keynote speech, he accused me of being a jumped-up non-writer, etc.

What did you think of* Dreams from my Father *by Barack Obama?

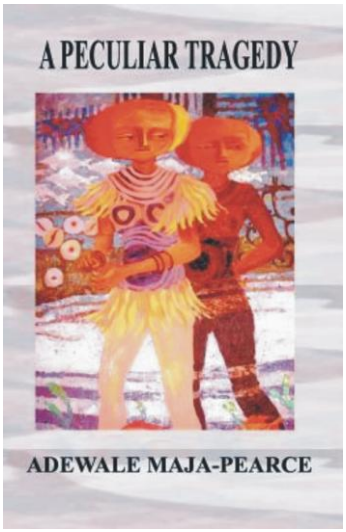
I liked it very much because Obama was grappling with issues and using himself as a springboard. It wasn't self-reverential.

Why did you go public with Wole Soyinka's rancour against you on The New Gong website?



I published the communications between Soyinka and me in its entirety to set the record straight, as they say. People could then make up their own minds, assuming they were interested. It was embarrassing. Lola Shoneyin, the author (she's Wole Soyinka's daughter-in-law) and others posted comments on Krazivity which my partner, Dulue, posted on The New Gong site alongside my own communications with Soyinka. We wanted to present the full debate. These things should be a lesson to us. Don't become an old man and behave like that. This culture we have of entitlement! This culture of *"Don't you know who I am?"* "*No, as a matter of fact, I don't know who you are!"* It's so trivial.

If you wrote a biography of JP Clark, your opinion of him must be very high.



Share your views about the poet.

He is Nigeria's best poet, our unofficial poet laureate. He had a rare talent which flowered early. Martin Banham, a lecturer at the University of Ibadan, got a contract to publish a book called ***Nigerian Student Verse*** from Ibadan University Press in 1960. When he approached JP for a contribution, JP said, *"I write poetry not student verse!*" Actually, he was right. He *was* writing poetry, not student verse. His poetry post-civil war was radically different from his earlier work.

***One of those who weighed into your clash with Soyinka was the writer Ike Oguine. In his letter, he veers off the subject, though, to address what he views as deficiencies in the content and style of your criticism of Soyinka's play,* The Road.**


Ike Oguine, Writer & Lawyer

This is what Oguine says: "You cannot deal fairly with* The Road *without conceding the ambition behind its complexity, the layers of meaning it seeks to engage. It is fair to question whether that complexity was successfully engaged, but to judge it on how good the pidgin in the play is or that sort of thing is simply to be ridiculous".

Would you be ready to re-consider your critique of* The Road *in the light of Oguine's thoughts?

Not at all. It was in the context of the whole language issue. This is, to me, a matter of great mystery. One of the chapters in my JP book is dedicated to not just *The Road*, not just to Soyinka, though he's a good example of the thing I want to talk about. Soyinka is a playwright of the Yoruba nation. Yoruba land has a long and distinguished tradition of drama. It is the main Yoruba literary vehicle. Moreover, at the turn of the last century there was great consciousness on the part of Yoruba intellectuals to revisit their culture which, due to colonialism, was under attack. By the early 1940s, this led to a revival of Yoruba drama with Hubert Ogunde at its helm. He and his troupe performed dramas across Yoruba land which the people could hear and understand. A Nigerian political leader banned Herbert Ogunde's plays but never banned Wole Soyinka's. But how do you communicate with Yoruba people in English? Soyinka's *The Road* isn't comprehensible to a Yoruba audience! Tolstoy wrote in Russian. Write in your language and in your own cultural idiom. Soyinka is actually writing English literature for a global English-language audience. The title of that chapter was *'What is Wrong With Writing In Your Own Language?*' I went to every interview Soyinka has ever given and this question crops up again and again. And he can

never give a straight answer. He says he doesn't want to speak only to the Yorubas. In fact he has betrayed his culture, just as Chinua Achebe has also done.

The problem is that this Yoruba language, this Igbo language, will die if people don't write in it.

Prof. Chinua Achebe

Oguine also dismisses your comments on Chinua Achebe as ''throwaway'' and as ''having no other purpose than to be provocative.''

From time to time, I hear similar views aired about your approach to literary criticism, which some might say is deliberately provocative. Would you care to respond

People have said that repeatedly. Maybe I'm blunt and direct. But I don't say what I don't feel. If I say it, it's because I feel strongly about it. Maybe it's the way I say it, not the content. There are many things in this society we don't say bluntly because we don't want to cause offence. So we as a *small boy* must sweeten the thing so in the end we miss the whole point. It's the ways we are silenced. It's a whole hierarchy.

You were the Series Editor for the famous African Writers Series (AWS) published by Heinemann.

Can you go back in time and talk to us about your experience while you served in that capacity.

I was brought on board as a consultant by Vicky Unwin, the publisher. We could only publish six titles a year. The series itself was initially sustained by the burgeoning need for books in Nigerian universities. But once IBB came in and the IMF introduced the Structural Adjustment Program in the mid-1980s everything changed. *Things Fall Apart* was like the American economy before the Chinese came, but other than that scale was not enormous at AWS. *Things Fall Apart* by itself sustained the series. It was a calling card. Everyone had read it. The second money spinner was another Achebe title, *No Longer At Ease*! I made some innovations: introduced poetry, and Vicky allowed me a few anthologies and I sneaked

in some stand-alones. The readers of our manuscripts were European Africanists, by the way, not Africans. AWS was based in Oxford. Publishing African books in Oxford is paradoxical, a contradiction somehow.

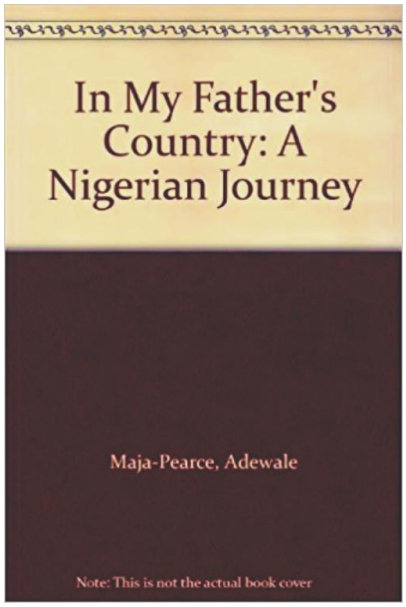
AWS was a tricky series also, being a trade imprint retailed by an educational publisher. Educational publishing is about scale - so the imprint never really fitted in.

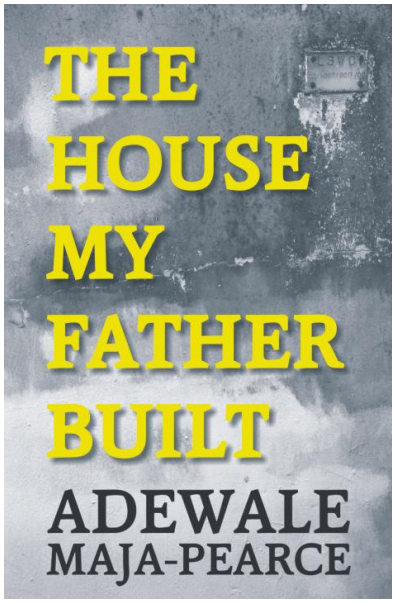
Christopher Okigbo, celebrated poet,
died at the Biafra front during Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970)

Of your books, the one I know the best is* The House My Father Built *published by Farafina Books. You are, however, recognised locally and internationally for several more, and now I'm quoting, "illustrious work(s)" ranging from your volume of Christopher Okigbo's Collected Poems (1986) to your travel essay,* In My Father's Country *(1987).

Can you tell us which of your books holds the deepest personal value for you, and why?

In My Father's Country was the first part of a trilogy. *The House My Father* built was the second. I jokingly tell people that the third one, which I haven't written yet, will be *'A Farewell to My Father's Country'!*





I left Nigeria when I was sixteen for the UK. I came back twenty years later. When I left, my notion of Nigeria was limited to Obalende, where I schooled, and Ikoyi, where we lived. It was my boarding school memories which brought me back. I was happy there. It was my

first time out of the colonial bubble of Ikoyi with its St Saviour's and Corona Schools, where we even had teachers from England. I learnt to speak Pidgin (so-called) and made good friends, some of whom I retained. While I was living in England, I wrote short stories called *Loyalties* based on my memories of Nigeria.

My Dad died in 1981 and left this property to my three siblings and me. An uncle came to visit us in 1983 and invited me to come to Lagos and spend a holiday with him and his family. I connected with some Gregs guys and wrote something about the whole experience for *London Magazine* which got picked up by an editor who asked me what my plans were. I told him I wanted to travel back to Nigeria, travel around and ask myself, *'Am I a Nigerian?'* Which is what I did. My travels coincided with Babangida's coup. There was a lot of material for a book. In *My Father's Country* was eventually published by William Heinemann. Later, I got a job as Africa researcher with the London-based *Index on Censorship* which allowed me to travel freely to Nigeria and engage with the tenants I had also inherited. *The House My Father Built* was about my quest to get rid of them in one year. It took eight! The ordeal was hilarious, great copy, and it was set against the turbulent background at the time: General Sani Abacha, Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution and so on.

The House My Father Built ***has been very well received. Congratulations, Adewale. And thank you for coming on Borders.***

Host, Olatoun Williams