

Tribute to Eckhard Breitinger – the African

My first personal encounter with Professor Eckhard Breitinger was during the 1999 Summer School in Bayreuth. It was an inevitable meeting because three years earlier, a former Humboldt Fellow, Prof. Umar Danfulani had given me Breitinger's email address and insisted I contact him to explore the possibility of studying for my PhD in Bayreuth. I was both reluctant and hesitant at first. The reputation of Breitinger had long been established through several publications of the Bayreuth African Study Series (BASS) and his own academic and activist output in the field of African studies were enormous. I did not want to jump in front of an egomaniac. When I finally made contact, Breitinger enthusiastically advertised the over 50,000 African collections in the Bayreuth University Library as the unique selling point but insisted on wanting to meet me in person before making any commitments. For this purpose, he invited me to take part in the Summer School of 1999. He was rather simple, down to earth and quite good-natured.

That meeting exemplified two things I came to appreciate about Breitinger: I was later to understand that he had just gone through an unpleasant experience with a Nigerian scholar he had hosted and naturally should not want to have another Nigerian again so soon. Yet he wanted to give me a chance to prove myself rather than generalize about the nature of Nigerians. Secondly, he used his resourcefulness to secure funding from DAAD and his wide contacts to assemble many scholars across diverse fields, countries and interests. Many of the people I first encountered in the Summer School have remained my friends and academic collaborators until now.

Over two years later, I was completing my PhD in Bayreuth under the supervision of Breitinger and like a dream come true, I also signed a contract to publish the resulting dissertation under BASS. He must have been happy with the work, for he entered it for consideration under the Best Literature in English Dissertation in Germany for 2001. A couple of weeks later, Breitinger called me to his office to announce that the dissertation had indeed won the prize; it had only one condition – the awarding body will fund and publish the work under their own pact. I asked what the implications of accepting the prize was and he informed me it would mean the book goes to a different publishing house than BASS. Now the Germans know too well the inviolability of a signed contract: 'Vertrag ist Vertrag'. Breitinger handed me his copy of the contract I had signed and urged me to think about it and should I accept the prize, I could simply tear away the contract like it never existed. I took the document home and had a weekend-long soul searching self-examination. Two days later, I returned the document to him and told him I would rather forfeit the prize and its 'glory'. That incidence was a big test for the two of us and we came out with great strength of character as well as a better understanding of each other's values. Curiously, Breitinger never once asked me, then or in the many years thereafter, what motivated me to turn down the award. If he did, I would have gladly told him that I was too grateful for the chance to work with him to be enticed by self-glory. I also never asked him why he was willing to invalidate a signed contract on my account.

Over the years, we stayed in touch. He organized more Summer School programmes and we met in four African countries over ten years. Like a full circle, I was back in Bayreuth in 2013, the year Breitinger died; this time I was a Humboldt Fellow and he, a retired Professor of the University. He still pre-arranged accommodation for my family and I, as he had done for countless students and scholars over the years. When he came personally to pick my wife and I from the train station, just as he had done consistently for others over the years, I immediately

noted that he was looking quite frail. Nothing in his emails betrayed waning strength. He went to grab one of the suitcases and I realized he was aging and not strong as he used to be. I told him to let me carry the two cases and thanked him for his usual hospitality. I did not know that his weakness would be diagnosed as cancer only three months later. I had the honor of visiting him while his physical body quickly deteriorated. I was grateful that his wife, Pia was there to stay with him through this time. This is fitting for the African in Breitingner, to be surrounded by people he loved. My wife, four children and I visited him just four days before he died. I was stunned that he never lost his great sense of humor. He brought out jokes I had not heard from him previously and shared them through concealed pain. When it was time to leave, Breitingner insisted on walking us to the bus stop. Nothing I said could dissuade him. He walked unsteadily with us, with my heart skipping beats as he looked like being ready to fall with each step. But he made it to the bus stop. We left Pia to hold his hand while we boarded the bus. I just did not realize it would be the last contact on this side of life. It must have been his way of having a grand farewell.

I am grateful for his passionate scholarship, committed friendship, avowed openness and accessible resource. He made Bayreuth home to many students who came from Africa to study in Bavaria. He took many of these students on unsolicited tours to show them historical areas of interests in Germany. He never missed an opportunity to be a German diplomat while sharing African perspectives of on issues. On behalf of the many African students who have benefitted directly and indirectly from the person, position and disposition of Eckhard Breitingner, I want to say, '*mun gode. A huta lafiya*' (we thank you. Rest well).

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My Doktorvater, Eckhard Breitingner

I had the chance to meet Prof. Eckhard Breitingner for the first time at the University of Buea in Cameroon in January 2005 at a DAAD-sponsored conference on "Women, Popular Culture and Land Use". Having heard of his profound research activities in the field of Anglophone African literature in general and African theatre in particular, I did not hesitate to walk up to this academic who had an endless list of established African scholars under his tutelage. I introduced myself, my research topic, and announced my interest to apply for a DAAD scholarship for postgraduate research towards my PhD thesis at the University of Bayreuth. He listened to me keenly, read some seriousness in my request and encouraged me to apply for the grant. I felt greatly honoured when, during this conference that he had initiated, he entrusted the selling of some books published in his Bayreuth African Studies Series (BASS) into my hands. I sold the books, but as I wanted to turn over the money to Prof. Breitingner, unexpectedly he refused to take it and asked that it be used for the conference.

Finding my research on rituals in African drama interesting, Prof. Breitingner accepted to be my academic host in Bayreuth. We immediately started the application process for a DAAD scholarship. I was awarded an eighteen-month scholarship and was finally on my way to Germany to complete my research. His approach to discussing, reading and commenting on my work was so comfortable that I was no longer intimidated by his decades of research or his

international academic reputation. He did everything in his capacity to ensure that my dissertation was submitted on time. His impact on my academic life does not begin and end only with discussions that shaped the work that was published as a book. During my stay in Bayreuth he ensured that I was at ease. He provided all that was needed for me to begin a comfortable life in Bayreuth. Upon my arrival in Bayreuth in April 2007, he picked me up from the train station and opted to lift my suitcases to my upstairs apartment.

Each time I refer to Prof. Breitinger as my supervisor, I feel uncomfortable because he was a lot more than a supervisor. With his boundless generosity, he was no less than a father. Indeed he was a father, and in my heart he will remain a father. I, like the rest of the academic world and especially his students spread all around the world, will forever miss him.

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What Eckhard Meant to Me: A Tribute in Memory of Prof. Eckhard Breitinger

The cell phone rang intermittently. I pulled off the busy highway to answer the call; I was travelling to Naivasha with my family for a long-awaited and well-deserved holiday. I had just returned to Kenya on 15 July 2013 upon the successful completion of my PhD studies at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. Instantly, I recognized the husky voice of the caller at the other end; it was Prof. Chris Odhiambo's, my colleague at Moi University. "Have you heard the sad news?" Chris asked. I had not, and told him so. From the tone of his voice and for the many times the phone had rung, I guessed it must have been something very important I urgently needed to know. To avoid creating suspense, Chris, who must have carefully rehearsed the words tersely said, "Eckhard is no longer with us." I was utterly devastated. My head dropped on the steering wheel and, as if waiting for a cue, violent sobs shook my entire being. My wife and children were shocked to see my reaction. "What is it, dad?" our daughter Madge asked, while my wife who sat next to me wrapped her hand around my shoulder trying to comfort me. I cannot remember well if Chris said more but the echo of those words deafeningly rang in my ears. At that moment, I got lost in surreal reality, struggling to make sense of that message, dramatically conveyed by Chris, a professor of theatre and African literature.

To borrow Chris' words, Eckhard left us on 15th August 2013, after a brave struggle with cancer. That was exactly one month since my return from Germany. Why did his demise leave me so devastated? For sure, Eckhard meant so much to me. He was my academic father and mentor, travelling with me through a long and sometimes lonesome journey in pursuit of a PhD. What struck me the first time we met in Germany is that he insisted that I drop the formal title and way of addressing him as professor. I must confess that I found it difficult to do so but as we continued to interact his easy demeanour enabled me to drop all formalities. With time, I realized that most of his former students fondly referred to him as Eckhard. He was simple, approachable and gentle.

Although his main role as a mentor was to advise me on academic matters, Eckhard together with his wife Dr. Pia Thielmann ensured I was comfortable throughout the four years I stayed in Germany. On many occasions, they would pick me from my room at the Internationales Studentenwohnheim in Bussardweg 43, to take me on road tours across the beautiful Bavarian

country side. Those precious moments will forever remain etched in my memory. Indeed, there is nothing as breathtaking as driving through the dark green forests of Bavaria in summer. With a deep sense of nostalgia, I vividly remember Eckhard for his detailed narratives on a variety of subjects during those excursions. It is through him that I learnt the rich history of the kings and queens of Bavaria. He explained the historical significance of the many castles found in the region. In short, his repository of knowledge was encyclopaedic. We often participated in the Easter festivities. Most remarkable for me were the processions during the holiday of Corpus Christi. As we followed these processions he would explain the religious meaning of the rituals and recitations led by a priest from the Catholic Church. Usually, the journey would start in a church and the procession would snake its way through the villages, stopping after short intervals for prayers. The streets would be decorated with colourful flowers as more and more people joined the procession. Immortalizing these occasions are treasurable photographs we took with Eckhard and Pia together with Hanni, their lovely dog. It is during these tours that I learnt a lot about life in Germany including; the origin of some beer breweries founded by monks; settlement patterns; regulations on garbage and waste management; farming techniques and how farmers get incentives and subsidies from the government; how Kartoffeln (potatoes) were part of the daily menu during a period of food rationing in Germany when Eckhard was a young boy.

My first encounter with Eckhard was in 1999 during his visit at Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya. He was a keynote speaker at a Summer School on Theatre for Development in Africa organized by Prof. Chris Odhiambo in conjunction with Prof. Peter Simatei. At that time, Simatei was pursuing his PhD studies at the University of Bayreuth under Eckhard's supervision. It was Simatei who initiated the relationship between Eckhard and the Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies at Moi University. But there was another person who was instrumental towards the formation of this linkage. Before going to Germany, Simatei had been desperately looking for a professor to host him during his stay as a scholar funded by the KAAD. He came across the name Eckhard Breitingner in the acknowledgement page of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's book *Decolonising the Mind*. That is when Simatei decided to consult Prof. Kembo Sure of the Department of Linguistics, who remembered meeting Eckhard during a visit at Bayreuth. From those encounters, staff and students from the Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies have continued to benefit from the collaboration between the two universities. That is how I was to meet Eckhard ten years later when I joined the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) in April 2009.

A week before the defense of my PhD thesis, I visited Eckhard in the company of three colleagues from the University of Bayreuth. Pia had baked his favourite cake. Although he was looking frail and drained by the chemo sessions, he narrated to us his encounters with various students from Africa with a great sense of humour. One anecdote he remembered was the exchange of words between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe during a conference organised by the Writers Association of Germany held in Berlin in 1988. At this event, Ngũgĩ delivered a lecture in his mother tongue (Gĩkũyũ) to the chagrin of his audience comprising of writers from Africa like Buchi Emecheta, Mazisi Kunene and Ahmadou Kourouma. At the end of our visit, Eckhard escorted us up to the door, promising that he would attend my PhD defense. Pia later told me that this occasion meant so much to him; it was very important for him because I was the last student he mentored and supervised in his long academic career. It is for this reason that he gathered all his strength to write the evaluation report for my dissertation. To fulfil his promise, he graced my defense which took place on 26 June 2013. I later learnt from Pia that his condition deteriorated after that day. I was so overcome with emotions when Prof. Susan

Arndt, president of the jury of examiners, asked me to say something after my presentation. I acknowledged support from my mentors—Prof. Said Khamis, Peter Simatei, Chris Odhiambo and Eckhard Breiter. The photo of Eckhard congratulating me after the successful defense is iconic; speaking a thousand words about a man who devoted all his energy to see his last student graduate with a PhD in African literature. This is a passion he had pursued throughout his life, having been a committed member of the African Literature Association (ALA) as well as being the founder and publisher of the much acclaimed Bayreuth African Series (BASS). I can only imagine what was in his mind at that moment. As the words “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race” flashed through my mind, I quickly thought they may have been relevant to Eckhard as well. That is why I wept when Susan called upon me to speak.

I returned to Germany on 4 May 2014. The coincidence and significance of this date was not lost to me as I arrived in Bayreuth that Sunday. I recalled that this was Eckhard’s birthday, having attended his 70th birthday celebration in 2010. My return was a homecoming of sorts. Besides attending a series of meetings organized by BIGSAS, I had purposed to meet Pia and later pay homage to Eckhard. Meeting Pia on Friday 9 May 2014 was truly therapeutic. We had breakfast together and had a lengthy talk, remembering precious moments we shared with Eckhard, and what he really meant to each of us. Afterwards Pia took me to visit Eckhard at his final resting place. The silence as we walked through the cemetery was amplified by the raindrops falling upon Pia’s umbrella. Coincidentally, I was in the same suit I was wearing during my PhD defense, the last time I met Eckhard, when he embraced me—the final embrace. The flood of these memories overwhelmed me profoundly. I am not quite sure how long we stayed there. We took some photos and I said a prayer for Eckhard. After parting with Pia, I went to my hotel room where I slumped on the bed. When I woke up, the pillow was drenched with warm tears. I returned to Kenya the same day, remembering what Eckhard meant to me: it is through Eckhard that I was able to undertake my PhD studies at a German university. May his soul rest in peace and may his legacy endure.

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Photo: Weeraya Donsomsakulkij