

## Susanne Wenger, Art, Religion and Yoruba Collective Cultural Memory

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### INTRODUCTION

Susanne Wenger came to live among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria in the 1950s at a time when most Europeans were disillusioned with Europe and its self-destruct following the Second World War. Already an accomplished artist, she came with Ulli Beier, a linguist, in the so-called “marriage of convenience” and they settled at the University College, Ibadan, where the determined efforts of the colonialists to ‘deculturise’ and acculturate Africans was palpable (Omotosho, 2015).

Prior to her coming to Nigeria, Wenger had gotten to study mystic religions—Shamans of the Eskimo, symbolism of Tibetan religion (Beier, 1984), even though she was not very religious (Oluwatoki, 2005). She was in quest of new experience and ideas to rejuvenate her and her art (Akanji, 1958; Oluwatoki, 2005). Her childhood meditation in the woods of Graz, Austria, where she was born in 1914 and the difficulty of living with ever quarrelling parent (Omotosho, 2015; Beier, 1975) prepared her to be free, determined and creative (Oluwatoki, 2005).

The Yoruba society of the 1950s, just like elsewhere, was going through critical re-evaluation of its values and virtues. Islam and Christianity, already entrenched, had compounded the bifurcation of the Yoruba religious worldview; the traditional and the ‘modern’, so-called. It was also a period of nationalist fervour; extolling African ingenuity and researching into the greatness of its civilization with the aim of boosting African renaissance (Beier, 1984; Oluwatoki, 2005).

Understandably, simultaneous with this intellectual fervour, the Yoruba *Orisa* religion gained new impetus—a boost in its inherent resilience with additional momentum in interest in its philosophy. Yoruba spiritualism was to touch the core of Susanne’s being; she had come home to stay (Beier, 1984; Oluwatoki, 2005).

From December, 1950 when she came to Nigeria to January 12, 2009 when she passed on, Susanne devoted her life and time to restoring shrines and producing archisculpture, as Borchhardt-Birbaumer and Schanti (n.d.) described her sculptures in the Sacred Groves of Osogbo, to “accommodate the homeless gods”. She worked hard throughout her long and eventful life producing great works of

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art—painting, sculpture and batik. Her works are a testimony to the ardour of a greatly talented artist and the devotion of a deeply religious person. Wenger was eventually the last resort of the battered *Olorisas* who often paid her visits to be advised not only on how to continue to preserve the “abode of the gods” but also on how to tackle the incessant lethal attacks on the Orisa and all that Orisa religion stand for even by the very ‘Children’ of Orisa!

This paper interrogates Susanne Wenger’s legacy of “Art is Ritual” to unravel her message in the seemingly unaccomplished and perhaps un-accomplishable rejuvenation of a ‘by-gone’ religious worldview through the re-creation of its art—the New Sacred Art. Did Susanne fail in her mission or we have to attempt a postmodern double reading to her intention to get her message? Through library search and historical and content analyses, the paper attempts to contextualise the jigsaw of Wenger - Yoruba tug-of-war over Yoruba Orisa religion and its world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Going by Wenger’s (and her contemporary colleague artists’—Nitsch, Beuys among others) declaration that “Art is Ritual”, it is important to discern the intrinsic connection between art and religion. As Bernard Shaw concluded, “religion is the only real motive force in the world” (Smith, 1965). It is about truth manifested in various forms even if its various forms (religions) lay claim to monopoly of absolute truth; a situation that has ‘made’ religion “fields of blood” (Armstrong, 2014). Religion is enlightenment but more and more it is meeting with science, which paradoxically seemed to have earlier rejected (western) religion. For, as Zukav (1980) has shown, Eastern religion (and its philosophy) has kin-relationship with Physics. It is all about reality. According to him,

Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends upon what we think. What we think depends upon what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality (p. 310).

If man is to reconnect with (embrace) Mother Earth, who, Susanne insisted, “is ill-treated to the point of exhaustion”, man would have to meditate in the “ongoing process of pure-form finding” (Wenger, 1994). This is the essence of art as ritual, art must assert humaneness. To Wenger; every true work of art is a pilgrimage to the wilderness-altar of multi-dimensional beginnings in psychic depth, which the artist and his work go hand in hand—in need of each other’s guidance (Wenger, 1990, 1994). This is what Borchhardt-Birbaumer and Schanti (n.d.) discern in Susanne Wenger having strong spiritual bond with nature. But Wenger’s point is that every artist must of necessity be so bonded.

While not directly addressing Wenger’s “multidimensional beginnings”, Wagner, the great composer has left us with what is akin to societal (public) purpose of art in his contrasting, in “Art and Revolution”, the public art of the Greeks with the ‘modern’ western art. According to Wagner, “art should be the pure expression of a free community’s joy in itself ... placed beyond the necessity of maintaining itself by commercial means” (Newman, 1952). Wagner was calling for a return to nature (Wenger’s beginnings) and man who will be supplied by the “collective wisdom of the community” (p. 216ff).

It must be noted that Wenger was actually prepared for her life works among the Yoruba by her enrolment and experiences in the Vienna Art Club, which she co-founded. As pointed out by Borchhardt-Birbaumer and Schanti, aside sharing common holistic approach and the vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the call for more organic and more humane architecture with Ernst Fuchs and Frederick Stowasser (a.k.a. Hundertwasser), he shared with the latter the absorption of Eastern philosophy. Wenger and her colleagues had been influenced by Taoist ideas which (like Zen Buddhism) led them (Wenger and Hundertwasser) to a process-driven, dynamic world (and art) view.

Susanne Wenger came, perhaps, just in time to 'salvage' the situation for the dying Orisa world with its attendant ritual art. As Oluwatoki (2005, p. 64) pointed out, she seemed to be trying to 'recreate' what her (European) culture was doing everything to destroy. Oluwatoki rhetorically asked if Wenger could make a success of the venture. Wenger could be said to have gone beyond 'My' culture—'Their' culture in her absorption of Orisa religion. As she put it herself (1994), she was devout to all religions' inner source; she belonged to no one. Wenger conceived life as motion—being in and beyond time—simultaneously using the analogy of river and time that never flow back to their source but follow "the inescapable dimension of time". Just like motion, culture mirrors life. There is nothing like her culture and their culture for Wenger. She found herself in the time expanse of Orisa world.

We are still left with explaining why six decades of Susanne Wenger's concerted art and religious work left the Yoruba even farther from the cultural and religious fervour of the 1950s. To put Oluwatoki's (2005) question in reverse, "Did she fail in this onerous task? We have adopted constructivism as the theoretical framework to explain the outcome of Susanne Wenger's work—art and religion—in Yorubaland. Central to constructivism is the idea of knowledge and social order. As Barnes (1995) pointed out, Durkheim was seminal to the sociology of knowledge and to interactionist theory.

Durkheim in *The elementary forms of the religious life* (1915) showed that interaction and repeated interactions bring forth, sustain and reinforce categories of experience. As he claimed, classifications and cosmologies are "constructed by men". In other words, categories are socially constructed and rules socially sustained and interpreted (Barnes, 1995).

The world operates on shared knowledge, which enjoys support of authority that sacralises it as resource from the ancestors and passed down the generations. This Durkheimian brilliant exposition captures the essence of religion and culture as determinants of socialization (of the child). To Scheff (1988 cited in Barnes, 1995), socialization is possible because "deference- emotion system" is not culturally transmitted (taught), but present prior to what is taught. As Trevarthen (1988 cited in Barnes, 1995) concluded, the child does not merely assimilate, she connives in the "transmission, evaluation and application of knowledge". Shared knowledge and collective skills are essential for the cognitive and cultural development of the child.

Tradition—a belief, custom or way of doing things passed down through generations of a particular group of people (A.S. Hornby, 2015) —, what Barnes (1995) simply called "inherited knowledge", if created by human beings should ordinarily not control them. As Barnes suggests, giving constructivism, "tradition is the *continuing* collective accomplishment of human beings... exists through the continually exercised powers of human beings themselves" (p. 112). It is the nature of tradition that "knowledge is inherited from the ancestors, extended and modified in the course of life, and passed on to descendants". The implication, Barnes insists, is that "tradition lacks the power to persist, and hence to exist at all, of itself". Garfinkel (1967), Habermas (1987, 1984), Giddens (1990) among others (all cited in Barnes,

1995), have all in their studies lend credence to how the traditional and the modern are the same prevalence of tradition—what won in the past and its adjusted version (by the people) in the present.

Going by the foregoing, it can be said that the inherited knowledge, in this case religious tradition, which had been sustained and passed on for generations among the Yoruba had become weakened due to many factors (that would be discussed in the next section); perhaps people had begun to doubt the ‘strength’ of the traditions, contemplating ‘closure’ of a worldview that no more served their purpose. It is in this respect that the ferocious attack of the tradition by the Christian missionaries (backed by the authority of the colonial state) made the people (already traumatised) yield by a few generations, and which led to the near total abandonment of the knowledge inherited from the ancestors while they took on the inherited knowledge of another people and have since made it their own in subsequent generations. The vehemence with which the Muslims in Northern Nigeria defended their inherited knowledge of Islamic traditions, the acquiescence of the British authorities to ‘ban’ the Christian missionaries from evangelising in the North for pecuniary advantage go ahead, both ways that authority, at different levels, support shared knowledge for it to thrive.

## THE COLLAPSE OF ORISA WORLD

The Yoruba have a very deep philosophical tradition as exemplified in the rich array of their folklore, proverbs etc. They developed a very sophisticated cosmology and an elaborate pantheon. According to Akintoye (2010, p. 32), by the 10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, Yoruba religion was fully formed; conceiving all existence as located in two realms; *Aye*—lower realm—the earth, the abode of humans, and *Orun*—higher realm—the abode of spiritual beings, where Olodumare, the Supreme Being resides in the first heavenly sphere. He is the Orisa—*Olorun* (Sovereign of Heaven) and *Oluwa* (Lord of all). The other gods—*Imole*—and the spirits in their hierarchy occupy the second heavenly spheres. The orisas are in the highest category. Each imole—some 401 of them—with its own human affair department requires particular type of sacrifice (*ebo*) and rituals (*etutu*).

Yoruba divination system, *Odu Ifa* is binary and very sophisticated just like the Chinese *I Ching* (Legge, 1964). Oluwole (2017) has brilliantly pointed out the need to go for Binary Complementarity of the African world view as against Western Binary Opposition (pp. 174–175). Ifa (also called *Orunmila*—Heaven knows who accomplishes/survives), the god of divination and custodian of hidden knowledge, is the mouthpiece of the gods. The profound Yoruba philosophy is encompassed in Odu Ifa—the tome of Ifa corpuses to be mastered by the adept diviner. With intensive and long training in Ifa lores, the *Babalawo* (Father or adept of secret knowledge) is an embodiment of folk wisdom, privy to great secrets and practising in a guild of collaborative elite (Abimbola, 1976; Akintoye, 2010). The Yoruba believe in afterlife, a place of rest where they are constantly in interaction and help of humans. They have no concept of hell. They believe in the reincarnation of the dead in their descendants. They are ardent practitioners in herbal medicine. The Yoruba lived a good life with the belief that living well and in harmony with family, friends, neighbours and associates as *Omoluabi* (Respectable personality) not only gives you good repute (*Oruko rere*) but also make you a dignified person (*Eni iyi*).

Many factors account for the fall of the Oyo Empire, the largest mega state ever achieved by the Yoruba; unresolved rivalry and suspicion between the Alaafin and his chiefs that produced a despotic Prime Minister, Basorun Gaha, Alaafin Abiodun’s destruction of Bashorun Gaha and other warrior chief

lineages, the false prospect of Alaafin Abiodun's reign (a facade lulling the people to a false well-being), subsequent rise of royal despotism and the disappearance of the Alaafinate constitution's checks and balance (Oluwatoki, 2001; Akintoye, 2010). Oyo military power vanished following Gaha-Abiodun Saga (Akintoye 2010, p. 271). Abiodun's successor, Awole started a spiral of anti-constitutional, taboo-breaking policies and actions that not only cost the monarchy the much enjoyed reference and popularity, it produced weak and ineffective Alaafins culminating in the most unfortunate ambition and miscalculation of Afonja that terribly sealed the fate of the Empire (Akintoye, 2010; Johnson, 1921). The last Alaafin, Oluewu lost his life in the final attempt to subdue Ilorin, Afonja's dream cemetery city-state. The fall on the battle field of Alaafin Oluewu triggered the unprecedented exodus of Oyo people from their glorious capital, Oyo Ile, the proud city of valiant and majestic Alaafins. The people just packed and went to take new lives in other towns to the south (Akintoye, 2010).

The disappearance of Oyo Empire and the Oyo Kingdom at its core resulted in great tumult for Yorubaland and peace eluding the Yoruba. Oyo refugees became menace of other Yoruba towns; breaking the Yoruba lofty ethos in the angst of their dire situations. Many new city states sprang up with Ibadan emerging supreme and able to check the menace of Ilorin on the entire Yorubaland at Osogbo Battle in 1840 (Ajayi and Smith, 1964; Akintoye, 2010). Ibadan however strove to hold hegemony over all Yorubaland. Resistance to this new hegemon that would have created a new order spread wide aside from minor wars and the invasions from neighbours. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a dreadful destruction of the achievements of earlier centuries for the Yoruba.

The loss, insecurity and destitution that reduced people, old and young, rich and poor, to utter penury and degradation definitely caused psychic disequilibrium. All manners of fellow feelings were gone; betrayal, perfidious actions and bewilderment were the new order. Many Yoruba were carted into slavery.

It was a mad house scenario of a people who turn against themselves, disrupting their age-long civilized life patterns and sending off countless of fellow citizens into slavery. At the same time new city states rose that gave Yorubaland a new face. Akintoye (2010, p. 326) gave a striking description of development:

... Ibadan has come, in the twentieth century, to serve as a sort of "national" political capital of Yorubaland; Abeokuta, the early headquarters of Christianity; Ilorin, the Yoruba headquarters of Islam.

This euphoric declaration is the exact epitaph for the Orisa world, which had collapsed with the caving in of the social and political edifices of Yoruba civilization. Islam and Christianity flourished in the post war decades. Ilorin's political and military ambitions on Yorubaland might have been checked; its waves of preachers and proselytizers got ready converts.

The Christian missionaries had double advantage; the British brokered peace to settle the 16 years Ekitiparapo War in 1893 and subsequently declared South-western Nigeria a British Empire protectorate, paving the way for the missions to gain the troubled souls of the people that had not known peace for more than a century. Even though not so readily, Yoruba gods were abandoned as if the people were in protest of the "failure of the gods to 'protect' them". A new worldview was being constructed; by the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Akintoye's declaration, the new shared knowledge in Yorubaland had been

entrenched in the psyche of the people. The old traditions forced out of their psyche had become abominable.

New authority was and has been supporting and sustaining new shared “inherited knowledge”. It must be noted that as the various Yoruba kingdoms fought one another to stupor, the centre could no longer hold for their political institutions; mutual suspicions and sworn vengeance had eroded all notion of central authorities. The kingdoms fell like a pack of cards even as British colonial administration consolidated. The colonial state now ratified the installation of *Obas*—Yoruba sovereigns. It should be understood how easy it was for the Christian missions to convert the people to Christianity and indoctrinate especially the youth at school on Christian ethos. Bible stories and English (European) myths and lore supplanted the very rich Yoruba (African) folklore, folktales and proverbs. The onslaught was total; school pupils were severely punished for speaking vernacular (derisive reference to their native languages) in class.

The brainwashing was so total that at independence, the great nationalists never deemed it fit to reverse these horrendous British imperial sins against the colonised people. The Britons might not have declared an assimilation policy like the French, they nonetheless shared with them the disgust for the colonised and base conviction that they were on civilizing mission. This was in contrast with the Islamic Ottoman Empire that put many parts of Christian Europe under its wings till early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and yet the *Millets*, so called, emerged after upward of four centuries of colonisation with their religious and linguistic identities intact (Hitti, 1973; Inalcik, 1975; Oluwatoki, 2001).

## EXIT ORISA RELIGION: ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY SHUFFLE FOR SPACE

The political power behind Orisa religion tottered, Orisa could no longer ‘control’ the Yoruba social milieu. It would be recalled that one of the great factors for the spread of Islam in West Africa for example was the conversion of the sovereigns that made Islam the state religion—in Ghana, Mali, and Songhai among others (Trimingham, 1969; Clarke, 1992; Martin, 2012). Christianity was the faith of the underdog until a Caesar became a Christian (Boer, 1976; Armstrong, 2014). To discountenance the symbiotic relationship between a people’s ‘national’ religion and the strength of their political (system) institutions is, to say the least, to deny the role the bark plays in the survival of the tree or the skin and the health and survival of primates.

Christianity had the upper hand in the post-Orisa period; Christian missionaries turned out to be the instrument of the colonial and subsequently the post-colonial Education policies, the means by which the people were reoriented to the New Normal. Conversion to Christianity was a silent weapon of the colonial state. Both the Muslims and the Orisa devotees were targets of these operations (Fafunwa, 1990) until the Muslims rose to the occasion and found their own schools (Fafunwa, 1974; Fafunwa, 1990; Oluwatoki, 2020a).

As Oluwatoki (2020a) put it, the Muslim-Christian divide created in Yorubaland during the colonial era made the political terrain volatile. This means that the Muslims resisted the pressure of suffocating them out of the religious space. The Orisa devotees however had to endure the double barrage of the Christian-Muslim attacks. The new (western) education created new elite (Ajayi, 1969); in a few generations, the Olorisas had become a negligible minority. Today, Muslims and Christians are at each other’s jugular to control the Nigerian political space making national integration near impossible

(Oluwatoki, 2020b). As a secular state, the Nigerian (1999) Constitution (Chapter Four: Fundamental Rights, 38; 1–4 and 40) provides for freedom of association and freedom of religion. But the way Muslims and Christians jostle, it is like there are no other Nigerians of other religious persuasions. In actual fact, the psychological warfare on the Orisa, Orisa religion and the Olorisas have been devastating. To the Muslims they are *Keferi* (Yorubaised Arabic *Kafir*, equivalent of the Christian term *Alaigbagbo* (disbelievers)).

Orisa religion is no more popular; its priesthood have been crowded out by the Muslim and Christian clerics who enjoy government patronage; public holidays and sponsorship of their festivals and pilgrimages. What remains of government attention to Orisa festival is tied to tourist attraction, such as the *Osun Osogbo* festival with the prominent role of the *Arugba*—the Maiden carrier of the Calabash of Sacrifice to the Osun River.

Those Olorisas who dare show their identity as such are looked at with suspicion, regarded with derision or tolerated with indifference. It is however interesting to note that many Yoruba, nay Nigerian Muslims and Christians sometimes seek the advice and services of Orisa priests and priestesses when life exigencies so dictate.

## WENGER'S ART AS RITUAL: THERAPY FOR COLLECTIVE CULTURAL MEMORY

Susanne Wenger came to Nigeria in 1950 on a personal psychic search for spiritual rejuvenation and to give a new meaning to her artistic endeavour. She did not have a pre-conceived idea of what she would do with the people and their religious and cultural situation, which she did not know anyway. Coincidentally, the Yoruba society in which she found herself and which primordially had the answers to her questions had at the surface the “scars of war”, of attacks, neglect and imminent abandonment of its cultural and ideological content.

The significance of her encounter with the Ajagemo, high priest of Obatala, was, for her, having the opportunity to “journey to the depth of Yoruba cosmic world” (Wenger, Interview, August, 1991). For the Orisa religion, the encounter enabled her to understand psychically the profound needs of the battered faith bearing the brunt of a people that were beginning to discard it in a somewhat self-destruct of their society, which would lose its élan—to go adrift once the cultural spiritual anchor is severed. Here, Wenger and her new-found home community had identical need; this, the Ajagemo realised and so, he placed her in the unique position to understand and “to be able to help”.

As Susanne reported (Beier, 1975 cited in Oluwatoki, 2005), the Ajagemo immediately understood that through her “there might be a new lease of life”. He was aware of the dwindling support for his cult to keep the Orisa alive. In other words, the Durkheimian men that constructed the “classifications and cosmologies”, (the elementary forms) of the Yoruba religious life (Barnes, 1995) were, knowingly or unknowingly, going revisionist. Convinced of the relevance of “the old curriculum”, the Ajagemo saw a lifeline in this unique woman and her talent to save the situation. As this coincided with the convictions of Susanne, she could see that the death of Orisa religion meant the emptiness of Yoruba ritual art.

For the next six decades and till she journeyed to the Great Beyond (*Titi o fi re iwale asa*), Susanne used her art to promote the religion. As a priestess of Obatala—Divinity of creation and creativity, she became *Adunni Olorisa Amun Omi tutu Obatala* (Adunni, Devotee of Orisa, the pot of the sacred water of Obatala (Oluwatoki, 2005, p. 64). The significance of Amun in her epithet lies in the

nearness—spiritual and physical—of “the waters of life” (Wenger, 1994). “The pot”, she told us, “is the other realization of the room, for whose sake it came into existence”. Ironically, the pot has been replaced with the refrigerator, not only in the Yoruba room, but in most rooms around the world. The water is no more “Omi tutu”, Cool water, but cold and iced.

Susanne Wenger and her archisculptural art works in the Sacred Groves of Osogbo are a reminder to us, Yoruba and all peoples on Mother Earth, of the life we have lost in living. Wenger and her works go on in a “to-and-from ideographic coming and going, like breath” (Wenger, 1994). As she put it, she moulded “the forms forecast and memory in an ideatious swinging process”.

To answer Oluwatoki’s (2005) question, Susanne Wenger did not fail in this onerous task. She could not possibly change the change that had crept into the collective Yoruba psyche over the century. She did not set out to do that. She could not turn back the hands of the clock on the havoc done to the Yoruba tradition by the Christian missionaries backed by the colonial state. She could not erase the centuries of Islam’s *Kafirization* of Orisa and Orisa religion. She had done what she could, to demonstrate that Art is ritual; not that art is religion. As she put it (Uwaezuoke, n.d.), art has its connections with life similar to religion.

Susanne was not out to preserve her artworks for posterity, so-called. To her, culture must be living. It is useless to push (culture) to live. This is true of Orisa religion, which does not proselytize. Culture must be kept alive by the life people live. She did not force anything. She was unflinching in the face of attacks from those who could not comprehend her mission—to honour the truth about art because “art is a great secret about humanity” (Nwaezuoke, n.d.).

Susanne (1994) asked us, “Who can count the faces of truth”. As she admonished, mankind may learn to live with the wisdom of the Yoruba proverb concerning the ancient pre-eminently sacred species of forest tree, *AGBAAYIN* (priestly trees in the Osogbo Groves (Wenger’s words). “Neither the child, nor the elder can count the leaves of *Agbaayin*” (*Omode ko leeka ewe Agbaayin; beeni agbalagba ko leeka ewe Agbaayin*). She had not salvaged African (Yoruba) culture, culture is what is lived; Wenger (1994) and Oluwatoki (2005) agreed on this. She never begrudged commercial art; it is a part of life. She did not lament the fact that Yoruba people had abandoned *ebo* (sacrifice) and *etutu* (rituals). She only referred to its realities.

In the final analysis, Islam and Christianity could continue to dominate the physical and spiritual space of the Yoruba, nay, Nigeria, contesting state apparatus for appropriating its material resources. Wenger had accomplished her mission of keeping alive the collective cultural memory of the Yoruba. As she put it, “Orisa is a quite real ancestry—beyond time—as he is the focus of the universality of SACREDNESS OF MATTER.

## CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying it that history does not give room to chance; everything follows a pattern as products of generated ideas. Ideas stand man out from other beings. Historical process goes beyond the design capability of any individual. The plan and actions of every man or woman join with the plan and actions of other men and women to make historical process. Every action adds something to history and thus affects the course of future events. Those whose actions affect the course of history and who appropriate the yearnings of people and act on them for effects are the mark of historical individuality.

Susanne Wenger came to Nigeria in search of meaning to her life and to her career. She had the idea, or she generated ideas through studies seeking big answers to the big questions that had arisen in her individual life in her society and in the world. The 1950s when she began living with the Yoruba also marked a time when her host as a society were in need of cultural redirection. A convergence of interest and needs; Susanne became a conveyor belt for the realisation of what the people needed. Her encounter with the Ajagemo helped define the course of her artwork. It also defined the necessary path to address the knotty issue of the dwindling Orisa influence.

Yoruba Orisa religion provided Wenger with the spirituality that makes Art ritual. She became a priestess of Obatala. In the course of six decades she produced paintings, batiks and sculptures that have unravelled art as a great secret about humanity. She and her *gbenagbena* collaborators, members of the New Sacred Art created art in service of the gods. The hallmarks of this endeavour are her archisculptures in the Sacred Groves in Osogbo for the abode of the gods. They restored shrines in town and in the Grove, energising the gods that were hitherto starved and rendered homeless.

Wenger died in 2009 an icon in the annals of art history. She belonged to that class of talented individuals who make creativity to serve humanity. You have to be different to make a difference. Susanne addressed humanity's penchant for desecrating; man starves the Earth in the name of progress. She did not like commercial art even though she did not condemn it. The declaration of the Sacred Groves in Osogbo as World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) did not excite her. She did not do all she did at the Grove for the sake of tourism. She fought hard to save the Grove from speculators and other commercial interests. Oluwatoki (2005) described Susanne Wenger as the art bridge of Africa-Europe relations. Throughout her busy and creative life she was a diplomatic asset to both Nigeria and Austria.

Wenger did not set out to proselytize Orisa religion or push the Yoruba to "go back" to their culture. She lived a simple, religious and selfless life. Her art works—the paintings and batiks now in Austria and the archisculptures in the Sacred Groves of Osogbo—serve as and encapsulate Yoruba collective cultural memory.

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