

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SUSANA WENGER TO THE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION OF OSUN-OSHOGBO SACRED GROVE/SHRINE

### Abstract

*This work describes the biography of Susana Wenger, laying emphasis on her artistic and conservation work at Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove/shrine. Wenger was the first European woman artist/tourist who came to Oshogbo and explored its cultural potentials and dedicated her life to it and made the grove, which was a forest at the time she arrived Oshogbo, her home. Even those who have visited the grove attest to the fact that Susana is in love with nature. The paper further discusses the relevance of this sacred grove/shrine to tourism development.*

### Introduction

In the 1950s, a world-renowned artist Susana Wenger migrated to Oshogbo in Osun State then Western Nigeria. Osun State is surrounded in the North-East by Ibadan, South by Ilorin and West by Akure. It is the centre of Yoruba cultural activity. As with most parts of Yoruba land, Osun State has many highly urbanized towns that are densely populated (Fadare, 2000). According to 2006 Official Population Census, Osun State has 3, 423,535 with Oshogbo as the capital. Osun's culture is centred on its religious belief in a deity known as "Orisa" (Jamin, 2005). The people embraced traditional religion that lays emphasis on the worship of gods. Thus, their worship and belief in gods, spirits and ancestors are in line with African worldview. This African worldview makes the African man, devote less attention to technological-know how. According to Andah (1988), African Worldview centres on African cultures, which he regarded as theonomic and theocentric. Abbey (1960) sees our worldview as the way we live. For Redfield (1952), African worldview is something in relation to African culture. It is this African culture with religious ramification that propelled this renowned European artist and career woman in her thirties into migrating to and nationalizing in Oshogbo, Nigeria. Her involvements in the culture of Osun-Oshogbo grove and shrine made Oshogbo a tourist paradise in Nigeria and the world over. This singular attitude made Wenger a unique woman in the midst of others.

### Who is Susana Wenger?

Wenger was born in her country home of Graz, Austria in 1914. Her birth coincides with the amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorates to form what is now known as Nigeria as well as with the First World War of 1914 –1918. Although, according to her, her father was born in Switzerland, age had made her forget her genealogy. She only recollected with difficulty that her grand father was a musician who worked as a flautist, migrated and nationalized in the United States of America. Her mother, a Makovitchcan woman in Germany was a great disciplinarian; hence, she underwent very strict upbringing. Susana vividly mentioned that, she had never in her lifetime picked offensive relationship with her mother. She jokingly acknowledged that her strength and career were inherited from her mother and grand-father. She also acknowledged that she had paramilitary training during her youthful years. For instance, she recounted how her parents took her up to a mountain and abandoned her there for days (Wenger, 2003). The mountain exploration and experience gave her a great expeditionary spirit. As noled by Jamin (2005:60), Wenger's challenge to life was



as a result of “internalized concentration from her early stage that motivated her to absorb the environment”.

According to Wenger, her early education was disrupted by war disturbances, although she inherited artistic career from her grand father as well as born into an elite family, she managed to study pottery at Kunstgewerbeschule School in Germany. This was possible because of her father’s influence. She (Wenger) was later transferred to Vienna (Austria) to study Graphische Lehrund Versuch Sanslalt (Jamin, 2005). At Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, she learned and developed her artistic career. Wenger later acquainted herself with some groups of artists. Beier (1984) in his book “*Susana Wenger’s Batiks and Oil Painting Exhibition*”, reports Wenger as a foundation member of Viennese Art club in 1946. Wenger amongst others discussed their welfare in the club; she later moved to Paris (Montpamasse and Geneva) in 1949 in search of adventure and lived a life of painting. According to her, she decided to achieve a painting unique from others. Therefore, she concentrated on religious art by exposing her painting based on the story of the environment, which involved flora and fauna. Susana Wenger frowned at the wars (first and second World Wars), which interrupted her studies. The harsh environment blanked her worldview and uplifted her spiritual beliefs. In the account of Beier (1975), Wenger does her painting in the mystical religious forms as well as studying other peoples’ cultures.

Susana Wenger’s marital background is a direct opposite of the African concept of marriage. An average African woman sees marriage to be an everlasting institution. Wenger sees marriage as a contract that can be called off when dis-satisfied. In line with this, she firstly married Ulli Beier but parted with him after some disagreements. She later married a renowned Yoruba professional drummer “Ayanbola Alarape” (personal communication, 2003). Alarape died after ten years of their marriage; it is therefore sad to note that both marriages yielded no children. Nevertheless, ethnographic sources revealed that she adopted a child who is now married. Furthermore, Susana was brought to Nigeria, by Ulli Beier in 1950. Prior to that, Ulli Beier was a pioneer Phonetics Lecturer at the University of Ibadan, who later moved to the Department of Extra-Mural Studies (Esta, 1988). Thus, they first settled at University College Ibadan, as it was then called. Also, ethnographic sources revealed that the couple imbibed Yoruba culture through Beier’s travel expeditions to other Yoruba villages. Being a lecturer in Extra Mural Studies Department, he was able to combine both his lectures with carrying out cultural activities. He did that alongside with his wife Susana. Susana herself did not only observe her husband’s programme but was determined to internalize the Yoruba culture. The culture fascinates her to the extent that it became a factor that broke their nine year old marriage (personal communication 2003).

She recollected having been bed-ridden for a year as a result of serious illness in Nigeria. That one year gave her the opportunity to imbibe Yoruba culture. She acquainted herself with both the spiritual and artistic environments. Not quite long after she began to interpret Yoruba ways of life including language, they (Beier and Wenger) re-located to Ede town from Ibadan where they were much welcomed by the indigenes. The pursuit of tradition made Wenger to involve herself in Yoruba traditional religious practices including consultation with the *Aejaigemo*, the chief priest of *Obatala* deity in Ede town. “My encounter with *Aejaigemo*, priest of *Obatala*, was the most memorable part of my life, it



marked an instant relationship and participation, which taught me a great lesson I will never forget" she recounted (Personal Communication, 2003).

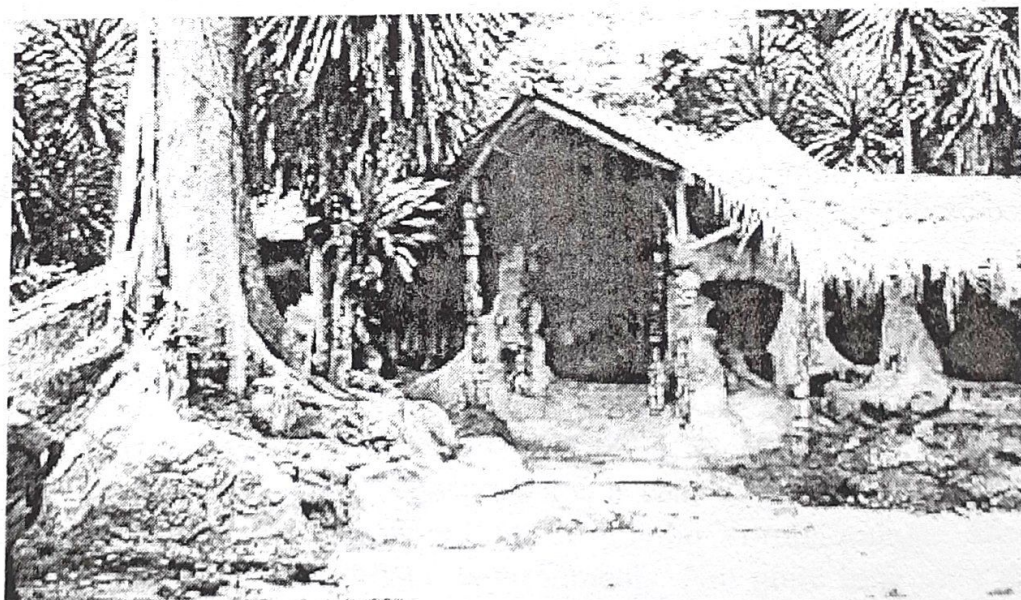
The quest for culture, tradition, nature and exploration moved the couple again to settle at Oshogbo. As they travelled, they enhanced their artistic career, exploiting nature and culture, which they represented in art work. At Oshogbo, Susana having been familiar with the traditional religion at Ede, was summoned by 'Igbini' drums into *Obatala* shrine. She followed the direction of the sound of the drum strictly to the dwelling arena of *Aajaigemo*. She was overwhelmed by the performance of the drummers and dancers. *Aajaigemo* without hesitation introduced her into the intricacies of the shrine meant for only few *Olorisas* to watch. This was done with the intention of tapping her wisdom into the local religion. *Aajaigemo*, the chief priest initiated Susana into *Obatala* worship; and explained to her the methods of sacrifices and taboos of the *Obatala* and *Soponna* religion. After the initiation ceremony, she was ordained as *Adunmi Olorisa* of Oshogbo. Since then, she became one of the active models during the annual festival of *Obatala* and *Soponna*, which is today known as Osun - Oshogbo annual festival that has enhanced tourism development in Oshogbo, Nigeria and worldwide.

Interestingly, when asked again, how she acquainted herself with the Osun grove and shrine, Wenger answered that she got acquainted with the Osun shrine through an invitation from the priest of Osun River. As a result of the priest's inability and/or incapacities in attacking termites (the chief agent of destruction of ancient buildings), he made a fervent appeal to Wenger for restoration of the shrine. Ethnographic resources revealed that Wenger liaised with the Public Works Department to wipe out the termites. She also involved the Osun lovers of cultures and devotees in the clean-up exercise. Carpenters, bricklayers and other local artisans were involved in the repair of the buildings while she acted as the instructor and used her artistic career to beautify the shrine. Wenger and other local artists like Duro Ladipo, Adébisi, Akanji and Ayansola, Alarape reactivated the shrine and grove, beautifying them with numerous artworks. Throughout the reactivation period, Wenger was much inspired by the goddess whom she adores so much.





**Plate 1: Susana Wenger at 88 Years  
(Her Photograph Was Taken During Fieldwork)**



**Plate 2: Orisa Aajagemo Shrine  
(Artistically Decorated and Conserved by Wenger)**

Between 1950-2008, Wenger lived her life hale and hearty in the two storey Brazilian's style building, leased by her first husband, Ulii Beier who used the house for only 15 years before leaving Nigeria for Europe in 1970 (Esta 1988). Presently, Wenger explains that being an associate of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, she (Institute



of African Studies) has taken over the lease of the house from the Extra Mural Studies Department and has continued the payment. Being an artist, she decorated her house with artwork depicting Yoruba ideologies and motifs. The house till date is called Museum of Yoruba Art (Esta 1988). When asked, what could become of her works after her life? She answered, that she has left the house and the contents to Nigerian government. Thus, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments had already taken inventories of all the artefacts and other works of arts. Pointing at the label tagged to each artefact, she concluded that she lived here, only as a caretaker waiting patiently for her glorious home call. She acknowledged that she did not regret coming to Nigeria.

### Wenger's Art Works

Interestingly, Susana Wenger's artworks centred on both social and religious life of the people of Oshogbo. Marshall Cavendish Encyclopaedia (1979) classified such art as "cultural homogeneity influenced by language". Art is the impersonating, synthesizing and depicting of life activities into objects. From global perspective, art works such as woods, thorns, ivory carvings, sculptures (cement), paintings and so on are prominent. But those in Osun shrine and in Wenger's residence are mainly wood carvings and sculptural works.

Art serves as a pictorial of ancient history, landscape, and religious activities that flourished in the remote past. The art in the Osun shrine has helped in popularizing Oshogbo society more than what the community realizes it is doing. Cavendish Encyclopaedia (1978) acknowledges social organization as the most prevailing factor that expresses people's beliefs and values. Osun would not have been prominent without the community's social organization. Therefore, without social organization, art would not have existed.

Susana Wenger's art works in Oshogbo especially in the Osun shrine is purely religious arts based mainly on "*Orisa religion*", the traditional religion of the Yoruba before the introduction of Christianity, Islam and western culture. Her work reflects the traditional values of the people and has little or no western influence. In the assessment of Esta (1988), Wenger's arts concentrates on religion, which she refers to as "New Sacred Arts"; thus, Wenger's initiation into new sacred art was endorsed in order to achieve a different and unique artwork from other old artists found in Oshogbo, who centred their work on gods and goddesses. She prefers to personify not only the spiritual activities of the gods and goddess of the land but also to preserve the social life of the people. She does that by expressing the important events and secular knowledge of the people of Oshogbo, which are exemplified in her sculptural works displayed in her residence and the shrine, depicts socio-religious life of Oshogbo people. Examples of these sculptural works are *Obatala* and *Oya* shrine (god of thunder and lightning) and his wife, *Agbo Osun* inside *Oja Oba's* shrine. *Agbo Osun* is a sacred pot filled with water from Osun River. It is surrounded by trees and cowries'. The pot is believed to contain curative water from the goddess and it is given to barren women to make them fruitful. As rightly argued by Olabode (1974) *Agbo Osun* is surrounded by *peregun* trees and spiritual cowries, which depicts "sacredness". Others such as *the first Oba's palace* with carved posts or "*Ere*" (gods and goddess that rule various Yoruba communities) are personified. Osun goddess is moulded very close to the Osun River to personify the Osun as a river goddess and giver of children to barren women. Wenger depicts



the gigantic statue with arms wide open which signifies that the goddess protects, cures and cares as a mother to all (Ojiakor, 2004).

The artists also mount three miniature sculptures representing Laroye, Olutimehin and Ogida (the three great founders of Oshogbo) with their hunting and farming implements, which portray them as hunters. Oral tradition explains that water scarcity in their homestead led them to migrate into Osun River for settlement. Tradition has it that the three men engaged in farming activities while making headway for survival in Osun River. This process brought them into close contact with the goddess 'Osoigbo' who governed them in return.

Finally, Wenger associated *Iyamoopo*, *Saponna* and *Ela* statues with some of the prominent social activities that flourished inside the grove in the remote past that is, before the coming of Christianity, Islam and western influences at Oshogbo. According to the artist (Wenger), *Iyamoope* was a sentry spirit to the goddess. This was as a result of *Iyamoope's* extraordinary height. Tradition believes that *Iyamoope* has magic eyes with which she guards the entrance of the grove against invaders. Therefore *Iyamoope* serves as a guard to the goddess. Ekeji (1996) assessed *Iyamoope* to be a natural security officer not only to the goddess but to the community inside the grove. *Saponna* and *Ela* are also depicted as having served one social function or another. For instance *Saponna* acts as the agent of discipline as well as inflicts calamities on defaulters; while *Ela* acts as an intermediary between the people and *Olodumare* (Supreme deity). *Ela*, according to tradition is the messenger of *Obatala*, the son of *Olodumare*.



Plate 3: The Symbol of *Iyamoopo* Deity  
(One of the Sculptural Work Done by Wenger and Local Artists)



### Conservation Practices

Conservation can be defined as a method by which “cultural property/heritage is protected from decay and damage (Edet, 1990). In other words, conservation method includes the preservation of all heritages such as sacred groves, shrines, wildlife and other resources. Susana Wenger with other local artisans engaged directly in the conservation of Osun landscape. Her initial conservation practices and management of this sacred grove/ shrine has led to the achievement of sustainable tourism development in Oshogbo in particular and Nigeria at large. Ethnographic research revealed two conservation practices in our study area viz: traditional and modern methods.

Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove and shrine’s management and conservation strategy rests mainly on community solidarity and customary practices, handed down from generation to generation. Oshogbo natural and cultural heritage has its management in-built in the Oshogbo culture as a whole and its development, as exemplified in Susana Wenger’s conservation practices and management strategies in Oshogbo sacred grove and shrine. As noted by Padre-Peter (1996) traditional method of conservation of Oshogbo heritage dates between 500-1000 years ago. According to Susana Wenger when she arrive Oshogbo in the 1950s, she noticed that the community dedicated their entire life to this grove/shrine and managed, conserved and maintained it single-handedly. Among the traditional methods of conservation are local laws, sacred sanctions, taboos, etc. These methods were employed with a view to conserving the cultural and natural heritage of the study area as well as to ensure the protection of wildlife, landscape, recreational and other values in the conservation areas. Perhaps, the methods of conservations and management of Oshogbo sacred grove and shrine have led Beltran (2000) to call for recognition in full, the role of indigenous peoples in respect of protected areas. In a nutshell, the community did not engage in any kind of fishing and hunting inside the grove, because they believed that every living organism including themselves is regarded as the children of the goddess, “*Oso-igbo*”, whose abode they inherited.

Susana Wenger with other local artisans moulded horrifying art works with dangerous animal motifs around the surrounding walls such as fishes, snakes, crocodiles, water plants, cows, lions, deer and human beings. These works were also meant to depict spirits and forest gods that served Osun in the past. These helped in protecting and conserving the landscape of Osun grove/shrine (animals, plants and water).

On the other hand, the modern methods of conservation practices in our study area include Local Guides, Federal Government/Legislation, National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), etc. Local guides as argued by Okonkwo (2004) are guides who received modern training in paramilitary techniques, tactics and survival strategies, which enable them to protect the area against undue human interference. He further observed that this new development has led to a more efficient means of conservation, as the guides often remind tourists of the reserves regulations (Okonkwo, 2004). In Oshogbo, local guides’ activities are well recognized. Through their able leader, O. Fogbouga, they serve as tourist guides explaining the features and history of attractions to tourists and ensuring that tourists do not kill any living organism. They also do not allow any body including tourists to swim in river Osun as well as ensuring that no herbal materials are collected from the sacred grove by any tourist. Local guides in Oshogbo sacred



grove and shrine are always on the watch for poachers and other illegal activities within and outside the conservation area. Finally, the guides ensure that farm and non-timber forest products within the area are not extracted by people.

Government came into the conservation of Osun/Oshogbo shrine and grove in 1965 when they collaborated with the natives and declared the sacred grove and shrine a national monument. It enacted laws, which forbade people from encroaching in the grove. The laws also forbade people from hunting, fishing and carrying out any construction activities in the grove. From 1965, Oshogbo grove and shrine became a historical and cultural site. In 1987, NCMM in Oshogbo took over the grove for proper preservation and conservation of the entire environment. It introduced the duty post of a day guard and local vigilante groups. The day guard stands at a strategic position through out the day while the vigilante groups keep guard all night. Both secure the grove and prevent trespassing of any kind. NGOs in Oshogbo such as Osun Grove Support Groups (OGSG), Adunni Olorisa Trust (AOT), etc. have also helped immensely in the conservation of the study area. They constructed botanical spots by carrying out biodiversity survey of both plant and animal population. They with the agreement of the state government mounted a signpost, listed some rules and regulations concerning environmental conservation of Oshogbo grove and shrine.

The taboos associated with the grove have made the natural trees survive till. Accordingly, the grove:

- 1 Acts as a living laboratories for traditional Yoruba medicine known as "*Agbo herbs*" which is collected from the grove; the *Agbo* is mixed with the water collected from the Osun River and used in curing diseases such as hypertension, heart problems, infertility and other naval disorders; and
- 2 Acts as a wonderful habitat for threatened species of fauna, the examples of which are monkeys, snakes, tortoises and so on.

It is pertinent to note here that Oshogbo grove and shrine portrays recreational and beautifying qualities as well as healing powers. Thus, clarifying what Ekeji (1996) referred to as human and tourist haven. Thorean (n.d.) postulates that "to save the wilderness powerful places of solitude and contemplation is to save one's soul". While Okon-Ekong (2005) maintained that, these qualities mentioned by Ekeji had made United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to list the Osun grove into the auspices of the World Heritage Convention in Nigeria in 2004 and was recognised in 2005. To conclude this, Ekah (2005) opines that the grove and shrine have been taken over by international bodies responsible for environmental conservation.

### **Relevance of Oshogbo Sacred Grove/Shrine To Sustainable Tourism Development In Osun State, Nigeria**

Some of Wenger's removable art works are found in her residence for future researchers in Oshogbo; while her outstanding works of arts inside the grove depict honour to this noble woman artist /sculptor. The works portray Yoruba religion, culture and social activities. According to her, people all over the world have been visiting Oshogbo to see the community's richest cultural attractions and antiquities. Essentially, the state is spared with cultural legacies (Ekeji 1996) Therefore, culture, natural landscape and Oshogbo festivals especially Osun-Oshogbo festival motivated the European woman in nationalizing at



Oshogbo. In addition, Olumu (2005) attested to the fact that Susana Wenger is a lover of nature.

Interestingly, her dedication and renovation of the grove have helped to conserve and preserve the environment (flora and fauna). The conservation of wildlife at Osun-Oshogbo has helped to enhance tourism development. Laws and taboos were made by the indigenes to safeguard what they believe that keeps them together. Taboos forbidding hunting, fishing and killing of any animal originated from the community, which believes that all including man belong to the goddess who directs their affairs and therefore are all sacred. Later-on, government took over from the community and also enacted its own laws, which forbade tree felling, bush burning and dumping of refuse in support of the community rules. Some NGOs such as Osun Grove Support Groups and Adunni Olorisa Trust saw the need to preserve and conserve the grove/shrine; thus, constructed brick walls to demarcate its boundaries and to avoid encroachment by people.

Tourism thrives tremendously in Oshogbo as a result of Wenger's contributions. People are avid to meet this unique European woman who has performed excellently in Nigeria through her art works. For instance, Lois (2003) posits that she visited Oshogbo in 1972 during the annual festival celebration and emulated Susana Wenger's spirit towards nature and culture. She quickly went back to Philadelphia and introduced *Odunde* festival meaning Happy New Year marked with visiting "Schuylkill" River in Philadelphia. Till date, *Odunde* is pulling lots of tourists annually just like Osun-Oshogbo, in Nigeria. Olomu (2005) acknowledged that Wenger is a woman on transit, accepting whatever nature and culture left for her at that point in time.

The annual Osun festival offers such an ample opportunity for people to see not only Wenger but also her noble art works. Meeting and interacting with her help in the promotion of socio-cultural and socio-economic activities. During such visits, people normally purchase Oshogbo works of art and crafts; namely: *Ashioke*, tie and dye materials, etc., which are peculiar to the community. Other relevant art works made with beads, masks and shells are displayed in the art shop in front of the grove/shrine, which were sold as souvenirs to tourists.

Hospitality and friendship are other relevant areas in Wenger's art works in Osun-Oshogbo tourism development. The hospitality and friendly behaviour of the citizens are worthy of note. They are accommodating and are always willing to render their assistance to tourists. A community with such unique behavioural pattern never offends tourists; thus, these characteristics make Oshogbo a tourist paradise. Furthermore, Wenger's dedication and resourcefulness encourage people around the globe to visit Oshogbo. Therefore, tourism in Oshogbo is superb. No terrorism of any kind has been recorded and of course security is assured. It should be noted that international tourists often put the security of an area into consideration before visiting such area.

There are various forms of accommodation around the grove, which serves local dish, intercontinental and international dishes as well as good hotel facilities for the comforts of both domestic and international tourists. These accommodations are comfortable, available and their prices are affordable too. Indeed, Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove and shrine is a popular holiday destination for adventurous tourists wishing to explore the remote corners of Nigeria. The sights are spectacular as one walk through the grove and the art works could task the minds of modern sculptors. The springing of the water from stones,



arrangement/display of art works, the sculptural figures represented, cultural materials within the shrines and the entire grove are the tourists' mines of adventures at Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove and shrine. A trip to Oshogbo will reveal these characteristics that radiate through Wenger's role in Oshogbo. Oparanti (2002) assessed Oshogbo as *Orokiasala* literally, meaning, no matter the pressing situation, any one who escaped into Oshogbo is sure of safety and protection.

### Summary and Conclusion

The summary and conclusion of this write-up are based on Denk's poem composed during Wenger's 90th birthday as well as her blue print for great success in Osun-Oshogbo, Nigeria. Says Denk's poem:

"The creation of the world happens continuously, there is neither beginning nor end, every thing dies into a new birth, forms of culture grow like grass, life and its meaning does not repeat itself, everything is born into a death. A good picture paints itself and man creates his world himself".

"Everything that exists is unique like the waves in the river and is never again its earlier self. Evolution itself is a reflection of the waters of life just as the tree who, daily visited by me never deposits the same picture twice in my tree wise heart".

"There is man and woman in everything was properly and enormous"

"There is a great difference between genuine synchronism and a hodgepodge. When the mother of a child baked her son a cake and her spoilt son declared it unfit to eat, she answered it must be good, it's full of good things. With a cultural mix it is the same: there are a lot of good ingredients but very often it is not fit to eat".

"Yoruba religion concerns itself with 16 (sixteen) principal *Orisa* whose cults ramify further, so that in principle the number of deities can be extended infinitely".

"One must avoid encounters with the restless souls of those who died too suddenly or as executed criminals which are called *Rako* that is dead who did not undergo the proper death ritual. They live between this life and the hereafter and yearn to be born again by women they meet".

"Not only have human beings, but also plants, animals, water, earth, stone, metal: all have a dimension of being which allows them total atonement with the appropriate *Orisa*. The Yoruba believes in *Oludumare*; the Christian believes in God, Which implies the possibility of disbelief? The Yoruba finds that absurd".

"*Oludumare* is the ground in deep consciousness of all knowledge. His meta – intellectual" [Denk on Susana during her 90 birthday celebration] (Olomu, 2005).



The poet concludes that Wenger is a lover of culture and her determination to serve *Orisa*, a Yoruba god made her achieve greatness. She claims that her fame and success come from *Oladumare* and not by her will power. Accordingly, Wenger affirms strongly that if she still has the energy to write a book on her life in Oshogbo, Nigeria, the title will be *Ólodumare*. Bravo! The great woman of valour and strength, the *Adunmi Olorisa* of Oshogbo (Mrs Susana Wenger).

### Acknowledgment

We sincerely thank Susane Wenger (Late) for giving us audience during the field work and to sadly inform her admirers that the world famons artist and 'Yoruba Priestess died on the 12<sup>th</sup> January 2009 at age of 93 in her adopted home town of Oshogbo, Osun State.

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