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**OSUN OSOGBO SACRED GROVE**

The Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove is part of the story of Nigerian modernism. Situated at the city of Osogbo in Southwest Nigeria, the grove consists of seventy-five hectares of forestland along the banks of the Osun river. Hunting, farming, and fishing are forbidden inside the grove. No permanent settlements are allowed. Instead the area is covered with a large number of sculptures and temples of various sizes and materials. Some are made of wood, others of stone and cement. Both the structures and the restrictions echo the religious character of the site. Osun is not only a river, but also Osogbo’s guardian deity who is credited with providing wealth, fertility, and protection. The origin of these structures goes back to the 1950s when the entangled forces of colonialism, Christianity, and commerce had started to erode the relationship between the city and the goddess. The cohesive force of the Osun Grove declined. People began to ignore local restrictions on hunting, fishing, and farming to the point that the grove was at risk of abandonment. To address this crisis, in 1959—one year before Nigeria gained independence—a group of Osun ritual officials approached the Austrian artist and convert to Yoruba religion Susanne Wenger and asked for her help.

Wenger had arrived in Nigeria nine years earlier. After years of artistic and religious soul searching she converted to Yoruba and settled in nearby Ilobu studying Yoruba religion and repairing shrines. That is where the Osun officials visited her and asked for assistance. Wenger agreed, moved to Osogbo, organized a group of helpers around her and, with permission of the king of Osogbo, started to reshape the grove. What previously was a mostly non-iconic space, turned into a kind of open air gallery filled with new sculptures and architectural structures. Designed and built by Wenger and her collaborators, the works were meant to be visual gestures of evidence for the presence of the deities residing in the grove. Thus the term Osun grove is actually misleading as the grove consists of multiple groves each considered to the homestead of a deity belonging to Osun’s realm or kingdom.

In terms of media and style, the structures radically depart from conventional Yoruba aesthetics. The difference is programmatic for the reshaping of the Osun Grove was actually part of a wider project that aimed to revitalize the local arts as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk. Parallel to Wenger’s activities in the grove, her husband Ulli Beier collaborated with the school teacher Duro Ladipo and the British artist Georgina Beier. Sacred and profane, visual and performance art all went together resulting in the so-called Osogbo Art Movement.

Wenger’s vision aimed at reflecting the ruptures intrinsic to the experience of colonial modernity. The general conviction was that “things fall apart” (Chinua Achebe). Consequently, any return to traditional aesthetics was seen as principally and categorically void. In order to survive, the old deities had to be updated with modern aesthetics. Thus, the new shapes and forms were thought to express the fluid, open, and the still undetermined phase through which society and religion was believed to pass.

The agenda proved to be successful. The “new images” not only attracted new visitors to the city. They also protected the grove. In 1960 the grove became a national monument and in the 1970s a local heritage committee was formed. The 1990s saw the building of a national museum; thus, the grove was turned into both a public gallery and an active ritual space. The most momentous boost came in 2005 when UNESCO added the Osun Grove to its prestigious list of World Heritage Sites. Today the Osun Grove and festival are one of Nigeria’s biggest tourist attractions; as such, the site is an important source for the local and regional government to generate revenue.

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