

THE OŠUN GROVES IN OŠOGBO, NIGERIA, A WORLD HERITAGE SITE (UNESCO 2005)

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The Ošun Groves consist of 75 hectares of rainforest encircled by the Ošun river and surrounded by the town of Ošogbo in S.W. Nigeria. They are home to a wide diversity of flora and fauna.

The Groves are also the site of shrines to the Yoruba deities, particularly the river goddess Ošun who, according to legend, promised Larọ, the founder, protection for the town of Ošogbo.

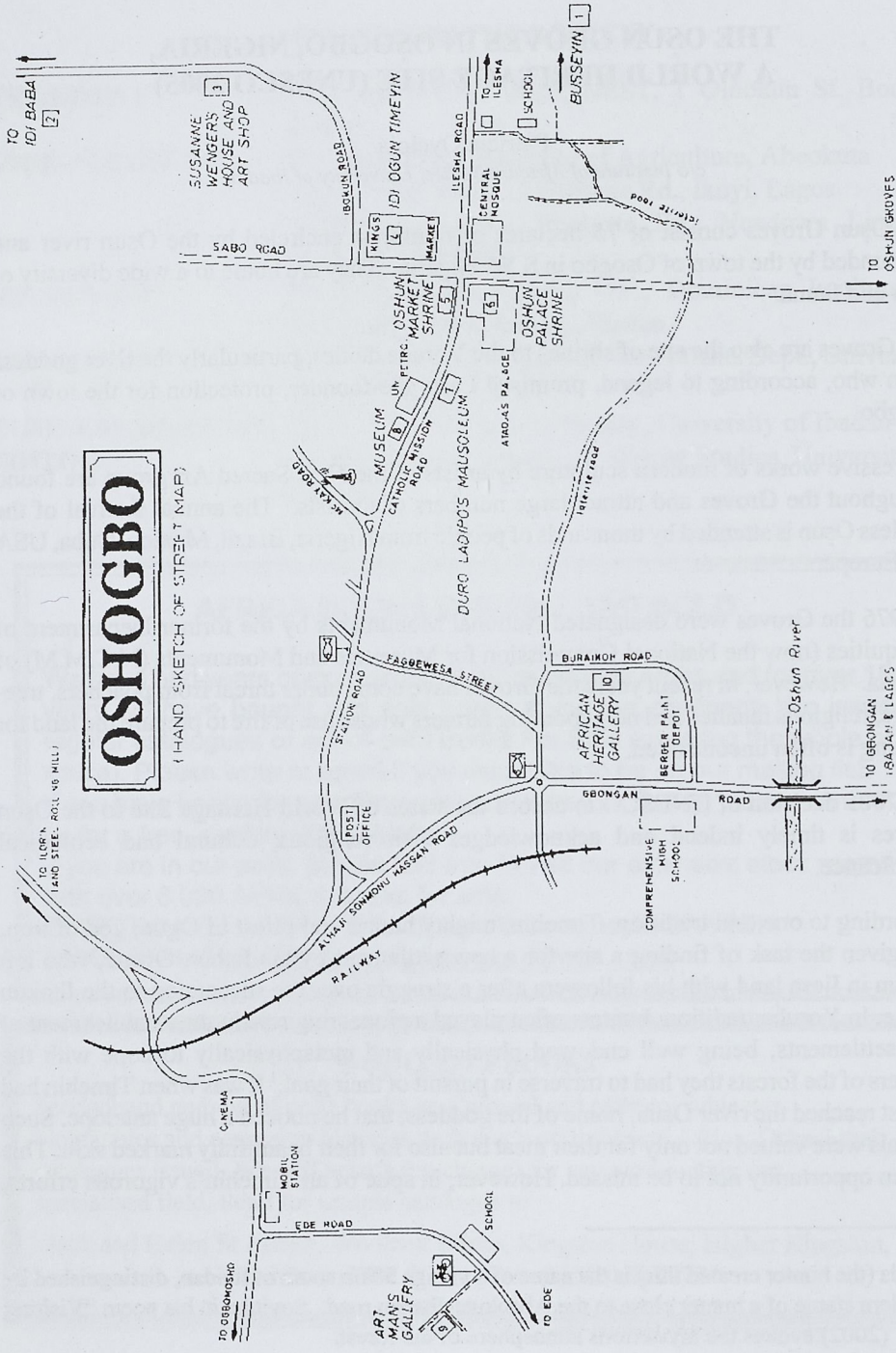
Impressive works of modern sculpture by artists of the New Sacred Art group are found throughout the Groves and attract large numbers of tourists. The annual festival of the goddess Ošun is attended by thousands of people from Nigeria, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, USA and Europe.

In 1976 the Groves were designated National Monuments by the former Department of Antiquities (now the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (N.C.M.M) of Nigeria. However, in recent years the Groves have come under threat from poachers, tree-fellers, religious fanatics and neighbouring farmers whose use of fire to prepare the land for planting is often uncontrolled.

The 2005 decision of UNESCO to accord the status of World Heritage Site to the Ošun Groves is timely indeed and acknowledges their religious, cultural and ecological significance.

According to one oral tradition, Timẹhin, mighty hunter and priest of Ogun, god of iron, was given the task of finding a site for a new settlement by his father, Owate, who left Ibokun in Ijesa land with his followers after a struggle over the succession to the Ibokun throne. In Yoruba tradition, hunters often played a pioneering role in the establishment of new settlements, being well endowed physically and metaphysically to cope with the dangers of the forests they had to traverse in pursuit of their goal.¹ It was when Timẹhin had almost reached the river Ošun, home of the goddess, that he noticed a huge antelope. Such animals were valued not only for their meat but also for their beautifully marked skin. This was an opportunity not to be missed. However, in spite of all Timẹhin's vigorous efforts,

¹Odeda (the hunter created this) is the name of a village 50km south of Ibadan, distinguished by a modern statue of a hunter close to the Abeokuta-Ibadan road. Soyinka in his poem "Visiting trees" (2002) evokes the mysterious atmosphere of the forest.



the antelope eluded him, finally disappearing inside a hollow tree. This only increased his determination. Timehin set fire to the tree which came crashing down into the river, from which emerged the goddess Oşun, blazing with anger at the destruction of her indigo dye-pots deep below the surface.²

When Timehin explained his mission, Oşun's anger cooled. She indicated a site for the proposed settlement some distance from the river and promised to protect the settlers if they did not harm the creatures living in the Oşun groves.

Timehin reported back to his father Owate who had received a sign from the gods that he should stay where he was at Ipole. It was Timehin's younger brother, Larø the farmer, who led the people to the site of what would grow to become the town of Oşogbo, escorted by Timehin. Oşun bestowed her favour upon Larø and installed him as her priest king.

The title of the Oba of Oşogbo is Ataoja, a contracted form of "A ɽ ɔwø mu eja" (the one who stretches out his hand to take the fish). This is a perpetual reminder of the benevolent powers of the goddess Oşun who cured Larø and his wives of childlessness. She put into Larø's hands a fish, one of her own children, to be looked after by his wives. The tension was broken and Larø was blessed with many offspring.³

There are other versions of the story of the foundation of Oşogbo, but they all acknowledge the pioneering roles of Timehin and Larø and the intervention of the goddess Oşun. The Oşun Festival is still celebrated annually in the month of August when rituals are performed at sacred sites before the procession to the river Oşun.⁴

This is led by a maiden (the Arugba) carrying on her head a covered calabash which encloses symbols of the goddess Oşun. The festival attracts Oşogbo indigenes from far and near, irrespective of their religion, as well as African-Americans of the diaspora.⁵

Within the Oşun Groves can be found shrines to other deities of the Yoruba pantheon, embellished with statuary in wood, stone or cement. These include Şango, deified King of

²For an illustrated version of this story written especially for young children, see *Oşun and the Hunter*, Oyelola and Oşoş, 2000.

³For a fuller version of the Oşogbo foundation myth, see Wenger and Chesi, 1983.

⁴Şoyinka (1991) refers to this festival as: "one of the most community-cohering events of a spiritual dimension in the Yoruba Calendar" (p.24).

⁵Murphy and Sanford eds (2001) give a detailed picture of Oşun in the Americas. The senior priestess of the second Ketu temple founded in Brazil in 1849 was Mae Meninha do Gantois (1894-1986) who, though born in Brazil, was of Egba Alake origin. She had been initiated as a daughter of Oşun in 1894. See her portrait, page 85.



Oshun Shrine, Osogbo, ac. 1975

HISTORICAL MONUMENT
OSHUN SHRINE
THIS SHRINE IS SAID TO BE ON
THE SITE OF THE FIRST ANDJIA
OF OSOGBO
APPROXIMATELY 1000 A.D.



Adebisi Akanji with his cement screen,
1970. Photo: Courtesy C.U.P.



Susanne Wenger at work, c. 1970
Photo: Courtesy C.U.P.

Oyo and Oya, his devoted wife, who manifest themselves in lightning and whirlwind; Ogun, the pioneer, who discovered the use of iron and is revered by all those whose livelihood depends on it (hunters, farmers, soldiers, mechanics, drivers); Obatala, epitome of serenity and patience, who moulds the child in the womb; Iya Mapo,⁶ tutelary goddess of childbirth and women's traditional occupations (pottery, indigo dyeing, palm-oil processing, soap-making) and Eṣu, who can be both benevolent and malign, whose duty it is to report to Olodumare on the deeds of divinities and man and on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices on particular: (Idowu: 1962) Capable of causing conflict and confusion in human affairs, he must be regularly propitiated. Above them all is Olodumare ("Aterere k'aiye: he who-spreads-over-the-whole-extent-of-the-earth". Idowu : 1962), who has no image and no shrine.

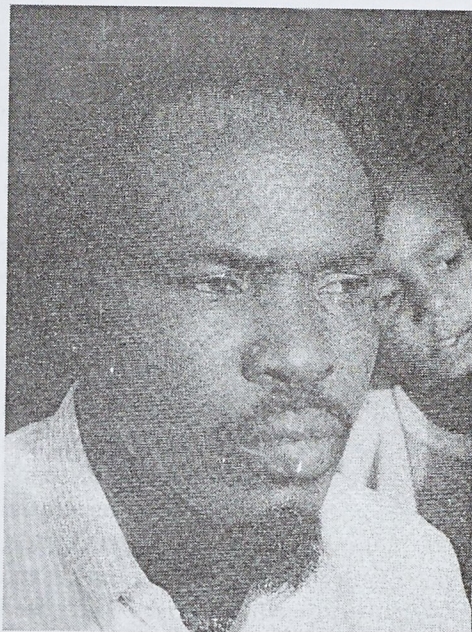
Fifty years ago, many of the shrines in the Oṣun Groves had totally disintegrated, although the sacred sites were remembered by the elderly. Their reconstruction and embellishment with figurative statuary was due to the request of the worshippers and the collaboration between Susanne Wenger (b. 1915), the Austrian artist, and a group of men, artisans by profession, whose creative talents were encouraged by Susanne.

Adebisi Akanji worked with Susanne Wenger on the creation of cement statues of the deities of heroic size. His cement screens can be seen at Susanne Wenger's house in Oṣogbo and the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan (see cover of this Journal). Another example of his cement screens was exhibited at the National Museum of African Art, Washington, in 2000. Buraimoh and Saka sculpted wooden posts and figures of wood and cement, Raifu and Lani, bricklayers by profession, created cement reliefs on the walls of the Oṣun shrine. Their works are known collectively as New Sacred Art which is "contemporary art, in the service of a traditionally worshipped godhead" (Wenger: 1990).

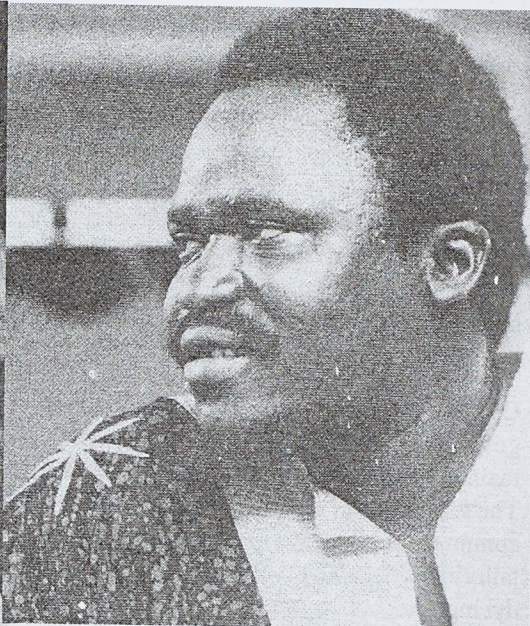
This New Sacred Art is not to be confused with the world-famous Oṣogbo Art of the 1960's which was secular in nature and arose from the art workshops organized by Mbari, the Artists' and Writers' Club.⁷ Ulli Beier (b. 1922), former husband of Susanne Wenger, was a member of the Mbari organizing committee and an enthusiastic promoter of art events. These included exhibitions of works by artists from all over Africa, art workshops, the publication of monographs on Nigerian artists and "Black Orpheus", a journal of African literature and art. Other activities organized by Mbari included dance, drama and musical performances. There was also a library on the premises, a modest, plastered mud brick

⁶Mapo Hall, standing on Mapo Hill in Ibadan, is named after her.

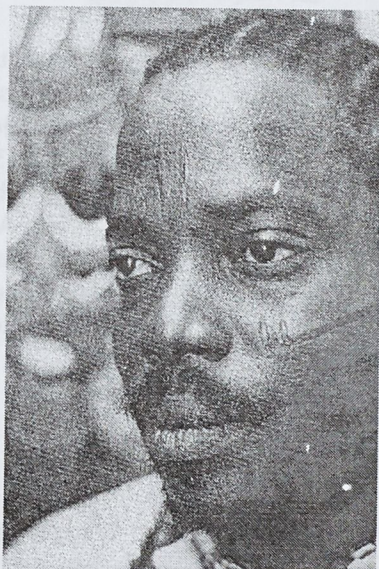
⁷Mbari is an Igbo word meaning "creation". Artists whose talents were discovered during the Mbari Art Workshops are Jacob Afolabi, Jimoh Buraimoh, Adebisi Fabunmi, Tijani Mayakiri, Rufus Ogundele, Muraina Oyelami, Twins Seven-Seven.



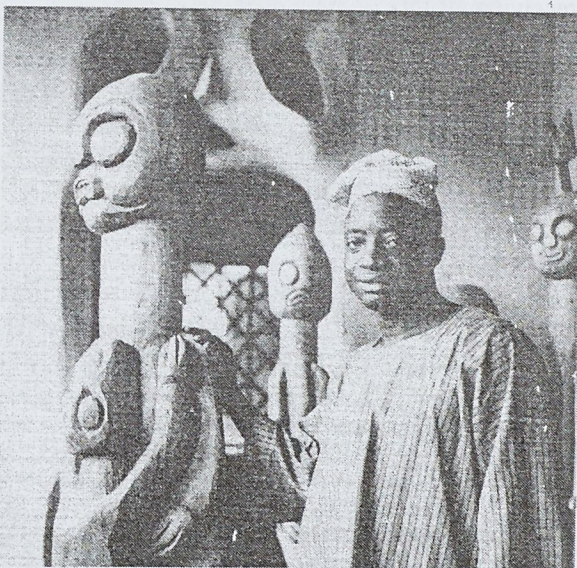
Bisi Fabunmi and son, 1988
Courtesy Ulli Beier



Rufus Ogundele, 1983
Courtesy Ulli Beier



Twins Seven Seven, 1984
Courtesy Ulli Beier



Buraimoh Gbadamosi with his work, c. 1970
Courtesy C.U.P.

bungalow behind Lebanon Street in Ibadan.⁸

The late Chief Duro Ladipo, Yoruba composer and actor, started Mbari Oşogbo⁹ in 1962 in his father's compound in Oşogbo town. Its activities were much the same as those of Mbari Ibadan but with a greater emphasis on dramatic performance. Duro Ladipo created a new genre of Yoruba music drama which incorporated drumming, poetry and dance performance against back-drops painted by artists whose talents had been discovered at the Mbari Art workshops. Duro Ladipo's production of "Oba Koso" (based on the life of Şango) and *Eda* (Everyman) went on tour to Europe where they won critical acclaim. Chief Duro Ladipo's mausoleum can be seen within the former premises of the Mbari Mbayo club in Catholic Mission Road, Oşogbo.

Oşogbo is now the modern administrative headquarters of Oşun State under the governorship of H.E Olaguntoyè Oyinlola, which was carved out of Oyo State in 1991. The main economic activities of Oşogbo span both the modern formal and informal sectors.¹⁰ The formal sector embraces manufacturing, commerce, construction, finance, transport and communications, catering and social services. The informal sector includes retail trade, tailoring and sewing, vehicle repair, printing and photography, hair-dressing, weaving and dyeing, shoe repair, traditional pottery and smithing. Subsistence farming is still practised but there are also large-scale farms which grow maize and oil-palm. There are several hotels of an acceptable standard in Oşogbo which has a well-established tradition of receiving visitors from all over the world.

The main attractions of Oşogbo are cultural and ecological. The Oşun Groves present a living example of indigenous conservation maintained by traditional sanctions. There is a small museum containing the Ulli Beier Collection of Nigerian and Oceanic Art. The major art galleries are the Art Man's Gallery (owned by Twins Seven Seven, a product of the 3rd Mbari Art Workshop), the African Heritage Gallery (owned by Chief Jimoh Buraimoh, who was a member of Chief Duro Ladipo's production team and also attended the Mbari Art Workshops and Ahmadu Bello University), the Nike Centre for Arts (owned by the famous batik artist, Nike Okundaiye) and Susanne Wenger's Brazilian-style house which incorporates an art-shop. The Ataoja of Oşogbo, H.R.H. Oba Oyewale Matanmi III, wields his traditional authority over the affairs of the town.

⁸Mbari subsequently moved to more imposing premises, the former Central Hotel, Adamasingba, Ibadan.

⁹The people of Oşogbo "Yorubanised" the name of the club by pronouncing it with Yoruba tones and adding "Mbayo" to give the meaning. "When we see it, we will be happy".

¹⁰See Onimode in Adepegba (ed): 1995.



Ibadan, Lino cut by Bisi Fabunmi, 1964



Oba Koso, Lino cut by Rufus Ogundele, 1964

The benign and creative spirit of the goddess Oṣun continues to protect her children, far and wide:

The mighty water is rushing past,
It is flowing to eternity
(translation by Olupona)

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Susanne Wenger at 90, 2005