

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paola Caboara Luzzatto. *Susanne Wenger: Artista e Sacerdotessa*. Florence: Firenze Atheneum, 2009. 181 pp. \$59.99 (paper), ISBN 978-88-7255-358-9.

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Narration and Translation

There was a time when publications about the Austro-Nigerian Susanne Wenger fell into two camps. On the one hand, there were those who celebrated Wenger's reshaping of the grove of the Yoruba deity Osun in Osogbo as a pioneering deed that transcended the categories of race and religion and embraced the universality of the sacred. On the other hand, there were the critics who discarded her work as being that of an egomaniac driven by a kitschy modernist spirit with little sensibility for Yoruba aesthetics. Three years after Wenger's death, however, the debate has calmed down. The perception of her has changed. With an annual symposium commemorating and praising her work, the critique has made way for a gradual deification of the artist.

At first glance, Paola Caboara Luzzatto's book *Susanne Wenger: Artista e Sacerdotessa* (artist and priestess) seems to situate itself firmly in this camp. Written in Italian (with an English translation), the book results from the author's long-term acquaintance with Wenger. As Luzzatto explains in the preface, during the mid- and late 1970s she conducted a series of interviews with Wenger. In view of Luzzatto's own interests in comparative religion, the focus of the interviews was less on artistic production than on religious experience. The notes remained unpublished though. For Luzzatto, turning them into a coherent autobiographical narrative meant to imbue her own written words with an authenticity she felt lacking. The situation changed with Wenger's death in January 2009. As we read, it was now "the right moment to let her [Wenger's] words free and listen again to her

voice" (p. 118).

Wenger's narration is divided into five parts. Part 1 is devoted to Wenger's youth in Graz, Austria; her studies of art in Vienna; and the year she spent in Paris, where she met Ulli Beier with whom she left for Nigeria in 1950. Part 2 covers her arrival in Ibadan, her experience of a colonial campus, and her illness (and recovery) from tuberculosis, as well as her relocation from Ibadan to Ede, where she came into close contact with Yoruba *olorisa* (priest or priestess), especially the Sango priestess Iya Peyu. Part 3 focuses on her encounter with Ajagemo, a charismatic priest from Ede who initiated her into the cult of Obatala, the Yoruba deity of thought and creation, and for whom she did her first shrine structures. Part 4 covers the death of Ajagemo; Wenger's move to Osogbo; and her initiation into the cult of Sonponna, the deity of suffering. Part 5 finally deals with Wenger's marriage (and subsequent) divorce from her second husband, the Yoruba drummer Ayinsola, and the beginning of her work in the Osun grove.

Except for some photographs from Wenger's personal archive and a few details here and there, the book does not offer anything profoundly new. The autobiographical narrative that Luzzatto constructs from her interviews with Wenger has been told before—often by Wenger. More to the point, the story ends in the mid-1970s, the time when Luzzatto interviewed Wenger. Consequently, the three decades following the interview are missing, from the serious conflict with the Osogbo palace

in the mid-1980s to the declaration of the Osun grove as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005, four years before Wenger's death. As a result, those who are looking for a comprehensive autobiography of Wenger's work will be disappointed. And yet the book is neither simply a lengthy retelling of facts long known, nor a hagiographic glorification of Wenger's life. Instead it repre-

sents a rather congenial view of her life. Just as Wenger translated Yoruba subjectivities into her own artistic language, so does Luzzatto using Wenger's voice. Seen in this light, Wenger's narrative—retold by Luzzatto—is a fitting tribute to a life and body of work that was very much about issues of translation and interpretation.

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