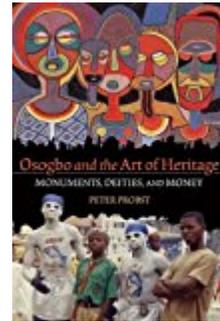




**Peter Probst.** *Osogbo and the Art of Heritage: Monuments, Deities, and Money.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xi + 207 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35611-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22295-4.



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Published on H-AfrArts (July, 2011)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

## Gods, Shrines, Politics, and Art Capitalism in a Yoruba Town

A consistent theme that runs through the various perspectives on the Osogbo school of art is a European modernist narrative that goes something like this: by the early 60s colonial modernity and the new Nigerian elites had led to a steady decline in traditional Yoruba art and religious practices, into which the expatriate mavericks Ulli Beier and Susanne Wenger suddenly appeared, initiating Osogbo's entry into the Western art world, inaugurating an artistic quest by introducing a new artistic vitality into the dusty decaying doldrums of traditional Yoruba formats of belief and expression. Art as preached in Beier and Wenger's workshops would be a saving grace, Osogbo the setting for the resurrection, and, moreover, talented locals provided with jobs and exposure through grants, exhibitions, and sales.

Everyone knows the story: the Austrian Wenger and the German Beier teamed up in a short-lived marriage of convenience. Later, Wenger went her own way, deep into her versions of Yoruba metaphysics, and married a polygamous chief who gave her security *and* freedom to better focus her energies on the Osun grove and,

with artists Adebisi Akanji and Bintu Lamidi, to interpret Yoruba religion in cement shrine statuary. Beier meanwhile initiated the famous Mbari Mbayo Arts Club, married Georgina Betts, who shared his goals, and after his successes, left Nigeria for Papua New Guinea, where he inspired the screen prints and lithographs of the Port Moresby artists Timothy Akis and Martin Morububuna, whose work bears an uncanny resemblance in style and motif to the Osogbo artists Jimoh Buraimoh and Taiwo Olaniyi (aka Twins Seven-Seven).

The expatriate players are important to Probst's book, which places their formative European inspirations and intrepidity in an African setting (while wisely avoiding an overwrought critique of Beier and Wenger, however) and provides us with background information on the key Osogbo artists by rounding out these Nigerians' artistic reputations with some details on their other business ventures in Osogbo, such as a wistful art colony, a working hotel, and a tourist heritage resort of sorts.

But that is all background material to what Probst's

book is really about: the Osun grove, Osogbo town, heritage, religion, and capitalism, as the subtitle implies. Probst is a professor of art and art history at Tufts University, but this exercise is straight political anthropology. By training he is a social anthropologist, or, as art historian Sidney Kasfir corrected me, a *European* social anthropologist, i.e., critical, iconoclastic, and socialist. After some crucial background information on Wenger and Beier, Probst sets the stage for their/his encounter with Osogbo, its putative history and the importance of Osun in geo-religious identity, the balancing of potential religious conflicts among Muslims, Christians, and animists, the changing contours of cultural heritage as influenced by local politics, FESTAC 1977 (Festival of African Arts and Culture), an emerging national consciousness, new commercial interests, and transnational forces. He explores how Osogbo, its particular Osogbo art style, the grove, the iconography of the fish symbol, and the Osun annual festival have become variously wrapped up with UNESCO and World Heritage sites, Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, tourism, religious pilgrimages, a meditation zone, a picnic area, and politically inspired informational brochures and kiosks.

Each chapter has a slightly different theoretical take, and each neatly sets out three or four major points that are then explored in detail. This is crucial because, although the book is clearly written, articulate, and exciting, it is also layered and nuanced. The book is held together by the many notions of heritage that the author considers: Heritage as Source focuses on Osogbo history and the ideas of Osun; Heritage as Novelty provides the background to Wenger's and Beier's European modernism and their different approaches to re-

vitalizing Yoruba art; Heritage as Project concentrates on postcolonial hybridity as the "new modern" and the re-authentication of the Osun grove through FESTAC, the Osogbo Heritage Council, and UNESCO; Heritage as Style deals with the marketing of Osogbo art through the British Council and the American Embassy and the fostering of generational continuity through the Osogbo style. Heritage as Spectacle looks at the meaning of Osogbo's Osun Festival; Heritage as Remembrance plays on the importance of photography in redefining the political interpretations of the Osun grove and its shrines, resetting the religious symbolism of Osun and river offerings into one of commemoration and entertainment; Heritage as Control looks at how the media plays into notions of Yoruba visuality and visual communication in art and religion, while a final coda is a note on Heritage as Presence that takes up the issue of cultural property and safeguarding cultural diversity.

Here, finally, is a meaty book that goes beyond the usual glorification of Osogbo art and paeans to Osogbo artists, their rags-to-fame trajectories, or the miraculous appearance of white expatriates who revive a desiccated art tradition. These are all exciting stories in and of themselves, but Probst goes beyond the textual surfaces of art history in Osogbo school art to give us the background noise and multiplex changing social and political contours that make for a meaningful understanding of the Osogbo experiment and its implications for the modern world of heritage designations and sacred sites in Yoruba and African art. Absorbing reading, it's as good as investigative reporting gets, and loaded with theoretical insights.

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**Citation:** Joseph Nevadomsky. Review of Probst, Peter, *Osogbo and the Art of Heritage: Monuments, Deities, and Money*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. July, 2011.

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