

**European Priestess of African Divinities:
A Review of Paola Caboara Luzzatto's *Susanne Wenger: Artist and Priestess***

Paola Caboara Luzzatto

Susanne Wenger: Artist and Priestess

Pp. 181. Scandicci Firenze: Firenze Atheneum, 2009. Euro 15,20.

ISBN: 978-88-7255-358-9

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Paola Caboara Luzzatto's *Susanne Wenger: Artist and Priestess* is bilingual, written in Italian and English. Though a small book, it is structured into five parts. Evidently, Luzzatto takes her time to do this neat structuring in order to better present the dramatic, though systematic, self-immersion of Susanne Wenger, the subject of the book, in Yoruba traditional religion. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this bilingual book of biography is that it records rather than tell. It records the words of the artist and priestess Susanne Wenger. In this style it reads as concise and direct. It also offers us the untainted wisdom, the mystical lore, of a rare woman turned half-human-half-god. The author very methodically conditions herself as a medium through which Susanne Wenger's enchanting words reaches the reader with an aura of mysticism.

It is thus through her own words that the reader delves into the life and practice of Susanne Wenger alias Adunni Olorisa, the iconoclastic, legendary priestess of Obatala (the divinity of creation, of the Sky) and Sonponna (the divinity of suffering, of the earth) in Yoruba traditional religion. She was indeed a strange phenomenon in Oshogbo, Nigeria. Though an Austrian, she lived in Yorubaland for over sixty years, not as an expatriate (as she ought to have been, having arrived Ibadan as an expatriate scholar's wife), not as a researcher, not as one of those Europeans who came to Africa in the 1950s to amuse themselves with primitive, *paganistic* folkways of the Africans, but as a naturalized (she disliked the word "converted") native, fully involved in the native religion now declared heathen by even some of the natives who had converted to Christianity and Islam.

Susanne Wenger herself knew of the strangeness of her immersion in the Yoruba traditional religion. She was also worried that people, especially her fellow Europeans, interpreted her involvement in negative, derogatory ways, and were inclined to, in her own word, "psychoanalyse" her. But one very frank thing that keeps recurring in the narrative is the strangeness of her entire being, which only became meaningful even to herself when she embraced the Yoruba religion. Raised by parents who "were both gifted and frustrated" (122), often spending her childhood nights crying ("I would allow myself to cry, and nobody ever knew" (121)), Susanne Wenger did not only get into the depth of loneliness and meditation, she also began to plumb the spiritual dimension of objects, such as the trees and the rivers around her. She naturally grew up a deviant, a communist.

CONTEXT: Journal of Social & Cultural Studies,

Volume 13, Number 1, March 2010, Pp 118 -- 119.

ISSN 1119 – 9229. <http://contextjournal.wordpress.com/articles/egy/>

Her movements from her homeland Graz to Vienna, and to Paris, and to Nigeria were, to say the least, dramatic. When, as a young artist, she agreed to marry Ulli Beier in order to come to Africa, she did not know that she was taking a step that will lead her home among the grove of her gods.

Her contacts with Yoruba gods left her in no doubt that she had embraced light. This was why she insisted "*I never 'converted' to any religion: I have just 'found myself'.... I have understood which forces guide my life*" (italics hers, 110). Susanne Wenger, in this epiphany, easily transcended the boundaries of nationality, of race, of civilization. She was initiated into the cult of Obatala, into that of Sonponna, became the priestess of those gods and tended and built their shrines. She gave a new meaning to the Yoruba traditional religion. The Yoruba people took her as one of them, astonished that their gods chose a European as a priestess, and awed by Susanne Wenger's willingness to accept the priesthood. They therefore named her Adunni, which means "they all want her near their side". Among them she became Adunni Olorisa (Olorisa meaning the initiated, the divined, keeping contact with superhuman powers). Her drawings and paintings in Nigeria sought to capture her spiritual contacts and the artistic dimensions of Yoruba divinities. Susanne Wenger's new life and activities in Yorubaland attracted tourists, researchers and admirers, one of which is the author of this book. She raised the status of the Yoruba traditional religion as her shrines came to be recognized and protected by the Department of Antiquities in Nigeria as well as UNESCO.

Although she had to persuade Susanne Wenger before she got the permission to write this book, Luzzatto may have done for Susanne Wenger what the latter did for the Yoruba traditional religion. I explain: it is certainly not the first book or only book on Susanne Wenger, but it is perhaps the most authentic, the most touching, the most moving because Luzzatto allows us into Susanne Wenger's intense shrine of words, uninterrupted. Each sentence is intense, mystical, indeed *godly*. This is because Susanne Wenger's mind, in her diligence as a priestess, continued to move into the depth of the supernatural, of spiritual essence where, as she says, "Each shrine is a spiritual pilgrimage towards psychic depth" (169). This book is a shrine, well built, that leads us into that spiritual nirvana Susanne Wenger attained.

For students and scholars of African religion, history, literature and culture, and for the general reader, this book offers a very interesting insight into the life and religion of a European priestess of African divinities, something that is rare in our inherently divisive world.