



OSUN
OSOGBO
GROVE

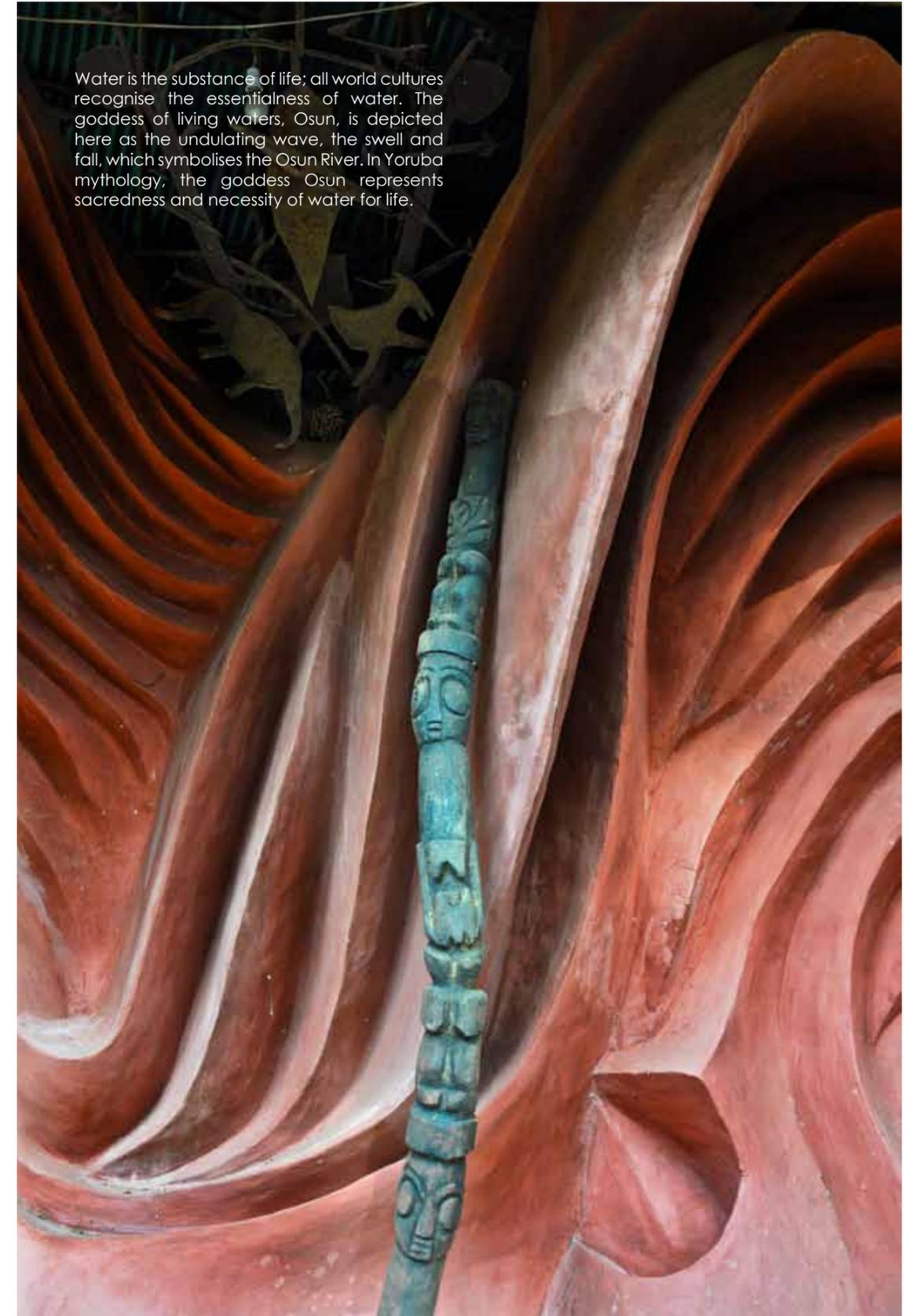
Osun Osogbo Sacred Groves is an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Yoruba people consider the Sacred Groves to be one of the most important religious and cultural sites in Yorubaland. The Sacred Groves is located in Osogbo, which is the capital of Osun State in southwest Nigeria and 250km north of Lagos. The Groves encompass 75 hectares of land along the banks of the Osun River and is home to over one hundred shrines and sculptures.

In traditional Yoruba religion, groves are sacred outdoor places reserved for rituals or shrines. The groves, shrines and sculptures retain an intimate relationship among the Yoruba people, their art, religion and natural environment. Throughout Yorubaland, most of the groves were sold to developers or have succumb to urban sprawl. Although the city pushes in from all sides, Osogbo has steadfastly protected its Sacred Groves.

Cover: Three structures take on the appearance of birds; the pointed-tip represent the bird's head. The spirit of the Earth, Obaluaye stretches his limbs to ride an elephant and prays to the goddess of water, Osun.

Right: Sangodara Ajala, Susanne Wenger's adopted son and international-acclaimed batik artist, explains the significance and details of wall-paintings in the Ogboni shrine-assembly hall.

Below: Outer wall of the Ogboni shrine-assembly hall restored due to the efforts of Adunni Olorisha Trust Fund.



Water is the substance of life; all world cultures recognise the essentialness of water. The goddess of living waters, Osun, is depicted here as the undulating wave, the swell and fall, which symbolises the Osun River. In Yoruba mythology, the goddess Osun represents sacredness and necessity of water for life.



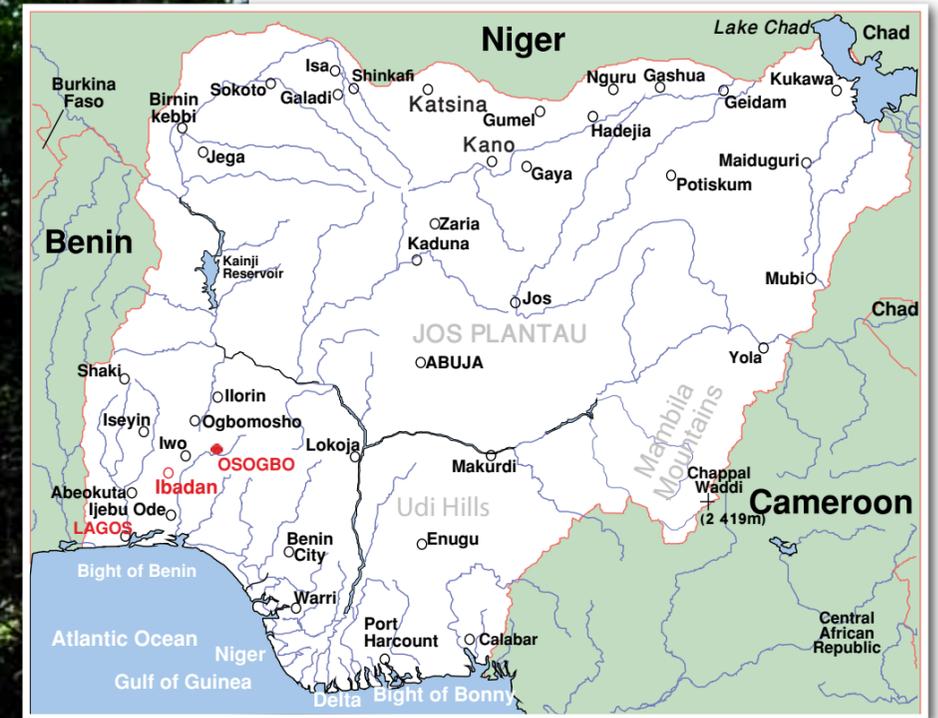


Above: Well-known Yoruba traditional carver, Adeyemi Oseni-Ikodu, restores sculptures. He is an expert in cement work. Adeyemi's sculptures (upper left corner) are of two villagers welcoming visitors to the market place. Adeyemi is one of the artisans of the New Sacred Art Movement who dedicates his art to protect the tradition of the Sacred Groves.

Below: The chameleon stands at the entrance to the Iya Moopo shrine. It represents the beginning of time with its tongue and tail holding the sun and moon.

Opposite page: Inside the Ogboni shrine. The carvers of these totems, along with the other artists of the New Sacred Art Movement, came from a variety of backgrounds. Susanne Wenger's view was that this art is an expression of the Sacred and the artists were inspired by the traditions, the mythology and the Groves.





The Osun Osogbo Sacred Groves is dedicated to the goddess Osun. Osun is a Yoruba word that means water of life. The river goddess named Osun is the spiritual mother of Osogbo. The Osun River flows into Osogbo town and meanders through the Groves, finally, making its way to the Gulf of Guinea. The water is believed to possess curative powers for infertility, barrenness, and life's controversies. Every year around the second week in August, a festival, Osun Festival, is held to observe the founding of Osogbo and to acknowledge both the gods' protections and the goddess of fertility, mother to all.

Above: Iya Moopo is the Great Mother. The monumental statue measuring over 10 meters in height. Her arms are outstretched to welcome daily visitors. Three pairs of arms: one to receive, the other to cast out, the third is the fist-over-fist gesture of judgement. Her face is uplifted to heaven. Twin birds on Iya Moopo's back and bosom are symbolic of 'being in balance'.

The Sacred Groves is a dense forest that supports diverse groups of animals and fauna. Many animals, particularly the monkeys, are fairly tame. Monkeys recline on the sculptures and jump overhead through the forest trees. Because of the sacred nature of the Groves, hunting, poaching and farming are prohibited.

The Sacred Groves might have been lost to the world if it were not for the lifetime dedication of the Austrian artist, Susanne Wenger. She and her husband, Ulli Beier, arrived in Nigeria at Ibadan University in 1950 to focus on art, drama, and music. They moved to Ede where Susanne focussed on her art and immersed herself in the culture. Here, she met the Yoruba priest, Ajagemo, who asked her to restore some ancient shrines. In 1960, Susanne Wenger settled in Osogbo; she studied the Yoruba language and religion. In Osogbo, she was asked to restore shrines in the Groves. She did. Ulli and Susanne divorced in the early '60s but Susanne remained in Osogbo. She dedicated her life's work to the re-creation and the restoration of destroyed shrines, and the protection of the Groves.

Susanne Wenger inspired and mentored Yoruba artisans and artists who worked in the groves with her. Wenger's approach was to encourage freedom of artistic expression within a traditional Yoruba culture. She believed this group of artisans and artists would protect nature and the Yoruba religion over generations. This group, she called, the New Sacred Art Movement. Many of the group that Susanne mentored

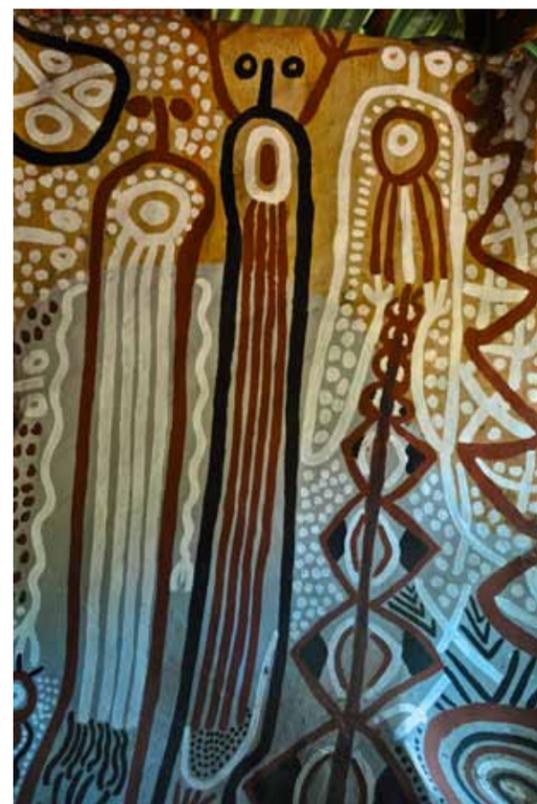


continue in the preservation of the Sacred Groves today. Artists such as Sangodara Ajala have gained international recognition. Sangodara won Nigeria's prestigious National Art Competition Golden Jubilee Award 2010. On permanent display at Oxford University's Saïd Business School is one of Sangodara's batik artwork.

Susanne Wenger's monumental sculptures throughout the Osun Sacred Groves are extraordinary. Wenger believed that art is a spiritual expression, "Art is a ritual or it is not art," she said. Susanne Wenger's sculptures, some over 12 meters high by 15 meters wide, are found along winding pathways, the banks of the River Osun and deep within the Groves. Wenger was initiated as a priestess, Olorisha, and was given the name Adunni, meaning the adored. From 1960, Susanne Wenger remained in Osogbo until her death in 2009; she was 93.

Above: Traditionally, the inner walls of the Ogboni shrine-assembly hall were painted by priestess, elderly women who went into a trance as they painted the walls. Each panel represents the core symbolism of the Ogboni society. The composition and proportions are considered highly sophisticated.

Right: This wall-painting is a masquerade. They are going to the market to dance during the Egungun festival.



The Sacred Groves is the crown jewel of Nigeria's conservation resources because of its green space and its cultural life. The Groves is a grand sculpture garden that showcase more than 100 sculptures, which are made of stone, iron, cement and mud. The harsh tropical climate and termite infestation makes maintenance of the sculptures a continuous challenge. During Susanne Wenger lifetime, she used money from the sale of her own artwork for the upkeep of shrines and sculptures. After her death, The Adunni Olorisha Trust took over the responsibility of restoration and preservation. Because of the untiring efforts of Robin and Hugh Campbell, the Sacred Groves has received funding from international corporations and support from diplomatic missions. As a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site and with community pride, the Osogbo Osun Sacred Groves has a good chance of survival. Ω

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Right: Entrance to the Ogboni shrine dedicated to Earth. The fist-over-fist sculpture depicts judgement.

Below: This entrance leads to the private interior of the Ogboni shrine. Mother Earth towers above the entrance; to the left and right are the undulating waves of the river Osun.

