

## Becoming Olorisa: Ede Town (Nigeria) in the Making of Ulli Beier and Susanne Wenger

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This paper examines the place of the historic Yoruba town of Ede, southwest Nigeria and the institution of Timi (traditional title of all Ede kings) in the evolution and development of Ulli Beier and Susanne Wenger's thoughts on Yoruba art, culture and religion. At Ede, under the guardianship of its king, Timi John Adetoyese Laoye I (1946–1975), Beier and Wenger were introduced into Yoruba culture and its religious cults and belief systems. Beier, in particular, was also introduced to the prominent traditional rulers in Yorubaland who were generally regarded as the custodians of Yoruba heritage and culture. This paved way for many of his discoveries and experiences on African cultures and religion where he was exposed to vast troves of sacred arts, rites, artefacts and the divination system of the Yoruba. Similarly, Wenger acknowledged that she was introduced into the mysterious world of the Yoruba belief systems by the Ajagemo (head of *Obatala* cult in Ede). The pair later became the purveyors and propagators of Yoruba art, culture and religions, although each one followed different approaches. They went on to influence and preserve Yoruba belief systems and culture. Beier was instrumental to the propagation of Yoruba talking drums and the recording of traditional history, festivals and *Oriki* (praise poetry) of Ede. Wenger, on the other hand, became a priestess and member of several cults in Osogbo. The paper draw its analysis on the use of secondary sources.

[Initiation; Ajagemo; Ede; Ulli Beier; *Olorisa*; Timi Laoye I; Yoruba; Susanne Wenger]

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### Introduction

Ulli Beier and Susanne Wenger's arrival in Nigeria in the early 1950s is particularly significant for the study and knowledge of Africa.<sup>1</sup> Before this

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period, Africa was generally labelled as a continent whose people had no history that mattered to the rest of human civilisation. This view was mostly represented in the works of British historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper who was of the view that Africa was a 'dark continent' and, therefore, was of no concern to the historian.<sup>2</sup> Other Western academics and writers that joined in this argument include Georg W. F. Hegel,<sup>3</sup> Reginald Coupland,<sup>4</sup> Andrew Foote,<sup>5</sup> Charles Seligman,<sup>6</sup> among others. Seligman, in particular, went further to assert that any remarkable achievement found across African societies emerged through the influence of the Hamitic race.<sup>7</sup> Also, in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Africans were said to come last in the evolutionary stage of the development of all human race.<sup>8</sup> Due to these unverifiable claims, the peoples of Africa were said to be incapable of contributing anything on their own without mentorship.<sup>9</sup> The humanity of Africans was also looked upon with suspicion. One of the greatest implications of this was that Western scholars wondered if Africans were ever conscious of themselves, their environment and what happened to them at any point in time.<sup>10</sup> In every respect, the sense of the history of Africans was seriously challenged by these Eurocentric views and scientific theories. Certainly, this appears to be the height of insensitivity to the development of other societies and the inability to move outside the cocoon of Western culture.

Incidentally, the attitude of these apologists for colonialism was not shared by some other Western intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> Beier and Wenger, both Europeans, for instance, believed in the people of Africa and their culture.

<sup>2</sup> H. TREVOR-ROPER, *The Past and Present: History and Sociology*, in: *Past and Present*, 42, 1969, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*, New York 1956, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> R. COUPLAND, *Kirk on the Zambezi: A Chapter in African History*, Oxford 1928, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> A. H. FOOTE, *Africa and the American Flag*, New York 1854, p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. SELIGMAN, *Races of Africa*, London 1930, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> D. N. REZNICK, *The Origin of Then and Now: An Interpretive Guide to the Origin of Species*, Princeton 2009.

<sup>9</sup> For a more explanatory discussion, see E. NWAUBANI – K. O. DIKE, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, "Trade and Politics", and the Restoration of the African in History, in: *History in Africa*, 27, 2000, pp. 229–248.

<sup>10</sup> F. FUGLESTAD, The Trevor-Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History: An Essay, in: *History in Africa*, 19, 1992, pp. 309–326.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, G. DEVENEAUX, The Frontier in Recent African History, in: *The International Journal of African Studies*, 11, 1, 1978, pp. 63–85.

While other Europeans found it insalubrious to think of any unique African culture or relate with the people, Beier and Wenger found solace and comfort among the African nay Yoruba people. Truly, there is no denying the fact that these two figures also found an enduring mission and career in life among the Yoruba whom they met on arrival in Nigeria. While Beier, after his time in Nigeria, continued to promote and expose different aspects of Yoruba arts and culture to the global community, Wenger became a strong patroness of the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove which was later listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2005. Beier and Wenger did not just relate with the Yoruba community, they were also initiated into the different aspects of culture and tradition of the people. These initiations were of a different kind for Beier who notes that “*such rituals as was performed [...] was more a gesture of friendship than a serious initiation,*”<sup>12</sup> while Wenger had gone through a more than ten years initiation into *Obatala*,<sup>13</sup> *Sonponna*<sup>14</sup> (later *Alajere*)<sup>15</sup> and was part of the *Ogboni*<sup>16</sup> cult. She was a high priestess and one of the most important spiritual reference persons in these Yoruba cults. This aptly explains the huge difference in their affiliation with Yoruba religion and belief systems as well as their approaches to Yoruba art and culture. Whilst, for instance, Beier paved the way for upcoming Yoruba artists to share their works around the world, Wenger was deeply involved in Yoruba religion as a priestess of *Osun*,<sup>17</sup> which is the divinity that plays host to her artistic activities.<sup>18</sup> This, notwithstanding, one of the imprints of these cultural influences could be seen in traditional Yoruba names Beier (Obotunde Ijimere, Sangodare Akanji and Omidiji Aragbalu), and Wenger (Adunni Olorisa) received in some Yoruba towns like Osogbo, Ilobu and Otan Aiyegbaju. At this point, one might ask how Beier and Wenger were able to infuse their lives into a culture once deprecated by their forebears who had worked in Africa. It is important to examine the extent of their involvement in this culture, their contributions to these communities and who their major influences were. Truly, these issues are very important and

<sup>12</sup> U. BEIER, *The Return of the Gods: The Sacred Art of Susanne Wenger*, Cambridge 1975, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> *Obatala* is the Yoruba divinity of creation and compassion.

<sup>14</sup> *Sonponna* is the Yoruba divinity associated with suffering and disease.

<sup>15</sup> *Alajere* is an ancient Yoruba deity.

<sup>16</sup> The *Ogboni* was a very powerful political institution and secret society in Yorubaland founded originally to worship the earth.

<sup>17</sup> *Osun* is the Yoruba divinity associated with the river and fertility.

<sup>18</sup> BEIER, p. 35.

necessary in the reconstruction of the history of the Yoruba in this period and the activities of Beier and Wenger in Africa. Answers to the questions above can be found in Ede, the ancient Yoruba town where the duo spent two fruitful years after newly arriving in Nigeria.

### **Ulli Beier and Ede: Forging an Enduring Relationship**

Ede is a Yoruba town in present-day Osun State, southwest Nigeria. Historically, the town was founded as an Oyo military outpost in the 15<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of an Oyo warrior-prince and a fiery archer.<sup>19</sup> Ede today is very expansive as it covers such neighbouring communities as Sekona, Oloki, Alajue, Owode and a host of others. The area was predominantly inhabited by groups who were adherents of Yoruba traditional religions until the 1820s when Islam was introduced by some itinerant preachers from the north of the country. Ede has since been recognised as a Muslim town by the sheer size of its Muslim population but there is also a considerable number of Christians and adherents of traditional religions in the town.<sup>20</sup>

While Beier and Wenger would continue to be celebrated in different parts of the world, the impact of Ede town in their lives cannot be underestimated. For Beier, it was here that his quest for an African life different from the colonial and Western-imposed tradition in the then University College, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) was first fulfilled and developed. His testimonies bear witness to this position when he points out that he was employed to teach Phonetics at the University College, Ibadan, but found himself moving out of the department and the ghetto around the university campus after only one year.<sup>21</sup> In the university, he was cut off from the everyday life of the local people and their culture and that the colonial character of the university was simply intolerable because it imposed the British syllabus on Nigerian students.

Beier was among the few Europeans who rose above the feeling, idea and myth of racial superiority of the Caucasoid race. His view on modernisation was not synonymous with westernisation. He was perhaps among the first persons to have observed the contradiction in the colonial education so cherished by African people as an instrument

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<sup>19</sup> On the early history of Ede, see S. OYEWESO, *Ede in Yoruba History*. Lagos 2002.

<sup>20</sup> I. NOLTE – K. OGEN – R. JONES (eds.), *Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town*, Woodbridge 2017, pp. 1–30.

<sup>21</sup> U. BEIER, *In a Colonial University*, Bayreuth 1993.

of modernisation and development. He was saddened at the contempt with which Europeans viewed African cultures but was more baffled with the shocking rejection of African culture by the African students at the University.<sup>22</sup> While he concluded that the racial arrogance of the European was born out of ignorance and unwillingness to appreciate and learn, he was shocked at seeing African students who were born into and lived the culture rejecting their heritage.<sup>23</sup>

One of the methods Beier adopted to demystify the idea of this inferiority complex in African students was to engage them in critical debates. From these debates, he observed that African students misconstrued the concept of education and the idea of modernisation. These African students defined education from the purview of the technological West, a means to escape the “gory” pictures of the African past and a key to unlock privileges that independent Nigeria would offer. Beier’s answer to the African students’ inferiority complex was to explain that even Europe, the model for the cherished modernisation and development, was in a dire situation.<sup>24</sup>

Still, on the deplorable effects of Western education on African culture and society, Beier found significant gaps in the Free Universal Primary Education scheme introduced by the then Government of the Western Region under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.<sup>25</sup> While Beier was not opposed to the noble idea to provide every child in the region access to primary education, he objected to the scheme because it lacked not only philosophical backing but had no acknowledgement of traditional/cultural practices and values. He engaged the then Minister of Education for the region, Stephen O. Awokoya, in a critical debate over the issue<sup>26</sup> but discovered that it was a wasted effort because most educated elites running the government were already brainwashed and immersed in the assumption that Western education and Western religion were inextricably linked. Beier was surprised that despite the enthusiasm of these politicians for the scheme, the governing elite failed to consider one important factor – what awaited thousands of young

<sup>22</sup> U. BEIER, *The Attitude of the Educated African to His Traditional Art*, in: *The Phylon Quarterly*, 18, 2, 1957, pp. 162–165.

<sup>23</sup> W. OGUNDELE, *Omoluabi: Ulli Beier, Yoruba Society and Culture*, Bayreuth 2003, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> BEIER, *The Attitude*, pp. 162–165.

<sup>25</sup> See A. AJAYI, *The Development of Free Primary Education Scheme in Western Nigeria, 1952–1966: An Analysis*, in: *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*, 5, 1, 2008, pp. 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> OGUNDELE, p. 46.

children in terms of employment opportunities after their education? The implications of this for African society were a mixed bag of consequences. While Western education brought what British anthropologist, John Peel, refers to as *Olaju* (civilisation/modernisation),<sup>27</sup> the number of people seeking white-collar jobs drastically increased beyond opportunities that the government could provide.<sup>28</sup> Western education also did not address the pressing needs of the people as it failed to serve as a stabilising and moral force.<sup>29</sup>

Ironically, while the products of western education were becoming estranged in their primary society, neither were they absorbed into the anglicised circles of their dreams. Based on this uneasiness, Beier was compelled to join the Department of Extramural Studies, which provided him with absolute freedom to introduce courses in African literature to his students. To do this effectively, he needed to interact with the local population not only to know more about them but to explore various means needed to convince them about his teachings. He had his first meeting with one of the most important custodians of the Yoruba culture, the Yoruba *Obas* (kings). Timi John Adetoyese Laoye I (1946–1975) of Ede was the first among the *Obas* who received him. Giving his testimony later, Beier notes that: “I was extremely lucky that the first *Oba* I met was Timi Laoye of Ede. In order to encourage his people to attend extramural classes, he joined my course for a whole year. He also became my mentor. Through Timi Laoye, I very soon felt completely at home in Yorubaland. He took pleasure in educating me about his culture and on rare occasions when he could not answer my questions, he called in his aunt, the *Iya Sango* in the palace.”<sup>30</sup>

After the initial contact with Timi Laoye, Beier relocated to Ede where he lived from 1952 to 1954 before he moved to Ilobu, another Yoruba town. During this period, he did not live in Oke District Office where the colonial officer was stationed or an isolated place in Ede but in the market square very close to the king’s palace. This allowed him to pay regular

<sup>27</sup> J. D. Y. PEEL, *Olaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development*, in: *The Journal of Development Studies*, 14, 2, 1978, pp. 139–165.

<sup>28</sup> M. KRIEGER, *Education and Development in Western Nigeria: The Legacy of S.O. Awokoya, 1952–1985*, in: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 20, 4, 1987, p. 662.

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent study on this position, see S. OSOGBA – A. FAJANA, *Educational and Social Development during the Twentieth Century*, in: O. IKIME (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan 1980, pp. 571–600.

<sup>30</sup> OGUNDELE, p. 20.

visits to Timi Laoye to chat, interact and see the everyday life of the town personally.<sup>31</sup> Until the time of Beier's death, he continued to speak of Timi Laoye as one of his mentors.

While in Ede, he experienced and understood the complexity and beauty of Yoruba social and political systems. There, he learned about the Yoruba royal courts, and patterns of relation and interaction between the king and the people. He observed that obeisance paid by African people to their rulers did not translate into inferiority and neither was it a sign of weakness nor pretence. While revering their kings, the Yoruba people were not precluded from criticising their rulers politely. Another important observation Beier made at Timi Laoye's court in Ede was the refinement of the Yoruba legal system which placed significant emphasis on arbitration, reconciliation and amelioration over litigation.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps, it is important to mention, as indicated earlier, that Beier was introduced to many religious cults as part of his mentorship under Timi Laoye at Ede. Beier's biographer, Wole Ogundele, notes that "*It was the Timi who introduced him [Beier] through his aunt, the Iya Sango, to the Sango cult and other Yoruba religious cults*".<sup>33</sup> According to Beier, when Timi Laoye saw his interest in the Yoruba culture: "*He invited me to all religious festivals in Ede and even insisted on initiating me into the Ogboni society because he said when I become more deeply involved in the culture and more confident, it would open many doors to me.*"<sup>34</sup>

At Ede, Beier was introduced to the *Ogboni* society and the *Sango* cult. This new relationship with these traditional agencies paved way for many of his discoveries and understanding of Yoruba cultures and religion. He learned about some important and sacred arts, rites, artefacts and divination systems of the Yoruba.<sup>35</sup> Beier discovered, for instance, some marvellous carvings in the *Sango* shrine which were never displayed in the public. Some of these images were later exhibited in Ibadan, Salisbury (now Harare), and Prague together with Timi Laoye and his palace drummers in attendance. Through this involvement with the *Ogboni* cult, Beier was able to understand that the agency was not a mere talking shop

<sup>31</sup> BEIER, *In a Colonial University*, pp. 11–14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>33</sup> W. OGUNDELE, Rereading Beier, in: *African Quarterly on the Arts*, 2, 3, 1998, pp. 61–65.

<sup>34</sup> Ulli Beier's Images: Stories of Receding Culture, *Guardian*, 7 March 2006.

<sup>35</sup> O. RAHEEM, The Ulli Beier Archives at the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding (CBCIU), Nigeria, and a Summary of Holdings, in: *Africa Bibliography*, 2020, p. 20.

of the elders but an important socio-political organ of the Yoruba people. He observed that the cult was able to effectively perform its political or judicial functions because of its all-encompassing membership. The *Ogboni* society was like a central cult for all *Orisa* (Yoruba divinity) cults. Thus, every action of the *Ogboni* cult represented the joint decisions of all the senior *Olorisa* (devotee of a Yoruba divinity) members.<sup>36</sup>

More importantly, this relationship, begun thanks to the fiery-tempered Iya Sango, allowed Beier to join priests and priestesses of other Yoruba communities in different religious and cultural ceremonies. He worshipped every *Ose* (week) with the *Erinle* cult in Ilobu and attended the *Sango* ceremonies in Ila-Orangun and Otan-Ayegbaju, two Yoruba towns. Ogundele recalls that “*these were [Beier’s] spiritual soul-mates, people in whose company he felt most at home and from whom he learned so much, such that if he had been born a Yoruba person, he was certain that he would have been a Sango devotee*”.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, while he was immersed in the religious cults in Ede, he was never in doubt about Timi Laoye’s exceptional skill and mastery of the talking drums. Beier discovered that these drums, apart from being an instrument of entertainment, also had powerful symbolic roles and rich meanings in Yoruba culture. Interestingly, many of these drums could not be played except on special occasions,<sup>38</sup> while some could not be displayed publicly except in the shrines of the divinities.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is only those immersed in the cults who have the privilege to know and understand the difference between these drums.<sup>40</sup> Beier was one of these privileged few. Therefore, his fascination with the talking drums influenced his decision to become one of the promoters of Timi Laoye’s exhibition on the talking drums in different parts of the world. He would later advise Timi Laoye to document his knowledge on these drums for future reference.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> OGUNDELE, *Omoluabi*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> An example is the *òsìrìgì* traditional drums popular among the Ifè people of southwest Nigeria. See A. ADESOJI, Of Orality and History: Songs, Royalty and Traditional Agency in Yorubaland, 1910 to the Present, in: S. ADERINTO – P. OSIFODUNRIN (eds.), *Third Wave of Historical Scholarship on Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Ayodeji Olukeju*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2012, pp. 98–100.

<sup>39</sup> A. A. SESAN, Gender Dialectics of Yoruba Drum Poetry, in: *Rupkatha Journal*, 5, 2, 2013, p. 172.

<sup>40</sup> U. BEIER, The Talking Drums of the Yorùbá, in: *African Music Society Journal*, 1, 1954, pp. 29–31.



To a very large extent, Beier appeared to have been overwhelmed by his new awakening and experience at Ede such that he wanted to know everything he could about the Yoruba. Through Timi Laoye, he extended his friendship to other Yoruba towns and communities like Ilobu, Osogbo, Okuku, Ile-Ife, Owo, and Akure. This was also the beginning of his friendship with several other Yoruba kings like *Oba* Samuel Adenle, the *Ataoja* of Osogbo; *Oba* Moses Oyinlola, the *Olokuku* of Okuku; *Oba* Olaosebikan Oyewusi, and successor to *Oba* Moses Oyinlola; the *Ooni* of Ife, the *Olowo* of Owo, the *Orangun* of Ila, the *Ogiyan* of Ejigbo, and *Deji* of Akure. Despite his friendship with these kings, Beier had a very intimate relationship with the Timi because he served as a worthy mentor, while his intimacy with the *Olokuku* was that of two good friends.<sup>42</sup> Also, beginning with his association with women in Ede, Ulli Beier discovered their true position in African societies. Before this time, the common notion about African women within Western circles was that they were dull and passive, prodded at the instigation of men.<sup>43</sup> But Beier's experience among Yoruba communities proved this theory wrong. His relationship with Yoruba women showed that they were an important and respected segment in any Yoruba community who held significant positions germane to the peace and stability of their communities.<sup>44</sup>

Beier's relationship and interest in Ede could be said to be a mutually beneficial experience. As he discovered and nurtured his interest in Yoruba cultures and pantheons at Ede, he was, in turn, instrumental to the educational and cultural growth and development of the town. As indicated earlier, he established one of his extramural classes at Ede, which was attended by many people including Timi Laoye. This class served as an avenue for knowledge production and a means of exchange of ideas about the peoples' culture.

<sup>41</sup> The product of this discussions led to the publication titled; *Timi of Ede, Qba LAOYE I. Yorùbá Drums*, in: *Odu*, 7, 1959, pp. 5–14.

<sup>42</sup> L. OLAGUNJU – B. SALAM – O. OLADÉJÍ – W. OGUNDELE, *Oyinlola Olokuku: Every Inch a King*, Osogbo 2005.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed analysis, see N. MUSISI, *The Politics of Perception or Perception as Politics? Colonial and Missionary Representations of Buganda Women, 1900–1945*, in: J. ALLMAN – S. GEIGER – N. MUSISI (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Bloomington 2002, pp. 95–115.

<sup>44</sup> *In Search of One's Head: Paul Onovoh talks to Ulli Beier*, Bayreuth, 27 February 1997. See also O. OLAJUBU, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, New York 2003.

He played an important role in facilitating the historical documentation of the people of Ede. Although he considered Timi Laoye as his mentor, he encouraged him to document the history of Ede as well as write an autobiography. Therefore, a significant factor in the production of a traditional account of the history of Ede was authored by a teacher, E. A. Olunlade, and edited and annotated by Beier. A historian and distinguished scholar, the late Isaac Akinjogbin, translated the manuscript into English from Yoruba which was eventually published by the Ministry of Education in 1961.<sup>45</sup> Beier also encouraged Timi Laoye to document the *Oriki* (praise poetry) of all Timi that had ruled in Ede from inception to Laoye's era. This led to the publication of the book by Timi Laoye titled, *Oriki ati Orile Awon idile ni Ile Yoruba ati Ekeeka Won* (Praise and Place Names of Selected Families in Yorubaland). It was to Ulli Beier's credit that the *Oriki* was later translated to the English language. Also, Timi Laoye's publications particularly on Yoruba talking drums published in the journals, *Odu* and *Nigeria Magazine* was facilitated by Beier. To this day, this article remains one of the most cited documents on talking drums in Africa.

In some of his publications on religion and culture, Beier also contributed a great deal in relating his experience in Ede. One of his most important publications<sup>46</sup> gave an eye-witness account of many festivals in Yoruba towns but focused more on Ede. He described in details the *Obatala* festival in the town and the major highlights involved in the celebration.

Also, through the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ulli Beier was responsible for facilitating cultural exchanges between Timi Laoye and the university on Yoruba culture, particularly on aspects dealing with the talking drums.<sup>47</sup> In recognition of his contributions to African cultures, the Obafemi Awolowo University awarded Timi Laoye an honorary Doctor of Civil Law in 1972.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, Beier was responsible for facilitating some of Timi Laoye's talking drums exhibitions in Europe and the United States. During this period, the respected king became a renowned expert in

<sup>45</sup> See E. A. OLUNLADE, *Ede: A Short History*, Ibadan 1961. See also, J. A. LAOYE, *The Story of my Installation*, Ede 1956.

<sup>46</sup> U. BEIER, A Year of Sacred Festival in one Yoruba Town, in: *Nigeria Magazine*, 1959.

<sup>47</sup> Timi of Ede, Oba LAOYE I, "The Talking Drum." Audiotape of Keynote Address, Fifth Ife' Festival of the Arts at University of Ife', Ilé-Ife', Nigeria, 12 May 1972. Obafemi Awolowo University Department of Music Archives. 1 tape reel.

<sup>48</sup> F. KEHINDE, Oba Laoye: Timi of Ede, in: *Vanguard*, 2 January 2016.

talking drums after having the honour to entertain the Queen of England on her visit to Nigeria in 1956.<sup>49</sup> He was not only recognised as a symbol of African culture but also received several awards for this including the Queen's Silver Medal for Chiefs in 1956 and at the same time was honoured with a Member of the British Empire (MBE) in 1963.<sup>50</sup>

### Susanne Wenger: A Spiritual Re-awakening in Ede

The influence of Ede on the late priestess of the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, Wenger is also relevant in this discussion. She was the second European initiated into the Yoruba religion at Ede. Although an Austrian by birth, Wenger would later admit her enchantment with the Yoruba people. This admittance did not, however, mean she rejected her background and, in fact, never stopped being European or Austrian. In her words: *"I have not rejected the Western world and the Western culture, I am still very European. But [...] I have been enchanted by the richness and complexity of Yoruba culture. I never 'converted' to any religion: I have just 'found myself'. I have found [...] receptivity that in Europe I had lost. I have understood which forces guide my life. I have rediscovered the possibility of celebrating life: this has been my conversion."*<sup>51</sup>

As indicated earlier, Wenger moved to Ede with Ulli Beier, where they met Timi Laoye in 1951.<sup>52</sup> Like her husband, she was not simply willing to escape the artificiality of the university compound, but she was also disturbed by the attack on traditional African culture. In an interview granted to the British Broadcasting Corporation in August 1998, Wenger pointed out that when she first arrived in Yorubaland, she noticed that the Yoruba traditional culture was in decline and faced a serious threat of extinction as a result of the activities of Christian missionaries and colonial officials who branded it "black magic."<sup>53</sup> In other words: *"[...] going native' was simply a matter of getting to the source of Yoruba art by submerging herself physically and spiritually into the vanishing culture which had once created such valuable art forms as Senubo Masks and Yoruba figure carvings. Where*

<sup>49</sup> G. A. NWAKUNOR, 45 Years after, Timi John Adetoyese Laoye I in the Sands of Time, in: *Guardian*, 2 August 2020.

<sup>50</sup> A. ADEWOPO, Palace Memories: Dinner with Oba Adetoyese Laoye, in: *Tribune*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>51</sup> P. C. LUZZATTO, *Sussane Wenger: Artist and Priestess*, Florence 2009, p. 110.

<sup>52</sup> The pair had been married the previous decade in London as a requisite to move to Nigeria.

<sup>53</sup> A. WALKER, The White Priestess of "Black Magic", *BBC*, 10 September 2008.

*colonists had come to oppress the natives and missionaries had come to change them, Susanne Wenger had come to preserve one of their contributions to culture.*"<sup>54</sup>

One of her adopted sons, Sangodare Ajala, recalled that Wenger discouraged him from attending school because she feared he would be converted into a Christian and his life would be over.<sup>55</sup> Such was her little way at that early period to preserve the dying Yoruba traditional culture. And in her case, she was sick when she came to Ede with Beier and was just recovering when from her house: *"She heard people who were doing the Obatala weekly worship with drumming in the neighbourhood. She was hearing it on her bed. Then she stood up from her bed and went in the direction from where the sound of the drumming was coming from. As she got to the place, she peeped into the shrine where they were doing the worship. The way she saw the devotees of Obatala dancing [...] captured her. She experienced for the first time in her life what one could describe as a real spiritual awakening. Although she could not speak Yoruba then, she was able to give signs that she was interested in Yoruba traditional religion to the then high priest of Obatala, Ajagemo. From there, she started to learn under the high priest in Ede, who initiated her into Yoruba traditional religion. From there, her journey into the [Yoruba] religion started."*<sup>56</sup>

Through a surreal experience, Wenger was initiated into the *Obatala* cult by Ajagemo (head of *Obatala* cult in Ede). According to her, Ajagemo *"took me by the hand and led me into the spirit world. This is in spite of the fact that I did not speak Yoruba and he did not speak English. Our only intercourse was the language of the trees"*.<sup>57</sup> Through this experience, she was not only hooked and transformed; she also found her *ori inu* (real essence) as the Yoruba referred to it. Thereafter, she became a daughter of *Obatala*, mastering Yoruba cosmology while the *Obatala* priest also became her leader.

It is significant to note that trees and water were two symbolic forces in Wenger's journey to priesthood. She once said that: *"I think and feel like the river; my blood flows with the river, to the rhythm of its waves, otherwise, the trees and the animals would not be such allies. I am here in the trees, in the river, in my creative phase, not only when I am here physically, but forever – even when I happen to be travelling – hidden beyond time and suffering, in the spiritual entities, which, because they are real in many ways, present ever new features. I feel sheltered by them – in them – because I am so very fond of trees and running water,*

<sup>54</sup> White Priestess, *Ebony*, 15, 6 April 1960, p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> WALKER, *The White Priestess*.

<sup>56</sup> K. A. GARBA, *Austrian Artist: the Story of Susanne Wenger*, in: *OPEC Bulletin*, XXXX, 1, 2009, pp. 52–55.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

*and all the gods of the world are trees and animals long, long before they entrust their sacrosanct magnificence to [a] human figure.*<sup>58</sup>

Despite her experience with the spiritual world, Wenger was also fascinated by the wonderful display of dancers and Timi Laoye's drumming skill. In any case, her initiation into the *Obatala* cult would also require that she familiarised herself with different drums and dance steps of the gods. Drums are one of the instruments of communication between the initiates and the gods.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, her admiration for the talking drums led to an intimate relationship between her and the drummer Ayansola Oniru, who was very adept at drumming the gods into frenzy. Wenger would marry Ayansola, which later ended in a divorce.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from this, she learned other forms of Yoruba arts including drama, dyeing and painting in Ede. Being a painter herself, she blended traditional art forms with Western forms to produce different works. As Wolfgang Denk remarks: "*The clear and transcendent language of these works is religiously motivated in the universal sense, but still spontaneous and free in the sense of the perception of art [...]. She incorporates themes from the history of mankind, the Bible, world literature and the Yoruba cultural circle.*"<sup>61</sup>

In the last years of her life, Wenger referred to some of her drawings and books as her "hour-books" where she confirmed that her inspiration was derived from her state-of-awareness and affirmations of her beliefs. Also, most of them were done in reverence to the gods. As far back as 1962, some of these works were on display in a joint Exhibition of Yoruba Traditional Religion and Culture held in Darmstadt, West Germany, with Timi Laoye.<sup>62</sup>

### Some Observations

Traditional Yoruba arts and religion enjoyed a very strong appeal from the duo of Beier and Wenger. They did not just show their interest in this traditional African culture, they became initiates of the tradition. Through this experience, they assumed the role of spokespeople and ambassadors of African belief systems and their people through various platforms. In many respects, there is a sense in which one could say that

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> A. ADEGBITE, The Drum and its Role in Yoruba Religion, in: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 18, 1, 1988, pp. 15–26.

<sup>60</sup> LUZZATTO, pp. 162–164.

<sup>61</sup> W. DENK, About Susanne Wenger, *Susanne Wenger Foundation*, <http://www.susanne-wengerfoundation.at/en/wolfgang-denk-about-susanne-wenger> [2020–06–25].

<sup>62</sup> B. JINMI, Susan Wenger's Tribute Revisited, in: *Guardian*, 15 April 2009.

out of many Africanist scholars, Beier and Wenger made the most significant contributions in the promotion and preservation of African cultures and traditions.<sup>63</sup> Wenger was a high priestess of the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove. She worked hard to resuscitate some of the dilapidated structures in the forest that housed the grove. Many of her sculptural works could be found throughout the forest. Through her devotion and belief in the sacredness of the shrine, she helped to preserve the once widespread Yoruba practice of establishing sacred groves outside every settlement. The preservation of this grove has, therefore, given a significant boost to the number of tourists and devotees who throng in their thousands from different parts of the world to witness the annual Osun Osogbo festival and pay their homage to the shrine to renew their bond with the gods.<sup>64</sup>

Also, in his tribute to Beier, Professor of History Akinjide Osuntokun, described him as one who “*lived a good and fulfilled life. He was a great exponent of Yoruba culture. He always wore Yoruba dashiki (attire) and ate Yoruba food most of the time and had some knowledge of Yoruba language [...]*”.<sup>65</sup> He went ahead to confirm that Beier did establish what was called Yoruba Haus, “*a kind of cultural centre/museum/restaurant where African culture was on display*”.<sup>66</sup> Beier had many Yoruba and African artefacts in his collection which includes the Yoruba *Agbada* worn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, carved objects and statues, paintings and pictures of individuals (especially kings) and events in various Yoruba communities. Some of these have been donated to several Institutes of African Studies, Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth, Germany<sup>67</sup> and the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding (CBCIU) in Osogbo, southwest Nigeria, which holds the collections in the Ulli Beier estate.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> See P. PROBST, *Modernism against Modernity: A Tribute to Susanne Wenger*, in: *Critical Interventions*, 2, 3–4, 2008, pp. 245–255; K. RICHARDS, *Suzanne Wenger*, in: *The Guardian*, 26 March, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> A. OGUNDIRAN, *The Osun-Osogbo Grove as a Social Common and an Uncommon Ground: An Analysis of Patrimonial Patronage in Postcolonial Nigeria*, in: *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 12, 2, 2014, pp. 173–198.

<sup>65</sup> A. OSUNTOKUN, *Professor Ulli Beier: A Tribute*, in: *The Nation*, 7 April 2011.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> K. GREVEN – B. PIERRE-NICOLAS, ‘Living with the Archive’ – The Ulli Beier Estate at Iwalewahaus, in: M. LE LAY – D. MALAQUAIS – N. SIEGERT (eds.), *Archive (Re)mix: Vues D’Afrique*, Rennes 2015, pp. 159–169.

<sup>68</sup> RAHEEM, *The Ulli Beier Archives*. See also K. GREVEN – L. NAUMANN – S. SALMANIAN – N. SIEGERT, *Collectivize (Re)sources: The Photographic Estate of Ulli Beier*, in: *Critical Interventions*, 12, 2, 2018, pp. 140–157.

In the same vein, it seems plausible to suggest that both Beier and Wenger were symbols of African religious emancipation from the vitriolic and vicious circle of attacks of Westernization, Christianity and Islam. As indicated earlier, Wenger prevented one of her adopted sons from attending school because of the fear of being converted to Christianity. Also, Beier and Wenger were not comfortable with the European imposed cultures on African students, and this explains why they immediately moved out from the university campus into traditional and core Yoruba communities where their desires and spirits were indulged. In one of his discussions with Wole Soyinka, Beier points out that African and, indeed, the Yoruba religion is more liberating and tolerant than modern religions. According to him: *“Yoruba religion, within itself, is based on this very tolerance. Because in each town you have a variety of cults, all coexisting peacefully: there may be Shango, Ogun, Obatala, Oshun and many more – even within the same small family – but there is never any rivalry between different cult groups; they all know they are interdependent. Because they are like specialists: everybody understands specific aspects of the supernatural world. Nobody can know everything. The Egunguns know how to deal with the dead; the Ogun worshippers know how to handle the forces that are symbolized by iron. But for the Ogun worshippers to function, it is also necessary that Shango worshippers and Obatala worshippers and all the other Olorisha perform their part. Only the concentrated effort of all of them will bring peace and harmony to the town.”*<sup>69</sup>

Also, Beier was critical of practitioners and clerics of modern religions. According to him, most of them are dubious and unfaithful and are more interested in enriching themselves by exploiting their followers. “Take a *babalawo*, for instance,” Beier contends, *“When you consult a babalawo, you put down three-pence. A token fee! There is no money involved in divination. Have you ever seen a rich babalawo?”*<sup>70</sup> Ulli Beier went further in this comparison by noting that the grand old *Olorisa* priests like the *Ajagemo* of Ede and the *Akodu* of Ilobu he knew in the 1950s who, despite their influence in the society, were all poor people.

Beyond this affirmation of African religion, Beier and Wenger played a significant role in transforming local artisans into world-famous artists. Through the Osogbo Arts School and the Mbari Club, Muraina Oyelami, Nike Ekundaye Davies, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Jimoh Buraimoh, Bisi Fabunmi

<sup>69</sup> Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion: A Conversation with Ulli Beier, in: *Isokan Yoruba Magazine*, III, III, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

and Twin Seven Seven all developed their creative talents in painting, textile designs and other artworks.<sup>71</sup> Beier also supported dramatists like Duro Ladipo in the production of epic indigenous stage plays like *Oba Koso*, *Moremi*, *Oba Moro* and many others.<sup>72</sup> Finally, he was a friend and mentor to many Nigerian literary giants like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo. Together, they helped to promote various aspects of the culture and tradition of African societies and their peoples.<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that Beier and Wenger were very important figures in the cultural growth of Africa from the 1950s. They were not in the class of ethnic chauvinists and religious bigots who failed to see anything good about the people of Africa. Both appreciated the indigenous people, their beliefs and traditions. In the case of Wenger, she never travelled much within Africa and so her knowledge is rather focused on Nigeria. This did not, however, undermine her deep respect and admiration for other African cultures and belief systems. They were also tolerant and accommodating of the differences among the diverse ethnic groups in various communities they visited in Nigeria, most especially the Yoruba. Beier and Wenger also lived in these communities, consumed their foods, wore their clothes, participated in their festivals, shared in their joy and sorrows, made friends among them, and impacted the development of their host communities.

Indeed, the importance of the town of Ede on both cannot be under-emphasized. There is no gainsaying the fact that their diverse experiences and interesting encounters in Ede played a very significant role in their relationship towards other Yoruba communities they later visited and lived in. This relationship especially was defined by a deep respect and appreciation of the cultural, artistic and religious traditions and conditions of the Yoruba people. In Wenger's case, in particular, she felt an intimate connection to Ajagemo at Ede and through her active participation within the Yoruba religious community; she became a priestess herself until her passing in 2009. For Beier, although he left Ede in 1954, he often considered the town as his home and one to which he would forever be attached.

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<sup>71</sup> U. BEIER, *Thirty Years of Oshogbo Art*, Bayreuth 1991.

<sup>72</sup> D. LADIPO, *Three Yoruba Plays*, edited by Ulli Beier, Ibadan 1964.

<sup>73</sup> I. MALZ – N. SIEGERT, *The Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan*, Bayreuth 2018.