How Susanne Wenger Turned the World Into a Classroom for a Young Artist

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
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Susanne Wenger may have lived in Òṣogbo, but Ìbàdàn always found a way to tug her back. The distance between the two cities wasn't exactly a stroll, though it wasn't terribly far either. She would often hop in her car, cruise through the roads connecting both towns, stop over in Ìbàdàn for a few hours or a day, and then head right back to Òṣogbo like it was nothing. It was almost like she had a little string tied between the two places, and she tugged at it whenever she needed some fresh energy or to see some familiar faces. One of those familiar faces was Professor Robert Plant Armstrong, the then director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan. Their friendship had stemmed from shared curiosity and mutual obsession with African spirituality and art. Wenger would drop by the Institute whenever she was in town, unannounced most times, the way old friends do, and spend time catching up with Armstrong, talking about art, ideas, and the ongoing work in Òṣogbo.

It was during one of those visits, sometime in 1967, that a young artist, just 21 or 22, began to take notice of her. He wasn't seeing her for the first time, of course; she had been a familiar figure, floating in and out of the space. At first, he thought she was just another visiting researcher. But then, he started paying attention to her patterns. She would show up mostly on weekends, sit with Professor Armstrong, and then she would stroll around the Institute. The young artist, encouraged by her friendliness, started showing some of his works to her. She would look at them and ask questions. "What inspired this?" or "What's the title of this?" She loved asking questions. But more than that, she listened to his answers. *Really* listened. She wanted to know. And for the young artist, that interest was more than encouraging. And in one of those casual, curious exchanges, a memory took root. One that would become one of the young artist's warmest recollections of the woman he fondly called Mama.

That same year, the young artist completed a painting he was especially proud of. In his own words, one of his favourite works. So, when he heard Susanne Wenger was coming round again, he knew he wanted her to see it. The painting was of a young woman balancing a basket on her head. She was caught mid-step, selling wares on the street, the folds of her wrapper caught in motion. He waited eagerly until Wenger showed up again. Then he brought the canvas to her.

She gave it a small, approving nod, and asked what the title was.

Susanne Wenger. Portrait by Gert Chesi (*from Wikipedia creative commons)*

“Hawking,” he replied.

She paused and repeated the word to herself. “Hawking.” It made sense, but she was neck-deep in her journey of immersion in—and documentation of—Yorùbá culture, by this time, and English alone wasn’t going to cut it. She asked him to translate the title into Yorùbá.

He didn’t hesitate. “Ó ń ta’jà,” he said. ‘She is selling.’

But something about that translation didn’t sit right with the visitor. She tilted her head and stared at him with that look teachers often give when they suspect you’ve just glossed over something important, as if to say, *You’re joking, right?* “What do you mean, ‘She is selling’?”

“She is walking around… selling her products,” he replied.

Hawking, yes—that much she could see. But how would the Yorùbá language render it? That was her

question.

The young man blinked.

The conversation turned into a little lingual tug-of-war. He went back to *Ó ń ta'jà.* She circled back with another angle. He rephrased. She questioned. Of all days, why was Susanne Wenger turning this into an oral defence?

Finally, after a few more stumbles and repetitions, she folded her arms and said *it*: "You don't understand Yorùbá."

Unbelievable.

A white woman—an Austrian, no less—telling him he didn't understand Yorùbá? The young artist blinked, searching his mind for a sharp comeback to save face. But she didn't give him the chance. The translation she was looking for was '*Ó ń p'olówó*,' which translates to: 'She is calling those who have money to come and buy: Ó ń pe olówó.'

As in many African traditions, Wenger explained, the market is a microcosm of the world itself, unlike mere economic centres where prices collide. The first customer at the market, she said, sets the tone for everything that follows. The seller's day will likely flow with joy if the first buyer is cheerful. If the buyer brings bad energy—say, someone who argues over prices or haggles with resentment—the rest of the day might mirror that tension. If the first person is a debtor, that could mean financial bad luck for the entire day. So, when a market woman starts her day, she doesn't just shout "Come and buy" to the wind. She is selective and intentional, calling on those who carry not just money, but good fortune.

That, the Austrian lady from Òṣogbo emphasised, was what the painting captured. And that was why calling it *Ó ń ta'jà* didn't quite cut it.

The young man listened, having lost his defensiveness. Humbled by how much he had not known. Someone from halfway across the world had come to know it more than he had ever thought to ask. All his life, Yorùbá had been familiar, but he neither deeply studied it nor fully grasped it. But that one afternoon in Ìbàdàn, standing in front of his painting, it was like a spotlight had been turned on inside him. For the first time, he realised there was so much he didn't know about the language. He had always assumed he understood Yorùbá. After all, he spoke it with friends and elders, cracked jokes, even flirted with it. But suddenly, he felt like a tourist in a country he was indigenous to.

He had to say it aloud: "Mi ò gbọ́ Yorùbá."

I don't understand Yoruba.

"That challenged me," the artist would say, years down the line. From that day onwards, his interest in the Yorùbá language deepened. And whenever he thinks of Susanne Wenger, he remembers her as the woman who dared him to know his language.

The artist's name is 'Túndé Ọdúnladé.

Túndé Ọdúnladé in Ìbàdàn (August 2024)

Babátúndé Samuel Ọdúnladé was born on 26 November 1954 in Iremo, Ilé-Ifẹ̀. That was where he spent his boyhood, soaking in the culture and tradition that would later shape his art. As a young person, he had ventured into painting, more as leisure activity; but his journey into the art world kicked off in the early 1970s when he crossed paths with Yínká Adéyẹmí, one of the celebrated members of the Òṣogbo School of Art. That encounter was the spark that lit a fire, with Ọdúnladé quickly emerging as part of the movement's second generation. By 1973, he had immersed himself in the Ògúntìmẹ́hìn Art Workshop at the then University of Ifẹ̀.

Ọdúnladé's work stands out for how deeply it draws from Yorùbá roots, not just in his themes, but in style and substance. He works mainly with batik, using an appliqué technique that is entirely his own. He also pioneered something he calls "floatograph," a form that blends texture, pattern, and narrative. He was artist-in-residence at Stillman College in Alabama, U.S., in 1986 and 1989. Returning home, he took on the role of artistic director at the Toki Memorial Arts Centre in Ibadan. Driven by a mission to promote cultural literacy, he also launched the International Campaign for Better Arts and Cultural Awareness (ICBACA).

Ọdúnladé's pieces are found in galleries and private collections around the world. His words have travelled too. His essays and reflections have appeared internationally in books, journals, newspapers, and art catalogues. His story has also become a subject of academic study: two master's degree theses—one by Ifeanyi Onwukpa of Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ University and another by Kọ́ládé Ayéyẹmí at the University of Ibadan. Beyond that, he has featured prominently in a Ph.D. dissertation by Sharon Pruitt at the University of Michigan.

Over the years, his talent has caught the attention of some of the world's biggest philanthropic institutions. He received grant awards for a book cover design on Higher Education in Africa, a project supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and New York University. He has also benefited from a number of state and national arts grants in the United States.

More recently, in December 2020, he opened the Túndé Ọdúnladé Arts and Culture Connexions, better known these days as the Túndé Ọdúnladé Gallery. The space is more than a gallery in the

traditional sense. It is, in many ways, the culmination of the founder's passion for art and heritage. One of the sparks came from that early conversation between him and Susanne Wenger, when she challenged his translation of 'hawking' into the Yorùbá language. That conversation pushed him to think deeper about language, tradition, and how much of his own culture he still had to learn.

Ọdúnladé in his gallery in Ibadan (August 2024)

Although he was not directly involved in the foundational Òṣogbo art workshops that catalyzed the movement, Ọdúnladé's connection to the movement—and to Wenger—has helped shape his own artistic journey. Long before heritage conservation became a buzzword, Wenger was already in the trenches. For a young artist like Ọdúnladé, who grew up surrounded by Yorùbá rituals but perhaps hadn't yet fully grasped their aesthetic and spiritual depths, Mama's work was a mirror. He saw, through her, that tradition was something to interact with, shape, and even rebel against, when necessary. "It was as though she saw what we were all walking past," he says. To him, Wenger's efforts were beyond art or even culture in the limited sense. He sees her efforts as a cosmological way of maintaining balance in a world constantly tilting toward chaos.

Back in the 1960s, something quietly revolutionary was brewing in Òṣogbo. The town wasn't just another sleepy cultural hub in southwestern Nigeria. Painting, sculpture, music, theatre, you name it: Òṣogbo had it. Before long, what started as an experiment began turning heads far beyond Nigeria's borders. Òṣogbo art became a kind of passport stamped with the rituals of Yorùbá heritage. Some of the output was contemporary art sold in local markets and international galleries. But others were sacred and not made to be sold. These were the ones that told stories of the Òrìsà, of ancient rites like the annual Ọ̀ṣun-Òṣogbo Festival that continues to pull in the crowds from around the world.

Much of that artistic bloom can be traced back to a small but determined group of dreamers: Susanne Wenger, Ulli Beier, and his second wife, Georgina (née Betts). They didn't just roll into town to start art movements. No, their approach was far more organic, almost accidental. They noticed the young actors of the Dúró Ládipọ̀ Theatre Group and thought: why not hand them paintbrushes? This experiment became the foundation of a new visual language. And the Òṣogbo School of Art was born. No one, not even Ulli and Georgina Beier, could have predicted how far it would go. But go far, it did: crossing oceans, breaking stereotypes, and putting Òṣogbo on the global art map. It is worth noting

that Nigeria already had a crop of contemporary artists trained in Western-style techniques by the time the Òṣogbo experiment kicked off. What set Òṣogbo apart was its ability to blend the new with the old. It wasn't just about adopting modern art; it was about building on the indigenous art traditions of the Yorùbá people. And that is precisely what made the artists of Òṣogbo so special and ultimately famous across the globe. The artists themselves were mostly young men with limited formal education. Many had barely finished secondary school, and a few hadn't even made it that far. Instead, their lives had been shaped by the practicalities of survival.

Ọdúnladé at a recent exhibition in St. Paul, Minnesota.

And they called Òṣogbo home. The capital of present-day Ọṣun State.

The real achievement here, though, wasn't just the art they created. It was the brilliance of Georgina and Ulli Beier's vision. They turned the disadvantages of these young men into their greatest strengths. There were no formal qualifications required to join the workshops. What mattered was the willingness to engage and to create. By breaking down these traditional barriers to entry, the Beiers opened up a whole new world to the artists of Osogbo. In many ways, they didn't *conventionally teach art*; instead, they showed them how to see the world through a completely different lens that valued the beauty of tradition while embracing the power of modernity. It all began in the early 1960s with the trio of expatriates that had settled in Òṣogbo. While Wenger was focused on reviving the Ọsun Grove, Georgina and Ulli Beier were at the forefront of the Òṣogbo art movement.

Túndé Ọdúnladé still remembers the challenge Susanne Wenger gave him like it was yesterday. Even though he didn't study Yorùbá formally, her words sparked something in him. "I'll pick up interest in conversation in Yorùbá, I'll pick interest in reading Yorùbá texts, classics, and so forth," he says, reflecting on how it all began. The challenge pushed him to go deeper into the language, making the world his classroom. "A lot of people ask me these days, 'How did you learn Yorùbá so well?'" he offers with a smile. "But to go back, it was because of the challenge that Mama gave me. So, I always remember Mama for that." Without Wenger's encouragement, he admits, his connection to the

Yorùbá language might not have developed in the way it did.

Ọdúnladé has stints teaching at colleges in the U.S., focusing on African-American history and folklore. As he puts it: "It's all those stories we hear growing up, the ones that teach us the *dos* and *don'ts*." For him, these lessons came through *Àlọ́*, a Yorùbá tradition of storytelling that helps kids learn the right way to live. "*Àlọ́* could be a parable, a full story, or even a children's tale," he adds.

"There are so many stories like that, stories I've come across over the years, but sometimes, I just can't remember the names off the top of my head. It's like those stories we grew up hearing that didn't seem like a big deal at the time. But looking back, they were everything. They shaped us, even if we didn't realise it then. It was during moonlight those days where we learnt the do's and don'ts." He reflects on how those early stories, the ones shared under the moonlight, were more than just entertainment. "That was what moulded us. That has shaped us into who we are today. The depth we have in Yorùbá, the richness of our culture—it all comes from those moments. The stories we were told were not just for fun. They were full of lessons. They taught us, they informed us, and they connected us with our roots."

Ọdúnladé has a keen awareness of how things have changed. "Now, those stories have shrunk into what I call 'magic boxes'—televisions. What we used to hear around the fire or under the moonlight is now told on screens in modern ways. And a lot of these stories have made their way into the Western world, reimagined and refined; they are making big waves, and big money, too." He pauses for a second. "Sometimes, you have to really pay attention. You have to be sharp to notice when a story that has been 'refined' and polished is one that came from us: our culture, our people. [The producers] might change the packaging, but the essence doesn't change." He recalls how one day, he was listening to one of his grandchildren playing with a gadget, and something caught his attention. It was a familiar traditional melody echoing from the device. "Can you believe it?" he says, shaking his head in mild disbelief. "This thing, made in China, was playing one of our native tunes. But you could tell only if you've got the mind to listen. If you have the mind to look critically, you'd hear it too." It's moments like this that make the artist appreciate Susanne Wenger the more. "Mama didn't just stay in her lane as an artist," Ọdúnladé explains. "[It's not just her work on] the Sacred Grove, she built workshops. She brought young people in to learn, especially the textile arts. Batik, for example. She

introduced it, got people in Òṣogbo to embrace it, and that became a huge part of Òṣogbo Art. She didn't just teach. She gave a lot of artists their start."

After her marriage to Ulli Beier ended, Wenger found love again with a local drummer named Baba Alárápé (also known as Àyánṣọlá). He wasn't the academic type, but when it came to drumming, he was a master, highly talented in his craft. "I can picture him now," Ọdúnladé says.

Adébìsí Àkànjí, who worked under Wenger in Òṣogbo produced this for the National Black Theatre, Harlem. New York.

Mama was many things to many people. To some, she was a mother, offering guidance and care to those who crossed her path. To others, she was a mentor who opened their eyes to new possibilities and showed them how to embrace their potential. For many, she was both, and it's this multifaceted presence that made her so special. Some people saw Wenger not just as an artist or mentor, but as an *Olórìshà*, a devoted follower of the Ọ̀sun deity.

Her full name was Susanne Wenger Iwínfúnkẹ́ Àdùnní Olórìshà. 'Iwínfúnkẹ́' is the part that stands out.

The word *Iwin* refers to something spiritually inclined, almost like a supernatural being in the Yorùbá sense. It is associated with divine power and presence. *Iwínfúnkẹ́* thus translates to "The Ghomid has given me this to care for." And then there is *Àdùnní,* which means "someone sweet," who brings joy and sweetness into the lives of others.

Ọdúnladé captures how Wenger wasn't just about guiding in the traditional sense, but she was also a tutor and teacher who helped so many people to see the world differently, to explore their roots, and to connect with their culture in ways they had not done before. For Ọdúnladé, that connection came through language. Àdùnní's challenge to him all those years ago was the catalyst that pushed him to become a connoisseur of the Yorùbá language. It's almost like she lit a fire in him. He retains a fascination for Yorùbá proverbs and how deeply they carry knowledge; and that wisdom has been a core part of his work ever since the encounter in Ìbàdàn.

One of the artist's pieces even draws from this exact idea. It is called "*Ẹiyẹ tó ń jèso kìí ké.*" It's a painting of a cluster of birds: some with fruits in their mouths and some without. The idea is simple: if the bird's mouth is full, it can't cry out. The proverb teaches something about restraint, about timing, and about what we hold back, even when we want to speak or be heard. Ọdúnladé uses this as a touchstone in his work, and he credits Susanne Wenger with helping him realise just how much knowledge is hidden in the everyday sayings of his people. The birds with seeds in their mouths represent those who already have what they need, those who have no reason to complain. They are content, their mouths sealed off by the very things that keep them silent. The have-nots, on the other hand, are the ones who are crying out, seeking what they don't have.

Ọdúnladé reflects on his late friend, Gift Orakpo, who tragically passed away in mysterious circumstances. His body was discovered at the University of Ifẹ̀ campus with a gun placed by his side. The gun was traced to a foreign woman, and when questioned, she explained that it was inconceivable for her to kill Gift and leave the gun behind. It didn't add up. Before his death, the woman said, Gift had borrowed the gun from her for an art piece he was working on. He needed to examine the details of a real gun to accurately represent it in his drawing. Ọdúnladé wonders why anyone would loan a loaded weapon in the first place.

Orakpo, who was born in 1953 in Otokuku near Warri, attended the Òṣogbo workshops. He had received support from Ulli Beier, who was instrumental to his growth as an artist. Sadly, Orakpo's untimely death left many unanswered questions and a profound sense of loss within the art community. "Gift was an incredibly talented artist," Ọdúnladé muses, recalling that his late friend was the person who introduced him to kung fu and karate.

"This world is too small," he says.

Ọdúnladé in his gallery office in Ìbàdàn

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Postscript: On *Hawking*, the painting Susanne Wenger admired on that long ago day in 1967, Odunlade says the price she paid for it is a blur now, and that there is every chance the art might still remain in her collection.

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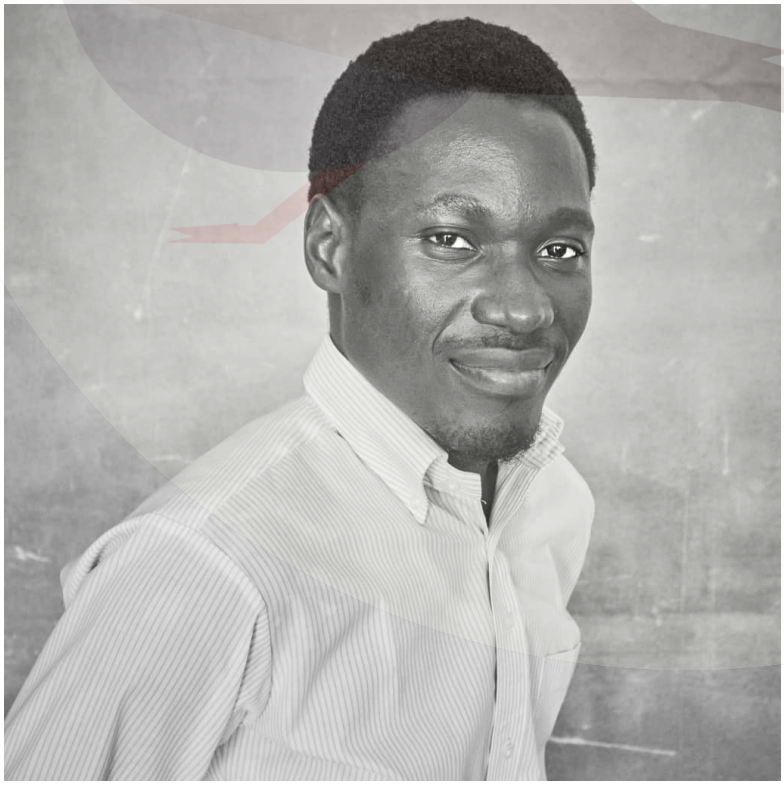

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in our **Black Orpheus Exploration Project,** chosen in collaboration with Archivi.ng. He has published a number of “dispatches” at OlongoAfrica exploring different findings from his fellowship. You can find the earlier ones here (*February*), here (*March*), here (April), here (May), and June. You can read more about the project here.