Feminism & Osun

A POWER THE WORLD FORGOT ABOUT

Osun River in Osun Osogbo, Osun State Nigeria. Picture taken by Ade Ogunkoya

In 1950s Nigeria, while empires were collapsing and new nations were being born, an Austrian artist walked into a forest and never really left.

She didn’t arrive with a manifesto. No grand theory. No intention of becoming part of anything sacred.

But what she found there would change her life.

Susanne Wenger came to Nigeria as an outsider. She stayed as something else entirely, a priestess, a cultural preservationist, and a devoted initiate of the river goddess Osun.

At first glance, her story feels improbable, a white European woman embedding herself so deeply into Yoruba spiritual life that she would become one of its most committed defenders.

But this isn't just her story.

It's about something bigger.

THE SACRED FOREST

Restored by Susanne Wenger and Yoruba artists, these sacred forms stand at the heart of the Osun Osogbo forest, where art and spirituality become one. Picture taken by Ade Ogunkoya

On the outskirts of Osogbo, in southwestern Nigeria, lies the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a dense forest of winding paths, shrines, sculptures, and riverbanks.

Today, it is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

But it wasn't always protected.

By the mid-20th century, the grove was fading. Colonial disruption had weakened traditional religious systems, while urban expansion crept closer to sacred land. Shrines decayed. Rituals disappeared. The forest itself was at risk.

This is where Wenger enters the story, Wenger arrived in Ibadan in the early 1950s with her husband, Ulli Beier, who was teaching at the university of Ibadan. But after moving to Ede, her life shifted dramatically. She fell seriously ill with tuberculosis, a moment that would quietly reshape her path. During her recovery, she encountered a priest, who introduced her to Yoruba cosmology.

Working alongside Yoruba artists, priests, and community members from the 1960s onwards, she helped rebuild what was being lost. Together, they restored shrines, created monumental sculptural works rooted in Yoruba cosmology, and resisted attempts to commercialise or destroy the grove.

This wasn’t preservation in the museum sense.

It was survival.

Eventually, Wenger was initiated into the priesthood and given the name Adunni Olorisha, “beloved of the Orisha.”

She didn’t just study the culture.

She lived it.

THE STORY THAT EXPLAINS EVERYTHING

In Yoruba cosmology, creation does not begin smoothly. It begins with failure.

Olodumare, the supreme deity, sends sixteen male Orishas to create the world. They descend with power, authority, and confidence. They believe they are enough.

They are wrong.

Nothing works.

The earth refuses to settle. Life does not grow. The world will not form.

Because Osun is not there.

Osun, the seventeenth Orisha, the only female, has been left behind. Not forgotten by accident, but overlooked, dismissed, excluded, treated as unnecessary.

And the world responded.

It refused to exist.

Because Osun is not a supporting figure in creation, she is the force that allows creation to happen at all. She is the river, and the river is life. She is the movement between things, the connection that holds everything together. Without her, nothing flows. Without her, nothing lives.

The Orishas try everything. They use power. They use authority. They act with certainty.

Still, nothing works.

Only when they return, when they recognise what they have done, when they seek Osun, when they bring her back, does the world begin to take shape.

The earth stabilises. Life begins. Creation flows.

When I visited Osogbo in February 2026, a guardian of the grove, Shade Osinowo, said it simply:

“They tried everything, but nothing worked. Osun was left out. When they brought her back, everything started working.”

It is not a complicated story.

But it is a complete one.

Because it does not suggest that feminine power is important.

It shows that without it, nothing works at all.

BEFORE FEMINISM HAD A NAME

It’s tempting to call Osun the first feminist.

The parallels are obvious: exclusion leads to failure, inclusion restores balance, feminine power is revealed as essential.

But that framing almost undersells her.

Osun doesn’t emerge from political struggle. She predates it. She exists outside it.

“POWER ISN’T DOMINATION”

To understand how Osun translates into contemporary thought, I spoke over Zoom with Minna Salami, a feminist writer whose work explores African knowledge systems.

She didn’t hesitate.

“Osun represents a form of power that isn’t rooted in domination,” she said. “In many Western frameworks, power is about control. Osun’s power is relational, it’s about connection.”

“We’ve been taught to prioritise logic over feeling,” she explained. “But knowledge is also embodied. It’s intuitive. It’s emotional. Osun represents those forms of intelligence.”

When I asked whether Osun could be described as “the first feminist,” she paused.

“I’d be cautious with that,” she said. “Not because it’s wrong, but because it’s too small. What Osun represents is something bigger, an ancient understanding that feminine power is essential.”

It’s a subtle shift.

But an important one.

Osun doesn’t fit into feminism.

Feminism is catching up to Osun.

HEARING OSUN FOR THE FIRST TIME

To see how this idea lands outside theory, I spoke to Tasha Bajulaiye, a 24-year-old art and design student at Portsmouth University.

She had never heard of Osun before.

Her reaction was immediate.

“That’s mad,” she said. “How have I never heard this before?”

She laughed, then paused.

“It makes you question what we’re taught. Like... what else is missing?”

When I explained the creation story, she didn’t need time to analyse it.

“It feels current,” she said. “Women are still fighting to be included in spaces that don’t even function properly without them.”

As an art student, she was drawn to the grove itself, the way art, spirituality, and environment merge into one space.

“It feels more alive than Western art spaces,” she said. “It’s not just something you look at; it’s something you’re part of.”

Then she said something that stayed with me.

“It makes feminism feel older,” she said. “Like it’s always been there, just told differently.”

And just like that, Osun made sense.

THE WOMAN WHO STAYED

Wenger understood this long before most people ever would.

She didn’t treat Osun as metaphor.

She treated her as reality.

At a time when Yoruba spirituality was being dismissed, she committed her life to protecting it, restoring shrines, preserving sacred land, and working within the community rather than above it.

Her life complicates easy narratives.

She wasn’t a coloniser.
She wasn’t a saviour.

She was something far less comfortable.

She was committed.

A WORLD STILL BUILDING WITHOUT HER

The story of Osun doesn’t stay in the past.

It follows you.

Because once you understand it, you start to see it everywhere.

In workplaces that undervalue emotional labour.
In political systems that prioritise dominance over care.
In economies built on extraction rather than sustainability.

We like to think we’ve moved forward.

That we’ve solved equality.

That we’ve outgrown the problems of the past.

But the structure is the same.

We are still building systems that look exactly like the world before Osun was included.

THE STORY ALREADY TOLD US

And maybe that’s the uncomfortable truth.

Because this isn’t just mythology.

It’s a warning.

The Orishas weren’t weak.
They weren’t incapable.

They were incomplete.

And so are we.

We build.
We expand.
We optimise.

And then we act surprised when things stop working.

Not when institutions fail.
Not when inequality deepens.
Not when the system starts to crack.

Because the story already told us what happens.

We just didn’t listen.