

The Benin Monarchy, Olokun and Iha Ominigbọ̀n

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate a link between the historical figure Ọba Ọḗn (ca.1334-1370 CE) and Olokun in Iha Ominigbọ̀n. There are no overt mentions in the Iha Ominigbọ̀n corpus of Ọba Ọḗn's association with the deity Olokun. However, I seek to demonstrate that the oracle speaks about the monarch, and his dual identity with Olokun, as well as historical events involving Benin chiefs, in coded, language through sacred folktales in the segments classified as deep meaning, plain meaning, personal names, and sacrifices. This interpretation begs several questions: What significance does worship of Olokun represent for the Ọba of Benin and Benin people? What is the association between Ọba Ọḗn and Olokun? What is the significance of the Ọba of Benin and Olokun in "personal names"? What is the significance of secret, coded, and symbolic meaning in the folktales? What is the significance of "deep meaning" in relation to the historical conflict between Ọba Ọḗn and Benin chiefs? What is the significance of "plain meaning" in the historical conflict? What is the significance of "sacrifice" to Olokun and "father" in Iha Ominigbọ̀n? The analysis of Ọba Ọḗn, Olokun, and Iha Ominigbọ̀n can provide substantial insight into sociopolitical events in Benin.

Introduction

This paper will analyze the complexities of relationships involving the Benin monarch Oba Oḥen, the deity Olokun, and Iha Ominigbon¹—the oracle of Great Benin². Iha Ominigbon is the indigenous divination system of the Edo people of Nigeria. While the intertwined relationship of this monarch and the deity of the waters and wealth is noted in history, the evidence the divination system provides has been unexamined. The itan Iha Ominigbon, those proverbs and folktales that relate to the oracular divination system, demonstrate a link—in secret, coded, and symbolic language—between Oba Oḥen, who ruled Benin in the early fourteenth century, and Olokun. In Edo mythology, every Oba is believed to be the reincarnate of Olokun, and Oba Oḥen is believed to be the first noted of these reincarnations,³ and this association strategically positions the Oba of Benin near the top of the list of Edo deities; he is surpassed in this regard only by Osanobua Noghodua (God Almighty), and the Benin monarchy enjoys a sustained political advantage as a result. According to Kate Ezra, in referencing a Benin plaque, “The mudfish-legged king refers specifically to Oba Oḥen (r. early 15th century)”. The Benin bronze plaques that represent Oba Oḥen with mudfish legs are referring to “his divine nature; he is the son of Olokun and the grandson of Osanobua—the creator god. The mudfish legs express his terrifying powers, since they suggest orriiri [sic], the fish that can give a jolting electric.”⁴ This gives the Oba, like his counterpart, supreme authority over life and death.

¹Iha Ominigbon apparatus consists of four chains. Similar to Ifa Odu, Iha Ominigbon takes on geometric positions when tossed by the *ob'ogwega* (diviner). A single throw of the Iha Ominigbon reveals at least four Owaha, or geometric positions. There are 256 geometric positions (Owaha) representing different sacred proverbs and folktales. A coded language is identified with each Owaha. The word Owaha is composed of two words: *owa*, meaning “house,” and *iha*, meaning “oracle” or “divination.” The word *Owaha* means “house of the oracle.” In addition, the Owaha holds the key information or sacred coded information of Iha Ominigbon.

²See Aimu Emovon, ‘Iha Ominigbon Divination,’ *Nigerian Magazine*, 151 (1981), 1-9, for a discussion of Iha Ominigbon.

³ See Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 131, for a discussion on Oba Oḥen and the mudfish legs.

⁴ Ezra, Kate. *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990).



Figure 1: Iha Ominigbọn Ek'Odin Owiha—first two chains R-L

Through my analysis, I hope to provide a meaningful glimpse into Iha Ominigbọn divination and how its coded references to the Benin monarchy and to the monarchy's relation to Ọba Ọhẹn and Olokun have helped shaped Great Benin history. By examining the plain meaning and deep meaning of the oracle's folktales, as well as the folktales' prescribed sacrifices and use of personal

names, we can see that the oracle speaks about the monarch and his dual identity with Olokun.

In the secret, coded, and symbolic language of the itan, or proverbs and folktales, the oracle contrasts the sociopolitical power and positions of the Benin monarch and Olokun in the personage of Ọba Ọḥen. Also, some of the enin ọmwan, or personal names, belonging to itan Ek’Odin Owih⁵ of Iha Ominigbon correlate the deity with the Benin monarchy. I will demonstrate that when the proverbs and folktales speak of “father,” they are referring to Olokun as the spiritual ancestral father of the Benin king. Similar to the Edo, the Yoruba believe that a reincarnated person can be present in both the physical world and the spiritual realm.⁶ Joseph O. Awolalu, a scholar of Yoruba religion, gives an example of ancestral rebirth into the same family, which is also applicable to the Edo people: “This idea of reincarnation sounds paradoxical when we remember the Yoruba also believe that in spite of the child that is born, . . . the ancestral spirit still resides in the spirit-world where it is invoked from time to time. This is why we cannot describe what we have among the Yoruba as full reincarnation, but, partial-reincarnation”⁷

The secret, coded, and symbolic language of Iha Ominigbon is restricted to the Ọb’oguega (doctor of Iha Ominigbon oracle). The Ọb’oguega is not only a diviner but also a holistic physician, treating the physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual components of the community through herbal, mineral, animal, and magical means.

The Ọb’oguega engages in years of initiations, study, and apprenticeship to comprehend the Iha Ominigbon and become an efficient adept.⁸ It is believed that the pronouncement of the sacred coded language, or “words of power,” of the Iha Ominigbon oracle unlocks cosmic forces. In order to clarify the organization of the Iha Ominigbon corpus, I have grouped it into several sections for analysis of

⁵ Ek’Odin Owih⁵ is one of the 256 Owih⁵ of Ih’Ominigbon divination and is composed of the Obih⁵—Eka and Odin making it Ek’Odin. An Ọb⁵ih⁵ is a single arm or word of the Owih⁵.

⁶ Daryl Peavy, *Kings, Magic and Medicine* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu Publishing Inc., 2009), 17.

⁷ The Edo version of reincarnation is similar to the Yoruba description, but not identical. See Joseph Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London, Longman Publishing Company, 1979), 60.

⁸ See Peavy, *Kings, Magic, and Medicine*, 54–64, for an in-depth discussion of *ob’oguega* training.

itan, or folktales. These include erhia dinmwin, or deep meaning, which refers to an in-depth understanding of the contents; erhia khere, or plain meaning, which is a concise explanation; enin ọmwan, or personal names, which refer to the client's name that the Owiha represents;⁹ ẹse, or prescribed sacrifices to the Edo gods, which reference the Edo deities associated with helping the client resolve problems or ensure success in life.¹⁰

Although many studies have been devoted to African divination,¹¹ especially Yoruba divination,¹² very little has been written about the primary divination system used in Great Benin—Iha Ominigbọn. Examinations of this system, especially those in English sources, are usually limited to a few sentences.¹³ No full recording of the throws and related verses, or the related exegesis through tales and aphorisms, has been published, nor has there been any analysis of the contents. However, Iha Ominigbọn houses a rich source of materials relating to the history of the Benin monarchy and has shaped the framework in which traditional Edo-speaking people view the world, as well as perceive history.¹⁴ I have conducted research in Esanland and Benin City since 1995; my work includes, but is not limited to, studies and interviews with professional diviners and other ritual specialists and initiations into Edo religions, including Oguẹga, Osun, Ọrọnmila, Eziẓa, Aẓen, Olokun, and Esango. Additionally, I have trained as an Iha Ominigbọn diviner. My familiarity with this material allows me to recognize the historical references in the oral corpus and extract them for further examination.

My interviewees in field research provided me with the following information either in Nigerian English or Edo language, which I later translated.

⁹ Jacob U. Egharevba, *Iha Ominigbọn* (Benin City, Kopin Dogba Press, 1965), 45.

¹⁰ E. Aighobahi, Interview with Author, July 2009.

¹¹ Phillip Peek, *African Divination System: Ways of Knowing* (Georgetown University Press, 1991); John Pemberton III 'Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa' in Alisa LaGamma, *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000); Walter E. Van Beck and Phillip Peek, *Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013).

¹² See William B. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

¹³ Emovon, "Iha Ominigbọn Divination," 1–9, for a discussion of Iha Ominigbọn.

¹⁴ Common Edo proverbs and folktales reflect many of the philosophical ideals in the Iha Ominigbọn corpus.

Being born outside of the Edo culture, I had to overcome my own cultural bias or subjective relativity before I could take on the monumental task of applying the itan to any scholarly work. In fact, it took quite some time before I could grasp the latent meaning of any of the proverbs or folktales. As time went by, my interaction with the culture, the people, and history—as well as my initiations into deeper aspects of Edo religion, spirituality, and worldview—caused the meanings of the proverbs and folktales to gradually become more translucent and their application more viable.

The large continent of Africa is a vast, fertile ground for various divination systems that have developed many methods for discovering the unknown, or “ways of knowing.” Peek states, “In Africa, diviners are first and foremost diagnosticians who reveal (directly or indirectly) causes for ailments. Secondly they often aid their clients in healing with prescriptions not just for proper behavior but for herbal preparations, sacrifices, and so on.”¹⁵ This is certainly true of Benin. In addition, by using divination to provide such remedies, the Edo diviner communicates with the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional aspects of the individual and society. This truly holistic approach incorporates all of the cosmic energies—positive or negative—and provides a way to avoid obstacles from either this world or the other world.

Iha Ominigbon is the repository and key to the understanding of the psyche, morals, mores, religions, medicine, magic, culture, spirituality, and art—in short, the total society—of Great Benin.¹⁶ This core of Edo culture is an oral corpus containing the historical wisdom, knowledge, and metaphysical science of the society, and it holds references to the Benin monarchy accumulated over millennia. Iha Ominigbon includes proverbs that address nearly every aspect of Great Benin life, and these are used in both formal discourse and informal conversation to reinforce applicable philosophical ideas and societal mores. Great Benin culture is orate, performative, and creative, its language expressing deep philosophical concepts through itie, or name calling—pronouncements of oracular

¹⁵ Van Beck and Peek, *Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination*, 5.

¹⁶ Egharevba, *Iha Ominigbon*, 5

code words, praise names, and panegyrics. All the above and more are contained in Iha Ominigbon because of its sacredness and insight into the inner self of the people and their culture. Iha Ominigbon is essential in truly understanding the culture of Great Benin. According to Egharevba in Iha Ominigbon Vbobo, “Iha Ominigbon ore aza kevbe isanhen emwen Edo. No ma ren Iha Ominigbon e i setin ren oto emwen Edo ese,”¹⁷ or “Iha Ominigbon is both the storehouse and key to the things of the Edo. He who does not understand Iha Ominigbon can never adequately know the roots of Edo.”

Analysis of a people’s indigenous divination system provides insight into the deeper meanings of the culture and history. According to Peek, divination studies convey three guidelines that may help with this process: “The first is the quest for hidden aspects of our reality, . . . the second is the dynamic relationship that divination has with the culture and religion in which it is embedded and the window it offers us on social realities.”¹⁸

The learning and comprehension of the oracular language—*itie*, *itan*, and *erhia*¹⁹—require years of initiations, study, and apprenticeship. Iha Ominigbon’s “words-of-power” are believed to unlock cosmic forces that can make the spiritual manifest into the physical, and this knowledge of oracular words is latent in the uninitiated.

Benin Monarchy, Iha Ominigbon and Olokun: Some Background Questions

What is the association between the Benin monarchy and Iha Ominigbon? The language of Iha Ominigbon refers to the Benin monarchy and Olokun in its *itan* of Ek’Odi Owiha, or proverbs and folktales; these references support and elucidate

¹⁷ Egharevba, *Iha Ominigbon*, 5.

¹⁸ Van Beck and Peek, *Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination*, 4-5.

¹⁹ *Erhia* is the Edo word for meaning, in this case, the oracular interpretation of Iha Ominigbon folktale. *Erhia* can be classified into *erhia dinmwin* “deep meaning”, and *erhia khere* “plain meaning”. Deep meaning is often the more complexed and involved oracular folktale. Plain meaning is a more simplified, and easily understandable oracular interpretation that the diviner gives to the client.

historical events recorded elsewhere.²⁰ Iha Ominigbon, has ancient associations with both the Benin monarchy's Ogiso and Oba dynasties.²¹ While the exact origins of Iha Ominigbon are uncertain, there is a consistency in the belief that it was brought to Great Benin by a foreigner.²² According to Osemwegie, the word Ominigbon consists of three parts: Omi, which is the name of the person who introduced Oguęga to Great Benin; ne, which means "of" or "from"; and igbon, which refers to somebody who is not a native or does not behave like a Benin person. Manfredi contends through linguistic studies that the oracle traveled to Benin, but Iha Ominigbon does not have Yoruba origins²³ (2011, 3). According to Ob'Oguęga Jackson, "Oguęga was one of the 201 divinities that came to agbon (earth) at the beginning of time²⁴ Therefore, Ominigbon or Oguęga is one of the primordial Edo divinities. If Ob'Oguęga Jackson's account is taken literally, Iha Ominigbon/Oguęga²⁵ divination is one of the earliest systems of knowing for the Great Benin people, as well as others,²⁶ although no exact date is referenced.

The history of the Edo can be organized into dynastic periods. One way to estimate the period that Ominigbon/Oguęga arrived is by using the chronicled history of Benin and looking at the approximate dates of the ruling Ogiso or Oba dynasty. A part of Edo life since time immemorial, divination has been incorporated into creation stories, proverbs, folktales, psyche, religions, as well as

²⁰ Included among these references in Iha Ominigbon are interpretations within *erhia dinmwın*, *erhia khere*, and *enin omwan*, as well as *ese*, or prescribed sacrifices to the Edo gods.

²¹ See Osayomwabo O. Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasty, 40 BC–1300 AD*, (Benin City: Nosa Computers, 1999), for the history of Ogiso and Oba dynasties.

²² Ikponmwoşa Osemwegie interview with Author, August 2009.

²³ Manfredi, using linguistic analysis, suggests that reconstruction of the oracular vocabulary indicates the oracular arrays share a common origin; he asserts that they spread northwest and south-southwest from the Niger-Benue region and link the Benue Valley, Niger Delta, and Bight of Benin. Victor Manfredi, 'Before Wazobia: Ominigbon and Polyglot Culture in Medieval 9ja' Paper read at Walter Rodney Seminar, African Studies Center, Boston University, 13 February, 2012, 3 <http://www.people.bu.edu/manfredi/BeforeWazobia.pdf>). These are areas that were controlled by the Oba of Benin and would have had Edo influence on their culture, including their oracles. Manfredi also asserts that the oracular array names arrived in Edo earlier than they arrived in Ife. He further states that *Iha*, the name for "oracle," came to Edo near the time of separation of Macro-Edo and that the Edo had no "f" sound; therefore, *Ifa* did not change to *Iha*. *Iha* is the original and indigenous name (Manfredi, Before Wazobia, 2011, 3), and this would indicate the oracular system is indigenous to Benin area, and not an adoption of the Yoruba Ifa system.

²⁴ Jackson Isegheghe Ekorowiro interview with Author, August 2010.

²⁵ See Peavy, *Kings, Magic, and Medicine*, especially Chapter 4, for an analysis of Iha Ominigbon.

²⁶ For an in-depth discussion of Yoruba kingdoms subjected to Edo influences see Peavy, *Kings, Magic, and Medicine*, 77–78.

kingship. Oral tradition is the pivotal hub of Edo collective memory, so it is unsurprising that the oral traditions of kingship and Great Benin history mention divination and, most important, Iha Ominigbon. Osayomwabo O. Ero writes that the eighth Ogiso (king)—Emẹhẹ, nicknamed the Oraclist (447–466 CE),²⁷ from Benin’s Emẹhẹ Quarters—is associated with Iha Ominigbon (1999, 21). Ogiso Emẹhẹ was one of the greatest diviners and native doctors from Benin’s Emẹhẹ Quarters. Ero further specifies that Ogiso Emẹhẹ was a great Iha Ominigbon diviner. This, of course, puts the Iha Ominigbon divination system in Igidomigodo “ancient Benin” during the Ogiso period around 447–466 CE. If Ero is correct, the arrival of Iha Ominigbon can be no later than this date (1999, 21).²⁸ However, Iha Ominigbon is probably older than the above date because Ogiso Emẹhẹ was already an accomplished Ọb’ogugẹga (doctor of Iha Ominigbon) by the time he ascended the throne. In an unbroken link, Iha Ominigbon and other oracles continue to be used at the Oba’s palace.²⁹

²⁷ Dating in most West African cultures is not exact. Prior to European colonization, most of the cultures relied on oral traditions, which refer to the reigning monarch to establish historical context. In such systems, dating is an approximation. Likewise, the dating in Edo oral traditions centered around the reigning king. Currently, no archaeological dating supports Ero’s Ogiso Emẹhẹ (447–466) date. However, Ero contends that the history of the Ogiso period is preserved in religious and secular lore, legends, folktales, songs, and so on. According to Ero, the legends preserve the period’s battles, migrations, and natural occurrences (such as famines, rains, and droughts) as well as the Edo rulers’ creation of “titles” within Benin City and on its outskirts (Osayomwanbo O. Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 46BC to 1300AD*, Benin City: Nosa Computers, 1999, xx–xxi), and these sources were consulted in an effort to arrive at dates.

After the first three Ogisos, the next nineteen were placed upon the Benin throne because they were the most senior men in the village at that time. Such a king, called an Ogiso Odionwere, would already have been an old man when he ascended to the throne and would probably have had a short lifespan and reign. In determining Ogiso Emẹhẹ’s reign, Ero utilized the following sources: (i) oral tradition, or accounts of the past handed down to the present generation by word of mouth or through successive generations; (ii) the society as it was or as it is; (iii) evidence of the material remains of the past or its replica; (iv) evidence of folktales and/or folk music; (v) evidence from the moats; (vi) evidence from the caravan or caravan routes and their international trade.

Ero was an Edo scholar and professor at the College of Education, Ekialodor, in Edo State, Nigeria, and lecturer on Edo history. In addition, Ero also consulted with Benin historian Jacob. U. Egharevba as well as elders in Benin’s Ughoton, Iguemokhua, Urohngbe, Urhomehe, Udo, Erhua, Ivbioto, and Emehe Quarters. He averaged the life span of an Odionwere and arrived at an approximation. I accept Ero’s approximate dates for Ogiso Emẹhẹ based on Ero’s indigenous knowledge, as well as his greater access to the indigenous oral sources in his field research.

²⁸ Ero and Egharevba (1968, 45) agree upon the number of Ogisos—thirty-one—that ruled Benin. However, Egharevba gives only fifteen named Ogisos. Ero lists a total of thirty-one named monarchs in the Ogiso period. He places Ogiso Emẹhẹ at number eight, between Ogbẹide at seven and Ekpigho at nine (Ero 2003, 84–86).

²⁹ E. Aighobahi interview

What is the association between Ọba Ọḥen and Iha Ominigbon? Ọba Ọḥen (around 1334–1370 CE) is the first monarch to be linked to the Olokun deity through secret, coded, and symbolic language and historical records.³⁰ In the version I collected from the field, the itan, or sacred proverbs and folktales of Ek’Odin, use coded and symbolic language to mention Olokun—as well as Ogie, the traditional ruler—several times. In Egharevba’s version of Ek’Odin, Olokun along with Ogie³¹ are also referenced. It is by examining these itan that the reader is able to get a more in-depth understanding of the Benin monarch Ọba Ọḥen and Benin’s history as well.

What is the significance of the Olokun deity in Edo land? Olokun is the most critical deity in Edo land.³² According to legend, Olokun petitioned Osa (short for Osanobua (God) to endow him with all the riches he would need to help his devotees be successful.³³ A Benin proverb succinctly illustrates this point: “No one ever lives without knowing Olokun, except one who never spends money.” In addition, his popularity can be attributed to people’s desire for a materially successful life and controlling success during life and his place within funerary rites.³⁴ Olokun is the only deity who must be appeased in order to guide the dead in and out of the spiritual world. At birth to death, the soul comes from the spiritual world to the physical realm in a boat through the vast sea—one of the deity’s symbols.³⁵ He is also the progenitor of female fertility and childbirth. The Ọbas have been linked with the Olokun deity starting with Ọba Ọḥen (1334–1370 CE) and the stories of his mudfish legs.³⁶ This reference alludes to the fact that Ọḥen was a liminal being with the ability to exist in two worlds—erinmwinn (the spiritual

³⁰ See Jacob U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968).

³¹ Edo name for a King (Traditional ruler).

³² Alfred O. Izevbigie, *Olokun: A Focal Symbol of Religion and Art in Benin*, (Diss. University of Washington, 1978); Osadolor Imasogie, *Olokun: The Divinity of Fortune*, (Ibadan: Tokoba Enterprise, 1980), 13.

³³ Imasogie, *Olokun: The Divinity of Fortune*, 12.

³⁴ Izevbigie, *Olokun: A Focal Symbol of Religion and Art in Benin*, 71–72, for a history of Olokun communal villages in Edo land.

³⁵ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 100.

³⁶ William B. Fagg, *Nigerian Images*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1963) 56.

world) and agbọn (the physical world). Oba Oḥen was the first Benin monarch to officially and actively encourage Olokun worship.³⁷

In one rendition of Benin cosmology, Osanobua Noghodua, the Supreme Being and Almighty God, has three senior children: Obiḗnmwẹn, the now-archaic female deity of childbirth; Olokun, god of the sea; and Ogiuwu, king of death,³⁸ Obiḗnmwẹn, although the oldest child, could not inherit because she is female. By default, following the customary laws of Benin,³⁹ Olokun, the second eldest and a male deity, inherits all of his father's possessions and represents Osanobua Noghodua as his eldest son. As a consequence of the Benin monarchy's association with Olokun, the Oba of Benin inherits through his father, the partial reincarnation of Olokun. In Benin society, reincarnation is believed to take place through family lines, as well as a significant factor in the law of inheritance through familial lines. Belief in reincarnation plays a role in many aspects of Benin culture. According to Ero, "One of the greatest connections between the ancestors and the living is they can seek rebirth into the same family through reincarnation."⁴⁰ In addition, Egharevba states in Benin Laws and Customs that "the system of primogeniture holds in Benin, both with regard to the crown and to all inherited property . . . if the king has no surviving male child, a brother may succeed to the throne,"⁴¹ thus establishing a link between reincarnation, as well as inheritance through familial descent. Ero explains the inheritance of real property:

The land of the family belongs to the ancestors and it is their bona fide property particularly if the land is large. It is also the reason why most of the landed property belongs to the senior son because it is only through the senior son that the propagation of the ancestors can become a reality. The altar or the ancestral shrine belongs to the most senior son of the family as he is the Okaegbee in most places.⁴²

³⁷ Izevbigie, Olokun, 46n.

³⁸ Izevbigie, Olokun, 46n.

³⁹ See Jacob U. Egharevba, *Benin Laws and Customs*, (Port Harcourt: Niger Press, 1949).

⁴⁰ Osayomwanbo O. Ero, *Igue and other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, (Benin City: Osunero Consult Publications, 2003), 9.

⁴¹ Egharevba, *Benin Laws and Customs*, 36-9.

⁴² Ero, *Igue and Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 9.

The Ọba's ancestors are believed to take care of the whole nation, as the monarchs did when they were on earth. This is why the Benin people, mostly the chiefs and their households, join the Ọba in celebrating the Ugierhoba festival, during which homage is paid to the spirits of the departed Ọbas.⁴³ In describing the senior son's relation to the departed father, Ero states, "The senior son is actually the chief priest of the departed father. He prays and intervenes on behalf of all the patrilineal descendants" (2003, 14).

Here, the Ọba's dual nature of being the senior son of his biological father (the late Ọba) as well as the senior son of his spiritual father (the deity Olokun) establishes him firmly in line to inherit all the wealth of Edo land. Indeed, the Oba is known as Oba o re osanobua nagbon, or "the god man"; his strategic, purposeful, and sociopolitical identification with the core deity of Benin—the deity of wealth and female fertility—and his association as his reincarnate, along with being the grandson of Osanobua,⁴⁴ ensures the Edo people's continued support of him and of their traditions.

There are many key politico-historical references to the Oba palace and Olokun, starting with Ekaladerhan, the okoro (or "prince") who built the first communal Olokun temple in Ughoton.⁴⁵ According to Izevbigie, "Ekaladerhan must be credited for making the practical link between the leadership in Benin and Olokun."⁴⁶ Olokun is also known as Eb'lkalerderhan, or "the god of

⁴³ For an in-depth analysis of Benin Kingdom festivals, see Ero, *Igue and Other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 3.

⁴⁴ Ero, *Igue*, 13.

⁴⁵ Izevbigie, Olokun, 48.

⁴⁶ Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso period king, had issued a death sentence against his son, Prince Ekaladerhan, after one of the wives consulted the oracle and misreported that Ekaladerhan was the cause of the barrenness of the Ogiso's harem. The prince fled for his life. During his wanderings, the prince founded Ughoton village (Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 2), the birthplace of the Olokun religious cult. According to Izevbigie, this event can be found in this ancient Edo song about Prince Ekaladerhan's flight: *Ekaladerhan, Uro-*

<i>Ekaladerhan, Uro-</i>	-Ekaladerhan, Uro (chorus)
<i>Iyabe gb'ode Ne' nogie</i>	-I used knife to clear the grass from the road for the King uro
<i>Ogie mabomwen o Uro</i>	-The King did not pardon me uro
<i>Ifedin rha Ne' nogie uro</i>	-I harvested the palm fruits for the King uro
<i>Ogie mabomwen o Uro</i>	-The King did not pardon me uro
<i>Ekere ogha khian, Uro</i>	-From today onward uro
<i>Amen ghi rhorho o, Ur</i>	-There shall be no rain uro
<i>Okuku okuku aghamien vb' Eguo-Ogiso o Uro,</i>	- All days in the Kingdom of Ogiso shall be without Rain or sunshine uro (Izevbigie, Olokun, 39).

Ekaladerhan.”⁴⁷ Oba Oḥen, the king depicted with mudfish legs, is represented in Benin iconography as Olokun reincarnate.⁴⁸ An additional link to the Benin monarchy is Oba Ewuare. It is claimed that Oba Ewuare received the king’s regalia of coral beads directly from Olokun.⁴⁹ Oba Ewuare rebuilt a second communal Olokun temple in Ughoton and another in Benin City. According to Izevbigie, Oba Ewuare fully completed the tripartite connection between Benin kings, Olokun, and Osanobua—or sons, father, and grandfather. (1978, 85).⁵⁰ In addition, the architecture of Olokun temples reflects an association with the Benin kings. In mud palaces, or eguae-Olokun, the walls bear the ama eguae-Oba; these royal marks are parallel lines reserved for the Oba of Benin’s palace.

What is the significance of Olokun worship to the Oba of Benin and Benin people? Olokun is the most revered deity in Edo land because of his association with wealth, female fertility, and childbirth. The most dreaded fate in Benin society is to die childless.⁵¹ Children are extremely important because they assist in old age, as well as perform the necessary funerary rites for their parents. The deceased cannot make the transition to ancestorhood unless their offspring survive. The emphasis on having children is evident in the designations of a person’s status at the time of death. The most sought-after death is called Ofiya—death in old age and leaving surviving children. Oguomirere is childlessness

Izevbigie also states that the prince struck the ground with an Olokun magic wand (an *uwenrhiotan*, or glyphaea lateriflora) and placed a curse upon the reigning Ogiso, which is evident at the end of the song. Prince Ekaladerhan called upon the Ebo Edo (gods of Benin), including Olokun, to stop the rain and sunshine (confusion and mayhem) in retaliation for his banishment (Izevbigie, Olokun, 40). Thus, the literature suggests that Ekaladerhan was an initiated priest of the cult. Although not a Benin king, as a prince, he was a logical choice for the royal administration to begin the sociopolitical association with Olokun for a number of reasons: Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton, Olokun’s headquarters. His father, Ogiso Owodo, committed an unforgivable crime by sacrificing a pregnant woman—two of Olokun’s symbols are fertility and children or childbirth. Using one of the deity’s tools, Ekaladerhan placed a curse of Olokun on his father. Ekaladerhan also built the first Olokun communal temple at Ughoton and probably spread the Olokun cult to various parts of Nigeria in his wanderings, including Ile Ife. Izevbigie, Olokun, 41.

⁴⁷ Izevbigie, Olokun, 130.

⁴⁸ See William B. Fagg, *Nigerian Images*, 56.

⁴⁹ Izevbigie, Olokun, 27.

⁵⁰ Oba Ewuare, in a well-planned strategic move, was able to turn the focus of the end of his father’s (Oba Oḥen’s) tumultuous reign from conflict with the town chiefs toward the divine connection of the Oba of Benin with Olokun. Izevbigie, Olokun, 85.

⁵¹ Izevbigie, Olokun, 98.

resulting from the death of children. *Agan* refers to death in old age without ever having had a child, and *Uwu* means death at a young age without children.⁵²

Not only is Olokun the deity who brings children into the world, but he is also the divine spirit that takes the departed to the spiritual realm in his boat, one of the deity's symbols.⁵³ Therefore, Olokun's role as the deity of female fertility and the transporter of life in both birth and death, as well as his association with the Oba of Benin (his partial reincarnation), fulfills Benin society's goals, particularly with regard to continued family lines and property through childbirth and inheritance. For the Edo, wealth is children, as shown through this selection of the meanings of Benin names: *Ẹf ọmọ 'rẹfe*—"having children is wealth rather than anything else," *Ọmọsigho*—"having a child is better than having money," *Ọmọkaro (Ọmọkaruẹfe)*—"a child is first in wealth." Also, the title Oba is common both to Olokun and the king of Benin. One of Olokun's titles is *Ọba n'amẹn*, or "king of the water," while part of the king of Benin's title is *Ọmọ n' Ọba*, meaning "child of the king" or "first child of Olokun."⁵⁴ This demonstrates a connection with Olokun, as well as the monarch's position as a deified traditional ruler through ancestral inheritance, the first child of Olokun, and supports the traditional government's objective of divine kingship and legitimacy.

What is the significance of secret, coded, and symbolic language in Benin proverbs and folktales? Knowledge of *Ẹdo* proverbs and folktales, or *itan*, and their appropriate application are signs of a traditionally well-educated and cultured Benin person. Many of the characters and inanimate objects in *itan Ẹdo* take on anthropomorphic qualities and symbolize people or certain kinds of people in specific situations that can be applied to life's individualized lessons. Some of these proverbs have been documented and notable examples are the works of Emmanuel I. Aigbe and Alex G. Igbineweka.⁵⁵ *Ẹdo* proverbs and folktales also

⁵² Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 20 and 98.

⁵³ For an in-depth discussion of Olokun's transporting the newborn and deceased through the spiritual world see Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 100.

⁵⁴ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 235-293.

⁵⁵ Examples of some these proverbs are from Aigbe's 1960 collection are : *Agan ma bie ukpokpo ira fo oguega egbe*, or "Unless the barren bares, there is no peace for the oracle" (328). *Akpakpahunagan we egbe iren a na l' obi egbe iren a ns sie ere*, or "The scorpion says on its body poison was cooked and on its body the cooking was completed" (# 340). *Ekpen gha roro emwin no ka gbele o ghi io ehien lalo*, or "When a

give cultural references for an indigene, who could easily recall them from childhood memories. Yet many of the culturally symbolic and specific meanings would be hidden from the outsider.

What is the significance of the similarity between the coded and symbolic language of the Yoruba Ifa religion and Iha Ominigbõn in Nigeria? There are similarities in the usage of folktales in Iha Ominigbõn divination with the better known Yoruba Ifa divination system. According to Wande Abimbola and Mary Nooter-Roberts:

Secrecy has three primary functions in Ifa. First, it is a safeguard against indiscriminate use of power. The second function of awo is to promote objectivity. Finally, awo protects against anti-social forces (Favret-Saada 1980, 31–91). The opening lines of almost every verse of the 256 Odu⁵⁶ give a figurative name for the historical babalawo whose divination prescription these particular texts records.⁵⁷

Oracular remedies for the many individual prescriptions that constitute the Odu, these priests adopt secret names, their referents known only to the initiated.⁵⁸ In Iha Ominigbõn divination, similar to the Yoruba Ifa divination system, secrecy serves as a system of checks and balances between the diviner and clients, keeping the coded and symbolic language exclusive to the initiated, as well as concealing the clients' personal information from the diviner.⁵⁹ The Iha

tiger [leopard] thinks of the prey it has killed, it licks its paws" (#363). *Ese na ma ru o gbe okhonmwon*, or "Neglect of sacrifice kills a sick person" (1960, 104). *Iha ma ze n' obe ai ye n' obe ai ria re*, or "If the Oracle does not speak harsh language, one does not give it harsh interpretation" (# 142). See Emman I. Aigbe, *Iyeva yan Ariasen vbe Itan Edo na Zedu ere ye Ebo: 1040 Edo Proverbs with their English Translations*, (Lagos: Ribway Press, 1960) and *Amen gb'upafen, iba gha ghogho. Oma ren ghee se' gbe ogiomwan ede ovbeh*: The rain was falling and the angry winds rippling off of Mr. Roof. But then, Mr. Balcony (patio) very happy and merrying over the calamity; not knowing that soon the roof edges will be gone; and that he too will come face-to-face with the wrath of the stormy skies. See Alex G. Igbinweka, "Edo Proverbs." Edofolks. Ehimwenma Aimiwu. 2012. Web. 23 Jul. 2013.

Similar to Edo Owihā, Yoruba Odu Ifa are binary code, open and closed seeds which represents the energies of the cosmos. The Odu Ifa often involve folktales of Orunmila "Yoruba divination deity, or his disciples."⁵⁶

⁵⁷ Wande Abimbola in Nooter-Roberts, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*, (New York: Museum for African Art, New York, 1993).

⁵⁸ See Abimbola, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*

⁵⁹ See Abimbola, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* for an in-depth discussion of secrecy between diviner and client.

Ominigbon client whispers inaudibly into the *utah*⁶⁰. Then the Ọb’oguega strikes the oracle with it to take the client’s message to ẹrinmwin (spiritual world); the answers from the spiritual world are returned in itan Owiha.⁶¹

What is the significance of coded and symbolic language in Edo religious lore? As in Yoruba religion, secrecy,⁶² or coded and symbolic language, is incorporated into Iha⁶³ Oronmila Odu.⁶⁴ In *Ifism: The Complete Works of Orunmila*, Volume 1, Cromwell O. Ibie states the following:

Okonron-meji made divination for the ant before he left heaven for earth. The ant was so small that he wondered how he was going to be able to work for a living on earth. He went to Okonron-meji otherwise known as Okon feere and feere. He told the ant he would be given governance over all food in the home if he could make sacrifice with 2 pigeons, 2 rats and 2 fishes, in order to gain everlasting control over all household materials in the world. He made the sacrifice and left for earth.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *Utah* is the messenger “*uko Iha*” of Ominigbon oracle. It is believed that Ominigbon sends *utah* to the spiritual world to inquire about the client’s question during the divination process.

⁶¹ E. Aighobahi interview with Author on 11 August 2009.

⁶² See Abimbola, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* for an in-depth discussion of secrecy in the Ifa religion.

⁶³ Iha is the Edo word for divination. Similar to Yoruba Ifa, Edo Iha is designated before most oracles to describe that mode of divination. For example: Iha Oronmila or Oronmila’s divination.

⁶⁴ In my field research, I found that Benin diviners use the term Oronmila to refer both to the deity and the divination system. In Benin City, there are some Benin Oronmila diviners who contend that the oracular deity first came to Benin before going to Ife. In fact, there was an independent development of Benin Oronmila worship from the Yoruba (Norberg 1992, 140). Both presently and throughout known history, diviners commonly travel throughout West Africa, acquiring and spreading knowledge. Peavy, *Kings, Magic and Medicine*, 77–82). According to Bascom, Ifa was associated with both Ife and Ado. He states, “It was uncertain to which Ado the corpus and sources were referring.” Bascom speaks of Ado Ewi (Ado Ekiti) and states that *Ewi* was actually the title of the king of Ado Ekiti; he also refers to Ado Awaiye, Ado Ayiwo (unidentified), Ado that was thirteen miles north of Badagry, and Ado (Benin City) (1969, 113). According to Ibie, when Oronmila first came to earth, he briefly settled in Benin City. Afterward Oronmila traveled to Uhe (Ile Ife), where he settled (1992, 3–5). In addition, Samuel Johnson suggests, the oracle moved from Benin City to Owo and then to Ile Ife (1921, 32–33), supporting the supposition that Oronmila came to Benin City before reaching Ife.

⁶⁵ See Cromwell I. Ibie *Ifism: The Complete Works of Orunmila* Vol.1, (Lagos: Efehi Press, 1986, 140) In the same work, Ibie also states that Benin Ifa (Ih’ Oronmila) was learned from the Oyo people and that the two systems are identical (1986, 65). I disagree with Cromwell about Benin Ih’ Oronmila’s originating from Oyo Ifa. I agree that the systems of Oyo Ifa and Benin Ih’ Oronmila are almost identical, and there is also a difference between the Oyo Ifa and Benin Oronmila in the order of Odu from Ife Ifa. I also agree with Ibie’s statement that Oronmila was first in Benin City and then travelled to Ile Ife (Ibie, *Ifism: The Complete Works of Orunmila*, Vol.1, 3–5), where he stayed the longest. More likely than not, Oronmila would have first taught the oracle to the Benin people, because he was there prior to Ile Ife. The migratory spread of the oracle, as I stated earlier, impacted those ethnic groups (Benin, Ife, and Oyo) and they continuously exchanged ideas, as well as methods, and they still do today.

Okonron-meji's secret, coded, and symbolic reference to an ant seeking a diviner and verbally communicating—asking questions and performing the recommended prescribed sacrifices—relays certain latent meanings to the reader that is privy to Edo or Yoruba cultural proverbs and folktales, as well as secret, coded, and symbolic meanings to the Benin Ih' Ọrọnmila diviner, who would readily be able to apply this proverb and folktale to the appropriate situation for a client. The similarities between the Benin Ih' Ọrọnmila and Iha Ominigbon are striking. Although Benin Ih' Ọrọnmila and Iha Ominigbon are two distinct oracular systems, their goals are the same: to help the client understand the meanings of the oracular proverbs and folktales in an effort to remedy the problem at hand.

Analysis of Ọba Ọhẹn, Olokun, and Iha Ominigbon

What is the significance of secret, coded, and symbolic language in the itan Iha Ominigbon? As stated earlier, understanding the language of Iha Ominigbon is reserved for the ob'oguega. According to Osemwegie, it consists of "deep Benin," which is an archaic Edo language that is no longer spoken by the general public (Personal interview. 21 Aug. 2009). Within the "deep Benin" of Iha Ominigbon, secret, coded, and symbolic references keep the oracular language in the sole purview of the ob'oguega diviner. However—and this is the case with Benin Ih' Ọrọnmila as well—once the "key" to this secret language is understood, the everyday proverbs and folktales of the itan Iha Ominigbon become comprehensible. Olokun's association with Ọba Ọhẹn can be demonstrated through the secret, coded, and symbolic language of Owaha Ek'Odin. The secret, coded, and symbolic language of the itan erhia dinmwin refers to Olokun, Ọba Ọhẹn, the iyase, and the Benin chiefs and addresses the historical relationship that resulted in the iyase's death and an eventual rebellion. Ek'Odin states:

Iruẹbọ Erha ye ẹrinmwin—omwan ẹtin.

Ugben ogie ore nọkpọlọse vbe ekhaemwen, o mu iran.

Ugben ise ọre ẹtin nọkpọlọse vbe non ọriọni emwe, ọ gha rrie va o.

Ugben Olokun ọre—ọ mu amẹn⁶⁶

or

“serve their Erha (Father) in spiritual world—a powerful somebody.

When the king is more than chief, he suppresses them,

when the ise (vital force) is more powerful than the word, it tears it.

When Olokun is—suppresses water⁶⁷”

Here, I contend that the oracle is using secret, coded, and symbolic language to say that the “king,” Ọba Ọhẹn, is “more powerful” than his weaker chiefs, so much so that he can “suppress them” or control them. All chieftaincy titles emanate from the monarchy.⁶⁸ In addition, the monarchy owns all of the beaded regalia that a chief is permitted to wear based upon his title;⁶⁹ these are beads made of stone⁷⁰ or coral that originate from ẹguae Olokun, or Olokun’s palace.⁷¹ In other words, the Ọba of Benin grants the right to wear such regalia and can recall these rights upon demand, demonstrating his “power” over the chiefs and his ability to “suppress” them. This interpretation is reinforced in Benin legends of Ọba Ọhẹn and the murder of his prime minister, the iyase.⁷² The oracle simultaneously references—through secret, coded, and symbolic language—Olokun’s being

⁶⁶ Hans Melzian, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria*, (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1937).

⁶⁷ E. Aighobahi interview with Author, November. 2009.

⁶⁸ There are four major classifications of Benin chieftaincy titles. These are *eghaevbonore*, town chiefs; *eghaevbonogbe*, palace chiefs; *enigie*, village rulers; and *uzama*, the kingmakers who co-ruled the kingdom during the Ogiso period. The original number of *uzama* members were called Edion Ene, or “four elders.” These titles were first bestowed during Ogiso Igodo’s reign. Ogiso Igodo, the first king of Benin, conferred the titles upon the Ediṣon ne Ẹne, or *Uzama*. Their number was eventually increased to seven. The *Uzama* were not equal to the king, and they were not traditional hereditary rulers. According to Ena Basimi Eweka, “To clear up some points in Bradbury’s description, it must be pointed out that at the investiture ceremony of any *Uzama* or any Chief for that matter, the Oba usually endows him with certain rights and privileges (Ena B. Eweka, *Evolution of Chieftaincy Titles*, (Benin City: University of Benin Press, Benin City, 1992), 37. It was during Oba Eweka’s reign that the *uzama* chieftaincy titles were made hereditary—as a reward for their assistance with Oranmiyan. Eweka, *Evolution of Chieftaincy Titles*, 35. Through known Benin history, there have been waxing and waning tensions between the Oba palace and the *uzama* as well as *eghaevbonore* chiefs.

⁶⁹ See Joseph Nevadomsky and Ekhaguosa Aisien, ‘The Clothing of Political Identity: Costume and Scarification in Benin Kingdom,’ *African Arts* 28:1 (1995), 62–73, 100, for a discussion of Benin clothing.

⁷⁰ Stone beads were worn prior to Oba Ewuare’s introduction of coral beads to Benin Kingdom.

⁷¹ See Ena B. Eweka, *Evolution of Chieftaincy Titles*, for an in-depth discussion of Benin chieftaincy titles.

⁷² See Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 14.

“more powerful” than his junior or son, the king of Benin.⁷³ Similarly, a more common Edo proverb contrasts the relationship of the superior Olokun⁷⁴ with the junior Ọba of Benin: Ọba na amẹn erọ sẹ nẹ rhe oke, or “the king of the sea who is greater than the one on land.”⁷⁵ This comparison of the sea king (ruler of the vast ocean) to the land king (ruler of the much smaller terra firma) supports the itan that the sea god is “more than” the divine land king. In addition, I believe that Owiha Ek’Odin is referring to Olokun in the passage that mentions “Erha—powerful somebody.” In Benin culture, the father is the ultimate head of the household. This headship⁷⁶ over the family continues after a father departs for the spiritual world. I contend the itan is speaking about Olokun as the “ancestral father” of the Ọba, as well as the partial reincarnation of the deity, giving credence to divine kingship. The Edo and Yoruba are not identical when it comes to naming the partial reincarnation of parents. According to Uyilawa Usuanlele, the Benin people believe in partial reincarnation but do not have Yoruba names like Babatunde and Yetunde to show that the parent has returned to the physical world. The translations of these words are Erha re nẹ and Iye re nẹ, but they are not used as personal names.⁷⁷ However, the process of partial reincarnation espoused by the Benin people is similar to that of the Yoruba.⁷⁸ Therefore, a contextual examination will be applied to the analysis of the term father in the Owiha Ek’Odin, in order to show that Olokun is depicted as the “father” of Ọba Ọhẹn.

In the above sentence, the spiritual Olokun-the-father is being prayed to by the partial reincarnation of the deity: his son, who is his divine manifestation in the

⁷³ In this instance, “chief” or “ogie”, as stated in the earlier Edo passage, and as used in the context of oracular folktale E’Odin, has a dual meaning: one as a traditional ruler, in this case, a chief, as well as referring to Olokun’s junior, the king of Benin. A similar example for the contextual meaning of “chief” is found in the plain meaning—oralacular folktale of Eghae Oba Owiha of the Iha Ominigbon corpus. The plain meaning of Eghae Oba Owiha is king, chief or rich person. These are general references to a titled person in a very high position and most likely a traditional ruler.

⁷⁴ See Paula Ben-Amos, ‘Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art,’ *African Arts*, 6:4 (1973), 28–31, 95, for a discussion of Olokun imagery.

⁷⁵ Izevbigie, Olokun, 44.

⁷⁶ Ero, *Igue and Other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 14, for discussions of the ancestral father.

⁷⁷ Uyilawa Usuanlele interview with Author 11 June 2014.

⁷⁸ The Edo and the Yoruba believe that through the process of reincarnation, a person exchanges places with his guardian angel seven times, for a total of fourteen reincarnations.

physical world, the Ọba of Benin—Ọba Ọhẹn.⁷⁹ In addition, Owiha Ek'Odin's references to Olokun and the Ọba of Benin's power simultaneously allude to their wealth. Olokun's wealth originates from the sea. The Ọba of Benin's wealth comes from the commerce of the market⁸⁰ and daily presents offered at the palace, yet another comparison of Olokun and his son, the Ọba of Benin. In addition, the Oba's palace merged with the Olokun cult and became the "state's religion" in an attempt to control trade⁸¹ and wealth. The marketplace, the physical center of wealth, is monitored and controlled by the Akaṛṛṇmwṛṇ (titled palace disabled and court jester) as well as "article lifters,"⁸² who keep a close eye on "forbidden" market activities⁸³ Thus, utilizing the religio-political symbol of Olokun, the Oba, uses his servants to tightly control the ebb and flow of trade and wealth in the kingdom.

What do the Oba of Benin and Olokun signify in enin ọmwan of Ek'Odin of Iha Ominigbon? It is not clear if Ọhẹn is a corruption of the word ohẹn which means "priest" in the Edo Language. If it is, then the name suggests his association with priesthood based on the historical accounts of their association, probably the Olokun cult as well. Included within Iha Ominigbon corpus are enin ọmwan (or personal names) identified with many Owiha (or "houses of the

⁷⁹ An alternative view is that this may be a concept incorporated at a later date (posthumously) to enhance Ọba Ọhẹn's legitimacy as a ruler. Historically, the Benin kings have had struggles with the Benin chiefs, town chiefs or *uzama*. It is possible that Ọba Ọhẹn's son, Ọba Ewuare, in an effort to bolster his father's legacy as well as his own legitimacy, heavily relied upon the indigenous belief in the supernatural powers of Olokun. In particular, I am referring to the concept in Christianity of father and son being one in the same. Certainly, Ọba Ọzọlua, grandson of Ọba Ọhẹn, was more influenced by Christian missionaries and European soldiers during his reign (Egharevba 1968, 27). It is possible that the father-son doctrine could have taken shape as a result of Ọba Ọzọlua's attempt to elevate his own status. However, I contend that the stronger possibility is that the borrowing of the Christian father-son doctrine began in Ọba Eṣigie's reign. Ọba Eṣigie, great-grandson of Ọba Ọhẹn, sent his Olokun priest at Ughoton (Ọhẹn Okun) to Portugal as an ambassador to learn Portuguese religion and customs to incorporate into palace rituals, as well as to bring back missionaries to establish a Christian (Catholic) church for the Benin people (Egharevba 1968, 28). In any case, the father-son concept could have evolved, at least partially, from these circumstances as well. However, in support of my original argument in this paper, the father-son concept from the indigenous standpoint of partial reincarnation is the most plausible.

⁸⁰ See Kathy Curnow, "Singular Identities: The Benin Bronze Dwarfs" in *Kulte, Kunstler, Konige in Afrika* (1997), 89, for a discussion of "article lifters" and the Benin palace and market.

⁸¹ Joseph Nevadomsky 'Religious Symbols in Benin Kingdom' in Phyllis Galembo (ed.) *Divine Inspiration: From Bahia to Benin*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993) 18.

⁸² Kathy Curnow, 'Singular Identities: The Benin Bronze Dwarfs' in Stefan Eisenhofer, ed. *Kulte, Kunstler, Konige in Afrika: Tradition und Moderne sudnigeria* (Linz: Oberosterreichisches Landesmuseum, 1997)

⁸³ See Curnow, 'Singular Identities: The Benin Bronze Dwarfs' for an in-depth discussion of "article lifters" and their reporting of market events to the Oba palace.

oracle”) that suggest the essence of the mystical forces associated with said names.⁸⁴ According to Izevbigie, “In Benin the meaning of names can be very important. From considering the names of people and places, one can gain insight into the political, social and religious philosophies and culture.”⁸⁵

I believe that the itan enin ọmwan of Owihā Ek’Odin in secret, coded, and symbolic language suggests an intimate association between Ọba Ọhẹn and Olokun. These are Igbinokun, “I seek refuge in Olokun”; Olokunṛọbo, “Olokun is doctor who cures or saves”; Okunsogie, “Olokun is the ruler”; and Ọbasuyi, “the king is glorious.”⁸⁶ Igbinokun is composed of I, meaning “I”; gbinna, “seek protection”; and okun, “water” or “god of water” in this context. Olokunṛọbo is an elision, and the full name is Olokun, “god of water”; o re, “cures or saves”; and obo, “native doctor.”⁸⁷ Ọbasuyi is composed of Ọba, “king of Benin,” and suyi, “is glorious.” These personal names reference the Benin monarch and Olokun simultaneously and interchangeably, addressing the association and link between the Benin monarchy and the deity that is supported by the traditional government. The most commonly used names in Benin culture are Osanobua, Olokun, and Ọba.⁸⁸ For example, some popular personal-names are; Osazuwa means—Osanobua “God” is the giver of wealth; Osanobua’s son—Olokun or Okunzuwa, meaning—Olokun is the giver of wealth; and Olokun’s son—Ọmọ N’Ọba—Ọbazuwa—the king of Benin is the giver of wealth; The Edo word “gie” is utilized and an ending in the tripartite forms of Osasogie—Osanobua is greater than other kings; Okunsogie—Olokun is greater than other kings; as well as Obasogie—king of Benin is greater than other kings.⁸⁹ The interchangeability of these popular personal-names illustrates the comparableness and compatibleness of the Oba with the son and the deities, of Olokun as the Oba’s father, and of Osanobua as the Ọba’s grandfather, giving divine legitimacy and sociopolitical power to the Benin ruler.

⁸⁴ Egharevba, *Iha Ominigbon*, 42-5.

⁸⁵ Izevbigie, Olokun, 53.

⁸⁶ Egharevba, *Iha Ominigbon*, 45.

⁸⁷ Uyiława Usuanlele interview with Author, 8 Jun. 2014.

⁸⁸ Izevbigie, Olokun, 53-54.

⁸⁹ Izevbigie, Olokun, 54.

Olokun's superiority relative to the Oba of Benin, as well as to the Benin chiefs, is reinforced in itan Owiha Ek'Odin, where the oracle states, "Now serve their father in the spiritual world . . . a powerful somebody"; "The king is more than chief"; and "He suppresses them." These statements show the child is subservient to the father, just as the chiefs are subservient to the king. An alternative reading is that Olokun (father) is superior to the Oba of Benin (son) and that the Oba is superior to the Benin chiefs. Olokun's ritual superiority to the Oba of Benin is demonstrated when a high priest of Olokun appears at the palace with the ada-Olokun (ritual ceremonial sword of Olokun). The Oba of Benin must tip his own ada downward in acknowledgement of the deity's elevated status. In any other context, the priest is an oviṅ-Oba, or servant of the Oba (the term used for a native Benin person).⁹⁰ In turn, the Oba of Benin's ritual authority over the chiefs is visible in their mode of addressing him—they must kneel and properly salute him⁹¹ with appropriate respect and formality, for he is the "absolute ruler." In the vernacular of oḥen (priest) and ẹb'oguega (diviners), a "powerful somebody" means someone who has not only physical power but magical power as well⁹² In this case, Olokun is a being with vast magical powers—more so than a divine king, his son.

What exactly is the historical association between Olokun and Oba Oḥen? In an attempt to conceal his paralysis,⁹³ Oba Oḥen associated himself with Olokun.⁹⁴ Prior to his paralysis, in an effort to fortify his royal position with magic, Oba Oḥen utilized the famous native doctors from the Olokun communal village Eṽbo-Odebo in Edo land and made them court physicians⁹⁵ in an attempt to utilize

⁹⁰ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 69.

⁹¹ See Peavy, *Kings, Magic, and Medicine* especially chapter 5, for analysis of Benin chiefs.

⁹² E. Aighobahi interview with Author October 2009.

⁹³ The Benin king is purported to be the physical and spiritual protector of the nation. Any physical or mental deficiency in a Benin king is considered a grave defect. A prince with such a deficiency would be ineligible to ascend the throne (Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 26). In a current ruler, the deficiency may be grounds for removal from the throne. The knowledge of a deficient king would have been a great advantage to any opposition group, namely chiefs. Since the beginnings of kingship in Benin, there has been a struggle between the Oba and Benin chiefs.

⁹⁴ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 14.

⁹⁵ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 181-182.

their magical abilities.⁹⁶ According to Kathy Curnow, in one version of the story, medicine was used adversely to paralyze Ọba Ọhẹn's legs.⁹⁷ In another version, according to Ekhaguosa Aisien, Ọba Ọhẹn fell into a hole and broke his legs, leading to paralysis.⁹⁸ In any case, according to legend, the paralyzed legs and the association with mudfish (a liminal being) and its iconography gave rise to his mythological origins (Olokun) and made him the partial reincarnation of the deity.⁹⁹ His mudfish legs were spiritually charged, and if they contacted the earth, they would render the ground infertile,¹⁰⁰ serving to enhance this mysterious legend. In addition, legend states that Olokun asked Osanobua, his father, for permission to visit the physical world and became reincarnated as Oba Ọhẹn with mudfish-like legs,¹⁰¹ legs that were spiritually charged—a sign of his divine qualities and sea-bound origins. This association has promoted and secured the Ọba of Benin's political and religious authority in Edo land.¹⁰²

What is the significance of Ọba Ọhẹn, Olokun, and the Benin chiefs? Historical accounts relate an aggravated conflict between Ọba Ọhẹn and the iyase¹⁰³ (prime minister and head of the town chiefs) of Benin, which led the iyase

⁹⁶ Peavy, Kings, Magic and Medicine, 150-151.

⁹⁷ Cathy Curnow interview with Author 2014.

⁹⁸ According to Aisien, Ọba Ọhẹn had an insatiable appetite for many of the Benin chiefs' young wives. In particular, one night he contrived to strike up a sexual relationship with one of the *uzama*'s wives and stealthily entered Chief Oliha's harem. One of Chief Oliha's female servants discovered the clandestine sexual escapade and reported her findings to him. Ọba Ọhẹn broke his legs and became paralyzed trying to escape from Chief Oliha's harem Ekhaguosa Aisien, *Ewuare: The Oba of Benin (Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 2012, 11. This action inflamed an age-old rivalry between Chief Oliha—Oliha is one of the original Ediṣon n' Eṣe of the uzama (Ena B. Eweka, The Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy titles, (Uniben Press, Benin City, 1992), 35). In short, this would have placed both the uzama and later, because of the murder of the Iyase, the town chiefs in a rebellious mood against the Ọba, thus setting up the framework for a political uprising against Ọba Ọhẹn.*

⁹⁹ See Barbara W. Blackmun, *The Iconography of Carved Altar Tusks from Benin, Nigeria*, (Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1984), for an in-depth discussion of Ọba Ọhẹn's mudfish legs in ivory tusks.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Blackmun W. *The Iconography of Carved Altar Tusks from Benin, Nigeria*. Diss. Art History, 1984. Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1984, 248–276.

¹⁰¹ See Ben-Amos, 'Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art' 28–31, 95.

¹⁰² Izevbigie, Olokun, 46.

¹⁰³ In an effort to suppress the powerful and overreaching Uzama Chiefs, Oba Ọhẹn's great-great-grandfather—Oba Ewedo (around 1255–1280 CE)—created a new title: *Iyase I yo na se uwa*; it means "This I created to be higher than you all which forms the Uzama group titles" (Eweka, *The Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy*, 28). The power struggles between the monarch and the chiefs are ancient. The creation of the *iyase* title would eventually lead to an ongoing power struggle between the monarch and the Eghaevbo n'Ore (town chiefs), the subject of this article.

to plant medicine under a bridge that Ọba Ọhẹn would secretly pass.¹⁰⁴ Sometime afterward, Ọba Ọhẹn was stricken with paralysis. In order to conceal this, Ọba Ọhẹn rearranged the order in which his chiefs would enter and depart the council chamber. Before, the Ọba would be the last to arrive and first to depart. After his paralysis, Ọba Ọhẹn became the first to arrive and last to depart the council chamber, so as to conceal his servants carrying him to and from his throne. One day, the iyase hid and observed Ọba Ọhẹn's servants carrying him into the council chambers. Subsequently, Ọba Ọhẹn had Iyase Emuze killed for his deceit and contempt.¹⁰⁵ Later, in rebellion, the chiefs stoned Ọba Ọhẹn to death because he had had the Iyase killed.¹⁰⁶ This historical event is commemorated during a section in Ugierhoba¹⁰⁷ ceremony. The Eghaevbonore, town chiefs,¹⁰⁸ use a hand gesture to ask the Oba, "Iyase vbo?"¹⁰⁹ This translates as, "Where is the iyase?" The Oba replies with a similar gesture.¹¹⁰ Ever since, Ọba Ọhẹn has been identified as a reincarnation of the Olokun¹¹¹ deity.

What is the significance of itan erhia dinmwin Ek'Odin Owiha in relation to the historical conflict between Ọba Ọhẹn and Benin chiefs? I contend that the erhia dinmwin, or deep meaning interpretation of Ek'Odin of Iha Ominigbon oracle, where it states that "the king suppresses them—chiefs," refers in secret, coded, and symbolic language to the historical incident in which Ọba Ọhẹn killed or suppressed the Iyase of Benin in retaliation for the Iyase's spying.¹¹² Furthermore, I suggest that Ek'Odin's statement "when the ese [vital force] is more powerful than the word—it tears it" is speaking (1) of Ọba Ọhẹn's vital force and medicine being more powerful than the Iyase's orhion, or life force and/or

¹⁰⁴ Kathy Curnow, Phone interview with Author, 28 April 2014.

¹⁰⁵ See Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 14 and Aisien, *Ewuare*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ According to Aisien, because Oba Ohen was considered a deity (Olokun reincarnate), the town chiefs stone him to death with his own sacred symbol *orhue* (white clay chalk) (2012, 15–16).

¹⁰⁷ This festival celebrates the Oba's departed ancestors.

¹⁰⁸ See Ena B. Eweka, *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*, 42–46, for an in-depth discussion of town chiefs titles.

¹⁰⁹ See Ekhaguosa Aisien, *Ewuare: The Oba of Benin*, for an in-depth discussion of Ọba Ọhẹn and Iyase Emuze.

¹¹⁰ *Ero, Igue and other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 5.

¹¹¹ See Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 14, for a discussion of Ọba Ọhẹn.

¹¹² According to Aisien, when informed of Iyase Emuze's death, the king said "*Ihuaro ero gbi'Iyase*," or "It is snooping, prying, that has killed the Iyase" Aisien, *Ewuare*, 14.

medicine, and (2) of a deity's vital force being so much more than that of mere mortals. In Great Benin religious, spiritual, and magical traditions, the "word" is believed to be very potent and carries its own spiritual force. Every prayer or incantation ends with the word of power. The *ese*, or vital force, from the partial reincarnation of Olokun is so powerful that it tears apart or cuts or destroys the *iyase*'s word or essence.¹¹³ In other words, the *iyase* was effectively stopped from reporting his findings to the other chiefs by Olokun. For sociopolitical reasons, this would eventually make the king's murder of the *iyase* justifiable to the masses, because it was Olokun that performed the deed. Also, sacred *itan*, as well as the everyday proverb and folktale about *Ọba Ọhẹn* and the town chiefs, serves as a sociopolitical reminder for potential rebels that the divine monarch has the absolute power to defeat them.¹¹⁴ In addition, *Ọba Ọhẹn*'s killing of the *iyase* destroyed his physical existence, or tore him apart from the physical world, sending him to be born again through partial reincarnation¹¹⁵ at some later time.¹¹⁶

What is the significance of *Ọba Ọhẹn* and the Benin chiefs and *erhia khere* of *Owiha Ek'Odin*? The *erhia khere*, or plain meaning interpretation, of *Ek'Odin* speaks of *oto* (or "ground"), *okuta* (or "stone"), and *Oto* (or "god of stone or ground"). There are several interpretations as applied to *Ọba Ọhẹn* and Benin town chiefs that can be examined. I contend that the secret, coded, and symbolic language of *erhia khere* refers to *Ọba Ọhẹn*'s spiritually charged mudfish legs¹¹⁷ contacting the *oto*, or "ground." In support of this interpretation, the legend of the ground being made infertile on contact with *Ọba Ọhẹn*'s mudfish legs suggests an intimate association between the ground and the *Oba*'s spiritually charged legs. In itself, *oto*, or "ground," is deified in the form of *Otoe*—divinity of the earth, which

¹¹³ In Benin, one's essence is composed of more than the physical body, the most important parts are the *Uhunmwun* or spiritual Head—which is a deity in itself, as well as and one's personal *Ehi* or guardian spirit (*Ero, Igue and other Festivals of Benin Kingdom*, 42-54).

¹¹⁴ I believe that the sociopolitical implications of "absolute power" to defeat the Benin chiefs developed over a series of successive kings, each capitalizing on the Olokun and *Ọba Ọhẹn* myth—"powerful somebody" and divine vital force (*ase*) to quell uprising against the monarchy.

¹¹⁵ The *iyase* chieftaincy title is nonhereditary, so partial reincarnation would not necessarily bring the *iyase* back to the same chieftaincy office and thus would probably send his offspring to a different position. In this way, the *Oba* effectively removed his opponent.

¹¹⁶ Similar to that of the Yoruba is the Edo belief that a person goes through the cycle of birth and death fourteen times, alternating with his guardian spirit (*ehi*).

¹¹⁷ Fagg, *Nigerian Images*, 56.

is very powerful.¹¹⁸ Also, the sacred ground is able to neutralize other magic. Olokun's vital force (ase) energy is water; Ọba Ọhẹn, as the partially reincarnated deity of water, is greater than and also neutralizes the ground. Water is able to wash away the ground, break down earthen barriers, as well as reshape the earth—that is, water can suppress the ground. This is coded, symbolic language for Ọba Ọhẹn's superiority and temporary postponement of a rebellion by his chiefs, especially the *iyaa*. Furthermore, I believe the *erhia khere* of Owihia Ek'Odin and the mention of *okuta*, or "stone," refer to the legend that Ọba Ọhẹn was stoned to death by the Benin people for his killing the *iyase* of Benin.¹¹⁹ However, there are alternative meanings to the *erhia khere* Ek'Odin. In my experiences as an Ọb'oguẹga, when Ek'Odin usually falls for a client (three other Owihias compose the total set of sentences as well and the meaning is contextual), it can indicate that the person is strong, immovable, permanent; like a stone or the ground or like the god of ground, who can neutralize any bad or evil medicine, such a person can overcome obstacles.¹²⁰ Applying this analysis to Ọba Ọhẹn, a sociopolitical figure representing the Benin monarchy, we see him depicted as someone who can overcome any obstacle because he is immovable, permanent, and can neutralize any evil medicine.

What is the significance of Ọba Ọhẹn and Olokun in the *ese* of Owihia Ek'Odin? The *ese* of Iha Ominigbon prescribes making sacrifice to the Benin gods. In this case, Ek'Odin prescribes offerings to Olokun and the ancestral "father." I believe that "father" is a coded reference to Olokun as the father of Ọba Ọhẹn. Here is another example of the father-son relationship from partial reincarnation. The son, Ọba Ọhẹn, is making a sacrifice to his spiritual father, Olokun, who is in the spirit world and at the same time exists in the physical world as Ọba Ọhẹn, the partial reincarnation of the deity himself. Also, the ancestral Benin kings are the "fathers" of Ọba Ọhẹn, as the partial reincarnation. By going

¹¹⁸ See Hans Melzian, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria*, (London: Keagan Paul and Company, 1937) 151.

¹¹⁹ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 14.

¹²⁰ The power of the earth is considered very strong and formidable. This is attested by an Edo proverb that "If all the gods are against a man, except the Earth, he will not quickly die" Melzian, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria*, 151. In this context, the earth deity is at work for the client.

to their respective shrines, Oba Oḥen serves and pays homage to Olokun (his spiritual father) as well as the ancestral father.¹²¹ I contend that examining the types of offerings selected suggests the deity's and royal ancestors' preferences and reinforces the deity's sociopolitical association with the Benin monarchy. The ẹse of Ek'Odin states the following: "Iruẹḅo -Olokun keghi re Oḱporu noḡua, Erha keghi re Ayon, ẹvbẹẹ, kevbe Oḱporu, oḡhe Esu keghi re ovbukḡo noḡua," which translates as, "Sacrifice for Olokun deity is made with white cock, to Erha [father]with drinks, kola nut, and a cock, and to Esu with he-goat."

The types of offerings, as well as their colors, have secret, coded, and symbolic meanings. I contend that the sacrifice of a cock (male gender) to Olokun symbolizes kingship because the fowl wears a crown on its head (cock's comb), making it an appropriate offering. The cock's comb is also red (ododo¹²²), a color associated with power, royalty, and spiritually charged areas,¹²³ and it is a part of the ritual ceremonial attire of the Oba of Benin. Also, the color white is a symbolic reference to Olokun,¹²⁴ for it symbolizes purity, as well as the Benin monarch. In addition, the Benin monarch's regalia is either white or red or a combination of the two colors, both colors representing his connection to the Olokun deity. According to Izevbigie, "The ododo may be the most sacred and prestigious of all the costumes of the Oba's regalia" and the color white is also important in ritual attire.¹²⁵ Here, Olokun and the ancestral Erha (father) take the cock, suggesting that their requirements are the same—and in fact, they are the same entity in different manifestations, the spiritual deity as well as the physical god king. I suggest that the focus on the sacrificial bird's being male results from two factors: (1) Olokun is a male deity. (2) Only the firstborn male heir, or Edaikẹn, may ascend to the throne;¹²⁶ thus, all Benin kings have been male. All Benin deities

¹²¹ The Benin people believe that the Oba's paternal ancestors protect the entire nation, as they did in earthly form. The Ugierhoba festival is dedicated to the Benin king's ancestors. The palace ceremonies take place in a large hall called Ugha Eroba ("fathers hall"), a large walled enclosure containing the altars dedicated to the past Benin kings, which can hold thousands of people (*Ero, Igue and other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 3). The deified ground is honored at the same time as the Oba's paternal ancestors (Nevadomsky, 74).

¹²² Ododo is bright red material that is used for apparel.

¹²³ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 89–90.

¹²⁴ Izevbigie *Olokun*, 67.

¹²⁵ Izevbigie, *Olokun*, 79 and 85.

¹²⁶ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 26–27.

take kola nut¹²⁷, and it is a traditional offering. All the Edo deities take some kind of drink. However, Olokun does not take harsh drinks,¹²⁸ but harsh drinks were not prescribed. The prescribed sacrifices of Owihā Ek’Odin of the Iha Ominigbon are both synonymous with Olokun (“father”) and the Oba of Benin, reinforcing the sociopolitical association of the Benin monarchy with the deity. In this context, Esu takes his normal sacrifice, a male goat, to help with carrying the sacrifice to Olokun and Erha¹²⁹ in *erimwin* (spiritual world) complementing the Edo cosmological order of Olokun or Osanowa,¹³⁰ a positive force, and Esu¹³¹, a negative force. Both are necessary for the monarchy and Iha Ominigbon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the itan in each segment of Owihā Ek’Odin of the Iha Ominigbon—deep meaning, plain meaning, personal names and sacrifices—provide indirect references in secret, coded, and symbolic language to Olokun, Oba Oḥen (divine king), and rebellious Benin chiefs. All of these itan Edo *neḍe oḡhe Iha Ominigbon*, or ancient Great Benin proverbs and folktales of the Iha Ominigbon oracle, are essential to elucidating latent aspects and complexities of the Great Benin worldview in general and give insight into socio-historical events in particular.

¹²⁷ E. Aighobahi interview with Author 11 August 2009.

¹²⁸ E. Aighobahi interview with Author 11 August 2009.

¹²⁹ The Benin people believe that the Oba’s paternal ancestors protect the entire nation, as they did in earthly form. The Ugherhoba festival is dedicated to the Benin king’s ancestors. The palace ceremonies take place in a large hall called Ugha Eroba (“fathers hall”), a large walled enclosure containing the altars dedicated to the past Benin kings, which can hold thousands of people (Ero, *Igue and other Festivals in Benin Kingdom*, 3). The deified ground is honored at the same time as the oḡba’s paternal ancestors (Nevadomsky 1993, 74).

¹³⁰ Osanowa, the creator of human beings, seems to be an alternative name for Osanobua, and focusing on the aspect of human creation, as well as an additional praise name that was later identified with Olokun. In addition, there seem to be another name which identifies aspects of Osanobua—Osanoha—the creator of animals (Izevbigie, Olokun, 24), this name has not been attributed to Olokun. However, Osanowa may have merged with Olokun, when deity of the sea became the patron of female fertility and children and necessary for birth and funerary rites, as well as the spread of his cult.

¹³¹ In Benin cosmology, Esu is the right-hand deity to Osanobua Noghoduā (God Almighty). Esu is the *okaighele erimwin* (leader of the spiritual world) and Osanobua’s most trusted subordinate. Esu goes anywhere that Osanobua travels. In a situation similar to that experienced by the Yoruba, a lack of understanding of African spiritual systems resulted in Esu’s classification as a “devil” in literature. There is no equating Esu with the European Judeo-Christian concept of the devil. According to Izevbigie, the negative forces can be described as “*Osanukumayan no rhievbe rri’ kpakpa*,” or “the god that does whatever good or evil that is asked, indiscriminately.” Izevbigie, Olokun, 19- 20.

The Benin monarchy strategically positioned Ọba Ọhẹn as the partial reincarnation of the Olokun deity, the most revered god in Edo land and son of Osanobua, or God Almighty. In this way, the socio-political legitimacy of the Edo ruler is ensured, as is his adoration by the Edo people. The Ọba's divine status was instrumental in quelling rebellions initiated by the Benin chiefs, benefitting not only Ọba Ọhẹn but also later Benin monarchs, such as Ewuare, Ọzọlua and Esięie (who were Ọhẹn a son, grandson, and great-grandson, respectively).

I contend that the itan, or proverbs and folktales, of Ek'Odin of the Iha Ominigbọn indigenous oracular system of Edo land contain insight into some historical events during Ọba Ọhẹn's reign and that because of the oracle's secret, coded, and symbolic language, the meanings of the itan were previously available only to the initiated—Ọb'ogueęa diviner. My analysis involves examining the complete itan of Ek'Odin, consisting of erhia dinmwin (deep meaning), erhia khere (plain meaning), enin ọmwan (personal names), and eęe (prescribed sacrifices), along with the known historical aspects of Ọba Ọhẹn's reign and his conflict with the Benin chiefs. Each of the itan segments contains valuable socio-historical insights about Ọba Ọhẹn: his status as a beloved deity and his paralysis, his status as an opposed ruler and his subjugation of an imminent rebellion, his eventual confrontation with and murder of Iyase Emuze (leader of the town chiefs), and the retaliation of the town chiefs for the murder.

I contend that the erhia dinmwin, or deep meaning, of itan Ek'Odin where it states that "the vital force is more powerful than the word—it tears it" speaks of Ọba Ọhẹn's vital force being more powerful than Iyase Emuze's word—he was going to inform the town chiefs about the Oba's paralysis—and refers to the murder of the iyase by the Ọba's servants.

I suggest that when itan erhia khere Ek'Odin speaks of "ground," it refers to Ọba Ọhẹn's spiritually charged mudfish legs, which were so powerful that their touch would make the earth infertile, and addresses his association with Olokun. Where itan erhia khere Ek'Odin speaks of "stone," it refers to the town chiefs' using stone—or orhue, white kaolin chalk, which is one of Olokun's symbols—to murder Ọba Ọhẹn.

I contend that where the itan ese Ek’Odin speaks of “father,” it refers to Ọba Ọḩẹn’s making sacrifice to Olokun, his spiritual father, as an example of the divine father-son relationship through partial reincarnation. I suggest that the type and color of the sacrificial offerings reveal the preferred colors of Olokun and the monarch, white (symbolizing purity and powerful kingly attire) and red (the color of the cock’s comb or crown).

I contend that the itan enin ọmwan, or personal names, of Ek’Odin speak of the association of Olokun, kingship, and Ọba Ọḩẹn. All of these sacred proverbs and folktales have been systematically incorporated into the indigenous oracular system of Benin, Ek’Odin of the Iha Ominigbon, as the sacred cultural memory of sociopolitical and religious events—illustrating how politics and religion are often married to promote a reigning monarch’s status.

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