Chalk Iconography in Olokun Worship

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The Edo people of Nigeria believe that Olokun, god of the sea, is a powerful and benevolent deity who can bring children, health, riches, and other blessings to those who worship him. One of his praise names is Oba n’ Ame No Se No Re Oke (The King of the Sea Is Greater Than the King of the Land). Olokun has a palace of cowries in his kingdom beneath the sea, but the oba (king) of the land does not. A popular worship song praises his omnipotence: A i ghi ghe oba n’ ame/ I tba oba n’ ame mwen. (You do not fight the king of the water! I come to meet the king of the water for help). 

Shrines to Olokun (Figs. 2, 9, 12, 18, 19), peopled with molded figures representing his wives, children, and chiefs, are meant to replicate his underwater kingdom. Their display of imported cooking pots, European dishes, and other prestige items (Fig. 8) refer to the wealth bestowed by the deity. I was initiated into the priesthood of Olokun in Benin City in July 1984. During the fourteen-day ceremony, I became intrigued by the close connection between the physical images or objects and the chants and songs used by ohen (priests, both male and female) in worship. In most weekly Olokun ceremonies, for example, seven songs, like the one that follows, are sung as a salutation to the spirit before the officiating ohen begins divination: Rhie egogo re/ Rhie emaba re/ Niya gha ga okun muen/ E ni s’de ehi/ E avba egbe/ Ewue n’ ame (Bring the bell/ Bring the iron rod/ That I can use to serve my Olokun/ So that I can live as my spirits wish/ We have met ourselves/ Spirits of the water). Images are also drawn (i.e., sifted through the fingertips) in powdered white chalk (orhue) or painted with a chalk-and-water paste for the same purpose (Figs. 1, 3). Worshipers may wear ceremonial garments (adaigho) embellished with cowries, coins, beads, and bells (Figs. 9, 10, 18) as they dance and pray near the visually impressive arrangement of shrine objects. Beautiful objects are used, such as the fan (ezuzu) and the musical instruments that are particular to Olokun worship: the egogo (bell), emaba (iron rod for beating the bell), ena (drum), ukuse (maraca), and aza (bell for invocation). These instruments may also be drawn in chalk. Only through this integration of the verbal and visual can the deity be invoked.

As my understanding developed, it became clear that every ritual action performed, every object used, and every image drawn or painted in orhue on the floor of the shrine was a tool for conveying prayer. For example, at the opening of an afternoon ceremony called Ugije Avan that took place during my initiation, the chief priest sifted an intricate drawing before the shrines of Olokun and Ogun, god of iron. By the end of the ceremony it was obliterated by the vigorous dancing of devotees. These drawings were not intended as permanent decoration but as a transitory medium of communication from priest to deity. The reverse is also true: they are regarded as the deity’s footprints. Chalk images within the environment of the shrine can therefore be viewed as a language shared by humans and spirits.

As I documented the chalk iconography of various Olokun shrines in and around Benin City, their ohen interpreted

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1 A DRAWING OF THE CEREMONIAL STAFF OF OFFICE (ADA) AND SWORD (EBEN) IS SIFTED IN POWDERED WHITE CHALK (ORHUE) AT THE OLOKUN SHRINE OF PRIESTESS AIGBOVIA OREDO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, 1985.

OPPOSITE PAGE: 2 OLOKUN SHRINE. IT REPLI CATES THE GOD’S UNDERWATER KINGDOM, WITH MOLDED REPRESENTATIONS OF WIVES, CHIEFS, AND CHILDREN FLANKING THAT OF OLOKUN HIMSELF. IMPORTED DISHES SIGNIFY THE WEALTH THE DEITY CAN BESTOW; THE BELLS AND THE FAN ARE PARTICULAR TO OLOKUN WORSHIP. BENIN CITY.
the designs for me and explained their functions. They are bound neither to a specific style or method of illustration, nor to a particular combination of designs. The images themselves may vary, as we shall see later in this paper in connection with the design called igba-edé.

A myth recounts how orhue images were involved in a test of power between Olokun and Osanobua, the Creator God. Osanobua's children lived in erinmwin (heaven, or the spirit world; as opposed to agbon, earth, or the physical world) and were given charge of various metaphysical forces. Olokun was the eldest son. The others were Sango (divinity of thunder), Ogun (divinity of iron), Orunmila (divinity of divination, decision-making, dreams, and prophetic visions), Esu (divinity of conflict and unpredictability—a trickster), and Ogiuwu (divinity of death). Daughter Obiemwen (divinity of human fertility) was the eldest child.

Early in his childhood, before his father had created the world and humanity, Olokun proved to Osanobua that he possessed the wisdom to control the affairs of the universe. Osanobua had decided to test Olokun by sending him to the river to fetch water with a woven reed basket. The clever Olokun immediately recognized his father's motive
and decided to show him that he could not be tricked. Before he left on his errand, he drew many patterns with orhui
on the ground in front of the house and then called out to his father to save the patterns by removing them if a rainstorm
should come. Apparently Osanobua was preoccupied and agreed to this request. Upon reaching the river, Olokun, know-
ing that a porous basket would never serve as a water container, decided to bathe instead. On his way back to the
house, he caused a rainstorm that destroyed the white kaolin designs. Upon his return, when Osanobua asked him
why he had not fetched water, he simply answered with a question about the disappearance of his designs. Osanobua
confessed that it was not possible to separate the designs from the land and that the rain had dissolved them. Olokun
then told his father that a porous basket could not be used for fetching water (see Imasogie 1980 for a similar account).

Impressed by the child’s wisdom, Osanobua later gave him the power to bring health, wealth, and children to the
world. As a result of this episode, the Edo pray that children will surpass their parents: A bie omọ no se o'mwen e re
Osanobua na bie Olokun (Pray to have a child greater than yourself; that is why Osanobua had Olokun).

Olokun worship is affected by the direction of the sun, time of day, and calendar day. The god is served either in
the morning or in the evening as the sun begins to bend in the west. Worship and divination related to Olokun take place
during daylight hours, except for special sacrifices, night dances held during annual festivals (Okpovbie O Ghe Uk-
pogbe), and the ceremony related to initiation (Na Na Khue Akhue Bo). River ceremonies for him occur on market days
in Benin City and environs.

Because messages are customarily sent to the deity as the sun rises or sets, early-morning worship is of paramount
importance to a member of the Olokun cult. Generally, the floor in front of the altar is washed at the beginning of each
day. In the morning, before a ceremony begins, a single design or group of orhui images will be sifted or painted there.

During prayer an ohen may invoke various spirits that operate with Olokun in his palace beneath the sea, calling out
their praise names, such as Oba n’ Ame (King of the Water), Eze n’ Unghegbe n’ Ebo (Glittering White River [That
Reflects Heaven and Earth], or Adesukhunwun (Stainless Sky). As a direct salutation, while praying they may sift four or more parallel vertical lines in orhui on the floor as well as on shrine objects such as bases of water vessels and molded figures. As the cere-
mony continues, Olokun can be invoked through the voice of a bell and a salutation song like this one: Okpe egogo ede gbe/
Okpe emaba ede gbe! Okpe ukuse ede gbe! Ede gbe! Ede Oba gbe! Ede Osa gbe (The bell ringer, the day has dawned! The
drummer in charge of the drum-maraca, the day has dawned! The maraca player, the day has dawned! The day has
dawned! The day has dawned! Oba’s day has dawned! God’s day has dawned). Most orhui iconography can be clas-
sified as salutatory designs, serving designs, purification designs, or initiation designs. Since I have already mentioned
salutatory designs with an emphasis on ritual functions for Olokun, I offer a concise explanation of the other categories.

Serving designs. These are used for invocatory purposes and for offering gifts to the spirit realm, Erinmuin. Worship-
ers believe that the heavenly spirits must be fed so that they can carry out their work in the physical world. When re-
questing aid, the ohen usually offers the heart, liver, breast, and left leg or wing of an animal sacrifice to the shrine.

Purification designs. The ohen uses these to make the body spiritually clean, so that his ability to receive clear visions
and messages from the spirit realm is not hampered: l’ommuun egbe n’ ebo m’ne (I purify myself for my shrine). Without a
purified body an ohen cannot be free to treat ill clients and select or prepare medicinal substances.

An ohen leads a disciplined life in which many taboos must be observed. These vary with particular specialties of
worship. When taboos are violated, by necessity or accident, purification may be necessary. In addition, routine purifi-
cation is a necessary aspect of an ohen’s existence. It is typically carried out be-

4. OLOKUN CHALK IMAGERY CALLED EZE AME

3. TOP: SIFTED CHALK IGHA-EDe DESIGN.

fore traveling and before leaving the house to mix with other people, to collect medicinal substances, or to visit patients. It is also performed after visiting with clients, after bathing, and at the end of an illness or menstruation. Dancing on a worship day or entering the shrine during a ceremonial day necessitates prior cleansing rites, as does the initiation of an ohen or novice into the Olokun cult. (The latter will be discussed with regard to initiation designs.)

The materials used in conjunction with purification prayers vary according to the complexity of the ritual. In routine situations an ohen passes one alligator pepper seed in a circle over the head and then discards it. At the end of the ritual, after chewing seven of these seeds, the priest sprays himself with the chewed seeds and saliva. An incantation like this one might be used: Oehen Obo kasa Owe kasa (Freedom, to clear oneself from taboos / To unite the hands to be active and free again/ To unite the legs to be active and free again/ To unite or unbind oneself from an unclean body).

When the ohen is delivering a child, carrying out an initiation, or treating an illness that puts him at risk, the cleansing procedure becomes more involved. Because its style is specific to each ohen, whose interpretation has been shaped primarily by those who initiated him, the following description should be regarded simply as one example of these rites.

The ohen draws a row of seven circles in chalk in an open space outside facing either east or west — toward the sun. Between seven and fourteen cowries and sometimes coins are placed randomly within the designs. As the ohen prays, he waves in circles overhead a stick of palm broom on which the shell of an egg (ohen ohokho) from a local breed of chicken has been placed. The priest continues this motion with the shell and stick as he walks or spins on one foot through each circle. This action is repeated seven times as the ohen walks back and forth through the design, switching the stick between the right and left hand as his movements change direction. Then he faces the sun and blows impurities off the shell and stick.

Next, a one-day-old white chick (ovbi ohokho uko) is tied to ufo and ikhinmwin leaves. Rotating this bundle over his head, the priest continues to walk through the design. The chick is subsequently slaughtered, and the ohen smears its blood on his face and body: from the left to the right eye, then from the center of the forehead to the base of the neck, and on the ears, breast, navel, wrists, and ankles. The remains of the chick are thrown between the ohen’s spread legs from behind and then discarded. Finally a few coins and large sacrificial cowries are added to a thin solution of chalk, wood ash, and water called Emuen O Gbe Awu (Ashes Kill Taboo).

The priest applies this solution to the

5. IGHA-EDE DESIGN WITH WATER IMAGERY.
body with afo leaves formed into a sponge shape, wiping the eyes from left to right, and sprinkling the head, body, hands, and legs. In the last phase of this ritual, the ohen faces the sun, jumps, and sprays himself with seven alligator pepper seeds he has been chewing. The taboos are thereby released from his body. Afterwards the water is tossed from behind through the legs of the ohen, who always faces the sun. Any cowries or coins that touch his legs or feet are kept as gifts for the shrine. In some instances an ohen may call on a colleague to assist in purification rites of this type.

Initiation designs. Designs that appear in Olokun initiation for the priesthood function slightly differently from those used on other occasions: they identify the particular shrine in which the rituals associated with the initiation of a priest are occurring. Usually a member of the initiating team of ohen is appointed to draw a series of floor designs for fourteen consecutive mornings in several locations, including in front of the door of the celebrants’ room, the bath house, the house, and the shrine of the ohen in charge of the initiation. Through these drawings, Olokun and associated spirits are constantly being invited into the shrine. It is conventional practice to depict objects that are essential in worship, along with wave-like patterns and water imagery.

In the beginning rites of initiation into Olokun, the purification design involves fourteen chalk circles instead of seven. They are drawn in two parallel rows, forming a channel between them through which the novice walks back and forth. At the end of the ritual, the afo and ikhimisin leaves, tied to a chick, are swept around the feet of the novice while he stands in the middle of the channel. Afterwards he jumps and spits out chewed alligator pepper seeds and sprays saliva. The priest, standing back to back with the novice, throws the leaves through the novice’s legs while the latter straddles the design.

The Igha-Ede Symbol in Olokun Worship

I chose the orhue design called igha-ede (‘division of the day’; igha = to share or divide, ede = day) as a focal point for this study because of its multifaceted nature: it cannot be classified in one of the preceding categories alone. Drawn or painted within the environment of the shrine, which in some instances has been sacrificially anointed, the design can be responsible for carrying out various tasks requested by the officiating ohen. Igha-ede is concerned with the division of foods in both erenminin and agbon, the transmission of messages between the two realms, the sharing of foods among various deities who are being saluted in a ceremony, the allocation of time in ceremonies, the strengthening of medicinal bath preparations, the detection of physical problems, and the protection from negative forces through the creation of an intangible block or gate.

When drawn simply, igha-ede is composed of two intersecting lines that form a cross. The cross may be circled at the end points and at the intersection that divides the design into four sections. This image is called ada nene, “four junctions” (Fig. 15). In Benin, four is an important number. The space between earth and heaven is said to be divided by four pillars: Ikale ete ene (ene) no da aghon yi (The four cardinal points that hold the world). Olokun worship requires the use of quartered kola nuts in prayer and sacrifice, and the sections are offered in pairs, either two or four at a time. They are also a tool in divination (Fig. 6). When the kola is split into four along natural lines, the faces will fall either up or down, resulting in two pairs of male
and female sections, according to tradition. How they fall determines whether the reading is positive or negative.

The number four is also of great significance in daily life. For example, the Edo week is divided into four days, and each day into four sections: morning, afternoon, evening, and night. In the traditional kitchen, cooking pots are set on four stones or four molded sand supports.

The igba-ede design represents a crossroads or junction, duality in nature, and the balance between positive and negative elements in the face of constant change. It is believed that spirits congregate at junctions to either bless humans or tempt them into wrongdoing or misfortune. The Edo say, "Uhien, aobe ada mwen aro" (Even the junctions have eyes). A simple cross configuration may symbolize the intersection of the earthly and otherworldly realms. A person who stands in the center of the image can "cross over" and speak in erinmoin. Through igba-ede, one can send the spirits messages as well as gifts of food and drink. Those suffering from illness may be treated with special bathing preparations while standing at the intersection of the design and requesting aid. Igba-ede can also deliver a message from Olokun to the ohun who owns the shrine in which the design operates.

An expression commonly recited in prayer refers to directional points: Ekpen vbe orie laho, gbe gun mwen de yu usu agbon (East and West, I beg you; do not let me fall into the mouth of the world). In other words the priest is asking the spirits to keep him (or his client) from falling into the hands of enemies. The concept of directions and their implied intersection, and of the division into physical and spiritual realms, is evident in various rituals. While in trance, a priest may salute all spirits present in all corners of the world by offering them ground ohue. He may dance to the perimeters of the compound beyond the shrine and blow ohue from his palm or fan to the north, south, east, and west. Therefore, just as igba-ede indicates the division of physical space, it can also divide psychic space that is spiritually charged.

In order to improve one's condition, one must offer Olokun sacrificial gifts revealed through divination. In a group situation, however, the ohun may use his rattle staff (ukhurhe), which is usually carved with decorative patterns, to drive
evils from the heads of celebrants and to appeal to the spirits until appropriate sacrificial offerings can be made. The officiating priest may call for his uklurhe during an Ugie (weekly ceremony) and recite: Ese12 ghe lele muen! Lele muen omol! Ese ghe lele muen! Ese ghe lele uwa! Lele uwa omol ooo! Ese ghe lele uwa (Sacrifices won't follow me! Won't follow my child! Sacrifices won't follow you all! Won't follow your children! Sacrifices won't follow you all). While the priest asks the spirits to protect all those present, he passes the uklurhe in a circular movement over the heads of the participants as they bend down. Afterwards the ohen walks to the nearest junction and blows the impurities off the staff.

While dancing the ohen may request that a drink be served to the spirits present. He passes a glass filled with gin over the heads of those in attendance and pours it on the ground at the nearest crossroads. The following song12 precedes this libation: Okun muen d'ayon! Daghorome, Daghorome da! Gha da! Gha da, akuda! Gha da, gha da, akuda! Ayon ma gbe erha muen! Ayon ma gbe iye muen! Gha da, gha da! Ideghe deghe ghi gbe okhuae! Amen n ukpaho ghi le okhiokhi (My Olokun, come and drink this wine for me! Be drinking, be drinking, be drunker! Be drinking, be drinking, be drinking, be drunker! Wine did not kill my mother! Wine did not kill my father! Be drinking, be drinking; Nothing happens to a basket suspended in air! Water for washing hands is floating in circles). The last two lines are separate incantations that have been added to the song for dramatic effect, their unusual images emphasizing the extreme nature of the situation. According to my informant, the song repeatedly refers to the unwavering ability of spiritual beings to act in the world of humans. In this particular context, it is emphasized that their powers cannot be hampered by drink.

Igha-ede can be drawn in the shrine or in an area nearby where the ohen sleeps. Before retiring for the night, the priest may offer kola nut sections and gin to the design, along with a prayer, to increase his ability to receive messages from the spirits through dreams.

Variants of Igha-ede

The method of composition and the process by which chalk designs are illustrated are unique to each ohen. In attending various ceremonies and visiting different shrines to Olokun, I never found two identical images, for each priest's perception of the deity differs somewhat. I recorded many variants of the igha-ede design, as well as interpretations by their makers. Despite their differences, all share the basic configuration of a cross dividing the figure into symmetrical quadrants, with design elements radiating outward from the center. The following examples were chosen from six shrines, none of them connected by membership or proximity; three were located in villages outside Benin City, and three in different areas within the city limits.

The igha-ede in Figure 15, mentioned earlier, shows ada nene (“four junctions”), which was drawn with powdered white orhue. The example shown in Figure 16 (top) was done in front of the
The igha-edé in Figure 16 (bottom) was drawn in front of the same shrine as the one in the preceding example. The ohen changed the design every three days and held an afternoon dance every nine days for worshipping Olokun. This design also contains ọme and many ada ọ'uri crosses (201 junctions). The dots signify cowries, which symbolize Olokun’s ability to bring prosperity and other blessings. The double-triangle symbol in the quadrant at bottom right represents a container made of hide called ękpokin, used for presenting gifts to royalty or ohen. These further emphasize Olokun’s ability to bestow gifts upon humans.

Once drawn in a designated area and anointed with gin, kola, and ground yam (ọdọbo), the design in Figure 17 can be used to hold off negative forces. It is

door of an Olokun shrine on the eastern side of the building. First the circle (okhi), approximately forty-five centimeters in diameter, was painted with a mixture of orhue and water. After it was dry, the rest of the design was drawn with powdered orhue. The forked lines at the end of the cross represent three junctions (ada ẹha) and the ability for sacrificial offerings to be sent through igha-edé. The ohen explained that these ends acted as hands passing gifts or messages between men and spirits. The small crosses are symbols for “201 junctions” (ada n' uri). The number 201 is traditionally associated with infinity, and the design describes the infinite power of spiritual beings. Two common salutations are offered during prayer. One is I ye erhunmwen na tue ebo okpa yan uri no bie meu (With this prayer, I salute 201 deities who gave birth to me). The other is Olokun ovie isahen okpa yan uri ya kie urho efe ne emo ikpia ve iku o gha ame (Olokun passes 201 keys to open the doors of wealth for sons and daughters of the water). The four feather-like elements represent ọme, the leaf at the center of a palm. According to an Edo saying, the ọme never falls and always grows upward, reaching toward heaven: Ohan i mu ogiome no vio ebo da so (The center palm tree leaf whose hands stretch to the sky is not afraid). Ọme is used in Olokun shrines.


19. OLOKUN PRIEST AGHATOTIKOLO IMAFU THE UNUSUAL ACCUMULATION OF COWRIES INDICATES AN EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE. THE STRINGS OF COWRIES WITH BELLS TIED AT THE ENDS DESIGNATE THE SHRINE AS A SACRED SPACE AND SERVE A PROTECTIVE FUNCTION.
called “A Ma Na Ya Gbe Ode Ebe Rua,” a sign that prevents problems from occurring. This igba-ede, painted with orhue and water, typically with the three middle fingers of the right hand, was made in conjunction with Olokun and Eziza, a deity associated with medicines derived from leaves, the bark of trees, and roots from the bush. The central image of the design represents the ever-flowing nature of water and water currents: A yan bu eze a i won a me oren fo (You go to the river, though one can never finish the water) (see also Figs. 4, 5). The many sets of three curved marks signify creatures that live in the water. The triple-line crosses represent the power of the night people—deities that operate after sunset, like Esu, Eziza, and Ogun—to protect or tempt humans in the junctions where spirits congregate. The night people can be offered sacrificial gifts: Ebo no setin gue ason guan (The deity that is able to talk to the strong people of the night).

The arrow symbol (osagbe) is described as the arrow that meets its target. Poison, in the form of a message using this image, can be sent to an enemy. The shaft of the arrow is covered by a snake representing the power of Eziza to move quickly through the bush. It refers to the swift, effective action of medicine. The following verse is popular in worship:

Eziza nu gbi ebo se! Eziza gue ebo wegb (Eziza makes the medicine to be effective! Eziza makes the medicine to be strong). The S marks are idiosyncratic, decorative images that identify this ohen.

The design in Figure 20, by the same ohen who executed the one in Figure 17, is used with a medicinal bath preparation that is believed to stop bleeding that occurs after the first trimester of pregnancy, which might lead to miscarriage. The process of preparing the bath with this igba-ede was described to me by an ohen of Eziza.14

Early in the morning, the leaves of the oguowu tree, which produces a thick white sticky sap, are collected from the bush. The client squeezes them with orhue and water into a bath pot (uwawa). Prior to preparing the bath, the priest prays with a mixture of ground orhue and salt, the traditional preparation for prayer, and touches the head and stomach of the client. The medicine is placed in the center of the igba-ede in the morning, and the priest prays for it to take immediate effect. The uwawa is left there, with two crossed broom straws over its mouth to protect the medicine from negative forces, until the sun begins to bend in the west. Cowries are placed at the center of the design, representing junctions. The S in the upper right quadrant is a decorative mark particular to this ohen. The arrows leading outward from the center toward the four cardinal points indicate that the medicine should be spiritually blessed from all directions.

The priest places a red parrot feather (ebakhue) on the forehead of the client, who then bathes using the medicinal preparation, a native sponge, and native soap. Afterwards the feather and the sponge are placed in the sun. It is believed that as they dry, the bleeding will subside and eventually stop.

The igba-ede in Figure 21 was drawn prior to a photographic session in front of the altar of an Olokun shrine. The procedure was meant to gain the deity’s permission to take pictures and therefore prevent any problems other than mechanical failure. The officiating ohen instructed one of the members, a priestess, to prepare the design with powdered orhue, and she sifted it with great skill and ease. Cowries and ten-kobo coins, suggestive of Olokun and his ability to bring blessings, were placed at the ends of the design. Then all members of the shrine prayed, holding pieces of orhue, and offered four-sectioned kola, gin, and a white cock as gifts to the shrine. A priestess placed various leaves in a white enamel bowl set in the center of the igba-ede drawing. As the photographer began to squeeze the leaves with water, elders added ground orhue as they prayed. A small amount of this preparation was sprinkled on the camera equipment. Then the photographer was led out of the shrine to take a protective bath.

The igba-ede in Figure 22 was drawn in front of the compound, before the steps leading to the interior of the shrine, on a weekly ceremony day for worship and divination. The shrine’s officiating ohen, who created the large (diameter 61 cm) design with the aid of several followers and several children, had been initiated into the cults of Olokun, Ogun, Eziza, Orunmila, and Sango. The color combination—red (ume, a camwood pigment), black (charcoal), and white
orhue — appeals to all deities. Olokun is invoked through the use of orhue, and Eziza, Ogun, and Sango through red and black pigments. The ohen explained that she calls the gods to join in worship by thus inviting them into the shrine. As the various deities recognize the design painted on the ground, incantations also call them to participate: Okunmwen tie ere rre ool Emokpoluwa¹⁵ mwen tie ere rre oool Do ye okpo Eronmuoon dugie (My Olokun, call him/Emokpoluwa, my own/ Call him here).

The cyclone or whirlwind image of this igha-ede refers to Eziza, who operates quickly and effectively in the physical world. In addition, he is associated with the strength of the breeze to carry objects off suddenly and is charged with overseeing medicines derived from plant substances. It is believed that when the deity was in the physical world, he lived in the forest as a native doctor.

The design illustrated in Figure 23 signifies the ability of Olokun to travel anywhere to send messages: Ehofo Okun (Air of Olokun). Because there is water in the air, Olokun can move freely. It is believed that he can enter any of the fourteen paths or roads drawn in this figure in order to communicate with worshipers. The deity's fourteen important praise names are also signified by these lines. The central intersection represents "201 junctions"; therefore, worshipers perceive that Olokun's protection is constant: Ohinmwin Ame n'Ogboy I Khue (The Depth of a Big Sea Which a Novice Dares Not Try). The lines radiating from the center can also be viewed as early-morning-sun rays casting shadows or outlines around objects. On a ceremonial day, this design is drawn in the four corners of the shrine.

The images in Figure 24 and Figure 25 were created by the same ohen in ground orhue within a week's time, and they serve the same purpose: Igha-ede no igha emwin n' ohen (The divider of the day that shares food among all of the deities). This ohen explained that the ends of the igha-ede in Figure 24 are like fingers, enabling sacrificial gifts, messages, and prayers sent through the image to be appropriately distributed. As the ohen prays, she sifts numerous additional fine chalk lines from the ends of the design, like those at the top.

Figure 25 shows a more elaborate drawing, rich with various uses of line. The ohen explained that the additions call upon various deities to accept gifts and respond with aid. A complex design like this one can be executed only by an ohen of many deities. Without proper initiation into their cults, it would not be possible to communicate effectively with them.

In either case, igha-ede is first drawn on the ground with Osanobua, the Creator God, represented at the center, surrounded by the deities whom the ohen contacts. In this case, Eziza, Olokun, Sango, Ogun, Orunmila, and Esu are all indicated. She then puts leaves onto the design that are specific to igha-ede. After praying, using a kola nut split into many small pieces, she places the kola bits along with alligator pepper seeds within the quadrants of the design. Then a cock is slaughtered and the blood placed on the leaves. Its cooked liver, heart, and breast are split and divided on the design, along with obo. A special white obo is placed in the center as food for Osanobua.

Unlike other chalk designs, which appear to be limited to a specific purpose such as salutation, serving, purification, or initiation, the igha-ede is extraordinary in its range of functions, as this sample of variants indicates. Although it does not have the permanence of a three-dimensional object and can be instantly obliterated by dancing devotees, its function is no less valuable. When properly anointed by an ohen, the design allows man to communicate with the spirit realm. Finally, stylistic differences within the igha-ede model can identify the owner of a particular shrine. In this way, each ohen can appeal to various deities through his artistry and be compensated for his efforts by the Creator. □

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Metropolitan Valley: Notes, 50-53.


ROSE: Notes, from page 53

Olibre nu ba tou e ci gnei mo: "If a palm tree does not cooperate with the ground it will not bear fruit." Without the deep concerns and sensitivity shown this work by my excellent research assistant, Mr. Pius Guobadia, the path would have been most difficult. Mr. Ademola Williams, lecturer in textiles at the University of Ibadan, is to be commended for his interpretation of illustrations based on my field notes, was also of great assistance, and Dr. Thomas E. Agbohia, director of statistics for the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Bendel State, offered valuable information and support. I am very grateful to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) for their continuous support of this project. Prof. S. Iren Wangojbe, dean, Faculty of Creative Arts and deputy vice chancellor, University of Benin, head of cultural research, Centre for Social, Cultural and Environmental Research; Dr. Foluso Ogbe, Department of Botany, Principal Health Sister, Juwon Igwe, and Mr. Makokole Azikubone, faculty officer for Creative Arts.

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54 Photos: Michel Pont

55, 59 Photos: Richard Todd

57 Photos: James de Vere Allen

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61-62 Drawings: Michelle Anderson

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63 (left) Photo: David Ponting

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64-67 Photos: G. J. Jones

68 Photos to Troccoli

69-71 (top), 72 Photos: Robert Colburner

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84 (bottom) Photo: Roman Szechter

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85 (right) Photo: Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini

References cited


Allen: Notes, from page 63

The south coast of Swahili world is generally reckoned to stretch from Mogadishu (2′S) all the way to Tanga Bay, a short distance south of Cape Delgado on the Tanzania-Mozambique border (about 12S), and to include the Comoros Archipelago. The northern border, however, has shifted southwest in comparatively recent times.

The official account of Napoleon Bonaparte’s discoveries in Egypt was published in Paris in many volumes between 1804 and 1814, simply entitled Description d’Egypte.

3 By "Shirazi," I mean a following a certain south Arabian political regime whose links with Shiraz in Persia were tenuous (see Allen 1982).

(4Greenlaw 1976:103-30). Strictly speaking, this sort of grille work and fretted decoration is known in Sudan, Grellaw tells us, as tishik, shawlik, or shartia.

5 See N. Bennett’s entry on "Benin" in Encyclopedia Britannica 1962.

6. One version of the Swahili Chronicle of nearby Pate Town refers to Suyi as miji ufu mafundi, “town of craftsmen.”

References cited


NUNLEY: Notes, from page 75

1 Christine Gail of the Trinidad and Tobago Tourist Board opened this new window on Carnival for me.

2 The Castros became totally committed to this project, going to great lengths to experience Carnival for themselves. They later talked to Mr. Inis Goden, a producer of a radio program that highlights West Indian communities in the Bal- timore and Washington, D.C. areas. Von Martin, from Washington, also advised them about the design of the installation.

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"Maska Mythology and the Dogon," page 34

"Chalk Iconography in Olokun Worship," page 44

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