

Views on the Origins, Structure and Hierarchy of Some Niger Delta Mud Sculpture Styles of Southern Nigeria

Ese Odokuma

*Department of Fine / Applied Arts, Faculty of Arts, Delta State University,
Abraka, P.M.B 1 Nigeria*

Telephone: + 234 – 8026 340780, + 234 – 8060 385695, E-mail: eseodokuma2@yahoo.com

KEYWORDS Custodian. Montage. Furrow. Veneration. Propagation .Reverence. Rich Metropolis. Custom. Ritual

ABSTRACT Mud sculptures are common artistic idioms erected and constructed in some Niger Delta communities of southern Nigeria. Various sizes and structures ranging from naturalistic to abstracted types exist. Consequently, the need to determine the initial ancestry location became necessary, particularly as regards the concentration of this art form as well as its' characteristic spread in the region. Evidence of hierarchical traits and certain formal similarities initially point at Benin but further investigations show more western Igbo influences than those of Benin. That the origins of the medium and concept, particularly those representing *Olokun*, most likely stemmed from the western Igbo area and later spread to other neighbouring areas through the river Ethiope, is probable.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the origins, structures and hierarchy in some Niger Delta mud sculptures of southern Nigeria.

Located in the southern part of Nigeria, is the Niger Delta, which comprises: Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Edo, Imo, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Ondo States. It is a region which consists of abundant natural supplies of crude oil, diverse mineral resources and fertile lands. Other substances such as clay (Pearsal 1991) and mud (Peek 1976) also exist in large quantities across the Niger Delta States.

Quite a few mud sculpture tableaus are located in several communities across the Niger Delta. Most are built near the river, whilst others are erected at the edge or within forest grooves of the town. Some of these tableaus show diverse styles of naturalism, stylization and abstracted forms. There are even traces of interaction as well as multiplicity of forms in the works. This study however aims at ascertaining the origins of mud sculptures in the Niger Delta region, particularly works affiliated with Olokun worship. In other to examine this work appropriately, certain methods such as the classificatory, analytical, descriptive and interpretational forms of deduction were employed. Selected areas including some western Igbo, Urhobo, Isoko, Ijo and Benin towns were chosen for the purpose.

Having provided a background to this study, an attempt is therefore made to first discuss the

source of the Olokun concept as well as the Benin origins of some of these cultures, since most of them trace their origins to this ancient kingdom. The structure, hierarchical elements as well as the iconography of their mud sculpture would also be examined.

Origin of the Worship of the Olokun River Goddess

“Olokun” is a river goddess associated with wealth and the provision of children. It is a traditional cult common to most parts of southern Nigeria. Cultures like the Yoruba, Edo, Urhobo, western Igbo, Ijo and other areas in the south, practice this tradition. But it is more prevalent among the Benin and her immediate western Igbo neighbours. In Benin culture, Olokun can be looked upon as a god or goddess of the sea. The Benin shrine dedicated to Olokun is located in two major areas namely: Urhionigbe and Evboise in Edo State, although of course many more sites exist. The Urhionigbe Site is sandwiched between two Delta areas of Umutu (Ndokwa) and Abavo (Ika south), all in Delta State. These areas also have large representations of Onoku(Olokun) figures (Fig. 1).

Olokun in Evboise was said to have originated from Ethiope river in Delta State. Oral tradition suggests that before Oba Adolor became king, his mother sought protection against pre-mature death, so that he could rule when the time came. The only solution at that time was to go to the

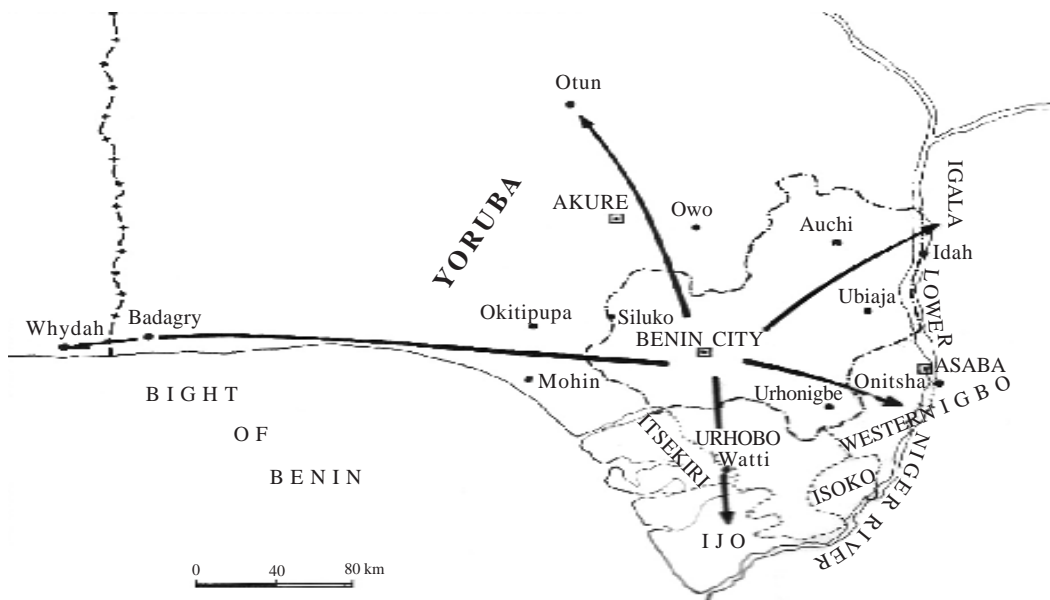


Fig. 1. Map showing areas, towns and peoples mentioned in this study

goddess of the river. The request was granted and subsequently a shrine was erected in honour of Olokun in Evboise.

The Urhionigbe version comes in two forms. The first version reveals that a woman coming from the farm with yams on her head was suddenly possessed by Olokun which in turn led to her confusion and eventual death. After three years, according to Beier (1963), she suddenly reappeared not carrying yams but as carrying a stool which was believed to have come from heaven. Beier (1963) describes the stool as having a pattern that nobody had seen before and which nobody could repeat. She was reported to have danced around the town humming an accompaniment. This dance is still being performed annually at Urhonigbe as the "Ekabo" dance. It was she who instructed that the Olokun shrine be built in Urhonigbe.

The second version attributes its origin to one "Okuase", a hunter from a neighbouring town of "Ulu," who wandered into the bush with his dog. According to the tradition, it was prohibited to go hunting with a dog. As a result, he was then possessed by the river Ethiope which overwhelmed him and sucked him to the bottom of the river. In the river, he was introduced to the deity Olokun and was made to stay in it for three years. During his stay, he learnt many spiritual

sciences and practices associated with Olokun. Although he was assumed dead by his community, after three years he returned, with a pot on his head, dancing in the middle of the town. It is this dance, that later metamorphosed into the 14-day dance ritual to Olokun and re-enacted during their annual festival which is called the "Ekabo" dance.

Beier (1963) confirms that all Olokun worshippers in Benin seem to agree that the cult stems from a small Benin village called Urhonigbe. Beier (1963) quoting Okaivbo, stresses that the spirit of Olokun is said to be derived two miles from Urhonigbe in a little river which is the source of the river Ethiope. However, these stories seem to point at the same area of origin in the Niger Delta or the Ethiope river. It is this evidence that motivated the initial intention to study the precise origin of this concept.

A number of scholars including, Foss, Peek, Egonwa, Dark, Ben-Amos, Mack, Jones, Bradbury and a few others have given their views as regarding the origins, significance and classifications of these mud sculptures.

Foss (1976) believes that these images are re-working of clay – modeling traditions developed by both the Benin people to the north and certain Igbo groups to the east. Peek (1976) goes on to ascribe Igbo overlays to the mud sculptures of

the Isoko people. Egonwa (1994) links some Niger Delta mud sculpture styles to those of Ijo or Benin descent. Dark (1973) tells us about the two discernable styles of Benin mud sculpture, which reflects the distinctions William Fagg made. They are the court and plebeian styles. Ben-Amos (1973) made a remark on the relationship between court and plebeian styles. According to her, imagery and the spatial composition possessed by these sculptures are closely related to the Benin court art. Cited by Peek (1976) in his sacred "Mud sculptures", Ben-Amos also suggests that Olokun at least by name may be Yoruba in Origin.

Jones and Bradbury (1975) see Owerri as the stimulus, resulting in the Edo and western Igbo elaborate mud sculptures. In the same document, Bradbury (1975) also points out that the concept of mud sculptures were relatively recent introductions in Benin City.

Benin Historical Origins of Some of the Mentioned Cultures

Most cultures in the Niger Delta, particularly those located in Delta State, trace their origins to Benin. These cultures include Urhobo, Isoko, Ukwuani, Western Igbo and some Ijo groups. Some of these claims date as far back as between the fourteen to the sixteenth century A. D. The reasons for these similar dates are diverse. Perhaps, that was the period when the Benin Obas (kings) exerted their authority and sovereignty over their neighbours.

Egharevba (1968) in his book "A Short History of Benin" confirms the Benin lordship over these cultures. He claims that

...the early peoples of Ishan and Afenmai Divisions, the Eka and Ibo – speaking peoples of the west bank of the Niger, Aboh, the Urhobo, Isoko and the people of Onitsha are all emigrants from Benin.

Speaking on the Urhobo, Otite (2003) however believes that at the end of the *Ogiso* (rulers) dynasty, many Urhobo and other Edo groups left Udo in different directions. Ikimi (1984) attests to the Benin origin of some Urhobo settlements such as Ughelli, Ogor, Agbon, Agbarho, Agbarha, Abraka, Oghara, Okpe, Olomu, Uvwie, Effuruntor and Uwhenru. This view is also supported by Adjara and Omokri (1997). Ekeh (2006) went ahead to classify into three stages the likely periods of Urhobo history. They include:

Ancient Times, Middle Ages and Modern Times.

The origins of the western Igbo clans are not viewed differently. Henderson (1972) recalls that the founders of Onitsha and Agbor were from Benin. Beier (1963) even attaches the historical connections between Agbor and Benin to *Ezechima* who was said to be one of the sons of the Oba of Benin. Isichei (1977) quoting Osu, points at some western Igbo communities as originating from Benin. They include: Onitsha – Olona, Onitsha Ugbo, Isesele-Ukwu and Agbor.

Onwuejeogwu (1981) however supports the claim of Benin origin of some major western Igbo communities of Ossissa, Onitsha, Aboh and Agbor.

As regards the Ukwuani group, Okolugbo (1978) submits the following view:

...many of the Ukwuani clans trace their origins to Benin. The first wave of migrations is represented by Umukashiade, Ebedei and Akarai clans and their offshoots, the second was brought Abara, Uto-Oku, Umu-barauchi, Ndoni, Onya and Adai and the third which led to the rise of Aboh Kingdom, came from Benin.

Writing on the Ijo group, Leonard (1968) suggests a break away of the group from Benin as follows;

...In a way, it is tolerably evident the first of all originated from the latter and then after breaking away from them, remained under the sovereignty of their king... and as time went on and synchronously with the dwindling power of the present monarchy this connection loosened and lessened...

Alagoa and Kiebel (1989) comment on the claims of Benin origin amongst some Ijo clans of the Delta and Ondo States. Their claims were based on some reports written in the 1930s which indicate that five clans of western Ijo, Benin, Tarakiri, Kabowei, Kumbowei and Mein mentioned Benin as their origin.

Likely Hierarchical Conceptual Origins Amongst the Mentioned Cultures

Most Benin brass plaques classified by Fagg in the sixteenth century show traces of hierarchy. The concept of hierarchy in African art, however pre-dates the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Dates associated with the hierarchical trait goes beyond three thousand years ago. Historically, it is evident that ancient Egyptian and Sudanese

cultures portrayed traits of hierarchy (Dorling 1994). The Egyptian artist for instance, aimed at reflecting social and religious hierarchies in their compositions and assigned proportions to figures whose relationship to one another were constant (Mack 2000).

Traces of the hierarchical structures displayed in some Niger Delta mud sculptures seems to transcend beyond the horizons of Benin influence. Since Benin oral tradition supports its (Benin's) migration from Egypt and later from Sudan (Egharveba 1968), could it then be argued, that the hierarchical elements in her works were derived from Egyptian and Sudanese influences?

Most of the figures in some Niger delta mud shrines have in the central position an Oba-like depiction of a king. It is indeed apparent that some cultural mixtures can be seen in these concepts. However, hierarchy seems to be an African concept that is in most cases, spontaneously developed, not derived from other cultures but shared by them. The hierarchical concept in Benin tradition can also be reflected in the story of *Olokun's battle*.

Oral tradition tells us that Olokun and the Oba were engaged in a battle where Olokun's possessions were stripped. This act alone shows a form of hierarchy between the Oba and Olokun; as Olokun is now depicted as an Oba. Since the Oba defeated Olokun, the latter takes the physical form of the Oba. In other words, Olokun before then had a visual representation of its own but that had changed as result of the conquest. This battle could also portray the subjugation of areas where Olokun was discovered by the Benin empire.

Mack (2000) confirms the Benin tradition of the battle between the Oba and Olokun but, symbolically relates it to Benin and European contact. Here, he claims that the Europeans were associated with the white faced god, Olokun who lived beyond the sea and sends children and wealth. Legend had it that, after Benin's defeat of Olokun, the Oba stripped him of his properties. This act represents the monopoly of foreign trade in Benin where eventually the European manufactures were melted down and recast in the Oba's court as a sign of conquest. Or it may represent the conflict between Benin and other smaller communities around it. Whatever the case may be, the trait of hierarchy seems to be depicted in this legend.

As regards the origin of the Olokun cult,

evidence of western Igbo invasion had been chronicled in some Benin plaques and oral traditions. Facial markings not identified as Benin types had been recorded and analysed. Thus, the likelihood of Olokun as a king of the Western Igbo origin or some other riverine area in the Niger Delta is probable, considering the story of its origin in Benin tradition. The white faces on the deities may not signify Europeans or spirits. They may simply stand for purity and reverence.

There is also the probability that the concept of Olokun consists of two or more variables: the initial foundations of the Olokun ideology, the European contact, and the Western Igbo incursions. Thus, although the Olokun is depicted "white" "he has more black qualities and origins."

To buttress this view, is the fact that, the Europeans were not the only ones who travelled by sea, some Niger delta neighbours had also migrated to the Benin kingdom through the sea. Cultures like the Urhobo, Isoko, Ijo, Itsekiri and Western Igbo groups had migrated through the water ways before the advent of the Europeans in the Niger Delta. Possibly, the concept was carried from one location by sea to other areas, particularly through the Ethiopia River.

Classification, Analysis, Description and Interpretation of Some Niger Delta Mud Sculpture Styles

The styles of some of these mud sculptures vary in form and style. While some are naturalistic, others are stylized and a few others are abstracted. Despite the fact that the individual hand of the artist is often considered, a classification of the distribution of some mud sculptures show that the Western Igbo group consisting of the Ukwuani and Abavo areas, seem to possess the most naturalistic and numerous representations of mud sculptures. For that reason, we shall first attempt an analysis of this study area.

The four most important mud sculpture tableaux used in this study derive from the western Igbo areas of Ozanogogo, Abavo, Ukwuani and Umuaja. They all stretched along the path from Obiaruku to the Asaba areas.

However, certain persons seem to disassociate the Ukwuani group as being members of the western Igbo classification. Considering the linguistic and cultural as well as historic attributes of this study, the Western Igbo and Ukwuani will be lumped together as one.

Mud sculptures in the Western Igbo area seem to revere the spirits of Olokun or Onoku, the water god. However, the issue of hierarchy is evidently obvious in all the works displayed.

In 2004, five figures of Onoku were housed in a small building at Ozanogogo. These works were partially semi-naturalistic. Amongst the five depicted figures was a seated central figure which was flanked by one female and male statue. On the left was a maternite figure with child. The maternite figure seemed to be the wife of the central figure. With certain paraphernalia on the head, it wore a particular form of coiffure. The eyes, nose, mouth and ears seem to be very expressive of thought and naturalistically depicted. There is a form of alertness in the statue. Around the figure's neck are beads as it clings tight to its baby.

Certain bottles of bleach, wine, cream, may have been to be used to appease the goddess in request for children. In order words, this figure represents fertility. Next to the central figure on the right is a male figure carrying similar structure on its head.

The face is just like the female maternite except that it has a strand of beard under its chin. It also seems to be pointing a cutlass at the central figure, possibly suggesting its (central figures') superiority over the others. Displayed in its front are also containers, bottles, charms, jars

ammunitions as well as sticks of varied forms. There are also candles, cowries and pieces of native chalk dotted in front of this figurative. Other objects including a moulded basin – like structure and some metal rods are evident. These objects are probably used to appease the gods. Mirrors are also common with in this cult as in other Olokun shrines. Dots of red, yellow and black form the surrounding designs of the mirror (See Fig. 2). These colourful shapes may be coded which embody some of the mysteries of the shrine – assemblage.

Next to this figure on the right is a smaller figure with similar features, only it seems to be less dramatic than the others (Fig.2).

The soldier who acts as a security agent stands with divine dignity, as he protects intruders from penetrating the shrine. It is certainly dressed in black and seems to be carrying a sword-like implement. To its right is a plaque representing the cult of the shrine. It seems to be placed on an altar were libations are being poured. All the materials enumerated are used to appease and worship these gods. Requests are also made to them, by highly placed individuals, including politicians, religious leaders and business men and women in the society.

The central figure is of course the centre of attraction. It is the most adored statue in this assemblage. On its head is a tortoise-like creature



Fig. 2. The *Ozanogogo* tableau shrine with all five figures. Omomoh Osagie 2004

which is painted brown. The coiffure worn by the figure is bushy so is the beard under its chin. The eyes and mouth are highly expressive as it seems to be wearing a smile. Which of course can be termed the “traditional mud smile” (Fig. 3). On its chest are beads connected to a round black structure. Its arms rest on the legs. Over its head is a chain which seems to be attached to some metals. There are also sticks, rods and some coded paintings on the wall. By its side is a ceremonial Benin like sword while in its front are tusks, horns, bottles and gongs of various sizes. On the floor of the shrine are certain circular lines which seem to suggest coded linguistic forms. The hierarchical element is obviously depicted in this tableau.

Another tableau found in the western Igbo town of Abavo is the Omodu shrine. In the words of the shrine custodian... “these works in question represent the Olokun god and aids”.... The Omodu tableau which may have been executed in 1930s epitomizes his royal majesty and his subjects (Akpasubi 2007). It consists of more than thirteen effigies which are dressed in red and white strings and robes.

The main figure which represents the Oba (king) is shown on a different hierarchical level from others. This trait is common amongst most cultures in the Niger Delta. Here, the Oba is depicted with a hair style which is synonymous



Fig. 3. The Oba figure in *Onodu* shrine, Abavo

to some Benin types. The hair style is called “Okpekpe”. There are also geometric facial features displayed on its round face. On the chest are beads which may signify wealth, dignity and power (Akpasubi 2007). This statue is shown seated with arms placed at its sides, like the royal Benin chiefs.

Apart from the central figure of the Omodu shrine, other attendants are shown. They include the figures of Iyase, Isogban and Odede. All these statues are semi-naturalistic in form. The first figure on the right (Fig. 4) (from the viewer) represents “Iyase” the prime minister. Iyase is considered the king maker or forerunner of the Obi of Abavo land (Akpasubi 2007). Isogban, which is next to Iyase in rank is described as the oldest man in Idumu-Isogban quarters. The only female figure amongst this group is Odede. Odede supports the king significantly.

Structurally, all these figures seem to wear the Benin – type of coiffure called “Okpekpe” in Abavo. Stylized facial depictions as well as the “Oba” configurations are consistent in their works. The hierarchical elements evident in most Niger Delta mud sculptures are highly displayed there. Apparently, they all seem to wear red robes and have their hands placed on their laps. Some of the figures are seated while others are standing. The red-white colourization evident in most Benin works is fully displayed here. On the wall, behind these statues (Fig. 4) are black and blue marks which may represent certain codes associated with the cult.

There is also the figure of “Orodu”, the chief surrounded by earthen pots. These pots represent concoctions and solutions of different traditional medicine (Akpasubi 2007). In other words, Orodu is the medicine man or herbalist in this assemblage.

Akpasubi describes the content of the pot as ... *containing some congealed cow blood, slaughtered during the Ikaba festival...*

Similar paraphernalia like bells, beads, cowries, native chalk, mirrors, red and white cloths are depicted in this shrine. The mirror is for worshippers to know the direction of Olokun in the sea.

In the Omodu shrine, there is another shrine dedicated to the Olokun worship proper. It is the actual representative of the Olokun and attendants.

Abavo has yet another Olokun shrine called the “Ekeri shrine”. It shows a male figure flanked



Fig. 4. Figures of *Iyase*, *Isogban* and *Odede*

by two other female figures represented as wives. These figures according to the custodian of the shrine symbolize unity and harmony within the community (Akpasubi 2007). Structurally, these statues are more stylized as compared to the Omodu assemblage (Fig. 5).

These works are completely immersed in white kaolin with a few shades of blue dotted in specific areas of the head, ears, chest, breast and naval. This tableau is very similar to the Omodu assemblages, except in the hierarchical positioning of forms, a difference is evident. In the Omodu shrine, the Obi is in a different position as compared to the “*ekeri*” assemblage, where the male figure is in the centre, flanked by two other female. Though the history of Abavo suggests origins from Benin, there are also traces of Igbo elements, in their works.

Another remarkable tableau depicting mud sculptures of high proportions is the group from Owah-Abbi in Ukwuani area of Delta State. What is unique is first in the origins of the people, which can be traced to Benin, Aboh, Urhobo, Ijo and Isoko areas. The other important factor is in the age of these works which has not been ascertained. These works can also be termed semi-naturalistic, as regards all aspects of the body

depictions. These works show a king-like figure with two nude attendants flanked on both sides. There is also a figure at the right corner of a maternity with child as well as a pair of police officer depictions said to be protectors of the shrine.

The central figure wears a peculiar type of coiffure which springs up like a crown. It's facial features are semi-naturalistically drawn on the face. On it's neck is a bead-like structure which is painted black. It's attire is kingly, resembling the Benin-types. The half sitting and half standing characteristics of the Urhobo wood figures seems to be reflected here. The concept of hierarchy is evidently obvious in this tableau. However, as compared to the other related areas, the female figures appear standing except for the maternity statue.

One of the soldier statues is standing while the other seems to emerge from the floor. The two nude figures which flank the Onoku figure (Fig. 6) wear similar coiffures. They all seem to stand in a dignified way showing also the traditional African family set-up of husband and wives.

Formally, the Onoku figure seems to have contact with it's attendants unlike the other areas



Fig. 5. The *Ekeri* shrine at Abavo
Photograph by Akpasubi Useful 2007



Fig. 6. *Onoku* assemblage from *Owah-Abbi* at Obiaruku
Photograph by Esimike Uche 2006

of Ozanogogo and Abavo where contact is limited to the lower limb region. These works are highly semi-naturalistic. Besides their naturalism, is the use of stripes of red cloth as well as white and black colours which have symbolic and spiritual significance in the Niger Delta.

Chalk is also placed below the foot of all the six figures as a sign of obeisance and peace or purity. Still, in the western Igbo axis, mud sculptures are evident in Umuaja Ukwuani area (Fig. 7).

Interpretation Iconography

These figures are connected to the deity of the source of the River Ethiope. Four statues representing this cult are displayed. The main figure is wrapped with white cloth wearing feathers which are tied together with a red cloth. All these figures are painted white as they house the powerful spirits of the water. These works tend to be more stylized than naturalistic.

Amongst the Urhobo as well as Isoko ethnic groups of the Niger Delta, mud sculpture shrines are also common. This assemblage in Figure 8 is a representation of Onoku and his attendants from Agbarha-otor. This tableau is made up of about seven figures. All seven figures are painted white, while the female statues are clothed with

red robes and appear brown in colour. The male figures are seen with white robes. They all seem to be in a sitting position except the figure on the left end of the picture.

The main figure though stylized, wears a hat as well as a pair of eye glasses. There are beads around it's neck. Wearing red and white robes, a mirror is placed in between it's legs. At the feet are two smaller figurines. Flanking Onoku on it's right and left are two female statues which may represent it's wives. Plates, cups, maracases, and buckets are placed by the figures which may be used to appease the deity.

A few stylized mud sculptures still exist in Isoko land. It appears from recent investigation that most of the mud sculpture traditions which used to adorn the shrines in Isoko land in the 70s have become extinct as a result of Christianity. Perhaps, if not for the efforts of Philip Peek, most of Isoko cultures may not have been documented. In 2007, at Uzere, mud figures representing "Orere" and "Osako", were photographed.

Osako was shown seated with arms on its legs. The head is inclined to an angle. Orere on the other hand, referred to as a powerful giant is more abstracted than the stylized form of Osako.

The Ijo of Delta and Bayelsa states also produce mud sculptures. Although naturalistic types exist, more of their works seem to be



Fig. 7. Mud sculpture from *Umuaja* associated with the cult of *Onoku* in *Ukwuani* area
Eihnographic team report 2004.



Fig. 8. Agbarha-Otor Onoku tableau 2007

abstracted like the figures representing Odenowa, Atabruta and Oku. Odenowa is a god from Bayelsa State depicting the god of harvest (Eniemokumo 2006). Structurally it reminds one of an ant-hill riddled with holes (Fig. 9). These holes may not be accidental but might represent vital organs of the body.

The other work called Atabruta is depicted as a phallic-like structure representing the god of “peace”. It is designed like a male reproductive organ. While the work from Otuokpoti town in Ogbaia Local Government Area in Bayelsa State represents Oku god of adverting famine (Eniemokumo 2006). This object resembles a head springing from the grass.

Benin Mud Sculptures

The Urhonigbe shrine lies between two western Igbo communities of Umutu and Abavo. It is associated with the ancestral worship of the Olokun deity.

The Olokun figures are highly stylized with tinges of semi-naturalism stamped on a few of them. So there is perhaps, a mixture of two styles in the Urhonigbe tableaux. Amongst the statues depicted are various postures of security men, flutists, armour bearers, chiefs, palace guards, wives, attendants and the Olokun figure. Some of the statues are modelled with pieces of mirrors

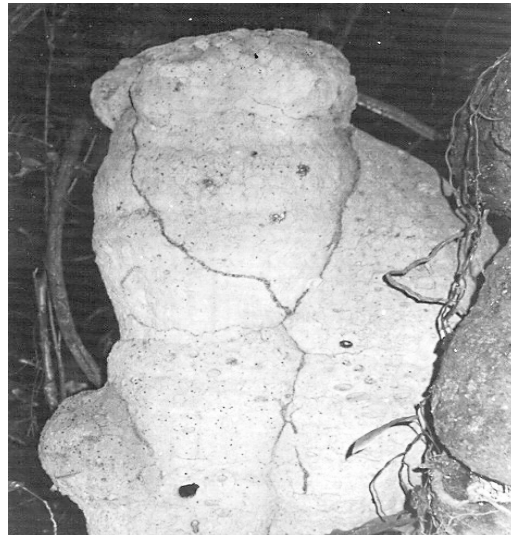


Fig. 9. The figure of Odenona

inserted in their eye-region, thus, signifying the position of Olokun in the sea. There are also multi-coloured depictions of figures within the corpus. These features are common in most Niger Delta cultures and they conjure religious significance. Such colour values include red symbolizing the strength of the deity and white purity. Some of the Olokun figures seem to emerge

from the shrine-floor, particularly as regards the figure of the armour bearer and Flutist. Similar traits can be seen amongst the Abavo, Owah-Abbi and Ijo figure.

The facial features displayed on these Urhonigbe assemblages are rather geometric. They also seem to be influenced by the stylized influences of Delta Niger, particularly works of western Igbo origins. The Olokun tableau, however, shows an Oba-like figure which is flanked by wives, attendants and subjects. The hierarchical trait which is common in most works from Niger Delta is clearly evident here. Another tableau associated to Olokun worship is the Olokun Lodugbo-melu shrine (Fig. 10). These works are more stylized and abstracted as compared to the main shrine type. These figures re-echo the Abavo assemblage which depicts over six figures revering over the Olokun spirit. These Urhonigbe statues, numbering about six, appear cylindrical in shape with certain stylized body features. The hierarchical positioning is evident. The attendants, subjects and maternite figures are all fully displayed. And on the body of most of the figures, are some blue-black colouration of strings which represent beads.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the work, evidence shows that in respect of the origin of the Olokun

concept in Benin, it can be traced to the source of the river Ethiope which is located in a Western Igbo community of Umuaja. The goddess worshipped there is referred to as Onoku. Although, Beier (1963) stressed that the cult of Olokun extends beyond Benin but none is known as Olokun. However, evidence shows that figures located in Umuaja and Abavo, all possess Onoku tableaux and are called Olokun or Onoku as the case may be. Perhaps, it is even the Umuaja montage that produced the first Onoku assemblage.

The findings reveal that even though historically, the peoples of the Niger delta trace their origins to Benin, most of cultural concepts like Olokun and the Ikenga worship can be traced to other areas. It can be deduced that Benin being what it was from the 15th-19th century, was strong enough to possess any cult or art technique they desired. That, large numbers of figures exist in Benin and that it has a story attached to it does not signify origin. What happened in Urhionigbe is a cultural amalgam of ideas, a mixture of the original concept with their beliefs showing an underlying feature of Osanobua, Olokun and their Oba-ship.

The Urhonigbe assemblage seems to reflect the supremacy of Osanobua as well as the second in command which happens to be Olokun who dressed in the form of the Oba. It appears that the Oba of Benin is juxtaposed on the powers of



Fig. 10. The *Olokun Lodugbomelu* shrine in *Urhonigbe*. Meant to grant farmers their wish
© Ethnographic team report 2007

Olokun making him an all powerful god. As regard hierarchy, the concept is an African one. No area can take full responsibility of possessing a traditional trait alone.

Another observation is stories concerning Olokun origins. They seem to represent a change in history. For example, the 1963 rendition says that a woman was involved in its establishment and origin. Whereas, the sources derived from 2007 link it with a male descent. There, however, seems to be a distortion in history.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear to say that considering the various Olokun sculptural depictions, those of western Igbo origins tend to show similar hierarchical arrangement, styles and concept with those of the Urhonigbe assemblages. The Urhobo and Isoko tableaus on the other hand, seem to be more stylized and abstracted as compared to those of western Igbo, except that the hierarchical element present in both the Urhonigbe and western Igbo corpuses are evident in the Urhobo and Isoko tableau. The Ijo types are of two styles, those of semi-naturalistic proportions and of abstracted forms. These types, particularly the abstracted one's are different in shape and form, but its riverine elements seem to suggest conceptual relationships with western Igbo types. It may have been as a result of these traits that led Egonwa (1994) to suggest that the concept of Olokun mud sculptures may have spread from Benin or Ijo areas or it may have been a resurgence of a once shared cultural value.

The possibility that the concept of mud sculptures stemming from the western Igbo area, particularly the Ukwuani axis is probable. The source of the River Ethiope is agreed to be located in Umuaja, in Ukwuani area. Within the confines of the river exists an elaborately decorated mud shrine, representing the deity of the waters. The possibility of the neighbouring areas such as Benin Urhonigbe, Abavo, Ozanogogo, Agbarhator, Uzere and other communities in Delta and Bayelsa States to have been influenced by this source is likely.

Thus, the concept of Olokun or Onoku as it is called in some areas, may have spread from the western Igbo riverine areas to Urhonigbe and other areas. To buttress this claim, is the study which is connected to the Urhonigbe shrine, that, as a result of the distance, the Oba of Benin, for easy

accessibility had to establish a similar Urhonigbe type of shrine in Benin. This factor seems to be the major impetus in the numerous representations of Olokun mud shrines, that instead of traveling so far towards the Ukwuani area, let us build ours within the confines of our area.

The Benin hierarchical factor also pushes us back to Benin. But as I had earlier established that hierarchy is not common only to the cultures near Benin, other Nigerian cultures had this feature. Hierarchy can be seen in Sudanese and Egyptian as well as other African artistic societies like, Kuba, Ijo, Ife, Isoede, Tada just to mention a few.

Traditional accounts of the origins of some western Igbo groups such as Agbor, Abavo, Ozanogogo and Ukwuani are often traced to Benin. But not the entire clans acknowledge these claims. Amongst the Ukwuani for instance, particularly as regards the origin of Olokun, Urhobo, Isoko and Ijo areas are sited as origin.

Finally, concepts, styles and techniques were and still are exchanged within many traditional Niger Delta communities. No culture in the past lived in isolation. That Benin was overlord over many communities from between the fifteenth–nineteenth centuries did not mean that all creative idioms within its kingdom, originated from it. Other concepts may have been brought into the kingdom by force or through migratory paths by neighbouring peoples.

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