

Tracing the African Origins of Obeah (Obia): Some Conjectures and Inferences from the History of Benin Kingdom

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The practice of Obeah divination among people of African descent in the Americas has long been established to originate from West Africa. But the place of origin has remained a subject of speculation. The earliest speculated places of origin were the Akan and the neighbouring Popo. Most recent studies using demographic size and linguistic evidence have concluded that Obeah originated from among the Igbo of the Bight of Biafra in Nigeria. This paper disputes this conclusion and shows that demographic size is least relevant and the linguistic evidence is faulty. It then argues that in spite of the marginal role of Benin Kingdom, Obeah and its early practice are most likely derived from the Edo-speaking people of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. It substantiates this with historical evidence and etymological inferences from the practice of slavery in the kingdom and its involvement in the Trans-Atlantic trade.

[divination; Obeah (Obia); slave; sorcery; witchcraft]

Introduction

Obeah (also Obea or Obia) can be described as a complex religious belief and practice that combine divination and medicine based on the supernatural and is associated with enslaved Africans and their descendants in some parts of the Americas. A contemporary analysis of Obeah by Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth Bilby in 2001, traces the earliest evidence of the use of the term "Obeah" to 1760 in the British West Indies and explains that the practice was also restricted to the same area.¹ The influence of the practice was so great as to pose a po-

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¹ J. S. HANDLER – K. M. BILBY, "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in

litical threat to the social control of slaves by white plantation owners and officials of the West Indian colonies. The West Indian colonial regimes started to investigate the practice of Obeah to understand and control it. This early investigation only established that it was not of ancient Egyptian origin,² and prompted continued investigation of its origin into other parts Africa in a bid to prohibit or restrict further importation of slaves from the region. At the same time, the colonial regimes criminalized its practice in the eighteenth century. Despite its prohibition and criminalization, it continued to thrive and even out-lived colonialism.

Since these early investigations, tracing the specific area of origin and/or the ethnic group from which Obeah originated in Africa, has engaged the minds of scholars and emerged as the subject of much speculation. The contemporary studies and debates on the state of African cultures and ethnicities in the diaspora communities in the Americas have revived interest in the investigation of the African origin of Obeah. The debate on whether African cultures survived intact across the middle passage has since been discarded and African cultures and ethnicities are now being unravelled from the creolized process they underwent during slavery.³ In the light of these recent approaches to the study of the African diaspora, Douglas Chambers, Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby revived the investigation of the African origin of Obeah. The trio of Chambers, Handler and Bilby went beyond the earlier approach, which viewed Obeah only in malevolent terms and traced its origin to Asante.⁴ This remained the

Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean", in: *Slavery and Abolition*, 22, 2, 2001, pp. 88–89.

² J. J. WILLIAMS, *Vodoos and Obeah: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft*, New York 1932, p. 110.

³ P. LOVEJOY, "Identifying Enslaved Africans in the African Diaspora", in: P. LOVEJOY (ed.), *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, London – New York 2000, p. 7; G. M. HALL, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Link*, Chapel Hill 2005, Chapter Two.

⁴ Joseph J. Williams review and analysis of 1932 adopted this European view and the large ethno-cultural population criteria, especially since they were close and from the same region and therefore the same. This made Williams to speculate that a Popo woman accused of Obeah practice was probably Asante from the interior of Popo country (p. 115). Mary Kingsley had earlier speculated an Asante origin and associated Obeah with a snake deity. Williams rejects the association of Obeah with a snake deity (p. 139) but agrees that it is of Asante origin based on evidence from Rattray.

dominant view for a very long time.⁵ The works of Chambers on the one hand, and Handler and Bilby, on the other, interpreted it in a broader sense to include its benevolent aspects and sought its origins from words in African languages that closely approximate these benevolent aspects and meanings, as well as from ethnicities that were enslaved and exported in large numbers.

Douglas Chambers, in making a case for this broader definition of Obeah to include its benevolent aspects, justified this approach based on Edward Long's eyewitness account of the practice.⁶ He went further to investigate the population sizes of the ethnicities that survived the creolization process and found that slaves of Igbo origin in Jamaica constituted a very large population and community, and derived the origin of Obeah from its closeness or similarity to the Igbo word "*Dibia*" (which he spells *Ndi Obeah*), a term he claimed to be used for what he called "juju men par excellence". Then he concludes that the etymology of the word "Obeah" is derived from the Igbo word – *Dibia*.⁷ He found Igbo parallels not only in Obeah, but also in the Jonkonu masquerades, which also had formerly been speculated to be of Akan derivation.

Chambers conclusions have been supported by Handler and Bilby who substantiated the broader definition of Obeah to include non-malevolent uses. They initially also accepted the Igbo origin thesis.⁸ However, they went further than Chambers to investigate other ethnolinguistic and cultural groups irrespective of their population sizes before concluding that the word was of Igbo origin. Handler and Bilby's efforts, however, are limited by the restriction of their search to only the word or words close to the term Obeah in spelling or pronounci-

He asserted that Obeah was unquestionably derived from Obayifo, the Asante for wizard or witch and substantiated this claim with the evidence of Koromanti slaves using the word Obayi (short for Obayifo) for "witch" in Jamaica (p. 120). Based on closeness or similarity of the word to Obeah and the malevolent nature of Obayi, he concluded that Obayi was the etymology of Obeah and such was of Asante origin. See WILLIAMS; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afro/vao/vao00.htm>, p. 78.

⁵ D. B. CHAMBERS, "'My Own Nation': Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora", in: *Slavery and Abolition*, 18, 1, 1997, p. 96, footnote 63.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ HANDLER – BILBY, "On the Early Use and Origin...", p. 91.

ation in various languages and which carry a benevolent meaning.⁹ Failing to find one with a malevolent meaning in Igbo language, they accepted Chamber's conclusion of an Igbo origin for Obeah. For unexplained reasons, they later retracted from their earlier position of an Igbo origin by proclaiming in a newer work that: "A number of such terms, phonologically similar to Obeah, exist in Igbo, Ibibio and related languages spoken in the Niger delta-Bight of Biafra region of southeastern Nigeria."¹⁰ Since the new position does not establish any basis for its assertion, it is presumed that they are still working with the earlier criterion of both malevolent and benevolent meanings. This paper argues therefore that if Handler and Bilby had applied this criterion differently by checking the words or names used in describing the phenomenon within its broader definition in all the African languages they investigated, their conclusion may have been different.

Though the term "Dibia" tallies with the definition or description of Obeah as argued by Chambers, it is problematic to conclude that the term is derived from the word "Dibia". This is because it would be difficult to elide or do away with the pronunciation of the heavy consonant letter "D" in pronouncing the word Dibia in order to arrive at "Obeah". It is also doubtful that the compound word "Ndi-obeah" as introduced and or used by Chambers is used in this context in Igbo language. The word is never separated into a compound word and has always been one word "Dibia" or "Dibie", depending on the linguistic area among the various Igbo speaking peoples. Given this situation and the obvious contrast between "Dibia" and "Obeah" as well as the impossibility of eliding the D or ND in pronouncing Obeah, it is difficult to accept Chambers, Handler and Bilby's conclusion on the Igbo origin of Obeah. Even Handler and Bilby's reliance on the word "Obi" found in many Niger delta and Bight of Biafra words (though benevolent and malevolent in their reference to disease, mind etc.) do not approximate the words for healer or diviner in any of the languages in South-eastern Nigeria.

This paper contributes to the ongoing investigation of the origin of Obeah in relation to the Benin Kingdom, in present day Nigeria. It argues that the fluctuating and small number of slaves from Benin King-

⁹ Ibidem, p. 96, footnote 14.

¹⁰ J. S. HANDLER – K. M. BILBY, *Enacting Power: The Criminalization of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760–2011*, Kingston 2011, pp. 5–6.

dom's ports and similarities in cultural and religious practices in West Africa among various African ethno-cultural groups notwithstanding, etymology and historical evidence points to a Benin-Edo origin for the term "Obeah" in the Caribbean. It shows that the word "Obeah" and its meaning are like the Edo word "Obo-Iha" a generic name for diviner/medicine man, and the etymology of Obeah is derived from the small community of slaves of Edo origin who were among the earliest slaves to reach the New World.

Benin Kingdom, the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Origin of Obeah

One ethno-linguistic group and area that has largely been overlooked by scholars and historians in tracing the origin of Obeah are the Edo people who founded and dominated the Kingdom of Benin. Handler and Bilby did consider Edo, but were restricted by their criteria. Their broader definition, which utilized only benevolent aspects of the term, disqualified the only Edo word (which they considered) – "Obi" which means poison in Edo language from acceptance in their assessment.¹¹ Their non-consideration of Edo people and the Benin Kingdom overtime is because of the presence of larger numbers of Akan and Igbo peoples in the British West Indies, where the word "Obeah" was widely used and adopted. The marginality of Benin Kingdom in the Trans-Atlantic slave export trade¹² and the Kingdom's role as a receiver of slaves,¹³ have also contributed to historians ignoring of the Benin Kingdom and Edo people. Another factor that disfavours Benin Kingdom and Edo people for consideration is the view that Benin did not sell its subjects, but rather sold slaves it got from other ethno-linguistic groups of the interior.¹⁴ Benin Kingdom's refusal to sell its subjects does not mean that Edo people were not sold into slavery. The Esan, whom Ryder claimed as one of Benin's source of slaves are Edo speaking. Their language and that of the people of Benin Kingdom's capital (Benin City) are mutually understood by both groups. Even if Benin

¹¹ HANDLER – BILBY, "On the Early Use and Origin...", p. 96, footnote 14.

¹² J. D. GRAHAM, "The Slave Trade, Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin", in: *Cahiers d' etudes Africains*, 5, 18, 1965, p. 319; A. F. C. RYDER, *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897*, London 1977, pp. 197–198.

¹³ J. E. INIKORI, "The Sources of Supply for the Atlantic Slave Exports from the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Bonny (Biafra), Paper read at the International Colloquium on the Export Slave Trade from Africa, Nantes, France", in: *Mimeo*, 1985, pp. 4–6.

¹⁴ RYDER, pp. 35 (footnote 3), 169.

Kingdom did not sell its subjects, other groups and polities sold Benin Kingdom's subjects along with their own people.

In spite of the marginality and the inconsistent policy of Benin Kingdom in the Atlantic slave trade and the long-held view that Benin sold only foreign slaves, evidence abounds of Edo people of Benin Kingdom among the slaves sold in the Atlantic slave trade. Even before the earliest Portuguese explorers established contact with Benin Kingdom in the late 1480s, the Portuguese had been buying slaves of Edo origin in the 1470s from the coastal Ijaws and Itsekiri, from whom they obtained information about Benin.¹⁵ These slaves of Edo origin would have been obtained not only through trade,¹⁶ but also through kidnapping and raids, as will be subsequently shown. With the establishment of European contact with Benin and the flourishing of trade, the numbers of slaves sold to European traders also increased as the Benin Kingdom sold its slaves directly to Europeans. However, Benin Kingdom regulated the trade, especially in regards to the sex and status of the persons earmarked for the trans-Atlantic trade. The regulation, prohibiting the sale of male slaves was temporary, lasting only through the first half of the sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century when it was lifted.¹⁷ But the latter regulation reported by David Van Nyendael that "*natives cannot be sold for slaves*"¹⁸ was only applicable to law-abiding subjects. Subjects caught on the wrong side of civil wars, which were at times frequent, could be and were sold into slavery. Also among the Edo people, certain crimes were punishable by banishment,¹⁹ which resulted in loss of protection by the state. In some communities among the Esan and Northern Edo groups, certain crimes particularly treason and malevolent sorcery, which harmed members of the community, were punishable by sale into slavery.²⁰ Thus the regulations applied to only law-abiding citizens within the ambit of protection of the state.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 44, 148.

¹⁸ H. L. ROTH, *Great Benin: Its Art, Custom and Horrors*, London 1968, p. 103.

¹⁹ J. U. EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, Neldeln 1971, p. 56.

²⁰ C. G. OKOJIE, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*, Benin City 1997, pp. 103–104, 242.

The state's regulation on slave trading did not affect pre-existing trade with neighbours and other groups in the interior, over whom the Benin Kingdom exercised little or no control but with whom they enjoyed extensive trade relations. This trade predated the coming of Europeans who further boosted it. Some of their neighbours also traded with the Europeans both directly and indirectly through middlemen, other than Benin Kingdom. Since people in the kingdom were free to do as they pleased with their slaves,²¹ they were within their rights to sell slaves (which might have also included males) to their neighbours in spite of regulations. This was possible, since there is no evidence of restriction of sale of male slaves to neighbours, as obtainable in the case of trade with Europeans.

More importantly, Benin Kingdom was not in an autarky. Despite strict regulations, its markets were open to its neighbours. Olfert Dapper's informants in the seventeenth century observed that: "In the market held at village of Gotton (Ughoton) people from Great Britain, Arbon and other places in the neighbourhood come to market."²² "Arbon", the town cited as the place of origin of some of the traders at Ughoton market, has been shown to be a non-Edo town peopled by Ijaws and Itsekiris and possibly Ijebu Yorubas.²³

There were also movements of traders from the Kingdom to neighbouring communities and polities, some of which were outside the jurisdiction of Benin Kingdom. Three trading associations known as *Ekhen Oria*, which used the Esan to Ozigono and River Niger route, *Ekhen Ikhuen* which went to the Etsako and Northern Edo areas and *Ekhen Egbo* which serviced the Ekiti Yoruba areas have been recorded by Phillip Igbafe as operating in pre-colonial Benin Kingdom.²⁴ Trade to the Igbo-speaking areas is also highlighted by oral traditions in the story of Adesuwa (daughter of the Ezomo in the reign of Oba Akengbuda about 1750) whose murder during a trading expedition to Ubulu Uku provoked the Benin-Ubulu Uku war.²⁵ To the south through Iyekeorhionmwon, Ekhaguosa Aisien has also recorded Be-

²¹ EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, p. 57.

²² ROTH, p. 132.

²³ RYDER, p. 90.

²⁴ P. A. IGBAFE, *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897–1938*, London 1979, pp. 31–32.

²⁵ J. U. EGHAREVBA, *A Short History of Benin*, Ibadan 1968, p. 41.

nin trading ventures known as *Eki-Egbamen* to Isoko and Urhobo countries where some made their fortunes.²⁶

Slaves played very important roles in this long-distance trade between Benin and its neighbouring polities. They were used as trade commodities, currency and porters, as well as trading assistants and domestic help in the trading settlements. Jacob Egharevba recorded that his father kept many slaves in his trading post in Akure, some of whom he inherited after his father's death in 1902.²⁷ With this free movement of persons and goods, slaves outside the Kingdom (where the embargo on the sale of male slaves and Edo slaves was not in force) were sold in these markets. Apart from trade, slaves of Edo origin could have also been smuggled out of Benin Kingdom. With the presence of willing buyers represented by European interlopers and others of their type from Sao Tome and Principe, smuggling thrived. Ryder provides evidence of smuggling of red wood out of the Kingdom, which was sold to European merchants, in spite of its prohibition.²⁸ Smuggling of male slaves cannot be ruled out. In these ways and through other outlets, slaves of Edo origin from Benin Kingdom were exported without passing through Ughoton, the main port, and other Benin River ports, and were not recorded in the ship ledgers. Having established the various means through which slaves of Benin and Edo origin entered the Trans-Atlantic export trade, we can now proceed to show how people became enslaved in and outside the kingdom and the high possibilities of such slaves for being practitioners of divination, medicine and other metaphysical practices.

Enslavement Processes of People of Edo Origin in and Outside Benin Kingdom

The dominant literature tends to emphasize only war captives, criminals, tributes, and trade with neighbours as sources of slaves in Benin Kingdom.²⁹ Kidnapping and slave raids are not discussed in these works. But Edo oral traditions allude to kidnappers known as Odo-muomu in times past. Egharevba had earlier described slaves as: *Emwan n' Ikpata muno-en vbe Egbo* – People whom robbers captured in

²⁶ E. AISIEN, *Benin City: The Edo State Capital*, Benin City 1995, p. 44.

²⁷ J. U. EGHAREVBA, *Itan Edagbon Mwen*, Benin City – Ibadan 1972, p. 2.

²⁸ RYDER, p. 138.

²⁹ GRAHAM, p. 318; RYDER, pp. 169, 198.

the forest/road – Kevbe Oghunmwun n’okuo muno ne – and prisoners who were taken in wars – ya khien vb’evbo ovbehe – and sold off in distant lands.³⁰

These are obvious allusions to kidnapping and possibly slave raiding as strategies for procurement. The existence of indigenous names for kidnapping and slave raiding these, attest to their practice within and outside of Benin Kingdom.

Kidnapping and slave raids were possible within Benin Kingdom, because the borders were also vulnerable to raids and even invasions. Oral traditions tell us that during the reign of Oba Esigie in the sixteenth century, Igala scouts/warriors reached the outskirts of the capital before the invasion was uncovered and repulsed. In 1894, the Royal Niger Company (R.N.C.) armed agents led by John MacTaggart marched unchecked into Benin City.³¹ Much earlier, David Van Nyendaël had noted the existence of insecurity: “I cannot say much for their wars; for notwithstanding that they are continually fallen on by pirates or robber, and their neighbours not subject to the King of Benin.”³² Ijaw predatory raids and sacking of trading posts and communities in Benin River are also well documented by Ryder. Information collected in the Ekiti Yoruba areas also showed that “the Owo people enjoyed the notoriety of brigands on the trade route from Ekiti to Benin”.³³ These kidnappings, raids and pirate activities within and outside Benin Kingdom partly necessitated the formation of trading associations to provide security for traders on some of the trade routes.

People from the kingdom who could not engage in raids within the kingdom lent themselves to mercenary activities elsewhere for booty, which included slaves. The civil wars in Benin Kingdom would have also provided slaves as well. For instance, shortly after the civil war in Benin in the 1720s, it is reported that the Oba and Ezomo tried to arrange the disposal of the prisoners of war with the Dutch and some were actually sold through Ijebu and Lagos.³⁴ Since they were prisoners from a civil war, it meant that the prisoners were native subjects of

³⁰ EGHAREVBA, *Itan Edagbon Mwen*, p. 78.

³¹ RYDER, p. 278.

³² ROTH, p. 127.

³³ S. A. AKINTOYE, *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840–1893: Ibadan Expansion and Ekitiparapo*, London 1971, p. 25.

³⁴ RYDER, pp. 169, 229.

the Oba or people of Edo origin. In addition, Benin Kingdom's wars against neighbours would also have made possible the acquisition of slaves of Benin or Edo people as captives. Though Benin Kingdom does not have any history of defeat (except from the British conquest), some of her warriors could have also been taken prisoners in these wars.

Other processes through which people originating from Benin Kingdom were enslaved were punitive measures like banishment and sale into slavery of those who committed crimes, deemed to be sacrilegious. In Benin Kingdom, Egharevba recorded that crimes like "*witchcraft, murder, piracy, conspiracy, robbery, malicious administering of medicines or ordeal, spying and treason (were) are punishable by banishment or execution*".³⁵ In the Esan area, apart from banishment or execution, the criminal could also be sold into slavery by the Onojie (Hereditary Chief or Duke) or by the Onotu (Age grade).³⁶ Onojie Ojiefu of Ewu is remembered to have sold of his son Abhulimen into slavery, out of frustration with Abhulimen's character.³⁷ This practice of punishing certain crimes through sale into slavery also obtained among some of the Northern Edo. For instance, Sigmund Koelle was informed by the two recaptives from Iheve (present day Iheve) that they were sold for their crime of theft.³⁸

A banished criminal was as good as sold. He or she was very vulnerable to enslavement and consequent sale. Banished people were not welcomed in any community as strangers and visitors had their background thoroughly investigated before acceptance and settlement in the new community.³⁹ According to Christopher Okojie, a banished person was "*usually led up to the village boundary and left to his fate which might be death in the hands of wild beasts or capture by slave raiders*".⁴⁰ The banished person had no protection from the state. Egharevba noted that "*if the assaulted person is a criminal, no fine would be inflicted on the as-*

³⁵ EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, p. 56.

³⁶ OKOJIE, pp. 102, 242, 391.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 334.

³⁸ S. W. KOELLE, *Polyglotta Africana or a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases in More Than One Hundred African Languages*, London 1865, p. 8.

³⁹ O. EDMONYI, *Benin System of Government and Culture*, Mimeo [sine anno], p. 52.

⁴⁰ OKOJIE, p. 103.

sailant or assaulter".⁴¹ Banished criminals also posed a threat and security problems to the Kingdom. Since they could not reside in any community, they were answerable to no one. Some of these individuals took to residing in the heart of the forest and became known as *Izigha* (bandits and manic killers). They were reputed for their raids on communities for kidnapping and stealing purposes and were also known for their banditry on trade routes.⁴² Smuggling, slave raiding, trading and mercenary jobs were also taken up by some banished people. The European trading interlopers, civil and inter-state wars and organized slave raiding activities provided ample opportunities for these activities. Mercenaries of Edo origin are known to have participated in slave producing activities such as the Yoruba civil wars and Nupe slave raids, which affected the Northern Edo, and parts of Esan.⁴³

Kidnapping, banishments, raids, and wars exposed people of the Kingdom and other people of Edo origin to enslavement throughout the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Such slaves found their way to the various slave markets. For instance, Prince Abhulimen of Ewu in Esan, who was sold by his father into slavery in the late nineteenth century, was only redeemed somewhere in Northern Nigeria in 1903. In this way, natives of the Kingdom and other slaves of Edo origin were sold to European merchants without necessarily passing through Ughoton—the official port of Benin Kingdom and other ports of Benin River. Since they were acquired outside Benin Kingdom port areas, they would be assumed to be indigenes of the port areas in which they were acquired.

The Vulnerability of Practitioners of Sorcery and Witchcraft to Enslavement in Edo Society

The groups most vulnerable to enslavement among the Edo people were diviners and practitioners of witchcraft and sorcery or harmful magical arts. Egharevba describes, these categories of people thus: "*Native doctors [...] were the most popular of all classes in Benin, they were also the most feared, honoured and respected by all. [...] There were three*

⁴¹ EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, p. 107.

⁴² Interview with Madam Osemwenowa EREBE, aged 80 years, at her Costain Road, Benin City residence, May 1986, and interview with Chief Thompson IMASOGIE, aged 92 years, at his Sokponba Road, Benin City residence, May 1986.

⁴³ J. U. EFGHAREVBA, *Some Prominent Bini People*, Neldeln 1971, p. 56; OKOJIE, p. 393.

kinds of native doctors: (a) medicinal or curative doctors, (b) divination doctor, (c) priest, or juju doctor, though in many cases their functions overlap.”⁴⁴

In spite of the respect they commanded, they were the most vulnerable people, any breach in their practice, which endangered people and the community was met with serious reprisals. Divining and herbal medicine were lucrative professions, which attracted people to their practice. As a result, diviners and herbalists were numerous in Benin Kingdom and other Edo polities. The diviners/herbalists constituted thirty-two out of the sixty-eight palace guilds of Benin Kingdom.⁴⁵ There were many more outside these guilds as well as people who were knowledgeable in these arts without professionalizing their practice. Their large number is not unconnected with the critical role of religion in Edo society.

Pre-colonial Edo society was highly religious and religion permeated virtually all aspects of life. Human life was largely interpreted in terms of activities of supernatural forces ranging from the Supreme Being or God, known as *Osanobua* or *Oghene*, through lesser gods and divinities known as *Ihen n’uri* (meaning that they numbered two hundred and one). Some examples of broadly revered divinities and deities are *Olokun* – a trans-Edo god of the sea and prosperity and *Ogun* – a trans-Edo god of iron and war. Others are deities known as *Ebo* such as *Ovia* – a local pan – Edo deity worshipped in Bini and Esan areas, *Okhuaihe* – a local deity of Ikhuen clan as well as ancestral and other spirits known as *Erinmwini* were the subjects of more localized reverence. There was also the belief in the existence of witchcraft and magical arts. Other mystical forces were (and are) believed to reside in the human person such as *Ehi* a guardian spirit, *Uhunmwunamure* – a person’s head – the seat of luck and so on.⁴⁶

People’s life fortunes were believed to depend on their ability to gain the favours of these supernatural forces as well as those of fellow human beings. Failure meant disaster or misfortune. Hence, people in Edo society from birth to death needed intermediaries to intercede

⁴⁴ EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ IGBAFE, pp. 392–395.

⁴⁶ U. USUANLELE, *State and Class in Benin Division, 1897–1960: A history of Colonial Domination and Class Formation*, M. A. Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria 1988, pp. 56–63.

on their behalf with these supernatural forces governing their lives.⁴⁷ These intermediaries or mediators were priests, diviners and medicine men invested with higher powers and/or knowledge by which they gained access to the supernatural.

One of the means of knowing the wishes or actions of the supernatural forces was through divination, which relied upon the use of some systematised knowledge or oracular means to proffer solutions to problems or predict the future. Divination existed in many and varied forms among the Edo peoples. Some of these divination practices existed independently of religious worship and cults, while others were dependent on religious cult practices. Two types of divination exist among the Edo people: one that uses material objects for divination and the one that uses no objects.

Divination without the use of oracular objects is known as *Obo-Iro*. In this system, the diviner listens to the problem brought by the client and then meditates on what has been said while gazing at the sky with intense concentration. After this exercise, the diviner proffers advice and/or solutions and makes prescriptions. This meditative sky-gazing system of divination is also practiced in Olokun cult by the *Olokun* priest or priestess.⁴⁸ But not all *Obo-Iro* are attached to or dependent on religious and/or cult ownership.

The divination system that uses oracular objects is known as *Obo-Iha*. There are many types such as the *Ewawa* which uses sculpted objects, *Akhuekuehi* which uses *Akhuehuehi* seeds tied in a string, *Akpele* which uses various objects that are thrown in a straw tray, *Evbe* uses cotyledons of four or eight kolanuts, while *Olokun* uses combination of cowries, coins, shells, and keys which are thrown in a straw tray filled with white chalk powder, *Ifa Orunmila* (uses string pods and is of Yoruba origin, and *Ominigbon* or *Oguega* uses sixteen halved *Oguega* seed pods which are stringed in fours). Not all the *Obo-Iha* are attached or dependent on religious or cult worship.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ O. EBOHON, *The Role and Responsibility of a Priest in the Nigerian Society*, Benin City [sine anno], p. 3.

⁴⁸ O. IMASOGIE, *Olokun: The Divinity of Fortune*, Ibadan 1980, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mr. Ikponmwonsa OSEMWEGIE, practitioner of *Ominigbon* divination, poet, playwright and cultural activist at his Benin City residence, December 1996.

For instance, *Ominigbon* or *Oguega* divination is not attached to or dependent on any religion or cult worship and it is one of the most popular divinations among the Edo people. When the *Iha Ominigbon* (also *Oguega* or *Ominigbon*) divination is consulted, the diviner, known as *Obo-Iha Ominigbon* or *Oka-Ominigbon*, sprays chewed alligator pepper on his *uta* (made up of a small piece of wood or bone or any object), which is believed to be the messenger of *Ominigbon*. The diviner then gives the *uta* to the client who puts it on his lip while saying the purpose of consultation. After this is done, the diviner throws at once the sixteen half pods of *Oguega* seeds strung in fours. The emergent pattern of sixteen half pods (either open with the inside part facing up or closed), have different names, codes, and accompanying folktales or verses numbering two hundred and fifty-six. The emergent pattern is usually read from top to bottom and then from right to left in order to know the code and accompanying folktale or verses, which is then interpreted to the client. It is on the basis of the code and interpretation, that the solution and rituals are prescribed.

Ominigbon Oguega divination has been found to be similar to the Yoruba *Ifa Orunmila*.⁵⁰ *Iha Ominigbon* is claimed to be simpler than *Ifa Orunmila*, for which the period of training is as long as ten to fifteen years.⁵¹ Apart from its use in fortune-telling and in finding solutions to personal problems, it is also used for judicial purposes, especially in detection of crimes or causes for misfortunes such as death or sickness or pestilence. Hence, divination can be said to have played (and still plays) a very important role in the life of the Edo people and their society.

In spite of diviner's important role in Edo society, they were very vulnerable to enslavement. Their practice made them susceptible to committing some of the crimes that were punishable by banishment and possible sale into slavery. These crimes, according to Egharevba, were "*witchcraft and malicious administering of medicine or ordeal*". It takes knowledge of divination or involvement with its religious cults to commit such crimes. The involvement of these professional diviners or medicine men in such crimes is further attested to by Egharevba, who stated: "*The majority of juju priests practice divination as well, by*

⁵⁰ J. U. EGHAREVBA, *Iha Ominigbon*, Benin City 1965, p. 3; A. EMOVON, "Ominigbon Divination", in: *Nigeria Magazine*, 151, 1984, p. 6.

⁵¹ EMOVON, p. 4.

means of their juju, without consulting any oracle people frequently apply to them to curse or anathematise their enemies.”⁵² Perpetrators of such crimes (which are obviously malicious administration or ordeal) were punished when discovered.

Another aspect of divination that would have made its practitioners vulnerable to enslavement was its itinerant nature. Diviners at times went to distant places to provide services. Traveling to distant places could also expose them to slave raiders or kidnappers, especially as there were security problems in and around the Kingdom. Likewise, diviners could be taken as prisoners of war, since they usually accompanied the army to render services during wars. In this way, diviners who were captured in wars could be enslaved and sold off. Some of them eventually reached the Americas through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Historical and Etymological Evidence from Benin Kingdom for Tracing the Origin of Obeah Practices in the Americas

Slaves of Edo origin from Benin Kingdom and other Edo polities were exported to the Americas through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. They were one of the first groups to be sold and exported, from as early as the 1470s and 1480s when the Portuguese reached the Niger Delta. These slaves were initially exported by the Portuguese to Sao Jorge do Elmina (present day Cape Coast, Ghana) Sao Tome and Principe, the Kongo (or Angola) and later to Lisbon, which became a major supplier to Europe and Spanish colonies in the Americas during the sixteenth century.⁵³ The British and French merchants who came in the sixteenth century continued until the nineteenth century to export slaves from the Kingdom to the Americas. The Dutch, who took over after the exit of the Portuguese, established factories in Ughoton to conduct trade with Benin and to collect slaves for export. Trading alongside them, were Sao Tome and Principe Island merchants who also bought slaves from the Kingdom for export to Santo Domingo, San Juan, and Brazil.⁵⁴

Apart from the evidence of European slave traders and their agents purchasing of slaves from the Benin Kingdom and slaves of Edo ori-

⁵² EGHAREVBA, *Benin Laws and Customs*, p. 51.

⁵³ RYDER, pp. 35–66.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 66, 168.

gin from their neighbours, the destination of some of these slaves are also fairly well documented. Sao Tome as one of the earliest destinations for slaves from Benin, and its Creole language is now known to have a significant Edo influence.⁵⁵ Hilary Beckles has shown that in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Dutch supplied the bulk of the slaves to Barbados with Bight of Benin coming next to Angola in the quantity supplied.⁵⁶ Beckles went further, to include Edo as the ethno-linguistic origin of some of these slaves.⁵⁷ Alonso de Sandoval who resided in the Spanish port of Cartagena (present-day Colombia in South America) collected information from slaves and ship captains who gave him explicit descriptions of life and events in Benin which were used for his book publication in 1627.⁵⁸ Edo words and names have also been found in the Gullah language of the U. S. states of Georgia and South Carolina.⁵⁹ In Africa, Edo slaves were amongst the recaptives of the nineteenth century settled in Sierra Leone. S. W. Koelle collected information on language from one Agmoifo (possibly Agbonifo) or James Johnson, a Sawyer and slave recaptive at York, Sierra Leone whose language was obviously the Edo dialect of Benin City (where he claimed to have been born and raised until his enslavement at the age of eighteen), and who claimed to have few of his countrymen living in Freetown.⁶⁰ In addition to these, were other recaptives of Edo origin specifically Ihewe or Isewe (most probably Ihevbe or Sebe in present day Owan East Local Government, Edo State, Nigeria), and Oloma.⁶¹ The recaptives in the Sierra Leone case are consistent with the findings of David Eltis and David Richardsons that “with nearly 30,000 departures in the seventy years after 1721, Benin was not sealed off

⁵⁵ L. I. FERAZ, *The Creole of Sao Tome*, Johannesburg 1979, pp. 95–97.

⁵⁶ H. BECKLES, *Black Rebellion in Barbados: The Struggle against Slavery 1627–1838*, Bridgetown 1987, p. 19.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ J. THORTON, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*, Cambridge 1992, p. 154.

⁵⁹ R. WESCOTT, “Bini Names in Nigeria and Georgia”, in: *Linguistics*, 15, 1974, pp. 21–34; W. S. POLLITZER, *The Gullah People and their African Heritage*, Athens 1999, pp. 10–11.

⁶⁰ KOELLE, pp. 2–4, 8.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

from the slave trade to quite the extent that earlier interpretations would have us believe".⁶²

Considering Itsekiri and Ijaw peoples and Benin Kingdoms very early contact and trade with Europeans and other neighbouring African groups and polities, slaves of Edo origin were purchased from various sources and exported from the numerous ports in both the Bights of Benin and Biafra, from the Gold Coast to Bonny and Calabar. The various European nationals including the Spanish who were mainly buyers of African slaves received slaves of Edo origin into their colonies including the Spanish Caribbean colonies, and Jamaica, which was to become an English colony. The English colony of Barbados also received Edo slaves through Dutch merchants. When the English took over Jamaica in 1655, they met African slave maroons who continued their resistance against the English.⁶³

Life on the American slave plantations and in the Maroon communities presented their own specific spiritual, psychological and material challenges. They sought solutions to their problems in the religious and cultural values, which they remembered from their African homelands. Problem solving institutional practices like divination and associated religious practices were used by the transplants from Africa. The Edo people shared some divination and religious divinity worship (such as *Ifa* divination and associated *Orunmila* divinity, *Ogun* etc.) with groups like the Yoruba and Fon and would have participated in and contributed to their establishment of these commonly-held practices in the Americas. It has been shown that groups other than mainstream Yoruba people contributed to the establishment and practice of *Ifa* in Brazil.⁶⁴

But in some other areas, Edo cultural influence seems to have predominated from the earliest time. Slaves of Edo origin were alleged to be rebellious,⁶⁵ and some were diviners and herbalist who were knowledgeable in the practice of witchcraft and sorcery. These qualities would have earned them leadership positions in some of the ear-

⁶² D. ELTIS – D. RICHARDSON, "West Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade: New Evidence of Long-Run Trends", in: *Slavery and Abolition*, 18, 1, 1997, p. 27.

⁶³ P. SHERLOCK – H. BENNET, *The Story of the Jamaican People*, Kingston 1998, p. 27.

⁶⁴ W. F. FENSER – P. VERGER, *Dilogun: Brazilian Tales of Yoruba Divination Discovered in Bahia*, Lagos 1989, p. v.

⁶⁵ RYDER, p. 125.

liest communities. In turn, this enabled them to establish their cultural and linguistic influences in these communities. These diviners-turned-leaders would have retained the professional title of *Obo* (also *Obo-Iro* or *Obo-Iha*) as they were referred to by the Edo in Africa. *Obo* is a generic name for “diviner”, *Iha* is generic name for “divination”, and *Obo-Iha* is also a generic name for “diviner”. It is only when one wants to specify the type of divination or diviner that *Obo-Iro* is used for diviners who do not use oracular objects and *Obo-Iha* is used for diviners who use oracular objects. Both systems would have been easy to practice especially as some of them did not require cults or shrines to operate.

Reports on some of the slave and Maroon communities in seventeenth century Jamaica observed that their leaders who were also witchdoctors or diviners were called “*Obi*” or “*Obeah man*” and used the power and belief in the “*Obi*” to control their communities.⁶⁶ In this mixed ethnic community, Edward Byran further observed the Maroons to speak a “*dissonance of the African dialects, with a mixture of Spanish and broken English*”.⁶⁷ Given this linguistic situation, the words *Obo*, *Obo-Iro* and *Obo-Iha* were probably contracted and corrupted into “*Obeah*”.

Obeah as a generic name for divination, associated beliefs and ritual practices in many African communities in the Americas, is similar to these practices among the Edo people and some other African groups.⁶⁸ On the basis of this etymological closeness between the Edo words “*Obo-Iha*” or “*Obo-Iro*” and “*Obo*” and the Caribbean creole word “*Obeah*”, it is inferred that *Obeah* might have been derived from the Edo word and term. The divination and ritual practices of slaves of Edo origin who were among the earliest Africans to arrive in the Americas influenced the adoption of the term from the Edo. The blending of the cultures of various African ethnic communities’ cul-

⁶⁶ B. EDWARDS, “Observations on Disposition, Character, Manners and Habits of the Maroon Negroes of the Island of Jamaica and a Detail of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the late War between these People and the White Inhabitants 1796”, in: R. PRICE (ed.), *Maroon Societies: Rebel Communities in the Americas*, New York 1973, p. 240.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ I. FRANCIS, “*Obeah: An African Traditional Cult Practice in Grenada*”, in: *Aman: Journal of Society, Culture and Environment*, 3, 2, 1984, pp. 65–69.

tures under the impact of slavery in the Americas⁶⁹ combined with partial, temporary restriction of slave exports from Benin Kingdoms as well as the influx of slaves from other African ethnic groups to the Americas, put the distinctive Edo character of Obeah practice under strain. Obeah practice would have been mixed up with similar practices from other African groups and such hybridization would have blurred the distinctive Edo cultural character, while retaining the original Edo name and possibly word stock.

Conclusion

This article has explored previous speculations on the African origin of Obeah in the Americas and showed the impossibility of elision of the diphthong “Nd” and consonant “D” from the Igbo words “Ndi-Obea” and “Dibia” respectively to get at the etymology of Obeah and derive its origin as argued by Chambers and supported by Handler and Bilby. The article went on to show how the limitations of Handler’s and Bilby’s criteria of words in various African languages precluded them from considering other words and meanings in the various African languages. The article argued that the various ways in which slaves of Edo origin entered the Trans-Atlantic market and the Americas without necessarily passing through Benin Kingdom’s port and official trade commodities by focusing on the internal history of relations with their neighbours and posits that the Kingdom’s contribution might be more than hitherto asserted. The article also argued that since practitioners of witchcraft and sorcery amongst whom were diviners generically known as *Obo* (or *Obo-Iro* and *Obo-Iha* to specify the type) were most vulnerable to banishment and consequently enslavement and export. For this reason, they might have introduced these divination and other religions practices, which gave the name Obeah to their practice in the Americas. The divination and other associated religio-cultural practices of the slaves of Edo origin might have been hybridized by the influx of slaves from other ethnic groups, which blurred the distinctive Edo cultural stamp over time, while the Edo name by which the practice was established in the Caribbean

⁶⁹ O. PATTERSON, *Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of Maroon Societies; Rebel Communities in the Americas*, New York 1973, pp. 250–252.

survived. This was in a corrupted and contracted form as Obeah or Obi, which came to be used for Obo-Iha and/or Obo-Iro and Obi for Obo.

This article postulates that since the dominant literature on the Benin Kingdom have tended to emphasize marginal participation and contribution to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Benin Kingdom and the slaves of Edo origin were overlooked in their contribution to the culture of the African diasporas in the Americas. This is further reinforced by the fact that Edo culture and language is largely understudied, and this would have made a comparative study of Edo culture and African diaspora culture and language in the Americas relatively difficult to undertake. It is recommended that more research should be undertaken on this comparative study of the culture and language of Edo people and those of the African diaspora in the Americas.