

RESEARCH NOTES

Òminigbọn facing Èdó past and future

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One of the greatest cognitive monuments of tropical Africa of the past 500 years or so is an 8-bit binary oracle known by similar names across a large and contiguous area of the Nigerian Middle Belt, southern forest zone and Westafrican coast, as well as in descendant communities of the Atlantic African diaspora. Yorùbá *Ifá*, Ìgbo *Áfa* and Èdó *Ìha Ominigbọn* are only the best documented examples of this institution, among many other localizations whose documentation is less complete (Egharhevba 1936a, Bascom 1969, Abímbólá 1976, Ọnwụejìógwù 1978, cf. Manfredi 2008). Unsurprisingly, the oracle's numerological system, verbal expression and associated therapeutic activity all vary from place to place over this large zone, but unmistakable resemblances in procedures, vocabulary and metaphysics prove the common origin of a complex institution, according to the standard logic of the comparative method shared by the historical sciences of biology and linguistics (Sapir 1921, Cavalli-Sforza 2000).

To be sure, elements of the oracle's numerology, perhaps along with some generic features of medieval hermeticism, are attested across a much larger span of Africa, Europe and Asia (Maupoil 1943, Hébert 1961, Kassibo 1992, Binsbergen 1997, Colleyn 2005, Sow 2009), but in and of itself the global borrowing of 16 binary signs scarcely proves "an Arabic origin for the basic procedures of *Ifá*" (Morton-Williams 1966, 407, cf. Goody 1987, 303 *fn.* 5) except in the eyes of those who insist on finding exotic origins for all of tropical Africa's intellectual and technical accomplishments (Frobenius 1912, Lucas 1948). Remaining within the scope of science, the immediate question is how the *Ifá/Áfa/Ìha* oracle's characteristic nomenclature of 16 untranslatable *names*—all conspicuously absent in the alleged Arabian sources—happened to spread from one place to another in the savanna and rainforest around the Niger-Benue

confluence. Closely related is the question of how the oracle as a whole evolved, simultaneously growing under the influence of, and adapting to, the local sociocultural context which was itself rapidly changing in the midst of urbanization and regional and global trade (Belasco 1980).

As rightly noted by Ifemésija (1976, 88), the famous skill and status of Yorùbá *awos* as compared to their more easterly counterparts the *òbós* and *dìbjàs* does not by any means entail that *Ifá* was the historical *source* of the other, cognate systems. Egharhevba himself falls into this presentist trap with respect to *Òminigbọn* (1936a, 3), as well as for other important aspects of Èdó culture such as its monarchy and metallurgical arts (1936b). Egharhevba's bias of Yorùbá irredentism, deriving anything and everything prestigious from "Úhẹ" (wherever that refers to, cf. Ryder 1965), is betrayed by his own textual inconsistencies and outright doctoring of data, as well as by independent evidence from the archaeological record and from contemporary observation (Bradbury 1959, Connah 1968, Ọbáyẹmí 1979, Eisenhofer 1995, Erediauwa 2004). The scandal is not trivial, given the absolute reliance of mainstream Yorùbá historiography on Egharhevba's well-publicised but unreliable opinions on Èdó cultural origin (Willett 1967, Horton 1979, Ọgúndìran, 2003, Àjàyí 2004). Even a normally careful scholar like Horton (1979, 123 citing Bradbury 1957, 54) was misled by the prestige of the Yorùbá *Ifá*, known in Èdó as *Ọrọnmìla*, to overlook the independent existence of *Òminigbọn*.

This problematic aspect of Egharhevba's writing and its exploitation by Odùduwàn narratives does not, however, diminish the indispensable empirical value of his collations from Èdó oral reports of the early 20th century, especially where *Òminigbọn* is concerned. The rapid pace of cultural change in the later 20th century means that Egharhevba's book about *Òminigbọn* is probably the best documentation on the subject which will ever exist. Unfortunately, as far as I am able to determine, no copy of the 1936 edition exists in the public domain, and the version of 1965 is problematic for its improvised and inconsistent Èdó spelling, not to mention its dozens of Biblical interpolations. With the kind assistance of Alhaji M. Ìghílẹ̀, founder of the Benin Club of Massachusetts, and through him of J. Ọmọruyì in Benin-City itself, a preliminary English translation has now been

attempted for 73 out of Egharhevba's sample of 80 oracle narratives. These texts have been posted as a working document at the following URL:

people.bu.edu/manfredi/Egharhevba1965.pdf

Furthermore, Egharhevba's shorter glosses for the full set of 256 compound signs are sampled in the comparative spreadsheet posted here:

people.bu.edu/manfredi/8bitSemanticKey.pdf

The provisional character of these translation fragments is painfully obvious, as is the urgent need for more expert and concerted efforts to make this material accessible to international scholarship (cf. Manfredi 2012).

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