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Itohan Idumwonyi

Gonzaga University, idumwonyi@gonzaga.edu

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Beyond a Dance: The Resonance of Ugie¹ *Ekaba* as God's Conduit to "Play" with Humans

Itohan M. Idumwonyi

Gonzaga University

Abstract

Scholars map Benin's (City, kingdom in present-day southern Nigeria) historical contours with its monarchy and royal arts as the subject of rich literature (Paula, G. Ben-Amos 1999, 178; Okpewho, Isidore 1998). Yet, the trajectory to advance Benin's cultural history and arts is at the expense of the less acknowledged, under-represented, and under-studied aspect of the Benin people who live beyond the capital. This scholarly neglect does not promote the understanding and appreciation of the people's religious tradition. Fascinatingly, these people constitute and share in the (city) kingdom's language (dialect), culture, and religion. This qualitative research is interdisciplinary and primarily descriptive, exploring and evaluating *Ekaba* as the people's important genus. The study argues that the full range of the complex *Ekaba* is the conduit by which *Osanobua* (the creator God) initiates, establishes, and advances a relationship with humans (Idumwonyi and Ikhidero 2013. 123-35). This study examines *Ekaba's* concept, origin, practices, and how it migrated beyond Urhoniḡbe. It concludes by articulating its utility and advancing a proposal for future studies to explore how this enigmatic heritage is recently reconfigured.

Keywords

Ugie Ekaba, ritual festival, Benin Religion, Benin (City) kingdom, Peoples beyond the capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

Benin City, now an urban area in present-day South-Western Nigeria, was situated in the forest region. It is rich in cultural, religious, and moral values, and it's the ancestral seat of the *Oba* (monarch), who is acclaimed as the spiritual and cultural head of the Benin kingdom. Benin (kingdom) stretches beyond – Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia North-East, Ovia South-West, and Uhunmwande – seven modern-day local government areas of Edo State. Some villages and towns in the greater Benin area beyond the capital include *Iguelaba*, *Ugboikhirima*, *Ughieghudu*, *Umoghumwun*, *Okokhuo*, *Oben*, *Ugo*, *Oheze*, *Oghada*, *Ebue*, *Obadan*, *Umagbae*, *Ugboko Numagbae*, *Evbobemwen*, *Egbokor*, *Evboesi*, *Ughoton*, *Urhomehe*.

It will be helpful to distinguish between the concept of the village and the town here to situate my case study - Urhoniḡbe. The village is a small settlement in a close-knit community with a tranquil epitome where everyone knows one another. It has a handful of houses that may be separated from other settlements by farmland. Villages grow as a small farming community, where the inhabitants live off the land they farmed. It may have an *odionwere* or an *Okaevbo* (as the case of Urhoniḡbe) as its local administrator who primarily reports to an Enogie (Duke -who oversees a collection of villages or to the Obas in Urhoniḡbe's case). It has a single *ogu' edion*

¹ *Ugie* is a broad terminology for religious ritual ceremonies (festivals) amongst the Benin people, irrespective of geographic location.

(meeting point/hall). Nowadays, definitions are blurring as many villages form part of a town administered by an Enogie. A town, as opposed to a village, typically has more and larger settlements- with more population density and several ogua edions. It has the status of becoming a local economic center with more facilities. People tend to escape from the fast-paced town/city life to enjoy the idyllic serenity and closed-knit community.² The Enogie oversees one or several villages on behalf of the Oba and reports to the Oba. Further research will inform us of the administrative processes involved with the Oba and how many villages and small communities there are in the Benin Kingdom.

Izevbigie Omokaro, in his unpublished but classic work, lists *Egbokor*, *Evboesi*, *Evbobemwen*, and *Urhomehe* as constituent centers of the “Olokun triangle,” where they celebrate *Ekaba* in honor of the Olokun deity.³ By this tradition, one can assert that *Ekaba* is synonymous with the Olokun deity, as captured in this study. This study focuses on *ugie Ekaba* and how the *Urhonigbe* people (in *Orhionmwon*) who live beyond the Benin Kingdom’s capital ritualize it. The choice of *Urhonigbe* in this study is based on its critical position in *Ekaba*’s construction, expansion, and exemplary migration to the villages within the Olokun triangle.

Like those in the capital, the Benin people beyond the capital boast many *Ugie* practices. But this study focuses on the totality of an aspect of a religious tradition, the *Ugie Ekaba*, as practiced by the *Urhonigbe* people. While nobody recalls the date that *Ugie Ekaba* started, it has become an essential part of the annual *Ugie* for the villages that constitute the “Olokun triangle.” It is an age-long basis for the people’s historical and cultural trajectory and offers a site for engaging with spiritual entities.

Ugie (festivals), according to scholars, is a “type of themed special event that involves a sense of celebration and an experience of fun among its participants and the observance and participation in festivals as “an increasingly significant aspect of the people’s experience.”⁴ In my view, Ma and Lew’s definition of the festival is faulty because it fails to acknowledge the religious dimension of a ritual undertone that forms a significant category in African religions. Therefore, I draw on *Morufe Bukola Omigbule*’s theorization of ritual drama to posit that beyond the theatrical and fanciful funfair of festivals, some festivals like the *Ekaba* form an essential part and accomplishment for the people’s religious encounter.⁵ This study theorizes *Ekaba* as a religious phenomenon that is beyond a mere dance performance. It is based on the explicit source narrative that supports the submission of a particular [hu]man named *Osiokun* (of *Idun-Olo*) who went from his hunting trip to *egua-Olokun* (Olokun’s palace) believed to be in the seabed and returned to introduce *Ekaba*.⁶ Thus, it is not out of place to posit that *Ekaba* validates religious beliefs and cultural practices that resonate with the distant past and spiritual beings. In this case, it is a ritual for idealizing the past and present *okao-okuo* (heroes), like the lost hunter – *Osiokun*. I will discuss this subject in detail in this article’s section on “origin.” In the section that follows, I pay attention to *Urhonigbe*’s brief historical account.

² Ellanne “A hamlet, a village, a town, or a city” in <https://www.gorgeouscottages.com/blog/a-hamlet-a-village-atown-or-a-city> (31st October 2017) <January 4 2023>

³ Izevbigie Omokaro’s research is very useful and informative for this article and worthy of mention.

⁴ Ma, L., & Lew, A.A. (2012). “Historical and geographical context in festival tourism development.” In *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 7(1), 1, p.13; Picard, D., & Robinson, M. (2006). “Rethinking worlds: Festivals, tourism, and change.” In D. Picard & M. Robinson (eds.), *Festivals, tourism, and social change: Remaking worlds*, Clevedon, UK: Channel View, p. 1. cited in Harmer Devin and Rogerson, Jayne M., (2012) “Festival Processes, Innovation, and Locality Response: Evidence from South Africa’s Rage Youth Festival” in *Tourism Review International* (Vol. 21, p.169.

⁵ *Morufu Bukola Omigbule*, (2017), “Rethinking African Indigenous Ritual Festivals, Interrogating the Concept of African Ritual Drama” in *African Studies Quarterly* vol. 17 (3) Pp. 71-88)

⁶ Izevbigie, p. 131-134

2. HISTORY OF URHONIGBE: A BRIEF

Urhonigbe is situated in the southeastern part of the Orhionmwon local government area, and it's about sixty (60) miles from Benin City. Urho⁷-nigbe is a derivative of two words. *Urho* (gate/entrance) while [*E*]nigbe (that is, ten gates) was derived from the founder's name – *Enigbe*.⁸ *Enigbe* migrated with his younger sibling, *Emehe*, founder of Urhomehe village. Although *Enigbe* is credited as the founder, oral tradition has it that *Iduozegha* and his family first settled here. *Iduozegha's* family now constitutes *Idunmweka*.⁹ Another source posits that Urhonigbe was so huge that it had ten gates and derived its name from these gates.¹⁰ And yet another account records that Urhonigbe was derived from the ten *eka-okuo* (war commanders) who founded and had the obligation of protecting the village.¹¹ Whatever the narrative, it is noteworthy that Urhonigbe was renowned for its military might, and now its *Ugie Ekaba*.¹²

Urhonigbe's early history was characterized by constant war with the neighboring Oru (Ukwani) people and other immigrants searching for farmlands. The fiercest warlords were *Okanigbon* (the actual name, *Amadin ai yangbon*: it takes bravery to own the world), *Ogo*, *Ehen*, and *Akpoko*. *Okanigbon* and these warlords often rose to the war challenge in defense of their land.¹³ Each battle saw Urhonigbe's victory, and the defeat of the invaders facilitated the payment of annual tributes of yams and food crops in recognition of Urhonigbe as overlord and landowner. These invasions compelled Urhonigbe to have a standing army/regiment fighting the troublesome invading Oru (Ukwani) people. These victories enabled Urhonigbe's sense of unity, popularity, respectability, religious influence, and Orhionmwon's central seat of power.¹⁴ Emokpae Otaniyeke validated this claim by informing me that "Urhonigbe was famous for her *eka-okuo* (great soldiers and war commanders) that guarded the ten gates against invaders and protected the village."¹⁵ Today, Urhonigbe has three major quarters: Idumwun Okao, (Idumwun- 15 eka), Idumwun-Ehen, and Idumwun ogo. The older quarter, Idumwun ugha, denotes the quarters that the warlords occupied.¹⁶ Urhonigbe's military system and might are beyond the scope of this study.

Ikpomwosa Ugiagbe believes that Urhonigbe is one of the richest among the "Olokun triangle" villages in matters of religion and cultural heritage, I support his position in this work. Urhonigbe is traditionally headed by an *Okaevbo*, who is primarily the confirmed oldest citizen.¹⁷ Its culture developed with her history that is enriched with as many festivals as there are villages. In addition to the most famed religious *Ugie Ekaba*, Urhonigbe prides herself in the ritual observances of *Igue*, *Eho*, and *Izeki*.¹⁸ *Ekaba* thus signifies the platitude of

⁷ In idiomatic usage, urho could mean "family," "door/gate/," "home," "town."

⁸ Urhonigbe means "Enigbe's family." Urho-nigbe also means Enigbe's door/gate; the door belonging to the ten; and the elephant hunter's door/gate.

⁹ P.I. with Robinson Emokpae on May 24, 2021; cf. Anonymous, "Benin Kingdom: The History of Urhonigbe" in <https://www.edoworld.net/URHONIGBE.html>, (March 24, 2021) <Accessed on July 20, 2021>

¹⁰ P.I. with Ebizugbe Edoba on July 10th 2021.

¹¹ Edo world, <https://www.edoworld.net/URHONIGBE.html> <Accessed July 7, 2021> cf. Izevbigie, 113

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Izevbigie, 122; cf. Edo world, <https://www.edoworld.net/URHONIGBE.html>

¹⁴ Anonymous, Benin Kingdom: The History of Urhonigbe in <https://www.edoworld.net/URHONIGBE.html> (updated March 24, 2021) <Accessed July 7, 2021>.cf. Andrew Iro Okungbowa, "Urhonigbe, Tales of Woes" in Guardian Sunday, <https://edofolks.com/html/pub23.htm> (April 30, 2000) <July, 21, 2021>

¹⁵ P.I. with Emokpae Otaniyeke on May 22, 2021

¹⁶ P.I. with Emokpae Otaniyek on May 22, 2021

¹⁷ P.I. with Ikpomwosa Ugiagbe on May 18, 2021 cf; Anonymous, "Usonigbe" in <https://amp.en.google-info.in/1731719822/1/usonigbe.html> Accessed May 4/2021); Anonymous, A Brief History of Urhonigbe Town and Olokun Deity" In Orhionmwon Youth Alliance, <http://www.orhionmwon.com/index.php/brief-history-of-orhionmwon/briefhistory-on-urhonigbe-town-and-olokun-deity> accessed May 4/2021

¹⁸ Personal Interview with Ebizugbe Edoba on July 10th 2021.

Urhonigbe's religious wealth. And by this position, I submit that the encounter with the Olokun deity popularized Urhonigbe and positioned her as Benin's most crucial religious-cultural center.

3. EVALUATING URHONIGBE AS BENIN'S RELIGIOUS HEADQUARTERS AND HER RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

Pa. Igiebor Isokpan, in a personal interview, informed me and thus supported Izevbigie Omokaro's 1978 study that "Olokun religious tradition originated in Urhonigbe. It is the base for Olokun's original shrine."¹⁹ Similarly, Paula Ben-Amos also considers Urhonigbe as the essential seat of the Olokun deity and, thus, Benin's religious headquarters.²⁰ By this stance, the trio, like Izevbigie, agreeably regards Urhonigbe as Olokun's place of origin.²¹

Olokun²² *Oba-name*, is the reservoir from which all bodies of water - lake, stream, and river flow. He is a central spiritual entity in Benin cosmology, religion, and culture. Olokun is intricately connected with the people's mythology, history, and traditional system of government, philosophy, and religion.²³ The acceptance of Urhonigbe's religious hegemonic position is tied to its Olokun communal worship. Olokun is allied with fertility and prosperity and ranked highest amongst the pantheon of Benin deities. He is most venerated religiously than any deity in the Benin pantheon.²⁴ As crucial as the *Igue* festival is to the Oba,²⁵ he cannot perform the festival not until it is celebrated for and in honor of Urhonigbe's Olokun Deity. This singular act is another nod to Urhonigbe as the religious headquarter of the Benin people in the same way that Benin City is the political headquarters today.²⁶

The Olokun (Ethiope) was central to worshipping the sea deity. Olokun remains the core of the people's religion. The Olokun River (Ethiope) is to Urhonigbe what the River Nile was to the Egyptians and Athena to the Greeks.²⁷ The people's religious history is wrapped around the Olokun deity and Olokun worship. Olokun, as a focal symbol of religion, is prominently featured in prayers, songs, proverbs, and praises.²⁸ The peoples' philosophy depended on Olokun, who they believe is the source of their economic, political, social, and religious advancement. Olokun influences the spiritual life of Urhonigbe, as well as most Benin people. *Ekaba* ritual dance has dramatically revolutionized the Olokun communal worship in Urhonigbe and positioned Urhonigbe as the most critical religious (mecca) center amongst the Orhionmwon peoples. It was once comparable to *Ughoton*, prominent as the land of the spirits, a pathway for the spiritual entities or the living dead to go to, or return

¹⁹ P.I with Pa. Igiebor Isokpa, June 13, 2021

²⁰ Paula Ben-Amos, (1973). "Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art." In African Art Magazine (Vol.6(4), LA: UCLA, p.3.

²¹ Izevbigie Omokaro, 42

²² Olokun is an Okun (sea) deity conceived of as either a king or queen, depending on the geographic location, as he is both considered either a male or female. Being a deity/king/queen is often mistaken for Osanobuwa, the creator God. This idea of describing Olokun as the sea god or goddess is a misnomer.

²³ Izevbigie, p.11.

²⁴ Omokaro Alfred Izevbigie, (1978). Olokun: A Focal Symbol of Religion and Art in Benin. In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Washington University, p.4; also see Paula Ben-Amos, "Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art," Pp.29, 51.

²⁵ The *igue* festival of the Benin and the Oba (not the Urhonigbe version) have been discussed in another research work. For details, see Itohan Idumwonyi and Wilson Ehianu, (2015) "*Igue* Festival among the Benin People: Response and Resilience of Indigenous Religion," in David O. Ogungbile, ed., African Indigenous Religious Traditions in Local and Global Contexts: Perspectives on Nigeria (Lagos: Malthouse Press), Pp. 227-44.

²⁶ Izevbigie, Pp. 51, 110.

²⁷ Anonymous, "Benin Kingdom: The History of Urhonigbe" in <https://www.edoworld.net/URHONIGBE.html> 27 (March 26, 2021) <Accessed July 21, 2021.>

²⁸ Izevbigie, p. 5

from *Erinmwin* (paradise), the abode of the dead. Olokun was and is still considered the great deity that they consult for all life's situations.

4. A CONCISE HISTORY, CONCEPT, AND ORIGIN OF *UGIE EKABA* RITUAL

Today, Urhonigbe is substantially situated on Benin's religious map. That *Ekaba* is native and cultural to Urhonigbe supports Omigbule's theory that rituals are elements of African cultures' and "cultural subsystems." Culture is taken to mean a body of systems into which many human experiences and surrounding conditions are classified. This subsystem includes religion, social-cultural, political practices, and economic behavior.²⁹ Put in a discursive term, rituals in Benin, like their African counterparts, belong in the logical sphere of African cultural studies. Omigbule posits that African cultural studies should be located at the nodal point of the entire African knowledge enterprise, and I agree.³⁰

Ekaba, a large-scale communal religious, and social-cultural phenomenon, is an indigenous ritual practice. It has cultural elements for knowledge generation for/about the Benin people. *Ekaba* is integral to the cultural, religious experience, and historical heritage. It results from a complex web of religious-philosophical thought that does not exist in isolation; instead, it exists simultaneously with the celebration of the Olokun deity.³¹ However, a side-by-side exploration of Olokun and *Ekaba* is not within the purview of this study.

The annual *ugie Ekaba* ritual is when the Urhonigbe people celebrate the sacred sacrament of their whole religious and cultural prowess, inspiring participants' admiration. Okuoimose Okunzuwa asserts that "*Ekaba* marks the end of an old year and the beginning of a new year beginning in the last two weeks in December."³² Obazee Edegbe informs me that the entire process "lasts about three moons in Urhonigbe."³³ Agbongiasede Nekpen also told me that "the celebration marks the people's triumphs, health, achievement, and many successes."³⁴

The date *Ekaba* began is not as vital and elemental to its conceptualization. Oral tradition links *Ekaba's* concept and origin to the religious encounter which *Osiokun* had with the Spiritual being – the Olokun deity. *Ekaba* is actually the memorial of the deific meeting of the divine - Olokun deity - with humans. Enyoze Edoba agrees with Izevbigie, retells, and maps *Ekaba's* conception to the hunting episode of *Osiokun*, a local hunter that was lost and assumed dead.³⁵

Izevbigie had also tied the communal *ugie Ekaba* ritual to the return of *Osiokun* from his numinous disappearance from the village. In his narration:

[Two men], *Osiokun* and *Olagbe*, from the *idumwon-Olo* (or *Idumwun -Ehen*) quarter and their dogs, ventured into the woods on a hunting spree. In the end, only *Olagbe* and his dog returned home. *Osiokun* and his dog had disappeared. The *Okaivbo* (elders council) summoned *Olagbe* for an explanation of *Osiokun's* fading. *Olagbe* informed the elders' council of how *Osiokun* and his dog chased an animal but was lured to the *Uhu'amen aikpowa* (the source of river *Ethiope*)

²⁹ Omigbule, Pp. 71-88

³⁰ Omigbule, Pp 71-88

³¹ Olokun in Benin cosmology is believed to be the god/dess of the sea (body of waters). Scholars are yet to come to 31 agree on the gender of Olokun. For details see: Nowamagbe Austin Omoigui, (2000). *Edo Anthropology*, (Albany, NY) in <https://www.edo-nation.net/anthro.htm>, (Dec. 20, 2008) <accessed July 21, 2021>

³² Personal Interview with Okuoimose Okunzuwa, May 22, 2021

³³ Personal interview (over the phone) with Obazee Edegbe on June 14, 2021.

³⁴ Personal interview with Agbongiasede Nekpen on May 17, 2021

³⁵ Personal Interview with Robison Iyare on May 21, 2021

and did not return. He was taken to the river bottom. Olagbe looked for them until it was almost dark. The following days, the *Olotu* (youth leader) led the *ighele* (youth) combed the forest, searching for Osiokun to no avail. The people assumed Osiokun and his dog were dead in the hands of a wild animal after the failed search mission. The elders suspected Olagbe of some foul play as there were no signs of his remains if actually hurt by a wild animal and severely punished him.³⁶ The villagers gave Osiokun a befitting burial and forgot about him.

However, *ikp'iha* (three years) later, Osiokun showed up. Alas, he was not dead! He had been “transported” to *egua-Olokun* under the guise of chasing a game that was essentially Olokun’s emissary. He had become the guest/trainee of the Olokun deity and stayed underwater for the three years he was declared dead. For this *ikp'iha* (three years), he was [“playing”] exposed to, participated in the underwater spirituality. He was introduced to the spiritual sciences, worship practices, and the rudiments of the Olokun deity. At the end of *ikpiha* (three years), Olokun “released” him to the land of the living with some ritual insignia – *Ovbiodudu*, *Uvua*, and *Irhe*. He had the *irhe* and *uwua* on his head, the *Ovbiodudu* (staff) in one hand.³⁷ He had an *Ukhure* (stool) on which he sat. He was also endowed with the knowledge-gift of *Ekaba* ritual dance. He tied the *Akaba* representing his hunting dog around his ankles. He danced into the village to the amazement of the spectators without a song. All they heard from him was the sound: Hmmmmm Hmmm Hmmm!³⁸ It was only the *Akaba* that provided the musical sounds to which he danced. *Ekaba*, to date, has no music, and it is referred to as the *iku'erinmwin* (dance of the spirits).

Osiokun’s reappearance created a scene, the bewildered villagers who presumed him dead had not seen anything like this enigmatic dance before. *Akaba*, which accompanied his solo music, became the name of the dance and was later changed to *Ekaba*. Osiokun appeared muted, deaf, ill, and irresponsible to any form of medication (he had lost his ability to speak and general sensibilities) for many days. So, the elders summoned and consulted with the local *Obo'gh'iro* and *Ogie-obo* to revive Osiokun. At the *Obo'gh'iro* consultation with the spirits, the *iha* (oracle) revealed that Osiokun was under the influence of the Olokun deity. Following the disclosure, appropriate religious rituals were made to the Olokun deity at the *Uhu'amen-Olokun*. After 14 days of ritual ceremonies, Osiokun spoke, informed his audience about his sojourn, and confirmed that the ritual items were Olokun deity’s gifts. Osiokun revived and lived many years after that.

Since then, hunters and the villagers continue to organize the *Ekaba* similar to Osiokun’s dance steps to re-enact this famous safe return and legacy with the annual ugie *Ekaba*. The Olokun shrine sits on the spot where

³⁶ Izevbigie, 131ff

³⁷ *Ovbiodudu* (also known as *aba*) is a small wooded staff, now decorated with *ikpigho* (cowrie shells). *Uvua* is a 37 small-clay-pot known as the *akhe-Olokun* (Olokun water pot) adorned with *orhue* (white native chalk). It contains medicines for curing various diseases associated with intestinal and fertility disorder. It never dries up and always in the custody of the serving *Odionwere* of Idumwun-olo, Osiokun’s home. The *irhe*, reminiscent of the *agba*, is the most significant ritual element. It is the official religious stool of the Oba of Benin. *Irhe* is an intricate wooden carving used in the official installation of the Okaivbo (high Pries) of Olokun. It has three woven rights to support the top and bottom flat parts. The rings are representatives of the python and serve as decorative designs of animals and human figures. It is hardly in the public eyes and kept by the serving Okaivbo like the *Uvua*. (For details see Izevbigie, p. 133).

³⁸ This is why there is no song associated with *Ekaba* dance. He broke his silence after seven days and narrated his 38 sojourn in Olokun’s abode. Olokun, according to him fed him with *orhue* (native chalk) for the three years. Idun-olo continue to celebrate the safe return of their son, Osiokun yearly.

Osiokun rested the Olokun water pot on the 14th day. The white chalk (*orhue*) and the white dress signifies purity. The people thus yearly celebrate ugie *Ekaba* following his triumphant encounter with the deity.³⁹ This account is explicit and supports my claim that the *Ekaba* offers a medium of communication, contact, and interactions among the spiritual entities - the Olokun deity and its adherents.

Ekaba dance eventually replaced Okunyamen. It is organized by the idumwun'kegbe, where Enigbe, the town's founder, lived and died. Okunyamen, dance used to be the most crucial ceremony in honor of the Olokun deity before *Ekaba's* emergence. Okunyamen dance now assumes its importance in marking the beginning processes of ending the annual ugie *Ekaba*.⁴⁰ During Okunyamen, groups of individuals, social clubs, and cultural groups organize dancing performances – *Ugho*, *Egbo*, and even (wrestling).⁴¹ Uyilawa Usuanlele informed me that these performances do not have religious connotations in the same sense as *Ekaba*.⁴² I agree with Usuanlele as *Ugho*, *Egboo*, and the even performed during *Ekaba* (Okunyamen) ritual celebration are means of re/telling the people's history and thus advancing their cultural heritage.

5. THE PRE-EKABA RITUAL ACTIVITIES/REVELRIES

The first major pre-*ekaba* event is the *Okaoku's* (warlords) meeting with the *Okaevbo* to fix the date for the ugie *Ekaba*. The meeting happens after the *Igue* festival is done.⁴³ Urhonigbe typically celebrates the *igue* in October, long before Benin City and the Oba engage in their *igue* festival rituals. The *ede uki eha's* (three moons) announcement is made at the end of the elders' council's first meeting. The elders hold a follow-up meeting to review the first notice and decide on the *ede uki okpa* (one moon) date. This date precedes the second major and perhaps the most important pre-*ekaba* event, the *Ekaba idumwun-Olo*. The *Ekaba idumwun-olo* is a day's religious festival associated with the Olo's family – who are Osiokun's descendants.⁴⁴ The *Ekaba Idumwun-olo* involves a ritual ceremony to the *Uvua* and *Irhe* – both items in custody of *Idumwun olo's* odionwere. They dance the *Ekaba* in honor of Osiokun and give a cue that the major *Ekaba* will happen one moon away. At this point, they send messages to the Oba of Benin and the sister villages – Urhomehe, Evboesi, and to vassal villages – Umutu, Obiaruku. They ask them to join Urhonigbe and pay the annual tribute, ranging from yams to oxen.⁴⁵ Then they summon the third elders' meeting to consider the *Ede-nairhiehin* (unchangeable date for the beginning of the critical *Ekaba* festival). The *ede-nairhiehin* could be the *uhunrun* (9th day) or the *Ikpede iwene* (14th day). During this period, different age groups such as *ikpolughe* and *ihema* assume the responsibility to maintain the public places by weeding, clearing, and sweeping.⁴⁶ The *Ihema* age-group of idumwun-ehen and *idumwn-eka* especially pay attention to giving a fresh and festive look to the *Eguae-Olokun*.⁴⁷ The festive look is

³⁹ Anonymous, "A Brief History of Urhonigbe Village and Olokun Deity" in Orhionmwon Youth Alliance, <http://www.orhionmwon.com/index.php/brief-history-of-orhionmwon/brief-history-on-urhonigbe-town-and-olokun-deity> (accessed: May 4, 2021).

⁴⁰ For a detailed description of okunyamen, see Izevbigie, 146-47

⁴¹ The wrestling match in times past helped them to make selection of likely warriors. For details, see Efe Omo 41 Igori, "Ekaba Uniquely Urhonigbe" in YouTube Channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9Zpm8Dn-_k, (Dec 6, 2016) <Accessed July 22, 2021>

⁴² P.I. with Uyilawa Usuanlele July 16th 2021.

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⁴⁴ Izevbigie, p. 134.

⁴⁵ The practice of paying tributes to Urhonigbe no longer happens today. The custom of bringing yams and cows as 45 tributes has been replaced with wines and kola nuts donations.

⁴⁶ For details of the age group system in Africa, see John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, (2nd ed.), Long 46 Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1991, Pp. 87 - 102.

⁴⁷ Solomon Ogunrobo, "The Origin of Ekaba Festival" in Discussion: Association of Great Benin Descendants 47 (GBD) Worldwide <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1861225510554657/posts/3600448283299029>, (August 21, 2019) <Accessed May 19, 2021.>

widespread, with every household scrubbed, wearing a new paint, and decorated in readiness for the *Ugie*. Enough foodstuff to last several days is stored at home. The head of each household educates his people about the norms and the taboos associated with the *ugie Ekaba*. During this time, they prohibit fighting, quarreling, farming, and going to the river.

Two days before the beginning of the *ugie*, *ekhaemwen-Olokun* (Chief priest(esse)s of Olokun), who are mostly women performs *ikpowa* and *itukpon*. During the *ikpowa*, the female *ekhaemwen*, led by the *lyasere*⁴⁸, go from house to house, supplicating Olokun in prayers for blessings. In return, the homeowners offer gifts of *evbee* (kola nuts) or *ikpi igho* (cowrie shells) to the priestesses. During the *itukpon* rituals, they wash the Olokun shrine's clothing. They spread the clothes outside to dry under the sun. Passersby are required to donate gifts to these female *ekhamwen* Olokun. These clothes are taken to the Olokun's temple. After the *itukpon* observance in the temple, *the Utukpon* meet in front of *Nosidova* deity (Olokun's favorite wife). They resolve disputes through oaths at this temple, and *Nosidova* is beseeched to witness the oath-taking rituals.⁴⁹

The *Adan* (priest or priestess) performs the *Ahonmwotoe* (sanctification of the land) rituals a day before the *Ugie* starts. There are two ways of achieving the *Ahonmwotoe*. In one form, the priest ties a live chicken to an *omen* (palm frond). He rolls the chicken on the ground along the streets with incantations and chants: "*Otoe' furhe, Awua Oba, Awua Olokun, lahien, Otoe rhe, Ne-otoe' furhe*" (oh land, be peaceful, ills/taboo against the Oba and his laws, taboos/offenses against Olokun, depart from the land, for the peace and purity of the land.

The second form is the rituals performed in the Olokun temple. The *ekhamwen* Olokun (priestess) performs the rituals accompanied by dance. And the *ekhaemwen* during the ritual says *Olokun dorhie; ahonmwotoe rhunmwun d'ivbievbo, Olokun dorie o – ahonmwontoe rhunmwun d'ivbievbo* (Olokun come forth to accept the land's purification for the welfare of the people. Olokun, come forth and bless the land's ritual cleansing for the people's sake).⁵⁰

The *ahonmwotoe* (ritual cleansing) of the land ushers in the *Ekaba* festival's first major event, *igbemwin* (ritual sacrifice). These ritual sacrifices done during the *ugie* are believed to counteract threats, rid the land of *awuaa* (taboos) and evil supernatural powers, and ward off and expel disease-causing spiritual elements. It is thought to safeguard them from evil incursion. Overall, it keeps the village and the people ritually clean and ready for the *ugie*.

6. UGIE EKABA IN PRACTICE: TOWARDS ITS DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

This section sheds light on the religious actors, the *Ekaba* activities, structure, and communication in the rituals and rhythmic dance procession.

On the set day, the *Ohen nokhua* (chief priest) (in some instances, the *Okaevbo*)⁵¹ appears in public after several days in seclusion, "playing" (communing) with the spiritual entities (ancestors) and praying for the people. While all the priests/priestesses gather for the religious rituals, the chief priest officiates. Together with the elders, he engages in thanksgiving rituals to *Osanobua* (God) and the ancestors for leading them throughout the outgoing

⁴⁸ The *lyasere* is the chief priestess with jurisdiction over all important Olokun deliberations in the town. She joins 48 the *Okaevbo* to preside over all major rituals..

⁴⁹ Izevbigie, p. 135-37.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 138

⁵¹ *The Okaevbo* is in charge of religious and political matters. He is the highest positioned priest in the village and 51 presides over religious rituals of public interests.

year.⁵² He also does *the Igbemwin* ritual (sacrifice of prescribed animals) at the *ogua edion* (elders' shrine) in preparation for the new year. *The ohen* (or okaevbo) invites the ancestral beings and prays to *Osanobua* for peace in the land, progress, the prosperity of all indigenes, and for the *Oba* (monarch) of Benin to enjoy good health and long life. He prays for the country and the world, knowing their sons and daughters have migrated to distant ends of the earth.

Each of the three major quarters: Idumwun-eka, Idumwun-ehen, and Idumwun-ogo offer a cow on the *igbemwin's* day. Before the *igbemwin* rituals begin, the *ohen* (male and female each) would have returned from the *Uhu'amen* (source of the Olokun river). At the *Uhu'amen*, they formally invite the ancestral spirits to join them in *ugie Ekaba* in *Olokun-n'oba's* honor.

This ritual of "invite" is called *Asuerimwinre* (spirits' escort). It requires *obobo* (food believed to be the spirits' delight, made from mashed boiled yam, sometimes mixed with oil), *ikpigho* (cowrie shells), and *orhue* (white native chalk) are the invitatory ritual emblems for the spiritual entities. This aspect of the *Ekaba* ritual is not done in public and is not known to the *ogbee* (non-initiate).⁵³ The religious leaders who officiate in the *Asuerimwinre* rites never look back as they return from the *Uhunmwun* amen. Looking back, they believe, is an invitation to see the spirits who are believed to have responded to their invitation, and the person who looked back would fall ill. This religious belief and practice parallel the narrative of Lot's wife in the Abrahamic religious tradition, who is alleged to have become the pillar of salt upon looking back on their journey from the land of Sodom.⁵⁴

These religious leaders go straight to the *ogua-Olokun* (Olokun temple) through the *Urho-erinmwun* (spirit's door/gate) upon arriving at the village; this door/gate is opened throughout the *ugie Ekaba* duration. It is after the arrival of the religious leaders believed to have been accompanied by the spirits from *Asu'erinmwunre* that the *igbemwin* ritual begins. It is the moment that everyone has been awaiting. The *Ohen nokhua* (or Okaivbo) officiates in *the igbemwin* ritual. However, a deputy could officiate if the *Ohen nokhua* (or Okaivbo) is too old or incapacitated by illness. The officiating *ohen* (priest) has a bowl of kola nuts in his left hand and an *eroro* (Iron Clapper bell) in his right hand. The *eroro* signals the Olokun deity and other spiritual entities to *the igbemwin* rituals. The *ohen-nokhua* prays for the well-being of the *Oba*, Olokun's children (the *Urhonigbe* people), and the land simultaneously with the *eroro* sound. He must first call on Olokun's favorite wife, *Ora*, by whom all prayers are made, saying: *Ora o* (4 times), *Iso ooooo! Osanobua vbe Olokun, Olokun n'oba, Obanamem noser'nor'oke*.⁵⁵ The prayer is followed by the ritual sacrificing of the three oxen. The deputy *ohen* assists the *ohen* (or *okaevbo*) in *the igbemwin* ritual ceremony.⁵⁶

The *igbemwin* ritual is accompanied by *the Igbalegb'ason's* dance. In *Urhonigbe*, this dance is done by the age groups below *the ighele*: *Ikpolughe*, *Ihema*, *Ata-otuiku*, and *Otuiku*. For this dance, *the Ikpema* produce frenzied percussion music. They play two long drums known as the *Ugbe*. The playing of the *Ugbe* drums awakens the people to the official birth/start of the *ugie Ekaba*. The *Ugbe* ceremony is the end of the *igbemwin* ritual, the beginning of the 14 days ritual ceremony and marks the old year's end.

The *Ekaba* dance follows the official declaration of the *Ugie Ekaba* for six days. First, the same age group organized the *Igbalegb'ason's* dance from the night to complete the *igbalegbe* ceremonial dance called the

⁵² Nowamagbe Austin Omoigui, (2000). *Edo Anthropology*, (Albany, NY)

⁵³ Personal conversation with Okuimose Okunzuwa on May 18, 2021

⁵⁴ For details see, Genesis 19: 15-16

⁵⁵ *Ora* (Olokun's favorite wife) and *Osanobua* (the Father) are mentioned in prayers to Olokun deity. Olokun's 55 praise names includes *Olokun noba*, (Olokun, the *Oba*), *Oba-namen nose'nor'oke* (the *oba* of the sea who is greater than the one on land, in reference to the *oba* of Benin)

⁵⁶ Izevbijie, p. 140-141

igbalegb'owie (early morning's *igbalegbe*). Between the *Igbalegb'owie* and the first *Ekaba* dance in the evening of the second day, the town goes feasting. On this occasion, the Olokun deity is treated to *Egho-Olokun* with the meat from the *igbemwin* rituals. The *Egho-Olokun* is a merry romp for all people, including the visitors.

The *Ekaba* dance is followed by dances organized by the three major *idumwun* (quarters) in seniority. *Idumwun-Eka* is the first to open the dance festival with the *ekab'ason*, done in the evening of the second day. *Idumwun-Ehen* takes its turn on the third day, and *Idumwu'-Ogo* on the fourth day.

On the fourth day, the *ighele* organizes the *ekpo* (masquerade) dance. The women, led by the *Ohen-ebo* (priestess), do the uke dance once a moon for three consecutive moons. The objective is to induce rainfall. During this *ugie*, the spirit possesses the women, and they make significant predictions. Leading the contingent is the *obo-ekpo* (healer masquerade), who is vested with *ekpo* mystic power.⁵⁷ The *Ekaba* dance is done in a cycle among these *idumwun* (quarters), each staging their dance twice. The *Olotu* and *Odion-otu* (leaders of the dancing groups) of each quarter organize the dance.⁵⁸

The women in white are *Olokun* priestesses led by the chief priestess, known also as an *n iyasere*, an *Igiohen*, or an *Ohen-ebo*.⁵⁹ They hold *oroke* (cow's tail) and *ezuzu* (leather fan with no designs. But the one for the priestess in *Urhonigbe* comes with colorful bird feathers and a small mirror at the center) for fanning the dancing *Ohen nokhua* (or *Okaevbo*). The *ezuzu* is used to calm the *ohen nokhua*.⁶⁰ The *ohen ebo* holds a bowl of *orhue* from which they spray as the procession advances. It is symbolic of peace to the people and the land. Some of them have an *egogo* (a gong-like bell). The *egogo* is part of the ritual element in Olokun's worship. The *ohen* has an *ekpoki* (cowhide-like cross-bag) covered with cowrie shells. The *ekpoki* is used to carry sacred ritual objects.⁶¹ The *obo-ekpo* is convoyed by the *isuekpo* (male masquerade escort), who fans the *ohen nokhua* (or *okaevbo*). The *obo-ekpo* is in front of the contingent to offer mystical protection to others.

In the 2019 *ugie Ekaba* in Orogho village, the participants had *uwenrhien-otan* (long wands (whips) (*gylphaea lateriflora*) in their hands.⁶² The *ohen nokhua* dances to inspiration point and assumes a trancelike state of possession. The people, in a tag, file, and dance, follow the spirit-possessed *ohen*. This act of spirit possession was not observed in the *ugie Ekaba* in *Urhonigbe*. In the Orogho ceremony, unlike the *Urhonigbe*, there are *ekpo* (masquerades). On this occasion, two men hold the spirit-possessed *ohen's* hands, who leads the people to excessive movement. A woman with a bowl of *orhue* walks briskly, side by side with them. She blows the *orhue* in the sun's direction to invoke the support of the Olokun Deity and for the ritual's efficacy. And they sing: "iyare ugha yo, ovbie okhuo! (May you arrive safely, oh child born of a woman).⁶³ I observed the Orogho procession go in a single file as if it were a journey through the ancestral world. The drums and rhythmic dance draw the people into a world of spiritual excitement where the living explores and interacts with spiritual beings. This

⁵⁷ See the YouTube link on Orogho celebration for a detail description.

⁵⁸ Izevbigie, p. 143-43

⁵⁹ The *Iyasere* is the chief priestess with jurisdiction over all important Olokun deliberations in the village. She joins 59 the *Okaevbo* to preside over all major Olokun religious rituals.

⁶⁰ Personal Observation, Dan Iyaji, "Ekaba Festival in *Urhonigbe* Community, Edo State" in YouTube channel 60 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgEtSbj8I-8> (Dec. 29, 2020) <Accessed March 12, 2021>

⁶¹ Personal interview with Ehisimen Osagie on May 22, 2021

⁶² Personal observation, Omo Ise TV "Ekaba Festival Orogho Village, 2019," YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6t-nSdVik8>, (January 3, 2020) <accessed July 20, 2021). The *Uwenrhien-otan* (*gylphaea lateriflora*) represents the magical whip which was used to initiate *Omobe* and for Prince *Ekaladerhan* to use in his oracular predictions. (for details see, Izevbigie, pp. 38-42, 95.

⁶³ Personal observation, Omo Ise TV, "Ekaba Festival, Orogho Village, *Ogbehien Day*" in YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWf2UwUllmM> (Aug 26, 2020) <Accessed May 18, 2021>

ritual dance affirms their “play,” not just with the living members of the community but notably with spiritual beings.

This communal celebration points to the worldview of the people that emphasizes the continuous interaction and relationship of the departed members in communion with the living relatives. Within this space, the sacred meets with the secular in traditional aesthetics to keep the peoples’ culture and religious traditions from extinction.

6.1 TABLE 1: URHONIGBE UGIE *EKABA* SCHEDULE⁶⁴

NO.	BENIN WEEKDAYS	URHONIGBE WEEKDAYS	MAJOR EVENTS OF UGIE EKABA
1	Okuo	Ede-ki	Asuerinmwini; Igbemwin, Igbalegbe’ason
2	Aho	Ed’ubiaroko	Igbalegb’owie, Ekaba feast, first Ekaba dance by Idumwun’Eka
3	Eken	Eken	First Ekaba dance by Idumwu’Ehen
4	Orie	Ed’eken’degbe	First Ekaba dance by Idumwu’Ogo
5	Ukuo	Ede’ki	Second Ekaba dance by Idumwu’Eka
6	Aho	Ed’ubiaroko	Second Ekaba dance by Idumwu’Ehen
7	Eken	Eken	Second Ekaba dance by Idumwu’Ogo Okunyamen dance by Idumwun’kegbe
8-13	See above	See above	No major event of Ekaba festival. Routine work resumes at home and on the farm
14	Ukuo	Ede’ki	The official end of Ekaba festival with post-ekaba ceremony, Asu’erinmwini

There are two parts to *ugie Ekaba*. While one is the dance itself, the other is the procession. The *Ekaba* procession happens when the dancers move from one pre-selected spot to another, forming a long line, sometimes covering about a quarter of a mile. During the parade, spectators who are *ogbee* (novices in *Ekaba* dance) might be confused. While some are running to catch a glimpse of the spectacle, others flee to escape the whips of the *Ugie* guards, whose duty is to protect the dancers.⁶⁵ There is so much excitement in the air so that the physical exercise of running/walking means nothing to the participants/attendees. The procession sound is changed to *Ekaba* music, and the *Olotu* (group leader) comes to the fore, displaying the unique artistry of the dance.⁶⁶ The dancers mostly rely on the instrument’s rhythmic harmony.

On the last day of the *ugie Ekaba*, the *ohen nokhua* is at the head of the ensemble while the participants shout: *Ekaaaabaah! Ekabah rie amen!* (*Ekaba* is going back to the water). The different *idumwun* (quarters) take turns in performing on extra days. The parade is the last of the public *ugie Ekaba*. The most popular of

⁶⁴ This is a representation of the four quarters of the earth and number of the days for the ritual ceremonies. The four 64 days are eken (east), Orië(West), Okuo (North), and Aho (South). Eken is the rest (sabbath) day where nobody goes to the farm, market, and rivers for fear of encountering spiritual entities. It is believed to be the day that the spiritual beings come to these locations. The Benin weekdays represents the “universal” names of the Benin day, while the Urhonigbe weekdays represents the local names of the days. For details see, Jacob Egharevba. (1968). *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan University Press), p.82; cf. Izevbigie, Pp. 143, 188.

⁶⁵ For a vivid description see the Orogho Ekaba - Ogbehien day see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWf2UwUllmM>, (August 26, 2020). Also see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6t-nSdVik8> (January 3, 2020) <accessed July 16, 2021>

⁶⁶ See Urhonigbe Ekaba 2020 in “Benin Naija TV in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgEtSbj8l-8>

all the ritual activities is the *asu'erinmwinnie* ritual (ushering the spirits back home) on the 14th day to await a "rebirth" in the next year.

The next six days following the end of the *Ekaba* dance, the *Ekaba* taboos and restrictions are partially lifted. The farmers return to the farm, and traders to their market. Although the public activities are done, the *ekhaemwe Olokun*, *Iyasere*, and *Okaivbo* (representatives) are still expected to assume their religious positions and perform the daily ritual duties in their homes and temple. The people are very conscious of the presence of the spiritual beings in their midst until the *asu'erinmwinnie's* rituals are performed. The *asu'erinmwinnie* has three parts to the practices – the baking of *eka-igiorua* (cakes made out of *igiorua* yam), the *erinmwio-ovia* rite (rites for Ovia river's spirit celebration), and the escorting of the *erinmwinnie* (spiritual beings) back to their *uhu'amen* abode. The women bake the *eka-igiorua* in the morning of the 14th day and ritually scatter them in various religious sites - along the village roads - paths believed to be traveled by spirits entities. It is the last food item for the *erinmwinnie* before they return to *uhu'amen*.

On the evening of the 14th day, the Idumwun-Ogo elders, where the Ovia deity is worshipped, meet to elect an officiating *ohen* (priests) for the *erinmwio-Ovia's* rites. During this process, there is an *Ulomwan* (curfew) in town. The women and the *ogbee* (non-initiates with no knowledge of the cult) remain indoors. Only the elders and initiates have the permit to be outside for this rite. They request blessings from the departing spirits on behalf of themselves and the people, far and near.⁶⁷ A terrifying, bull roar-like noise - woo, woo - oooo - signifies the spirits' departure.

The final phase of the *asu'erinmwinnie* rite involves a delegation of *ohen* (male and female) to usher the *erinmwinnie* back to *Uhu'amen*. As they proceed, they chant *urie, urie! ogbe'wa ghi dia re!* (departing, departing, return next year to feast). The ushering *ohen* (priests/ priestesses) hit the path they travel on with the magic wands. Arriving at the *uhu'amen*, they offer gifts of *obobo*, *Ikp'igho*, *ivin* (coconut), and *evbee* (kola nuts) at the source of *Olokun* (the great sea), with songs:

<i>uhu'ame mwen,</i>	the source (head) of the great sea,
<i>Ise L'ogbe ee!</i>	(We) rejoice for the end of the year
<i>Ogbe mavbe diarhu.</i>	(we) pray to be able to live through the coming year!
<i>Ma ghi rukpo ghukpo o!</i>	We pray not to regret the coming year
<i>Uhu'ame mwen,</i>	the source of the great sea
<i>Ise L'ogbe eee!</i>	(We) rejoice for the end of the year! ⁶⁸

The following section will consider the ritual instruments.

7. CRITICAL RITUAL AND CHARACTERISTIC INSTRUMENTS

The most critical and common feature of *Ekaba* dance is wordless music.⁶⁹ All *Ekaba* musical patterns are similar. While the instruments belong to the percussion group, any non-special improvised or contrived

⁶⁷ Personal interview with Okuomose Okunzuwa on May 22, 2021

⁶⁸ Izevbie, 149

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 262

objects serve as instruments for making sounds.⁷⁰ During the *ugie*, the village ensemble makes a distinct sound that makes *Ekaba* dance identifiable and different from other ritual ceremonies. The most common and frequent instruments associated with *Ekaba* are the *Em'ekaba* (*Ekaba* drums). The *em'ekaba* is produced by special: *em'ighan*. According to Uyilawa Usuanlele, this mother drum is believed to be of Igala origin.⁷¹ *em'a-edo*-(Edo drums), consisting of small drums. Others are *egogo* (gongs), and the *ukuse* (maracas), *Orhu*, and *ekpere* (horn). These are the musical instruments that give an original percussion to *Ekaba* dance.

According to Edoba and as observed, this instrumentation comes without songs in a dominant, distinct style and form dance procession. *Ekaba* priestly celebrants adorn in *ododo* (red flannel)⁷² and *ukpon no fua* (white cloth garments) the colors and ritual costumes for Olokun worship. It symbolizes power, purity, morality, peace, and harmony.⁷³ The *orhu* and *ekpere* (carved gourd rinds or animal horns),⁷⁴ *oko* (short horns from ivory carvings), (*eroro/egogo*), (bronze, metal, or brass ritual gong,⁷⁵ and *ukuse* (maracas, made out of a rind of gourd) are amongst the ritual emblem to summon the attention of Olokun to the *Ugie*. They are a typical scene in *ugie Ekaba*. The *Ohen-ebo* (priests/priestesses) wears the *Iha'ahano* (made of coral beads or cowrie shells) around their neck. The *Iha'ahano* is the *ohen-ebo's* identification emblem. The male *ohen* ties around his head a band with cowrie shells and an *ebakhue* (red parrot feather) or *Igan* (*oghe*) *oghoghon* (eagle feather) that could be from a parrot or a vulturine fish eagle.⁷⁶ The use of *uwerhiontan* (magical stick), prominent in the *Orogbo Ekaba* is a vital ritual object in the Olokun shrine. Animals such as goats and cockerels are the most familiar ritual insignia.

8. IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON THE SPREAD OF EKABA

Izevbigie argues that *Ekaba* is the prominent link between the members of the Olokun triangle.⁷⁷ *Ekaba* ritual knowledge originated in Urhonigbe and spread to other centers of the Olokun triangle, as noted above, and is second in importance to the *Igue* festival. Clarifying the similarities of the *Ekaba* dance among centers of the Olokun triangle, Ehsien Okundaye affirms Izevbigie when he told me that the forms and process of *ugie Ekaba* were derived from one source – Urhonigbe – the religious headquarters of Orhionmwon.⁷⁸ I estimate that Orogbo, Ogba-N'azagba, and Ugoniyekorhionmwon are examples of such villages that loan forms and practices from Urhonigbe. Interestingly, these communities do not venerate the Olokun deity communally. They are different villages and do not share the same communal Olokun shrines associated with the administration of *Ekaba*. Each community has its *Ohen*, *Iyasere* and *Okhaemwen* and could be grouped in Izevbigie's identified triangle. Still, it is unclear why he did not

⁷⁰ For details see, Izevbigie, p. 144-45, cf. Dan Iyaji "Ekaba Festival in Urhonigbe Community, Edo State: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msPShLhtzKE> (Dec. 29, 2020) <July 16, 2021.>

⁷¹ P.I. with Uyilawa Usuanlele December 16th, 2022

⁷² *Ododo* in religious parlance symbolizes success and victory. In this space, the *oba*, traditional doctors, and priest/priestesses, and warriors adorn in it for ritual performances.

⁷³ Izevbigie, p. 64

⁷⁴ The size of these instruments determines the volume of the sounds they produce.

⁷⁵ *Eroro* helps to summon the attention of the Deity to answer the call of the supplicants.

⁷⁶ The vulturine fish eagle has white feathers reminiscent of the Olokun's purity and the red parrot's feather is representative of the mythical powers of the *ododo* cloth. The eagle is believed to be the king of the birds as Olokun is the king of deities. And the parrot is the wisest and most intelligent bird in the sky.

⁷⁷ Izevbigie, p. 175-76

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 240.

capture these villages in his study. I make this assertion because Orogho organizes the *ugie Ekaba* in honor of Olokun.⁷⁹ It is not immediately clear if Orogho began her *ugie Ekaba* aser Izevbigie's study.

As noted earlier, the *ugie Ekaba* is celebrated in villages where the Olokun deity has gained a foothold. And the *Ekaba* dance follows the same pattern. The differences may be in the individual dancing variations, dresses, and duration of the dance. The number of days they perform *Ekaba* reflects the size of the village. Only the leading dancers put on identical costumes; other participants dress as they desire.

While there is no *ekpo* (masquerade) in the Urhonigbe *Ekaba* rituals, *ekpo* is a common feature in the Orogho and Egbokor *Ekaba* rituals. David Ojo confirmed Izevbigie's finding when he told me that "*ekpo* had long been native to Orogho and Egbokor villages before the introduction of Olokun-nadesevbo. This phenomenon explains the presence of *ekpo* and its absence in Urhonigbe's *Ekaba* celebration. The *ekpo* dance signifies the end of the *ugie Ekaba* in Orogho and Egbokor.

Oral tradition has it that dense waves of migration led to the export of the Olokun religious traditions. And wherever Olokun worship spread, *Ekaba* was also established. Now we shall pay attention to the villages, and the first to be considered within the triangle is Egbokor.

9. EGBOKOR

No one knows precisely when the *Ekaba* festival started in Egbokor. But they remember borrowing the religious tradition from Urhonigbe. Izevbigie suggests that the date could be understood by counting the number of sacrificed goat skulls left at the shrine annually.⁸⁰ The Olokun communal worship spread to Egbokor village by migrating three siblings, Oron, Ose, and Orozua. Oral history supports the claim that they fled to seek refuge from the military campaign between Benin and the Ika-Ibos, West of Niger. They introduced the Olokun communal worship to consolidate their foothold in their new abode and ensure Osanobua's protection from hostile neighbors.

10. EVBOBEMWEN

Olokun was introduced to Evbobemwen as a result of internal strife between Urhonigbe and Evbobemwen. An Evbobemwen man had kidnapped an Urhonigbe woman for marriage purposes. In revenge, the Urhonigbe people made war with Evbobemwen and, in the process, left behind (or perhaps forgot) the ritual bag that contained an *osu-orhue-olokun* and *ukugba-olokun* believed to be Olokun's protective elements for the people. Aser the war, an epidemic broke out, and an unusual mold began to grow on a hilltop. The *ighele* found the *ekpoki* (ritual bag) with the ritual elements, and an *obo-ogh'iro* told them to build a house for the ritual elements. The aftereffect is the settlement and the beginning of Olokun communal worship in Evbobemwen.⁸¹

Whether these ritual items were deliberately left behind or not, no one could tell. Evbobemwen, like Urhonigbe, organizes and *even* (wrestling) match among the *Iroghae* and *Ighele* age groups to mark the end of *ugie Ekaba*. Despite the common ancestry of *ugie Ekaba*, time and indigenous considerations have

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 266

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 199

⁸¹ Ibid, Pp. 202 - 217

caused variations identifiable when two or more of the *Ekaba* traditions are compared. Uyilawa Usuanlele supported Izevbigie's findings when he noted standard features of the ugie *Ekaba* in all the villages as the ritual sacrifices, the *Igbalegbe*, the worship accompanied with percussion drums and dancing techniques without songs.⁸²

11. EVBOESI

Evboesi is one of the most popular villages in the Orhionmwon territories. Evboesi celebrates the *Isiokuo* ritual for showing respect to the magical *ohor* (sword), which is not directly linked to the Olokun deity. But because Olokun provides Evboesi's communal faith and worship baseline, s/he cannot be disconnected from *Isiokuo* ritual performance. Oral tradition has it that Olokun's collective worship was introduced from Urhonigbe town by Ugiomon, the first *Enogie's* (Duke) mother.⁸³ Ugiomon was afraid that her son, Usi, would be overrun by his enemies if she did not protect and strengthen his magical power. Ugiomon was also the mother of Chief Ekpen, the Urhonigbe's *Okaevbo*. Ugiomon visited the *Egua-Olokun* in Urhonigbe to get *Osu-orhue*, with which she began the Olokun communal worship. The entire village became interested in sharing the protection and welfare associated with the collective Olokun worship. So, they went to Urhonigbe to seek the rights and privileges to worship the Olokun deity.

Usi, the first enogie of Evboesi, was an *ogiobo* (magician), not a warrior like the first Urhonigbe's enogie - Ekpen. Usi's greatness in magic and medicine is commemorated during the *Isiokuo's* ritual. *Isiokhuo*, a two-day celebration, sees the people go to war against itself in commemoration of *Ohor*, a magical sword used by Ekpen, Urhonigbe's first enogie.⁸⁴ In Evboesi, the ugie *Ekaba* represents the high mark of the people's belief in Olokun.

12. URHOMEHE

A long historical and social connection exists between Urhonigbe and Urhomehe. *Olokun-nosaluve* was introduced from the sister town, Urhonigbe. The two villages are regarded as sister villages because the founders, Enigbe and Emehe, were siblings. Urhomehe desired to share a common faith with her family members at Urhonigbe.⁸⁵ Like other villages, Urhomehe starts the ugie *Ekaba* on the *ede-igbemwin* (day of sacrificial rites). Before the sacrifice, the *Okaivbo* prays for the worshippers, the town, and the Oba of Benin, calling on Olokun through Ora, the favorite wife, to accept the offering and bless the people. On each occasion of the *Ekaba* dance, before anything else occurs, the organizers must assemble in the *Okaighele's* compound for the dance procession to begin and move to the streets, terminat]ng in the Olokun temple.

12. POST-UGIE EKABA RITUALS

⁸² P.I. with Uyilawa Usuanlele on March 2, 2021; cf. Izevbigie, 241.

⁸³ An enogie is a descendent or an appointee of the Oba, See Egharevba, 1975, p. 6. Cited in Izevbigie, 221 -23.

⁸⁴ For details of the ugie *Isiokhuo* see Izevbigie, pp. 224 -

⁸⁵ Izevbigie, p. 249

The day following the end of *ugie Ekaba* is for the *ihuegho* ritual. Every farmer offers a yam tuber in Olokun's service. The yam tubers are smeared with *Orhue*. Although the yam tubers ceremonially belong to Olokun, they are shared by the village elders. This ritual is purposed to pay tribute to *Osanobua* for the year's harvest and request a better yield for the coming year. These villages have a delegation that goes to the river source to perform the *Asuerinmwini* (first day) and *Asuerinmwini* (7th or 14th – last day) rituals. These rituals invite and send off the spiritual entities from *ugie Ekaba*, marking its end at the river's source.

13. CONCLUSION: THE UTILITY OF *UGIE EKABA* RITUAL

This inexhaustive study portrays Urhonigbe as the nodal point of *Ekaba's* construction and the religious headquarter (mecca/Jerusalem) of the Benin people. It validates that the *Ugie Ekaba* has become a significant and essential part of the Benin people who live beyond the capital. *Ekaba* serves as the basis for their religious-cultural self-expression as it embodies their cosmological energy. The *ugie Ekaba* continues to undergo changes and elements of reconfigurations. The people's embrace of modern and external culture occasions its continuous configuration.

Ekaba is the uniting base for projecting the people's identity. It helps to re-enact their core historical formation and sustenance, religious practices, cultural values, and socio-political organizations. It constructs, maintains the people "Beninness" (Africanness), and re/shapes the African knowledge enterprise. The religious function of *Ekaba* is quite inspirational to the people and connects them to the divine being and the cosmological experiences.⁸⁶

If anything is evident about Urhonigbe's people during *ugie Ekaba*, it is their dedication to the Olokun deity. The study affirms the theorization that *Ugie Ekaba* is the direct encounter and relationship building of the Divine (*Osanobua*) with humans. The *ugie Ekaba*, reminiscent of the Urhonigbe people's past, supports the view of the involvement of the spiritual beings with human beings and the creation of vibrant life. It elucidates the cardinal position of the people beyond the capital in the sustenance of its religion and culture. It places *Ugie Ekaba* and Urhonigbe specifically in a more realistic context. For example, the *Ugie Ekaba* is not a mere symbolism for the Urhonigbe indigenes and the people of the Olokun triangle. It is, for them, a recognition and celebration of the time that God comes to "play" (fellowship) with the people. In return for this invitation to "play," *Osanobua vbe Olokun* blesses and provides protection for the people. I, therefore, conclude that the phenomenal *Ugie Ekaba* nurtures a substantial, rich heritage. And I recommend further research through interdisciplinary scholarship that will advance and explore how the enigmatic heritage is reconfigured to meet modernity's onslaught.

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⁸⁶ Damian Ukwandu and Benjamin Obeghare Izu, p. 249. 86

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