

---

The Initiation of a Priestess: Performance and Imagery in Olokun Ritual

Author(s): Joseph Nevadomsky and Norma Rosen

Source: *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1988), pp. 186-207

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145858>

Accessed: 30/11/2009 04:47

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mitpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *TDR (1988-)*.

# The Initiation of a Priestess

## Performance and Imagery in Olokun Ritual

---

*Joseph Nevadomsky  
with Norma Rosen*

The setting—an impluvium, a courtyard, or a large room—is airy and cool. The suffused light of the late-afternoon tropical sky illuminates the performance space. The participants, mostly women dressed in white cotton garments decorated with cowrie shells and brass cutouts, sing, dance, clap, and play calabash rattles. Bells are rung to invoke the deity whom they have come to worship. Prayers are chanted over and over. A white fowl is killed. Some of its blood is poured on the shrine; the rest is used to anoint the foreheads of the worshipers. Elaborately drawn chalk iconography is obliterated by dancing feet (as it is meant to be) and vaporous messages fly back and forth in the magnetized space between the other world and earth. As the singing and dancing intensify, one of the worshipers falls into a trance. Her eyes become glazed, her movements feverish and erratic as the spirits of the otherworld take possession, imparting visions, predictions, and vibrations from *erinmwin*, the world of spirits, to *agbon*, the world of living things. As dusk falls, the scene becomes eerily luminous: ground chalk which throughout the performance has been liberally sprinkled over the entire area, blown into the air to ward off evil, and rubbed on the faces and bodies of dancers and onlookers for good luck and fortune, hangs in the air like millions of brilliant dust particles. Chalk—cool and pure and white—is a symbol of Olokun, the god of fertility and wealth who lives in a palace beneath the sea.<sup>1</sup>

The Kingdom of Benin is justly renowned for the more than 4,000 artifacts which came to the attention of an astonished European world in 1897 after a British expeditionary force conquered the city, exiled the king, and looted the palace. The booty consisted of massive carved-ivory tusks, brass and ivory masks, and a large number of brass plaques, portrait heads, stools, and scepters. These are now housed in museums and private collections throughout the world. The aesthetic merit and sheer quantity of these objects has diverted attention from other, less known but no less interesting, art traditions. Craftspeople and the worshipers of local cults employ rich imagery in fabricating objects such as shrines, costumes, and

sacred implements. Behind this imagery lies an equally rich tradition of songs, incantations, proverbs, dances, and performances which infuse these objects with vitality and give them magical potency.

Every practitioner—priestess or priest—has her or his own approach to image-making and performance. Although there are general guidelines and norms to which members of the various cults adhere, icons, shrines, fabric regalia, and other religious paraphernalia, as well as dances and rituals, are personal interpretations of the practitioners' conceptualizations of their relationships to and interactions with the deities whom they worship. Every priestess/priest develops her/his spiritual powers over many years, a process enhanced by medicinal and herbal treatments. The priestess and her shrine are therefore the physical evidence of supernatural forces at work. The idiosyncratic construction of shrines and their related rituals can best be explained as art resulting from visions, that is, as divine inspirations. Such visions often come in the form of dreams or through possession trances. When a priestess undergoes the customary anointings and then participates in the songs and dances appropriate to her cult, she becomes a sanctified container into which otherworldly forces can easily enter.

At the root of the artisan-priest's involvement with the craft and performance process is the need to communicate with the gods and to transcend the natural so as ultimately to control it. Crafted objects and ritual performances thus serve as bridges between major modalities of the culture: they break through the barriers separating the perceptible from the transcendental. In an effort to capture the experiential aspects of Bini imagery and performance, Norma Rosen, an American textile artist, became a devotee of the Olokun cult through a sequence of rituals which culminated in her becoming a priestess. The concern of the Bini artisan-priest for creating objects which are brought to life by prayers and performances is similar to Rosen's interest in storytelling with fabrics shaped into wearable forms. It was this idea of objects as more than material things which prompted her to leave her job in the art department at San Diego State University and travel to Benin City. Some years earlier she had taken a course on African arts and had become fascinated by the culture of Benin and the ways in which Bini beliefs are translated into images, objects, and performances. As an anthropologist resident in the city, I helped Rosen document her initiation. This paper incorporates some of her field notes, a few personal impressions, and my observations and research to provide a narrative account of these rituals.

### *Olokun Worship*

Every four days in and around Benin City, devotees gather to invoke Olokun, beseech him with requests, and receive his blessings. Among the Bini, Olokun is the focus of a most ardent and intense devotion. A central preoccupation of Olokun worship is the control of human fertility, and around this fundamental nucleus revolves not only public acts of worship, but tightly woven cultural values and the perpetuation of the group. It is not sex in its carnal or erotic meaning that concerns the worshipers, but the fact of childbearing. Olokun is the divinity who grants children to women. In Bini cosmology the land of the living is surrounded by water into which all great rivers flow: *Eze ne o ma ye obo gie okun, ikpogbo eze o re o khian* (The river that does not stretch its hand to the ocean, a small river it must be). It is through these waters—the realm of Olokun—that human souls must pass either to be born or on their way to the spirit world after death.

In the mythology Olokun is the senior son of Osanobua, the creator God, and indeed in stories and sayings he is said to have surpassed his father. Every household has its Olokun altars constructed out of clay and painted or chalked white, and some dignitaries have special rooms in their compounds dedicated to the deity with life-size tableaux depicting Olokun and his courtiers. Every woman in a household has her own altar, and there is sometimes a central one at which the head male of the household occasionally worships. So entrenched is the association of Olokun with fertility that many girls cannot be married until a diviner has consulted the oracle in order to advise her about the construction of an Olokun altar. Indeed, the future husband may have to pay for the initiation of his fiancée into the cult so that she can have a personal shrine. In one way or another all women are devotees of Olokun.

Olokun is also regarded as the god of wealth, an association which may have been encouraged by the arrival of European trade goods at the end of the 15th century. Although the cult of Olokun probably antedated the coming of the Portuguese, the introduction of new forms of wealth—arriving as they did by sea—and the state's attempt to control them, gave an added dimension to Olokun worship. In the Bini version of their history, Oba Ewuare, the reigning monarch at the time, is said to have gone down to the sea where he won Olokun's coral beads by defeating him in a wrestling match—a contest which William Fagg (1978:27) interprets as a metaphor for hard trading. Mediterranean coral and scarlet cloth were among the European items of trade whose importance to the state is symbolized in the regalia of the Bini king and his chiefs. Olokun and the cult of the sea thus became an instrument of the state's monopoly over trade goods. These goods gave the impetus for the rapid expansion of the kingdom between the 16th and 18th centuries.

Bini appreciation of the pragmatic qualities of the ocean provides a backdrop for a host of images, symbols, and semantic clusters concerned with wealth, fertility, joy, purity, and death. *Okun* is the word for ocean and Olokun means "the owner of ocean." *Okun*, the homonym, is a carton-sized box utilized in mortuary rites which symbolically contains all of a person's wealth and social achievement. It is decorated with mirrors and white cloth, symbols of the sea and immaculacy, respectively. Both are representations of Olokun. In Bini culture, water may be grouped in the category of "white" symbols. Like other white objects—doves, cowries, chalk—water has the generic senses of goodness, beauty, and fortune. Oba Esigie, a powerful king of the early 16th century, is praised as *ologbenronmwon ne ebo* (the shining brass white man): brass because it is red, the color of potency, and white because of his handsomeness. He is also called *olomi* (the water man) because water is "white" and pure. Water also refers to the Portuguese whom the Bini say were Esigie's brothers because of the military assistance they rendered him.

### *Preinitiation Cues and Rituals*

Women devotees far outnumber men. When confronted with solving a personal crisis that is beyond him, a man may be instructed by a diviner to make sacrifices to Olokun, but afterwards he usually feels no compulsion to become an active worshiper. Such personal problems may be by way of a physical handicap, memory loss, or the unaccountable deaths of several of his children. More often they include his failure to get a job, buy land, or build a house—problems related to success in life, wealth, and material

possessions. Women on the other hand are more concerned about child-bearing: those who have no children are anxious to conceive, while those who are fertile pray to retain their fecundity. A person does not enter the world of the spirits by death alone. Those who die unmarried or childless cannot achieve this entry. In order to become an ancestor, one has to have descendants. It is one's heirs that give one an ancestral shrine. Since in Bini thought it is always the woman who is responsible for childlessness, and she alone who determines the sex of the child (in a society where it is the legal right of the eldest son to inherit his father's estate), it is little wonder that Olokun is so heavily patronized by women.

There are equally compelling if perhaps more mysterious reasons why a person becomes a priestess or priest of Olokun. Under the influence of dancing and drumming, a woman may suddenly envision that she is destined to become a priestess. Alternatively, her candidacy may be revealed by someone else under trance. Unusual behavior is also a sign of the calling. Often, too, certain kinds of dreams indicate a vocation to the priesthood.

ROSEN: For those who see themselves swimming inside the ocean or who dream about large bodies of water or rivers, Olokun initiation into the priesthood may be advised. In my case, waterlike patterns and whimsical creatures have always been a part of my textile design imagery. When Olokun summons a son or daughter to the calling, the person's previous work may be an important clue to the reason for his or her initiation.

The persistence of any of the above phenomena usually leads to consultation with a diviner who may conclude that the dreams, behavior, or trances are a sure sign of a vocation. A diviner may also be asked to check with the oracle to determine who should officiate at the initiation. This is crucial because the worship of Olokun is individualized and therefore varies among the local cult groups so that the person who will serve as the novice's spiritual mentor must be carefully chosen. When Rosen decided that the time had come for her to enter the priesthood, she consulted three diviners.

ROSEN: The names of two priestesses and one priest were written on a sheet of paper. Two of the three diviners agreed that Priest Ama Ebibirhen should be spiritually closest to me and guide me through the initiation. This was a good choice because Ebibirhen was the only one of the three who could speak reasonably good English—an important factor since he would be the only person in contact with me during my seclusion.

If people hold the belief that spirits and deities control human destiny, then on inquiry, a person's entire life—including the future—may be made known upon the proper intercession of a diviner. The diviners whom Rosen consulted touched their lips to the tooth of an *uta* (bush pig)—the instrument through which the oracle speaks—and silently transmitted her request to the tooth. This and other objects were then repeatedly tossed into the air and the arrangement of their fall was noted. As soon as the diviners were completely satisfied that the signals from the otherworld had been properly received and correctly deciphered, they conveyed the information to Rosen who then told Ebibirhen of the oracle's decision.

Most of the decisions about Rosen's initiation were arrived at under trance at divination dances held on the "native Sundays" (i.e., every fourth day) prior to her induction into the cult. These are regarded as spiritually charged days when the otherworld is near at hand and certain kinds of spirits roam about or congregate at lonely places such as farms and river banks. It was on days such as these, as vast energies flowed between heaven and earth, that Priest Ebibirhen divined the places where offerings would be made and the river from which Rosen would draw the water that would serve as the foundation, indeed the essence, of her Olokun shrine.

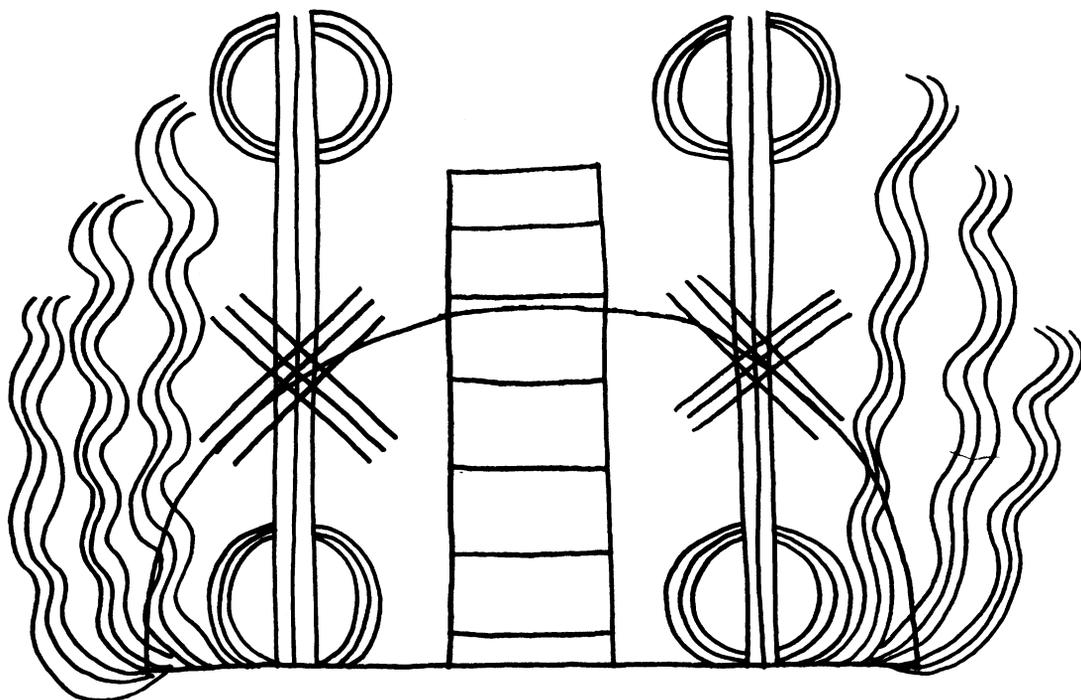
ROSEN: These dances were astonishing. The priest and priestesses sometimes wore different styles of dress and the dancing often went on continuously for eight or more hours. It was after watching these dances and how the spirits moved through the dancers that I knew what I was about to undergo would have a profound effect upon me.

To guarantee everyone's safe passage through the rituals, numerous deities and spirits had to be propitiated.

ROSEN: One evening when I visited Priest Ebibirhen (who is not only a priest of Olokun, but also of Esango [Thunder] and Ogun [Metal]), he tossed kola nut and divined that his Esango shrine had to be served with a red cock, gin, and kola nut, all of which I was obliged to provide to remove any possible obstacles from my path. Ebibirhen explained the serving of this and other shrines in this way: *Okherhe ma vba oto, ei mo* (If a palm tree does not reach the ground [suck water from the earth], it will not bear [fruit]).

The spirits of the night also had to be placated. To solicit the support of the night people, Ebibirhen sacrificed a black she-goat (black equals death, evil, and darkness) to the witches and wizards. The rope which had held the goat was passed over the heads of the participants so that "they should not be tied as the goat was tied during the sacrifice," in other words, so that nothing should stand in the way of a successful initiation. He then removed the goat's gullet and each person blew through it, an act meant to protect the breath (i.e., life) of those present against the time when they would find themselves traveling first class in the free space between the corporeal and the ethereal. A bowl of the goat's blood was passed 'round for everyone to drink, and afterward Ebibirhen shared what remained among his house shrines.

Then Ebibirhen put parts of the goat's internal organs in an earthenware jar which he left at a nearby junction, a point of convergence for powerful and often malignant forces. It is at *ada-nene* ("four junction" or crossroads) and the less potent *ada-eha* ("three junction," that is, a T or Y junction) that offerings like the above *izobo* (ambrosia) of liver, kidney, and intestines are given to mollify *eniwanren ason* (the elders of the night), the collective name for a myriad of malicious spirits such as *Ofoe*, the messenger of death; *azen*, people who transform into witches; *oso*, those who change into wizards as tall as the highest palm tree and hurl huge stones at their enemies; *ighele-erimwin* (the adults of the underworld), those ugly and grotesque monsters who snatch people and carry them off to the other world; and *Adabi*, the deity of the junction who straddles the boundary between this world and the next.



1. Example of a chalk pattern drawn on the floor at the exit from the initiate's seclusion room. The curvilinear designs represent water snakes—Olokun's messengers. The central ladder of seven rungs suggests the route for passing messages between spiritual and physical realms. The X marks indicate points of contact between the two realms as well as the obstacles the initiate undergoes during her period of transformation. (Graphic by Norma Rosen)

As the time for the initiation drew near, Rosen gave offerings to her own head, thanking it for her survival and prosperity. In Bini metaphysics the head is the seat of thinking, character, and behavior. It represents the ability to coordinate one's actions in such a way as to lead a successful and fruitful life. Her forehead was marked with chalk and the blood of sacrificed animals as a sign of blessing for the head itself. Blood and kaolin chalk were also marked on her ears so she would receive good news, near her eyes to see good things, and at the back of her neck to honor her *ehi*, a person's invisible counterpart and guardian spirit in the otherworld. After blessing her head and *ehi*, Rosen remained indoors throughout the night so that she would not accidentally see a cow, the representation of one's *ehi*. Seeing a cow could result in her death and the premature reincarnation of her *ehi* on earth. The cow symbolizes the *ehi* because, as it ambles along, it sways its head from side to side to summon affluence. Hence, *Uhunmwun emila ya tie uwa* (It is the head of the cow that calls prosperity).

Once these preliminary rites were out of the way, the stage was set for the initiation. Like all *rites de passage* Rosen's entry into the Olokun cult contained several distinct phases: separation, the liminal state, aggregation, and, finally, the return to secular time and space. To remove Rosen from normal time, a seclusion room had to be prepared. On the floor in front of the door to the room, Ebibirhen's assistant drew chalk designs consisting of river ferns, bells, fans, and other objects commonly found on Olokun shrines. Snakes were also a part of the imagery, especially *olose*, the strikingly beautiful red-lined water snake which is one of Olokun's messengers (plate 1). The room itself was painted white. White cloth and *ome* leaves (young palm fronds) covered the door and windows. *Ome* divides sacred from profane space and warns nonparticipants to go away. Only priests and priestesses could enter this room, and only they were allowed to have verbal and bodily contact with the initiate. Through them Rosen would

learn the elementary secrets of the cult. Communication with outsiders took place through an *aza*, a small brass bell which she rang to acknowledge the presence of others or to keep them at a distance. Bells were also used to invoke the deities. They were rung at both daybreak and dusk when Rosen bathed in native medicines mixed with chalk and river water. At night she slept on mats with various kinds of forest and river plants placed between them. As Rosen absorbed the powers of these medicines (and through them the ability to communicate with Olokun), she began the transition to the spirit world and, indeed, was regarded as more spirit than human.

Rosen's seclusion also guaranteed her sexual purity. Sexual relations were strictly forbidden. In fact, the 14-day sequence of rituals had to be carefully planned so as not to conflict with her menstrual period. Menstrual blood is the most polluting substance in the Bini world. Although it does not kill a man or render him impotent, it destroys his protective charms and leaves him exposed to all sorts of dangers and risks. When suspicious looking charms are found in one's compound, menstrual blood or, if not available, a woman's urine (less potent but still useful in a pinch) is put on them to neutralize their efficacy.

### *The Bath of the Deity*

*Akhuebo* (bath of the deity) refers generally to the initiation and specifically to the daily purification baths which infuse the novice with mystical vitality. Because Rosen was inducted not only into the cult (like two of her predecessors, anthropologist Paula Ben-Amos and art historian Barbara Blackmun), but also into the priesthood, her initiation lasted fourteen days, or two cycles of seven days each, with the last day marking the end of her seclusion. In Benin the number seven has magical potency and fourteen is twice seven. Many things happened during this period. Some of the events were private, like the special tutoring of the initiate; others were informal, like the sewing of the costumes and the cooking of food; while yet others were public, like the dances and outings to various shrines. Indeed, public performances were necessary because they gave everyone an opportunity to evaluate Rosen's progress, an important consideration since public rituals constitute a large part of a priestess's work.

ROSEN: After a person has entered the priesthood and established her own shrine, she receives clients for medical treatment and divination consultations. Much of this treatment depends upon close communication with the otherworld. Since most of this contact occurs during possession dances, a priestess must have the confidence and ability to perform in public.

The initiation rituals described below were a lot like theatre. There was of course their sheer entertainment value for both participants and audience. There were all sorts of special effects (such as trips to the river and the tossing of coins in the market) to create unusual moods or impressions. There were also moments of high drama, of excitement and tension, of solemnity and comedy. But an essential difference between theatre and initiation rituals is that the latter are meant to be efficacious, to produce changes (by an alteration of status, for example) in the people undergoing them. They are lived experiences, not ends in themselves, but means to

achieve other ends. An important technical difference (at least in comparison to conventional Western theatre) is the structured chaos within which these rituals take place. In Rosen's initiation, space was fluid rather than contained; the stages movable rather than stationary. There was more drift and less orchestration than would be seen in Western theatre. Moreover, nothing began on time and few events ended at any specified time. Noise from the audience was acceptable and anticipated. Spontaneous participation by onlookers was sometimes encouraged as part of the ritual. People drifted into and away from the performance area as their interests waxed and waned. Activities occurred simultaneously. The same ritual took on a different configuration the second time it was performed. Time expanded and contracted according to the vicissitudes of the key participants, rather than according to the dictates of a set performance text.

### *Bringing Olokun from the River*

Early in the morning of the first day (8 July 1984) preparations began for the 30-mile trip to the Ethiopie River, the gateway to Olokun's kingdom. Everyone dressed in white cotton *adaigho*, a knee-length tunic which had been "cooked" (ritually processed) with medicines and decorated with charms to protect the wearer as well as with crotals and small, brass cut-outs. As a new "bride" of Olokun, Rosen was specially dressed (plate 2). In her three-braid hairstyle denoting an *ogboi* (initiate), Ebibirhen placed an *ebakhue* (bright red tail feather) of the African gray parrot. The feather identifies an Olokun (or any other) priest. Around her neck priestesses hung a string of white glass beads, a symbol of the river and thus of Olokun, and large protective charms called *uleku* ("that which parades

2. Devotees dressed in ornamented white, knee-length cotton tunics that have been "cooked" (ritually processed) with medicines. Rosen wears a three-braid hairstyle marking initiation. (Photo by Joseph Nevedomsky)



across the belly," i.e., swings back and forth as a person dances) and *ewaen* ("that which paves the way," i.e., clears perils from the path). Around her ankles they put *ivie-ebo* (beads of the deity) and *orrigbe* (cowries, "that tied across") to protect her from stumbling or falling, accidents which might portend her death.

ROSEN: Without these protective talismans it would not be wise for a priestess to dance because her legs would be exposed to all kinds of dangers. Whenever a priestess serves her Olokun shrine, these objects are also served with the blood of sacrificial animals to keep them active and fully charged.

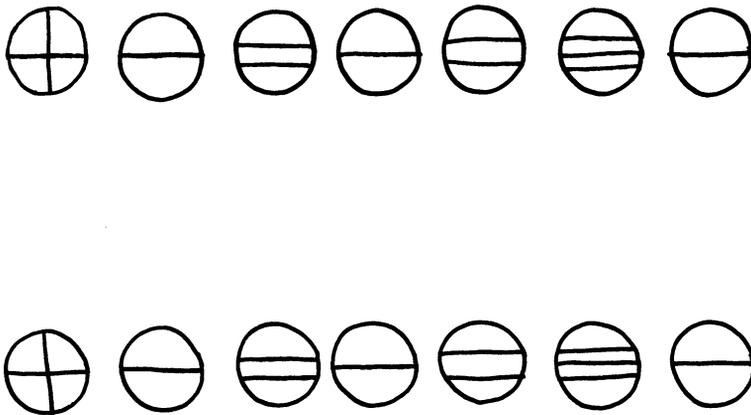
To dislodge any remaining impurities from her body and at the same time to open the way for Olokun, Ebibirhen tossed several dead chicks between her legs as she straddled two rows of chalked circles (plates 3 and 4). He then interpreted the way they fell. Satisfied with the results, he smeared her forehead and eyes with the blood of the chicks to clear interference from channels of communication that operate beyond the normal frequencies.

From the enclosed, stagelike space of the chief priest's courtyard, the participants moved to the front of the house where the creator God's shrine is located. In contrast to an Olokun altar, the shrine to Osanobua is remarkably modest: clay packed round the base of an *ikhinmwin* tree and held in place with lumps of chalk. The *ikhinmwin* tree is said to be the oldest tree in the world and is used to mark shrine locations and village boundaries. As the Bini say: *Erhan i dien ikhinmwin; Osa o re odion* (No tree is senior to *ikhinmwin*; only God is senior). A long, white pole called *osag-baye* (God occupies the world) protrudes from the center of these shrines and is topped by a piece of white cloth. The pole is the means by which messages are transmitted to God; the white cloth is the symbolic marker of God himself. Other objects are embellishments; Ebibirhen's shrine, for example, also has a parrot feather to indicate that its owner is a priest and a feather from the vulturine fish eagle, a symbol of rank. Ebibirhen touched Rosen's head, breasts, hands, and legs with a white dove, passed it over everybody's head to dispel evil, then tied it to the pole with strips of white and red cloth, where it was left to starve to death. Osanobua is a peaceful and benign deity, rather distant and remote, perhaps in some ways similar to the God of the deists. He accepts only live offerings. The white cloth symbolizes his tranquility and coolness. The red represents the dove's blood and hence its life force. Ebibirhen tossed cowries to determine if Osanobua had accepted the offering. Someone else smashed a coconut. It split open with the white meat facing upwards, a propitious sign. The chief priest broke and shared kola nut, the usual form of hospitality and conviviality. Priest and priestesses placed bells together on the ground to concentrate the collective metaphysical powers of those assembled. As a final precaution, *oghoye ne eguae ebo* ("the crooked wood of God's shrine," a twisted branch of a tree) was placed in front of the shrine and offered pieces of kola nut (sometimes a crippled person may be given kola nut instead). The branch represents the porter of the shrine who mischievously obstructs the offerings of worshipers from reaching God.

Full of enthusiasm and expectation—and now well fortified against danger—Rosen and her entourage made their way in a procession of cars to the Ethiopie River. At every crossroad they rang bells and blew salt and chalk into the air from the moving vehicles to summon the spirits to the bank of the river. Kaolin chalk and salt mixed together is a sign of joy and



3. Devotees of Olokun stand on two rows of chalked circles and "spot the sun" to summon Olokun just prior to purification rituals. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)



4. Design of two parallel rows of chalk. The "+" sign is the crossroads where spirits congregate, a point of potential obstacles; the symmetrical parallel lines with the circles suggest, in Rosen's words, that "the journey should be peaceful and trouble-free," achieving a balance between physical and spiritual realms. (Graphic by Pius Guobadia)



5. *Informing the spirits of the river that the ceremony is about to begin, Ebibirhen introduces the "bride" (or initiate) to the river. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)*

contentment: *Te agbon ruen gha rhuen vbe orhue vbe umwen* (May my world and yours be sweet like chalk and salt). Along the way offerings were thrown into the Jameison River, home of Igbaghon, Olokun's beautiful but tempestuous concubine, who does not share the harem with Olokun's 13 wives. At the Ethiope everyone lugged bags and trays of foodstuffs and other items to the waterside. The spirits of the river were informed that the ceremony was about to begin (plate 5):

*Ima khian rhie oha gie okun mwen vbe ame.  
Owe ne ima ya yo, na ra ya ne;  
Ofen ghi fian egere evbavba,  
Iyan ghi bun ye oghogho obo.*

(We want to take the initiate to Olokun in the river.  
The legs we used to get here, we will also use to leave;  
Just as a rat cannot break an iron pot,  
And yam does not split when eaten.)

*Egogo o!  
Egogo o!  
Ovbi ema mwen!  
A ra yo oto ame ne a rre.  
I rhie egogo rre.  
I rhie ukuse rre.  
A vba egbe o  
Ewoe ne ame.*

(Bell o!  
 Bell o!  
 My small drum!  
 We want to go to the bottom of the sea.  
 I take my gong and come.  
 I take my calabash rattle and come.  
 We meet ourselves  
 [With the] custodians of the river.)

Offerings of yams, plantains, bananas, snails, cowries, and lumps of chalk were placed inside five sifted chalk circles for the spirits of the riverbank. Ringing their bells, Ebibirhen and the priestesses entered the water to their waists and invoked Olokun:

*Ogie ne o mwen ehiagha igho.*  
*Oba ne ame ne o se ne o rre oke.*  
*Adesukhunmwon ne i rhei iruen.*  
*Odin ame ne ogboi i khue.*  
*Uwenrhien owen ne i ba ede ku.*  
*Oto ekan ne o rrie emila.*  
*Ore ne-ei mwen ighanghanso.*  
*Ore ne gbogbogbo.*  
*Evbu owie ne o ma iyan vbe iyokhuo.*

(The ruler that has hair of money.  
 The king of the water who surpasses the one on land.  
 The middle of the sky that never sees dirt.  
 The depth of water that a novice cannot swim.  
 The ray of the sun that does not miss a day.  
 The ordinary ground that eats cow.  
 The city that has no criminals.  
 The city that is vast.  
 The morning dew that favors yam and cocoyam.)

Rosen also entered the water:

*Gie ebo ne y'unu onren kha*  
*Ebo ne a gho o!*

(Let this white person use her mouth  
 To tell us the god that she will serve o!)

*U do ya de odo*  
*Ne u khian ronmwon.*

(You will go and buy a husband [i.e., Olokun]  
 The one that you will marry.)

A white goat, its legs broken and tied with white and red strips of cloth, was touched to the bodies of the initiate and the priestesses. Ebibirhen then heaved it into the river where it floated, struggled, and drowned. The wings of two doves were snapped, and they too were thrown to Olokun. Huge trays laden with soap, pomade, face powder, drinks, biscuits, sweets, china cups, and plates were also tossed into the water. Rosen undressed and Ebibirhen washed her naked body with water, an act meant, like Christian baptism, to sanctify her with Olokun's divine graces. *Ebe-*

*ahé* (river ferns) were placed in her mouth to symbolize that she had now been transformed into a container for the spirits. Her body was rubbed with wavelike patterns of chalk:

*A gha gbe orhue omo  
A ghi gbe orhue igho.*

(When you rub chalk of child  
You will rub chalk of money.)

When a baby is born or when a person has some unexpected good luck, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers chalk their bodies to share in the happiness with the hope that good fortune will also rub off on them. When someone is very happy the Bini say: *A gha wee eko ere, a ghi mie ukpudu* (If one were to open his stomach, one would find a lump of chalk).

On Rosen's head, the priestesses placed an *uru* (a small clay pot)—the receptacle of Olokun—filled with river water, chalk, and ferns (plate 6). Sticking out of it was an *uwenrhien-oton* (a long, thin, wooden pole) to dispel danger. As everyone returned to the cars for the trip back to the city, the new cult member was advised: *Owara a hia ekhoe* (It is the straight way that one peels raffia palm), which means, live a straightforward life and everything will be good for you.

When they arrived back in Benin City there was joy and jubilation as Rosen and the others entered into the flailing arms of a celebration. Songs of triumph filled the air:

*Ma yo, ma rre  
Igho ne ebo!  
Ma yo, ma rre  
Igho ne ebo!  
Eze ma ghi gbe ivbi ehen.*

(We have gone, and come  
Money of white man!  
We have gone, and come  
Money of white man!  
The river does not kill the child of fish!)

Olokun, you are the money of white man because you are so handsome! We have returned home safely because we are the children of fish—the worshipers of Olokun!

Everyone danced throughout the night, singing the praises of Olokun, rubbing chalk on their bodies and asking him for wealth and children:

*Do rhie uwa  
Ne u do rhie utonmwén!  
Do rhie orhurhu 'ya uwo egbe!  
Orhurhu na ya bie omo owe ghi ne o!  
Orhurhu na ya bie omo okhuo ghi ne o!  
U gha bie omo owe, u rhie yan egbe o!  
U gha bie omo okhuo, u rhie yan egbe o!*

(Come and take prosperity  
That you may take longevity!  
Come and take chalk and rub your body!  
It is the chalk of bearing a male child!



6. Her body rubbed with wavelike patterns of chalk, Rosen dances from the river carrying Olokun's clay pot on her head and river ferns in her mouth symbolizing that she has been transformed into a container for the spirits. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)

It is the chalk of bearing a female child!  
If you bear a male child, you will put it on your lap!  
If you bear a female child, you will put it on your lap!  
[i.e. alive and well].)

### *The Remaining Days of the Initiation*

The second to fourteenth days of the initiation consisted mainly of numerous night dances interspersed with free days on which there were domestic and private rites of worship as well as relaxation, cooking, and sewing. The second cycle of seven days almost exactly repeated the first, but more narrowly and intensely. Throughout this period Rosen began, slowly at first, to inculcate the secrets of the cult and to grasp the complex interplay among its various art forms: the kinetic, verbal, and visual. She learned the rules of the cult and she gained some knowledge of the materials used in Olokun rituals as well as an understanding of the drawn chalk iconography. Although some of this knowledge no doubt came in the form of direct exegesis, much of it had to be learned through experience. Over the next thirteen days there were seven all-night dances, an *ugie avan* (afternoon dance), and various other rites. By the time it was over, Rosen knew a few of the songs and had learned how to control the drummers with her *ezuzu* (hand fan) as she performed—she was the chief conductor as well as the dazzling dancer.

ROSEN: I had no previous training as a dancer. I had never danced before. I am a textile artist, not a dancer, and I dislike performing in public. Priest Ebibirhen taught me three simple dance steps during my preinitiation. He said: "Not only can you dance, you will dance when the time comes. That is all!" When I compared the simple dance steps he taught me to the floating movements and balanced turns of those skilled in Olokun worship, I thought I would never be able to achieve that level of expertise. But all Ebibirhen said was, "When the time comes, you can do it."

A part of the process of induction involves attaining the appropriate metaphysical attitudes necessary for true trance possession. A priestess has to be attuned to register the subtle and delicate impulses emanating from

7. In trance, Rosen dances, obliterating the chalk drawings on the floor as the other priestesses sing and play calabash rattles. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)



that area of the collective consciousness known as the spirit world. As a priestess becomes more experienced and more practiced it is easier for her to enter trance and her trances become more substantial and of longer duration. However, possession trance is not an exact science. There are bound to be occasions when the impulses are too weak to register, or when the vibrations register erratically. At *Ogue-ede-eha* (the dance of the third day), Rosen whirled round and round as she received flashes from the otherworld. She saw herself paddling a canoe on a swiftly moving stream which fed into the sky. When Ebibirhen heard this he quickly took her aside and fed her a large quantity of powdered chalk. He commanded her to speak. She said, "*Uhunmwun ame*" (Head of river), which, though recognizably an Olokun name, was mispronounced and barely audible. It could not, therefore, be accepted as her very own Olokun name. More time was needed for her to synchronize her sensate faculties with the elusive signals from the otherworld.

On the fifth day Rosen gave an exhibition of her dancing skills to an audience of palace chiefs and well-wishers. She donned a white *adaigho* loaded with charms, cowries, and bells. Strings of coral beads laid thick against her chest; chalk whitened her face and body. Then, suddenly erupting with volcanoes of subterranean energy, she commenced a dance of calculated frenzy, identifying her bodily rhythms with the historical metaphors of the cult, her hot breath dispersed to the otherworld, her sweat pressed against the cheeks of the humidity (plate 7). The *igha-ede* iconography was wiped out as she and the priestesses joined together in their heady transformation of time and location. In Olokun worship, the icon *igha-ede* (that which divides the [mystical] day), made by painting or sifting chalk images on the ground (often in a crosslike pattern), symbolizes the place from which a person crosses over into the other world (plate 8). *Igha-ede* is a messenger bridging the spiritual and physical realms. Through it, Olokun sends messages to his devotees.

On the eighth day—normally a rest day—Olokun revealed to Rosen the particular attribute by which he would want her and her shrine to be known. Caught by forces beyond her control, and hearing the language of another place, she began dancing, then jerked to a halt as if glued to the

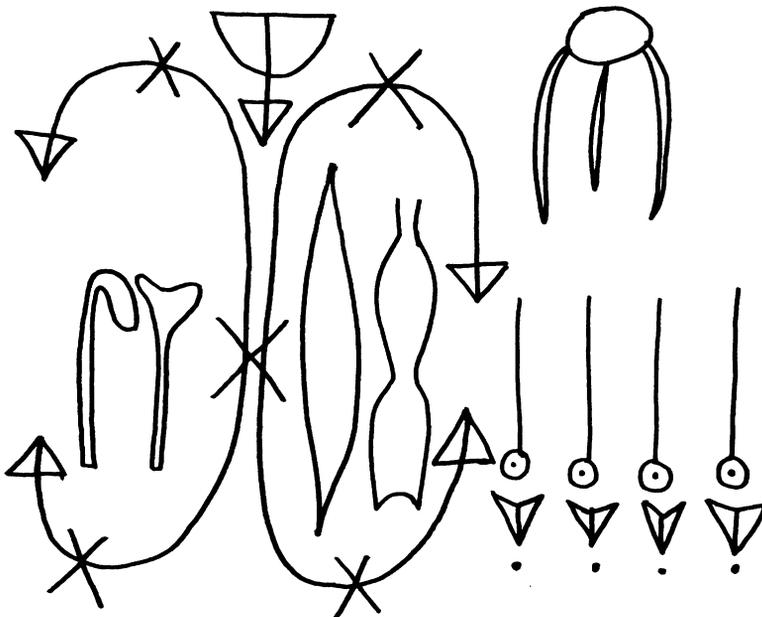
spot. Everyone around her frantically rubbed her legs with chalk and sprinkled magical medicines on her hands. Fortunately, this treatment worked—she resumed dancing and revealed:

I see so many things!  
 I see mirrors everywhere!  
 I see so many things!  
 I see the oceans and mirrors!  
*Eze n'ughegbe!*

*Eze n'ughegbe!* River of mirrors! The transmission from the other side had finally come in loud and clear. She had now received the name by which she would henceforth be known.

ROSEN: When I am in a trance I have no recollection of anything. I sing, but I don't choose the songs. I just don't remember. When people see me this way they afterwards laugh and say that I am *azen* (a witch). Things just come out of my mouth. When I begin to wake up I feel my mind coming down, and my heart coming down, and then I wake up. And there I am, sitting in a chair, sweating. I have no idea what time it is. When your *juju* ["deity," in this case Olokun] calls you, you just do what it tells you to do.

Finally, *ede ikpolo* (the day of sweeping) arrived and with it the end of seclusion. At dawn, after an all-night dance, the Olokun shrines of the officiating priest and the new priestess were served with salt, cowries, a crocodile, turtle, hen, duck, and a she-goat. The trip to and from the realm of high mystery had gone without a hitch. Now the bed of medicinal leaves and other disposable ritual materials could be thrown away because *okpolo ebo i kpolo wi* (the sweeper for the deity does not get lost in the sweepings). Accompanied by her supporters, Rosen presented offerings of



8. The pattern of an elaborate chalk drawing. The bow and arrow motif pointing downward at the top as well as arrows shown elsewhere in the design represent the warrior-deity Ogun. The X marks indicate obstacles that are overcome. (Graphic by Norma Rosen)

chalk and coins to the Emotan shrine in the heart of the city. Emotan was a market woman who is said to have rendered important services to Oba Ewuare as he struggled to consolidate his power. The shrine is one of the most venerated spots in the city. Ceremonial outings begin or end there. As with any new priestess, Rosen's outing announced to the public that she was free to enter the world of living things.

Her life from now on, however, would be hedged by taboos. An Olokun priestess is not permitted to eat any food after sunset. She is forbidden to eat food cooked by a menstruating woman (a traditional taboo for Bini men). She must be careful not to walk under clotheslines because they have been polluted by women's wrappers and undergarments (again, a standard male taboo). She is not allowed to have sexual intercourse during the day because of *egho*, a polluting condition arising from sexual activity (or birth) which must be cleansed from the body at daybreak before food can be prepared and other domestic chores performed (this is a general taboo). The violation of any of these requires ritual purification.

### *Bringing the Olokun Shrine Home*

As an Olokun priestess Rosen could now be possessed by the spirit of Olokun, enter into the trance state, see visions, and make prophecies. However, her Olokun pot, the *uru*, remained with her mentor, Priest Ebibirhen. To bring it home three months later required a second trip to the river, similar to the first, and a dance through the market with a pot of money. Rosen's Olokun pot was transported from Ebibirhen's house to her apartment where, after establishing it on a more permanent basis, it was served with numerous sacrificial offerings including a mudfish, a turtle, and a duck. Rosen also gave the shrine liver paté and cucumber sandwiches which she felt was necessary because when the shrine eventually traveled with her to the United States, it might not be possible to make animal sacrifices to it. The sandwiches were meant to wean the shrine from goats and accustom it to Big Macs. Olokun worship is, after all, individualized. It is left to the imagination, artistic creativity, and sensitivity of each priestess to embellish her shrine, make and interpret her chalk designs, and decorate her garments. Innovations may catch on and be adopted by others. For example, some of the materials Rosen brought with her for sewing costumes (such as sequins and pieces of titanium metal from a missile construction factory in San Diego) were quickly copied by other priestesses. Liver paté sandwiches, though not strictly "kosher" from an anthropological point of view, were not as bizarre as they may seem.

Similarly, individual shrines to Olokun may range from modest chalked clay altars containing little more than the necessary ritual pot to stunning life-size figures of Olokun. Of absolutely vital importance on an altar is the *uru-Olokun* (pot of Olokun) without which an Olokun shrine has no meaning. This is a simple, hand-coiled earthenware vessel with a large-flanged lip. Once it has been ritually activated with plants, river water, cowries, coins, and other items it becomes an extension of Olokun in the physical world and is known as *uru-Olokun*, a consecrated tabernacle, if you will. It is the central object in the shrine through which communication with the otherworld takes place. Bells are also a major instrument of worship kept on or near the shrine because it is believed that Olokun contacts his devotees through the voice of the bell. These bells vary in shape, but the most common is the pyramid bell. Because these are often commissioned, they have decorative designs which are idiosyncratic to the individual priestess.

The designs are derived from visions experienced either during sleep or while in trance.

Other common shrine objects include ceremonial chalk of various sizes, shapes, and carved linear patterns; miniature brass ladders which represent the devotee's desire for social mobility; carved miniature canoes, paddles, fans, brass ceremonial swords, and mirrors. These serve mainly as symbols of Olokun or as a means of communication with him. In addition, Olokun shrines may contain an assortment of purely decorative objects such as china plates, Christmas tree ornaments, plastic flowers and figurines—indeed, just about any item which the worshiper thinks may enhance the beauty of the shrine or indicate her special link with Olokun. The particular embellishment of her shrine may be influenced, for example, by the name a priestess received during her initiation.

**ROSEN:** My name is Eze n'ughegbe, "River of Mirrors," which may be extended to mean, "The river is the glass which reflects heaven and earth." Because of this my shrine is decorated with mirrors, different shapes and sizes of glass prisms, Christmas tree ornaments, and anything shiny or reflective (plate 9).

Worshippers believe that in addition to giving children to women, Olokun can increase their wealth. If indeed this actually happens, a devotee may reflect her change in status by expanding her shrine. Professionals may be called in to create the life-size effigies which objectify Olokun and his retainers. Sometimes, too, the larger shrines are commissioned by a priest or priestess who has had a dream in which Olokun commands that a shrine be molded in his honor. The imagery of these shrines is considered to be an accurate portrayal of Olokun's kingdom under the sea. The central

9. *Rosen's shrine for Eze n'ughegbe (River of Mirrors), decorated with Olokun pots, mirrors, glass prisms, Christmas tree ornaments, and other shiny or reflective objects. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)*



10. Dressed in her ritual cloth decorated with cowries, Rosen dances in the market carrying her "pot of money" filled with coins, cowries, chalk, and medicines. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)

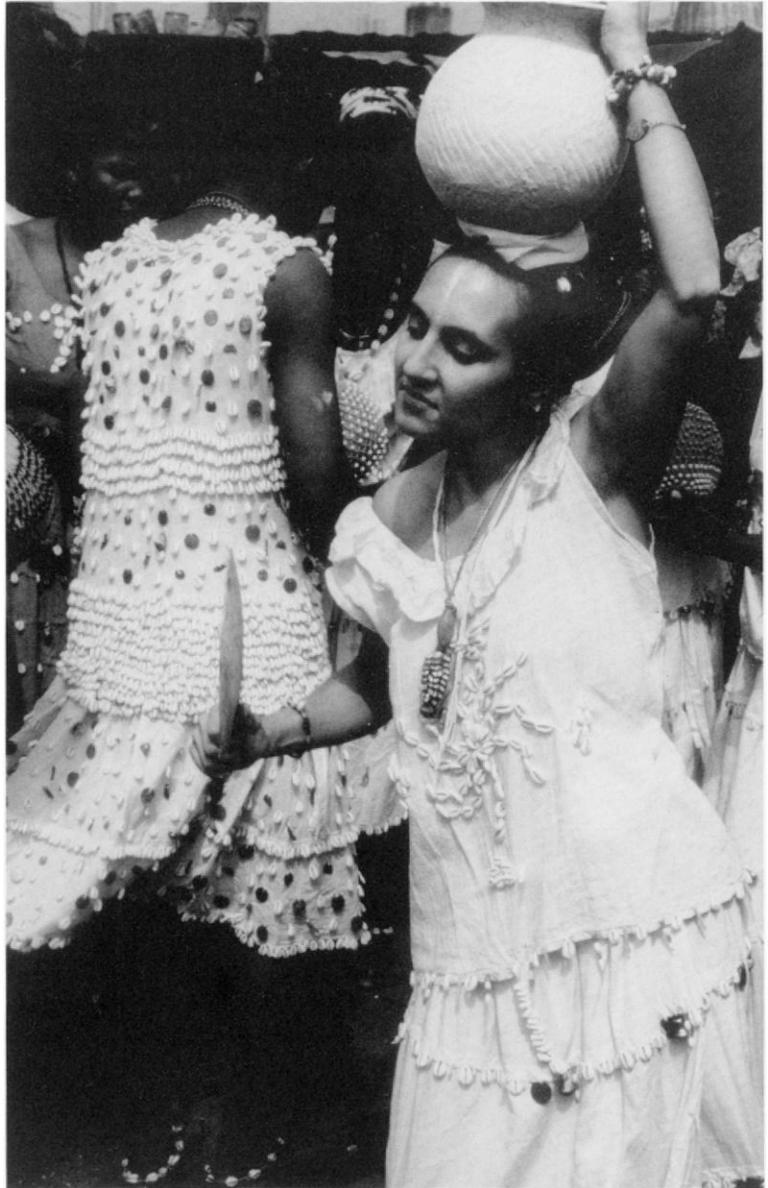


figure is Olokun dressed in the finest royal regalia, surrounded by his wives, important attendants, and perhaps some noteworthy historical personages. One shrine, for example, has the figure of Lord Lugard (the first Governor-General of Nigeria) mounted on a horse. As Ben-Amos (1973:30) points out, in their imagery these shrines represent the power, wealth, and munificence of Olokun. They evoke from the observer the same sentiments which inspire an individual to become a devotee of Olokun: the hope that one can go from poverty to bounty, from barrenness to fecundity, and from a lack of success to good luck.

After establishing the Olokun shrine in her apartment, Rosen took the *akhe igho* (pot of money) which had earlier been filled with coins, cowries, chalk, and medicines and carried it to the market. Why the market? Because it is a symbol of wealth and material success. The market is a place of

commerce and exchange, of noisy quarrels and busy transactions symbolizing the vitality and energy of a people. With the pot of money on her head and dressed in her traditional *adaigho*, Rosen danced through the market (plate 10), stopping momentarily at every junction to throw chalk and coins to the onlookers.

*I gha gbe ne edion ghe.*  
*I gha gbe ne edion ghe.*  
 Evbo—o!

(I want to dance for the elders to see.  
 I want to dance for the elders to see.  
 Townsmen—o!)

*Eguae mwen gha ro vbe eki.*  
*Ghe, i ghi he vbe eki.*

(My palace is crowded like the market.  
 Look, may I not close like the market.)

Olokun's palace is always crowded and full like a market on a busy day (plate 11). May I too be full of good things! Work came to a standstill as sellers and customers, the young and the old, pressed forward to catch a glimpse of the new priestess, pick up a few coins, and praise her in turn:

*Emwin ne o ma u vio rre;*  
*Emwin ne o ma u gha mie.*

(Good things you brought here;  
 Good things you will receive.)

At the exit to the market, and nearly trapped by the crush of the curious, Rosen—partly impelled by her own kinetic energy, and partly twirled round seven times by the priestesses accompanying and guiding her—dashed the pot of money to the ground where it exploded like a cornucopia of riches and good luck. Pandemonium ensued as youngsters and adults surged forward, shoving and fighting for the coins in the pot.



11. The group of priestesses dances through a busy market, always crowded and full of good things just as is Olokun's palace. (Photo by Joseph Nevadomsky)

One more ceremony remained. Two years later (three years by local reckoning in which the beginning of the initiation is included as the basis for counting), sacrifices were made similar to the ones on the first, seventh, and fourteenth days of her initiation. These acts confirmed her as a priestess competent to divine as well as to preside at the initiation of other priestesses.

### *The Shrines in Long Beach*

The obvious appeal of the cult and the large number of worshipers it attracts makes initiation accessible to anyone, provided the person is serious and has both the stamina (physical and spiritual) and financial means to see it through. Since the Bini believe that fertility and wealth are universal desires, they find nothing unusual in someone outside the culture seeking entry into the Olokun cult. They also recognize that after a person becomes a priestess or priest, that person will eventually organize her/his group of worshipers. Ebibirhen accepted the fact that Rosen would carry her shrine to the United States and become “famous and wealthy as an Olokun priestess.”

In Long Beach, California, Rosen established her shrine to Olokun as well as shrines to the deities of other cults she joined while in Benin, including Eziza, the whirlwind; Esango, the Yoruba god of thunder; Ogun, the god of metal; and Osun, the god of medicine. Each of these shrines has its own special name, determined by divination and reflecting the personality of their owner. Rosen also serves the night spirits who congregate at crossroads, a place of intense metaphysical activity. These shrines live in the painted-up window of her storefront apartment. Absent is the shrine to Esu, the gatekeeper of the gods (and also the god of unpredictability). An Esu shrine is always located at the front entrance of one’s house—an impossibility on the busy downtown street where Rosen lives. But Rosen wraps food for Esu in a bag and deposits it in a parking lot adjacent to her apartment. At night, when the streets are empty, she also serves a nearby junction with a pounded yam substitute made from bisquick and potatoes to which is added a (red) tomato stew.

Rosen worships her Olokun shrine every four days on Oba market day, the day on which her initiation into the cult commenced. Periodically, she carries trays of gifts to the ocean, being careful to go to an isolated place where she will not be troubled by the Long Beach police. Sometimes she takes small groups with her to participate in the giving of gifts to Olokun. When necessary, she divines not only for herself but also for friends and clients. She receives calls from people troubled by job insecurity, sleeplessness, and marriage problems. After divining for clients she may prepare amulets to protect them from harm or to help them through a personal crisis. She insists, however, on preparing talismans only for protection and not for destruction.

ROSEN: My shrines are not here to hurt people but to help them. I want to solve problems for people, not be the instrument of their injury or worry. When I divine for someone, the oracle may call for sacrifices such as a red hen tied with a red cloth, drinks, and cooked stew. I may then have to prepare a talisman made of coins, red cloth, chalk, the hair from the forehead of a dog. Whatever the oracle tells me to do, I do it.

Most of the time Rosen worships on her own behalf.

ROSEN: My shrines, including my Olokun shrine, help me be creative in my work. They keep me energized. I have a job with a fashion design group and I work hard all day. Also, when I need something special, my shrines find a way to get it for me. When I needed money to send to my friends in Benin City, I asked my shrines to help. Shortly after, three clients came to my apartment for divination and I received more money than I needed.

Drawn iconography decorates the walls in Rosen's apartment. Her *adaigho* and other ritual garments are hung on a rack. Because of limitations of space and other facilities, her shrines are not set up as she would like them to be. This is not a problem, however.

ROSEN: My shrines are managing. They are small and crowded together. But even if I had no shrines, I have learned that one can be a priestess without paraphernalia: the power is not in the objects themselves but in the person who has the spiritual ability. Some Olokun shrines in Benin are small, yet the priestesses who own them are highly respected because they are able to bring the shrines to life to do things for people. If all my shrines were taken away, I would dream up new ways of creating them because the deities want me to. At first, I was afraid that I would not be able to construct and activate my shrines in Long Beach—so far from Benin—but then I realized that the deities do not see time or space. They operate on a different level of consciousness that transcends all boundaries.

Rosen continues to adhere to the taboos of the Olokun cult. A life full of denial is not an easy one. Nevertheless, she feels that she has responsibilities to her shrines, and they to her. In her words, "You own them, but they own you."

### Note

1. I am grateful for the assistance of Ikponmwosa Osemwegie and Greg Airihenbuwa. Norma Rosen wishes to thank Professor W.I. Wangboje, the Dean of the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Benin; Pius Guobadia, her research assistant; Ikponmwosa Osemwegie, her research advisor; Chiefs N.I. Isekhure and A.E. Ogiemwanye; Joseph Nevadomsky; and Chief Priest Ama Ebibirhen. This project was funded in part by grants from the University Research and Publications Committee, University of Benin.

### References

- Ben-Amos, Paula  
1973 "Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art." *African Arts* 6:30–36.
- Fagg, William  
1978 *Divine Kingship in Africa*. London: British Museum Publications.

---

**Joseph Nevadomsky** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Social, Cultural and Environmental Research at the University of Benin, Nigeria. He has conducted fieldwork in India, Trinidad, and Nigeria and has published articles on Benin rituals in *African Arts*.