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A Reconsideration of the Ora-Benin Relationship

Ohioma Ifounu Pogoson

Abstract

The relationship between the Edo people of Ora and the Edo people of Benin dates back to ancient times. It is taken for granted in the accounts of the origin of this relationship that the Ora are the descendants of Uguan, son of Oba Ozolua of the Benin Kingdom. However, a painstaking dissection of certain aspects of the traditions of origin provides grounds for exploring some of the issues that may have been forgotten or become unremembered in the historical accounts. Whereas the Edo people of Benin place the beginning of their relationship with the Ora in the aftermath of the rule of Ewuare the Great in the 15th century, Ora remembrance of its Benin affiliation goes back as far as the reign of Eweka I in the 13th century. While it is not to be doubted that waves of migration from Benin led to the peopling of the Ora area, it also stands to reason that the Benin migration met an autochthonous element from which has been handed down some of the distinctive and longstanding features of Ora culture still in evidence today. These features include, but are not limited to, the Ora gerontocratic system of traditional governance and the absence of royal art in the Ora area, which mark major departures from the Benin way. In addition, there are extant contributions to Ora culture from the nearby culture of Ile-Ife, and these contributions appear to predate the Benin migration, even though the latter dominates accounts of the origin of the Ora.

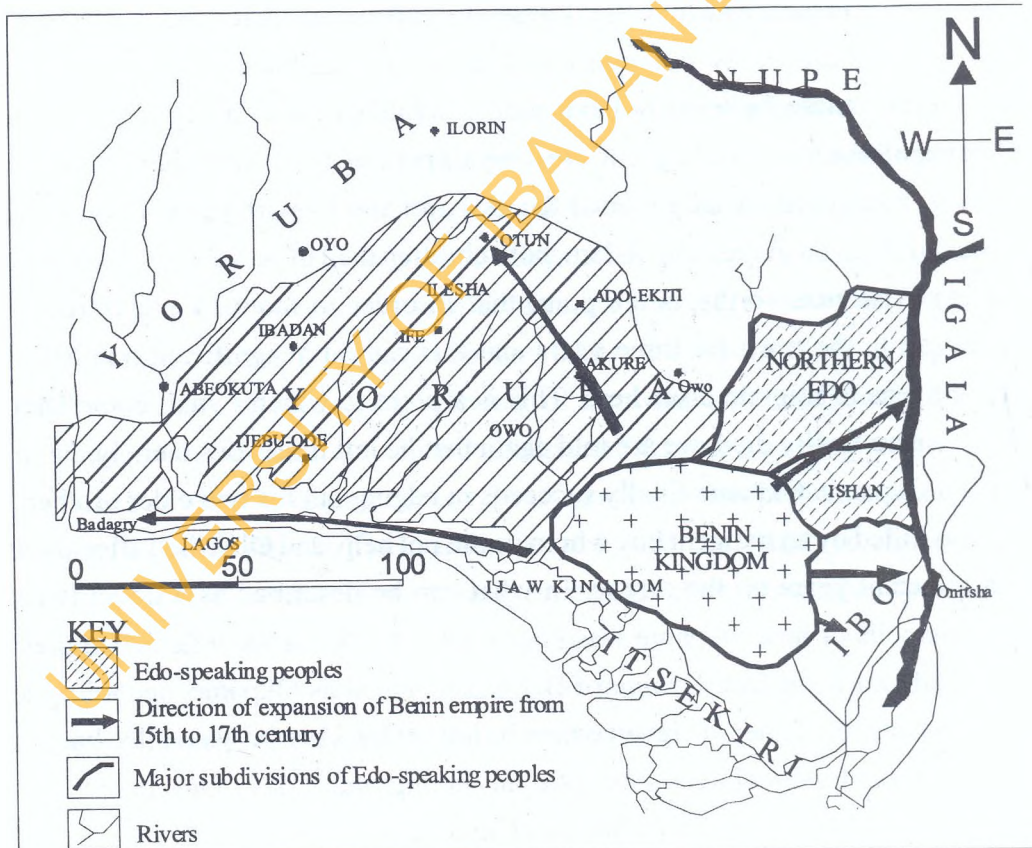
Introduction

The Ora are an Edo people situated in north western Edo State of Nigeria. Their traditional history links them very closely with the ancient kingdom of Benin, which ruled over most of the area (fig. 1) from around the 14th century. Benin kingdom was eventually conquered in 1897 by an invading British army said to be on a "punitive expedition" to avenge the killing of its officials who had obviously undertaken a trip of misadventure to the town at an inauspicious time of the year when the Oba was performing traditional rituals to propitiate his ancestors. After the defeat of Benin, the British established a colonial administration to replace the authority of the Oba. The Oba had hitherto been a supreme ruler, the head of both the religious and political life in the whole of Benin territory. Indeed, such was the political stature of the Oba that he had the power of life and death over his subjects. He also owned all the land, the mainstay of the traditional economy.

The term "Edo" can be confusing when it comes to the issues that are of concern in this paper. The people of Benin refer to themselves, their language, and their capital as "Edo". But there is also another sense of this word which encompasses more than the Benin experience. This other sense is largely linguistic although, naturally, it contains some other cultural and historical elements as well. In West African linguistics, there is the family of languages classified as Edoid. These are not languages that are variants of the language spoken by the people of Benin, even though within the group the language of the people of Benin is the most prominent population-wise. In fact, the language of the people of Benin is not attested as the oldest in the family. Therefore, the Benin people are primarily referred to as Edo, and all the ethnic groups that speak Edoid languages and that are located in present-day Edo State are also referred to as Edo people.

The Ora, as indicated earlier, are a sub-group of the Edoid people in the linguistic (and cultural) sense. The Ora are made up of the inhabitants of Ohia, Ovbiokhuarlin, Eviobe or Sabongida-Ora, Uhonmora, Oke-New and Old sites, and Eme. A common history, which traces their origin to Benin, has for a long time now bound the Ora people together filially and with the Benin palace. Actually, it is the Benin palace connection that binds the Ora with the Edo of Benin that is the

major interest here. Such a connection, well-articulated in Benin, has for a long time been taken for granted because both the Ora and the Benin speak related languages. But far from the language connection, it seems to me that the differences between the Ora and the Benin are significant enough to warrant a reconsideration of certain aspects of the relationship between the two peoples, indeed to raise the argument that they may not after all have been so closely related. This, in addition to reviewing the traditional Ora-Benin relationship, is the main theme of this paper. It will seek to find areas where the Ora and the Edo depart and, using these departure points, review the often-attested Ora-Benin relationship.



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Figure 1: Map showing areas of expansion of Edo in the 14th /15th century.

Ora-Benin Relationship

The rationale for the creation of Edo State rested on the homogeneity of the peoples of that region. Apart from the people of Benin, other inhabitants of the state include the Owan, the Esan and the northernmost Etsako people. These are the four broad categories into which the people of Edo State could be put, and the truth is that they speak related languages. Also true is that their historical origins associate them with mainstream Edo of Benin and indeed the palace.

According to Egharevba (1968), a popular Edo historian whose book of 1947 has more or less shaped the cultural discourse in that region, the primogenitor of the Ora is a Benin prince who, banished from the town, left with a group of people to settle in the area where the Ora are presently situated. It must, however, be noted that Egharevba is not consistent about the children of Ewuare, one of whom is Okpame, believed to have gone to found Ora after being sent on exile for cutting off the head of a boy while testing his cutlass. In his narrative on Ewuare the Great, Egharevba initially named Kuoboyuwa and Ezuwrha as Ewuare's first and second children. According to him, both children died of poisoning (Egharevba 1968:14). Also noteworthy is the point that in order to mourn his children he forbade sex in the town for three years and this caused a significant number of Benin citizens to migrate elsewhere. This is a point to which I shall come later. When Ewuare finally died, we are told again that he left three sons namely, Ezoti, Olua and Okpame. Okpame finally succeeds in edging out his two elder brothers. Ezoti was killed by an indigent boy whom he did not help, and Olua died after about seven reluctant years on the throne. In what can be described as a novel twist, Egharevba tells of how Okpame was later invited to the throne when Olua died. Okpame of Ora is, in fact, Ozolua of Benin. Ozolua alias Okpame, according to Egharevba, was the father of Uguan whom he left at Ora when he was called back to Benin. Indeed Egharevba is emphatic in noting that "The Ora people are descendants of Uguan" son of Ozolua alias Okpame.

According to Aisien (1989), the Ora are a branch of the Edo family tree. He refers to them as the descendants of Prince Okpame, later Oba Ozolua, the warrior king of Benin, through his son Uguan. Using apparently recently gathered data, Aisien (1989) reports that the Ora people are the propitiators of the physical earth

for the Oba of Benin; and that for this purpose a group of Ora specialists were brought to Benin and settled in Evborhan Quarters in Ogbelaka area of Benin. For a proper elucidation of this point in his discussion of the *Benin Kingdom and Her Immediate Neighbours*, he abstracts the Ora from the other groups in the Owan area whose traditional origins also in one way or another are replete with stories of migration from Benin. Indeed, Aisien remarks refer to the Ora clan of the Owan group. Clearly, the implication is that there is an especially close relationship between the Ora and the Edo. He even goes on to say that the Bini tradition is loud on the fact that, in the fullness of time, Ozolua was recalled home from Ora by the city elders to return to Benin and take over the throne of his father (Aisien 1989: 8). But in all of this, it appears that he had been exculpated from the offences for which he was originally exiled.

From Egharevba (1968) we learn that Ozolua's banishment was due to his culpability in the murder of Ezoti's only son, Prince Owere and his mother, "in order that he might be crowned Oba". Ezoti, eldest of the three sons of Ewuare the Great is said to have ruled for only 14 days after his father's death, having been assassinated. Olua, the second son of Ewuare, had initially rejected the throne after Ezoti's death, fearing his younger brother Okpame (alias Ozolua). When he was finally persuaded to take up the rulership of the town he immediately dispatched his younger son to Ehor to keep watch against Okapme's coming to attack him. (Egharevba 1968:20). Ehor is the last Benin town between Benin and Ishan/Ora in the same direction (fig. 2). Then, according to Egharevba, Olua's son later became the OgieEhor. All of this seems to suggest that Okpame must have been greatly feared. Therefore, why was it so easy to accept him back to the Benin throne? Be that as it may, the key point to note here is that the Ora are believed in Benin traditional history to be closely related to their palace.

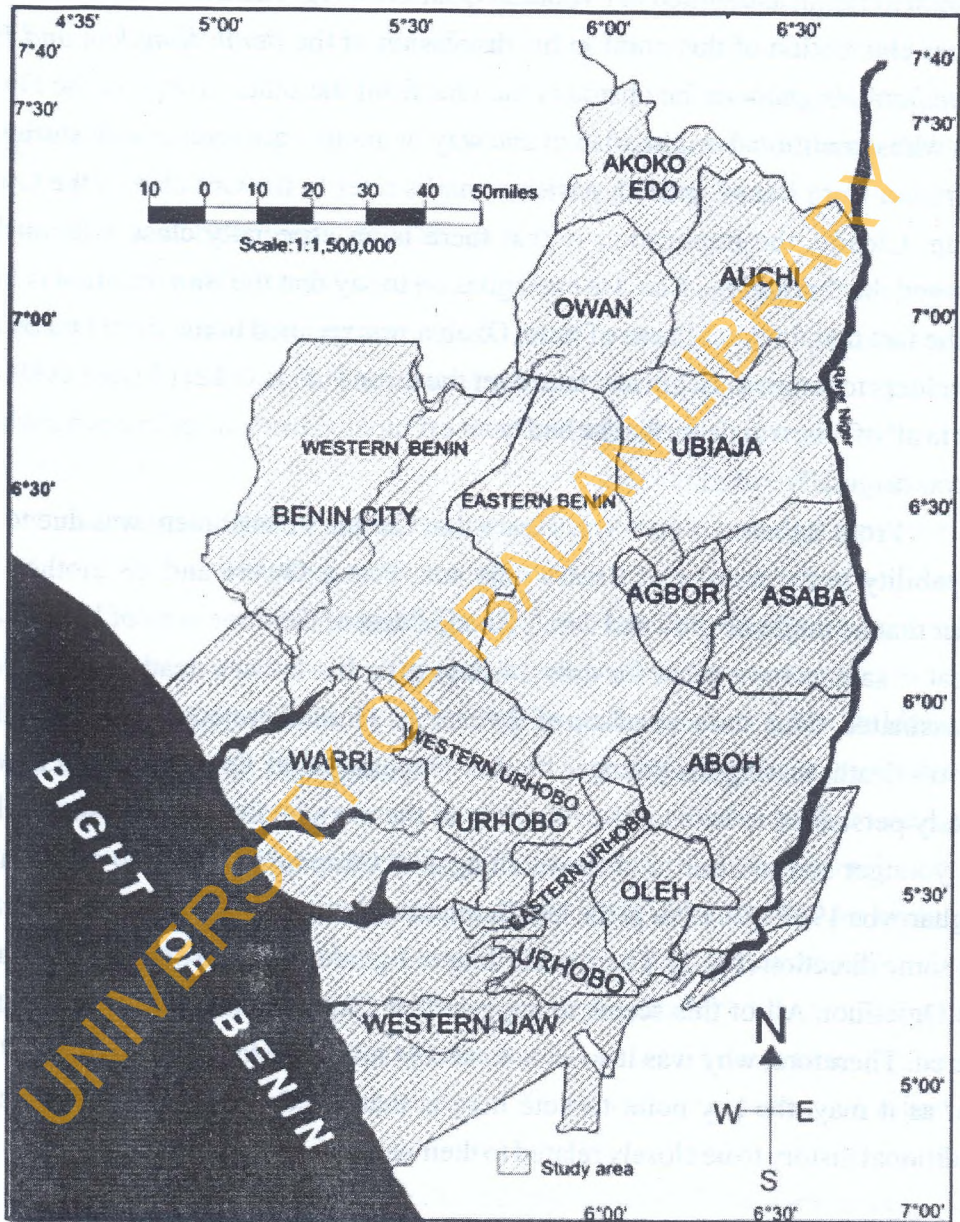


Figure 2: Map showing research areas of Edoland

In Ora, according to Orhewere (1988), the most prolific of the writers on the history, culture and religion of the area, the concept of "time immemorial" is expressed by referring to the period of Oba Eweka I. This is clearly demonstrated in the saying, "Da vboeghegh' Aweka'evae", which is how Ora people express the sense of "In the beginning". Oba Eweka I is the progenitor of the current Benin dynasty, and is believed to be the son of Oranmiyan of Ife and the daughter of the Ogiegor of Egor. According to Benin tradition, when the Ogiso dynasty lost favour with the people, they sent to Ife for a ruler to assist in the governance of Benin. Oduduwa, then Ooni of Ife, sent his son, Oranmiyan, to rule the town. On getting there, however, he found the place too difficult to manage, so he returned to Ife after bearing a child by an Edo woman, and later founded Oyo. This child was crowned Eweka the First. Egharevba dates the coming of Oranmiyan to about 1170 AD and the beginning of the reign of Eweka I to about 1200 AD. Now, whereas in Ora the people trace their origin to Eweka, the Benin people are more inclined to date their connection with the people of Ora to the time of Ewuare the Great, whose reign Egharevba (1968) puts at c1440.

What really happened between 1200 and 1440 is now certainly too dim to be incontrovertibly reconstructed. Oral traditions have not been helpful. These handicaps notwithstanding, Orhewere's (1988) view is that the date and time of early human movements from Edoland towards Ora are shrouded in obscurity. Oral traditions in Ora indicate, however, that the origin of Ora is Benin and that Ora people have a special relationship with the Benin palace. This relationship, as it has been shown earlier, is based on the founder of Ora being the son of Oba Ozolua of Benin. In Ora, for example, the people are called "ivbiOzolua", meaning children of Ozolua.

"Ora'idigwen'Oba" is a saying in Ora that refers to a protocol which is well respected by the Oba of Benin. It means that an Ora person does not genuflect or curtsy to the Oba. There are other numerous sayings, songs and proverbs to confirm the Ora-Benin relationship. The main concern of this paper, therefore, is not just to question the Ora-Benin relationship, but to attempt to understand the nature of this relationship and to investigate how it has affected both places given the fact that today the "homogeneous" Edo State is being dominated by the "Edo".

Consider that the Ora-Benin relationship, explained thus far, does not refer only to those who came in from Benin, but encompasses all Ora people. Meanwhile, there is sufficient reason, from numerous studies (e.g. Elugbe 1979) of the languages of the region, to believe that an autochthonous population existed there before the 15th-century arrival date of Ozolua from Benin. The implication of this would be that we may have lumped together an autochthonous people with those who came from Benin. In the traditional history of Ora, both Amu (1965) and Orhewere (1988) and, indeed, all others who have dealt with the subject of Ora

history agree that there was an earlier Ora settlement at a place called Odolere. This is the place where Ozolua's party, in my opinion, first settled on arrival in that region. Ozolua's party, on its way from Benin, could certainly not have immediately mingled with the autochthonous population.

Who gave the parcel of land at Odolere to Ozolua? Could Ozolua have merely settled there upon his arrival and built a population that is now the Ora? This is unlikely because that part of the region, very close to the Yoruba, had been interacting with the Yoruba for a very long time. Yoruba influence in the region confirms this. Uhobe or Sobe has on various occasions in recent times been placed in Ondo, Bendel, and Edo States. The Yoruba language is still widely spoken in the area.

The argument is that Ozolua met some people when he got to the region now inhabited by the Ora. It is from these autochthons that he got the permission to settle in nearby Odolere. After staying there for a while, he might have proved himself not only worthy of princely rehabilitation, but also showed good prowess and flair. A similar situation is the case of the Ekaladerhan-in-Ife theory of the origin of the Eweka dynasty. This is what made it possible for Ozolua and his party to merge with the autochthonous population who are the ancestors of some present-day Ora people. There is also the possibility that Ozolua's party was immediately admitted into the elders' council in that he was blue-blooded and from Edo. From there he could have worked his way to the top, employing the advantages of his pedigree. How all of the Ora have now come to be referred to as "ivbiOzolua" is now lost in the traditions of both the Benin and the Ora. This could certainly have happened with the growing success and domination of the whole area by the Benin forces. Indeed, the Edo of Benin were the leaders of the region up till the late 1890's when the British began to gain the foothold which led to Benin's eventual fall in 1897. I have collected traditional accounts of returnee slaves in Ora of how slave raiders from Benin ravaged the Ora area at the turn of the 18th century. Could they really have been taking people so closely related to the Benin palace, people who were excused from curtsying to the Oba of Benin? Recall that Orhewere (1988) even pointed out very succinctly the fact that the period from the 14th-16th century of Ora history is now unremembered. Then also in Benin history, we have had to rely on oral traditional accounts for the same period. These oral accounts are at best undependable. This puts the subject in a speculative realm, but we must be wary about how far, how daring and how plausible the speculations we venture into can go.

The whole theory of the derivation of the Ora from Benin royal stock has been best demonstrated in the Benin palace where, as it has been indicated earlier on, an Ora person is excused from giving the royal curtsies due to the Oba of Benin. Apart from this unusual situation, which tends to confirm a relationship at the least, other minor hints of the relationships are obtainable in Ora and Benin traditions and sayings. A close look at the traditional hierarchical arrangement, however, does not reveal any such connection. Could this be why there is no royal art in Ora of the sort and magnitude produced and still being produced in Benin? The head of the Ora clans is the Odion-Urhukpa. According to Unuigboje (1996), at the death of Uguan in Benin, his bosom friend Obazuwa went to Benin to collect his body for burial in Benin. When the request was refused, he was allowed to collect his staff (Ukpa), his sword (Ebein) and his crown (Odigien). Obazuwa is reported to have handed these items over to Ora-Ekpen who kept them in a hut and appointed Evboruan to take care of the items. In this manner he became the first Chief Priest of Ora-Ekpen. It is this position that was later passed on to the oldest man in the community in a departure from monarchy to gerontocracy.

In later years, however, when the sons of Ora-Ekpen dispersed, it was agreed among them that they share these items. In sharing the staff, it was agreed that it should be split equally among the six clans. But in order that it is made to remain a staff each benefactor-community was to add a piece of stick to the piece of Ora-Ekpen's original staff that it got. According to Unuigboje (1996), this is believed to be the origin of "orhan-Ekpeu"(wooden staff of Ekpen). Subsequently the oldest male who kept the staff for each community now became "Odion-orhan-Ekpen", the oldest male keeper of the wooden staff of Ekpen. The other two items, now part of the royal regalia of Odion-Urhukpa, were equally shared and are now known as "Uwenwen"and "Ugwodigien". These cultural materials are now said to be part of the royal regalia of the heads of Ora clans called "OdionUrukpa".

In a very striking difference, and a valid point in establishing departures between both peoples, Ora, with all its Benin connections, departs from the autocratic primogeniture-based form of government found in Benin, and practises gerontocracy instead. Could this have resulted from the struggle between the autochthonous Ora and the Ozolua party? It is instructive that despite being credited with the founding of Ora, Ozolua did not establish himself as an autocrat in tribute to the form of political arrangement in the culture in which he was brought up. Let us then, for the purpose of argument, assume that the treatment he got from

Benin had affected and conditioned his thinking about autocratic rule. The question that will arise will be: Why did he go back there to become the absolute Oba again, to be invested with the same kind of powers? Although centralized forms of governments were common in south western Nigeria in earlier times, it is perhaps only among the Edo of Benin that primogeniture seems to have taken a good foothold. This is still the only means of succession in Benin. And nowhere else, not even in its so-called former allied areas in that region or even among the peoples who share traditional historical relationships with Benin, is this type of administrative set up known. In Yorubaland, from where the Benin monarchy is said to have derived, the primogeniture rule is not applied in the succession of kings. Instead, what we have are ruling families producing kings in turns. In Ora, said to derive from Benin through Oba Ozolua, the rulership and administration of the towns are in the hands of the oldest people in the community.

Migration from Benin is always worthy of further study, but I shall take a brief look at its occurrence, especially as it relates to the formation of other Benin-related groups. Indeed, the whole of Northern Edo land, consisting of the Owan, the Akoko Edo, the Esan and the Etsako Local Government Areas, is Benin-related in one form or another. In addition, the origins of these places are invariably tied to migrations from Benin and hence the often-cited relationship. They even speak related languages. Such migrations from a likely urban setting with autocratic government such as Benin are conceivable. But the case, which I cited earlier, sounds implausible. I admit that autocracy has a good potential of breeding despondency. As such, one should not rule out anything on any basis.

It is worth noting that there is evidence that local slave merchants working in conjunction with their foreign slave merchants raided the whole of northern Edo land up to the early part of the last century. The merchants could not have sold from their own stock. The exception to this rule would be that the slaves they took, if they were Edo-related, most probably had been outcasts. Then, is there any possibility that the Edo slave raiders, knowing the Ora to be "ivbi'Ozolua", would continue to raid them as frequently as the oral traditions reveal and up till the early years of the last century? The point I am making is that if the migrations from Benin were without malice, or as a result of conflict, there would be little chance of Benin slave dealers taking such migrants from Benin as slaves. Or is there a chance that the Ozolua group was trading autochthonous citizens who had granted them hospitality?

That the population of Ora, as it is comprised today, is made up of two groups - an autochthonous group and the migrant Ozolua group - is a likely conjecture. If this is the case, it will be right to surmise that it is only the Ozolua group that will be related to the Edo through the Benin palace. The autochthonous group must have maintained its position of "landlord" and insisted on Benin culture not significantly influencing the indigenous culture.

But where did the autochthons come from? A close study of the peopling of that region seems to suggest a movement from the Yoruba area and elsewhere. Consider the Yoruba traditional history that suggests that Ife is the beginning of life and the point from which all the other Yoruba dispersed. In the direction of the Ora, oral and material evidences tend to corroborate the position. After all, the most ancient artefacts in the whole region are the famous naturalistic arts of Ife. Then going further west are the popular terracotta works from Owo, a town which has been described as the transition point in the transfer of the technology of *cireperdue* casting to Benin. In terms of proximity, Owo is closer to Ora than it is to Benin in another direction. Then, there are close affinities in the cultures of the Ora, Owo and Ifon, and Benin. These cultural affinities are such that some towns bordering the Yoruba and the Edo in that region have been constantly shifting between Ondo, the old Bendel, and Edo state in the several boundary adjustments that have taken place as a result of the creation of new states. Indeed, Yoruba is widely spoken in Ora, just as there are several Yoruba family names. One is therefore inclined to believe that the initial peopling of the whole of that region might have happened from the Ife area.

An interesting point already made by Ilevbare (1991) is that in spite of claims of relatedness to the Oba of Benin, he never appointed any Enigie to rule anywhere in Ora, Emai or Iuleha (Ilevbare, 1991:59). Ilevbare, also writing on the widespread Ejere chieftaincy title of the Ora, Emai and Iuleha clans of the area, suggests an Ife origin for the title. According to him, all indications emanating from fieldwork point to Ife as the place of origin of Ejere. He even adds that the parent-cult of Ejere could have been Ogboni or Mole, both of which E.B. Idowuin Ilevbare (1991) believes, are one and the same cult, since the Ogboni as well as the Mole claim to be the OniIe or owners of the land as opposed to newcomers (Ilevbare, 1991: 60-61). I find the last bit on land ownership quite interesting. Could a similar situation have been the case in the Ora area, with the landowners trying to establish a claim and at the same time preserving their identity? I strongly believe that there is good potential in such a search in spite of the fairly recent date postulated for the introduction of the title into the area (Ilevbare, 1991: 61).

There is no doubt that Benin influence in the region under consideration was great for a considerable length of time. However, because of distant time gaps, the absence of writing and documentation, and indeed, dimmed memories, such relationships, contacts or influences are now hard to incontrovertibly explain. We can only glean bits and pieces from the cultures of the present inhabitants of the region. What may perhaps be more rewarding at this time could be composite studies of the various groups currently inhabiting the area. Although the Ora do not appear on the surface to have much in common with Benin, it is a known fact that smaller groups tend to associate with the larger, more dominant groups in the same vicinity. If this is the case, then there could be a chance that the autochthonous Ora "from Ife" shifted their allegiance to Benin when the sphere of influence of Benin began to spread northwards in the direction of the Ora and beyond. The date and duration of the establishment of Benin influence in the Ora area are crucial factors in unravelling how that influence came to displace and stunt Ife culture in that neighbourhood. What is most likely is that the Benin influence in Ora started when Ora history began with the statement, "Da vboeghegh' Aweka'evae", which, as Orhewere(1988) explains, describes Ora people's conception of "time immemorial". Ora's past before the time of Eweka is now largely unremembered.

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