

ESU IN BENIN COSMOLOGY

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In Benin cosmology, Esu is not figured among the pantheon of Benin gods but rather an *Okaighele* (Youth leader) of the *Ighele erhinmwin* (The youth of the spirit world). And the *Ighele erhinmwin* are virtually the most dangerously malevolent entities in the spiritual and physical realms. They are the unburied dead or the unincorporated spirit, those of whom the benefits of obsequies were not accorded! Benin people take the obsequies with all solemnities because they ensure that the dead journey unhindered to the Hall of the Dead, where the revered ancestors rest blissfully. Obsequies, too, sanctify the dead absolving them of all their past open and secret misdeeds while they were living, as it accords them the worthiness or the honour to share the *Odion* status with the honoured ancestors in the spirit world.

Among the Benin people, the ultimate achievement of every living person is attaining the *Odion* status. A position of respect as an honoured elder among the revered elders in a given society, a position that involves exemption from obligations that are binding on the youth and all other ordinary persons or commoners in a given society. A position that enables one to participate as an honoured elder among the committee of the revered elders (*Edion evbo*) at the *Ogua Edion*, which is the meeting hall of the revered elders of the community. And attaining this ultimate status involves a growth movement through a gradation of age grade statuses, called *Otu*, starting from birth through toddlerhood, adolescence, adulthood to elderhood! A process assisted by relevant rites of passage.

The Benin people believe this same order is a copy of what exists in the spirit realm. And just as the living are assisted by these rites of passage for growth in statuses, so must the dead

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be assisted to grow in statuses through obsequies. And as for the dead that is left unburied, missing out in these obsequies, Benin people believe them to be unhappy, harbouring resentments against the living, because they're left hovering in the *Ada Agbon, ada Erhinmwin* that's the junction between the World of living and World of the dead. They are in this seeming limbo because the relevant obsequies that would have enabled them to advance in their statuses of *Ighele* (Youthhood) to the *Odion* (Elderhood) level, a necessary prerequisite for resting blissfully with the revered ancestors, is missing in their spirit life. And now feeling abandoned and trapped perpetually in the *Ighele* status, they become restless and begin to roam aimlessly away to places like the wilderness, lonely farm roads or paths, pathways to streams, junctions, marketplaces and even wandering to their former abodes while alive, land looking for whom to harm! And as the Benin say, "*Ogho yo ogho re vbe ohinmwin na ma he*" meaning "" milling around aimlessly like an unburied dead" ! And it's, for this reason, Benin people occasionally offer sacrifices in the likely haunts of these malevolent *Ighele erhinmwins* aimed are appeasing them.

These angry and restless spirits become willing recruits in the hands of Esu, who himself, incidentally because of his mischief, had never graduated to the *Odion* (elderhood) status in *Erhinmwin*. From the period of his creation by Osanobua, Esu creates a marauding army of angry spirits, the *Ighele erhinmwin*, which he heads! And as the Benin say "*Esu no ri'Oka'Ighele no ma ri'Odion*" meaning, "Esu who only attained the position of a 'youth leader' but never the exalted position of an elder! For this reason, too, appeasement offerings are made to Esu as a particular occasion demands! As Benin people say "*ta gho Esu*" meaning, "One appeases or make a concession to Esu." Incidentally, there are Benins steeped in the exoteric arts, adept in harnessing the potency inherent in the malevolence of Esu, which they embody in an image made in the likeness of

what their concept of Esu entails. They place this on a platform outside their houses, strategically positioned to face the street, ostensibly to ward off sorcery attacks from potentially dangerous adversaries. Be that as it may, it's believed by the Benin people that radiation from the presence and proximity of Esu image in a compound is potentially dangerous and harmful to residents, especially toddlers, hence the Benin saying, "*A ko Esu, amu ere aro da orhe, oye gbeleemo, akpa we ta mue aro da Owa vbo*" meaning, "One plants Esu in a platform facing the street, toddlers still die mysteriously, one wonders what would have happened if the platform was positioned to face the home."

The strong belief by the Benin people about the negative disposition of Esu's character, especially his proclivity for mischief against the living, stems from their myth of the creation of humans by *Osanobua* (God the creator) And the principal motive of this mischief, is to prevent one from actualizing the objectives of one's destiny. According to Benin cosmology, when *Osanobua*(God) creates every one of us, we are first all sculpted in clay images by him, and these images are in pairs. Then *Osanobua* strikes one of the pair with an *Umwenriotan* cane, this striking causes the image to emit a powerful sneeze that brings it to life. And when this living image opens its eyes, what meets its gaze is a splitting replica of itself facing it in the opposite direction! *Osanobua* now commands the living image to make resolutions of its aspirations when it eventually gets to the physical world in human form, to its replica image! And as the people Benin say, "*Osanobua ghi we nu hi man ren*" meaning, " God never commands a person to make his/her aspirations resolutions known to him but to his/her replica." Meanwhile, as you're making these resolutions, which are normally positively inclined, that's towards getting the best out of life, that's being successful in all life's endeavours, while on Earth, Esu stands close by, recording every detail of your resolutions.

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The living image is you yourself, your resolutions (*Hi*) become your destiny, while your replica becomes your *Ehi* because it holds and guards your *Hi*, which is your destiny, following you about as your guardian angel in the form of your *Aghonghon* (shadow)! And Esu, who is witness to your making these resolutions, swings into action, immediately employing all contrivances aimed at thwarting the actualization of one's destiny right from the moment of conception in the mother's womb. And it's for this reason that the Benin, when the physical changes associated with pregnancy become apparent in a woman's body, all the relevant precautionary measures are put into gear. Antenatal rites and rituals are employed aimed at the appeasement or checkmating the diabolical machinations of Esu while the pregnancy last and immediately after a successful birthing, for the sake of the safety, of the child and mother, the relevant postnatal rites and rituals are immediately carried out, with all solemnity, meticulously, adhering to the dictates predicated on the customs and traditions of the *Enikaro* (Ancestors).