

OLOKUN SHRINES IN BENIN CITY, NIGERIA: PRELIMINARY FIELDWORK

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My dissertation research examines the current visual culture of Olokun shrines among the Edo speaking people of southern Nigeria, and investigates the many objects arranged within them. Due to the rapidly changing contexts of the contemporary urban scene and the resulting social and religious transformations that have taken place since the later part of the twentieth century, my research is made justified. Supported by the Center of African Studies, I travelled to Benin City, Nigeria to conduct preliminary fieldwork of some individual and communal Olokun shrines in the summer of 2016. In the field, I was able to re-establish contact with practitioners and other traditional dignitaries in some communities where Olokun shrines abound. I also made contact with local scholars of the art history and religion of Benin, who were once my academic mentors.

Communal Olokun shrines abound in Benin City, however there are growing number of shrines created and used by individuals. In the homes of some wealthy individuals and eminent religious personalities in the urban and rural areas, are beautifully adorned shrines. Such individuals include the Iye-oba or Queen



Mother, the wives of the Oba, as well as certain chiefs and outstanding priests. I have ascertained through conducting interviews that the meaning of the many objects that adorn Olokun shrines are in part determined by the materials used in their construction, as well as the significance of the deity. While the results of my research remain preliminary, the number of interviews I conducted and photographs I have collected across the city and villages suggest that Olokun worship and the visual culture of shrines still thrive.

Although I will be examining the various objects that constitutes the visual culture of Olokun shrines, I am beginning to consider the shrines as sacred spaces intentionally created and activated for the veneration of various deities that complement the religious pantheon of the Edo speaking people. And due to mainstream art history obsession with the bronze, ivory and wood sculpture of Benin, it is easy to pass the significant visual objects used within the context of shrines, especially those constructed and used in the worship of Olokun – the most important deity in the religious pantheon of the people. I have been fortunate to receive a graduate school research award to return and continue further fieldwork this fall.

Ndubuisi Ezeluomba is a doctoral candidate at the School of Art and Art History, specializing in African art history. Through funding from the graduate school, he conducted a two months dissertation fieldwork in Benin City in the fall of 2016.

