The Right Hand in Indigenous African Economic Thought: The Case of the Benin People of Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper analyses the right hand in indigenous African economic thought using the Benin people of Southern Nigeria as a case study. The Benin people esteemed handiwork and industriousness and embodied it with the right hand, which was regarded as the ultimate bringer of material wellbeing and societal status. The paper aims to contribute to African economic thought by analysing the conception of the hand in pre-colonial Benin society as the source of material wherewithal and to reveal how the hand was epitomised as the ultimate purveyor of economic providence and class status. The study adopts the historical method and the interpretive design was used. Primary and secondary sources were utilised and the findings confirm that the conception of the hand as the giver of material wellbeing was calculatingly done to recompense industrious and productive lifestyle worthy of accolades and emulations. Findings also shows that the people of Benin thought that the right hand is the ultimate bringer of material prosperity and therefore place tremendous value on it up to the point of veneration. The paper also reveals that the Benin people thought that the fruits of ones' labour out valued other possessions like inheritance. The paper also shows that the Benin economic thought on the hand as signifying productiveness intensely encourage productivity and disdained indolence in the society.

Key words: Benin, Economic thought, hand, industriousness

Introduction

A prevalent intellectual feature of the human race is the ability to think deeply and critically. History shows that when in search of explanations for events or solutions to problems, man thinks deeply and methodically. This ability to think profoundly is the chief factor in the advent of his intricate civilisation and awesome achievements. Thus, to fathom out ways of meeting his material needs, the African engaged in economic thought and this has been shown by previous research on the subject.[i] This paper contributes to the knowledge of indigenous African economic thoughts by analysing the Benin people's conceptions of the right hand as documented in Ikegobo and supported by linguistic evidence. Ikegobo is found in most areas and in various forms in Sub-Sahara Africa particularly among the rain forest dwellers. In Nigeria for example, it is found over a wide area through the central part of southern Nigeria and on both sides of the River Niger. Surprisingly, it is known by the same name with slight variations particularly among the Benin, Igbo, Ishan and Urhobo, Isoko, Igala and the Western Ijaw peoples as shown in the table below.[ii]

A table showing the altar to the hand among Nigeria peoples

Benin People	Ikegobo	Altar to the right hand
Mbaise (Igbo)	Ikenga	Altar to the right hand
Igbo (Anambra)	Ikenga	Altar to communal Achievement
Igala	Okenga	Altar to the right hand
Isoko	Ivwruejiri	Altar to the right hand
Idoma	Okenga	Altar to the hand
Urhobo	Ivwruejiri	Altar to the right hand

Source: Composed by the authors

Ikegobo is the Benin altar of the right hand that documented the major achievements of the specific hand and the particular person it epitomised. It shows to his community that the economic fortune and status that have been achieved by the holder came through industriousness epitomised by the hand. The significance of the right hand in material wellbeing as documented in Ikegobo is crucial evidence of economic thought among those who conceived it. Therefore, economic thoughts are not the exclusive features of the Western societies. The human species anywhere is a material being and has always been in a constant

process of looking for ways in which it can improve itself and its environment. Innately, it reflects on its economic activities vis-à-vis the aim of material wellbeing and development while in search for ways in which he can improve his conditions. Throughout world history, people have always philosophised on the attainment material wellbeing and the people of Benin were not exemptions. Among others, their ability to think or philosophised is evidenced in the availability of man-made "mechanisms that regulate individual and group's behaviour, enforce conformity and compliance to the rules of the society"[iii] and prevent the establishment of chaos in order to pave way for peace and progress even in pre-literate societies. This ability to think is also well represented by the efficient economic system that created wealth and also took care of both the poor and the disabled through the kingdom.

Contrary to Hegel's belief that "the Negro exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state,"[iv] this paper opines that Benin had enlightened development thoughts that enable them to build very serviceable socio-political institutions that endured the test of time. Long before colonial rule was envisaged, political leaders in Benin had theorised and applied a viable and rewarding socio-political systems that were built on a "unique sense of communalism, founded on kinship in a proportion unequalled and unrivalled elsewhere."[v] The absence of private landed property and equal access to essential resources for development characterised this socio-political system. This greatly reduced the g*ini coefficient*[vi] and its resultant socioeconomic grievances that have resulted in resources control crises common in the contemporary world. The high level of economic development in Benin during the period of study in comparison with its contemporaries was not accidental but a result of workable economic ideas that motivated the people such as the honour for the works of the hand and symbolized by the right hand. These thoughts of the people of Benin regarding the right hand as the ultimate bringer material wellbeing, good fortune and economic class form the core of this paper. The paper is in five sections. Following this introduction is an analysis of the geographical environment and how it modelled the economic activities of the people while the belief in industriousness conceptualised under the philosophical conception of the hands as a symbol of economic prosperity forms the third section. The fourth section is an analysis of

the concept of the right hand as the source of good fortune and economic class while the fifth section concludes the essay.

Geography and Economic Activities of the Benin People

The name "Benin" represents the major city of the Benin people, which is also the administrative headquarters of the Benin Kingdom and of the Empire. It also connotes the people, their language and kingdom as well as the Empire status, which the kingdom attained during the reign of its warring Oba.[vii] The Benin speaking areas of the Kingdom include those that constitute the present-day Benin City and some proximate towns. This area is a low laying plain covered with porous red sand and rising to the Esan Plateau.[viii] It is bounded to the north by Esan land, on the west by Ondo State and on the east and South by Delta State. The total land area of the Benin speaking people is about 8,482 square miles.[ix] At the peak of its glory, following the conquest of Idah in 1504, the Benin Empire extended to Dahomey in the West, which has been named after it as Republic of Benin; the Igala Kingdom in the North and Onitsha in the East down to the coast of the Atlantic.[x] This area is south of the Niger-Benue confluence area, which is the centre of the cluster of languages including the Yoruba, Edo, Igala, Idoma, Igbo, Nupe, Ebira and Gbari that are all within the Kwa group of languages.[xi]

This large geographical area is "under the influence of the rain bearing southwest monsoon wind for most of the year and has a long rainy season of not less than seven months."[xii] It is drained by a series of deeply entrenched rivers and small streams flowing in north-south direction into the Atlantic. The major rivers in the area include Escravos, Forcados, Siluko, Osse, Orhionmwon, Ikpoba, Ogba, Ovia, Chanomi Creek and the lower areas of the Niger. The wet or rainy season is usually punctured by an intermittent drought known as "August Break," and there is the three months of harmattan occasioned by a cool, dry north-east wind from the Sahara, usually from December to February. The harmattan period is part of the dry season, which sets in around November and lasts till March.[xiii] These climatic conditions give rise to wide varieties of flora and fauna and both the plants and animals' growth is profuse, and because the fall and re-growth of trees occur gradually throughout each year, the forest is always active. Tree species are highly diverse but usually have smooth, straight trunks and large, simple leaves and vines. The most common and hardest of these trees are the *Milicia excelsa*

generally refer to as the *iroko* tree while the major fauna includes leopards, elephants, antelopes, warthogs, monkeys, gorillas and chimpanzees. Despite the basically constant climatic conditions, these flora and fauna is constantly changing and most of it has been altered. Olowokudejo and Oyebanji blamed this alteration on a multitude of factors including the "fierce action of strong waves and active coastal erosion, fishing activities, overexploitation of plant resources, invasion of alien plant species such as *N. fruticans*"[xiv] and replacement of original plant communities by crops such as coconut, mango, plantain, palm trees and vegetables. The most destructive impact of man on the flora and fauna includes dredging, pollution and canalization, which remain constant industrial activities that promote mangrove clearing and constitute a threat to the well-being of the ecosystems.[xv]

The climatic condition and the resultant ecosystem are significant in relation to the economic activities of the people because "rainfall is the most important element of climate in so far as agriculture, the main occupation of the people is concerned."[xvi] The rhythm of economic activity which is revealed in the farming calendar of the various parts of the country is controlled by the incidence and distribution of rainfall as well as by the length of the rainy season. Traditional Benin societies evolved ways of responding to the environment and organizing themselves to meet their material needs. They had a practical and stable agricultural system through which the people cultivated a variety of food crops and domesticated several farm animals. They were not only self-sufficient in food production and other daily necessities but also had enough to exchange with their neighbours for other needed items. The tropical rainforest vegetation together with the climatic conditions placed a lot of demands on the people and they adequately responded by developing techniques and other initiatives that enabled them to obtain maximum benefit from the environment. Just like other parts of tropical Africa, they introduced several agricultural techniques, which ensured high and sustained productivity. These agricultural techniques were the products of centuries of experimentation and adaptation, involving adoption of many new crops and the constant struggle to overcome the vagaries of different kinds of soil and climatic conditions.

The Benin people were not only self-sufficient in agricultural production but also had enough to exchange for other needed items in the markets, which served as centres for the exchange of goods and provided opportunities for social interactions. The market days for each community were scheduled in such a way that they did not overlap with those of the neighbouring towns.[xvii] The quantity and diversities of the products in the market were testimonies to the varied nature of the soil and climatic conditions, which allowed the production of crops of different varieties throughout the year.[xviii] To a large extent therefore, the mode of life of the people including their economic activities was determined by the environment and climatic conditions. Although a greater part of the Benin forest is now secondary forest with abundance of timber, the people are still primarily farmers and they produce a variety of crops for sales.[xix] The annual crops grown in this area in order of importance were yams (yellow, white and water), maize, cocoyam, pumpkin, varieties of beans locally known as *Ikpakpalor* and *Ere*, plantain, cassava and to a lesser degree, sugarcane, okra and cotton. The people were self-sufficient in food production to the extent that surplus food crops were exchanged for other products such as fish, salt and varieties of Cray fish which were surplus among their southern neighbours, the Ijaw and the Isoko peoples.[xx] There were series of well-informed economic laws that testify to the present of economic thought in the Benin society and were well thought out, practicable, and immensely useful in the consolidation of peace and harmony both in the kingdom and the empire in general. A closer examination of these legal concepts reveals that they were "designed to fit economic, polytheistic, and other characteristics of Benin society at the time"[xxi] and they were utilized for productivity. Most outstanding of these laws

> …was the law that bestowed ownership of land on the *Oba*. The Benin adage, *'Oba yan oto ya se vbo ebo,'* which is translated as 'the *Oba* owns all the land up to those of the Europeans' readily shows that the laws conferred ownership of land, anywhere it is located on the *Oba* in trust for the people and he alone can allocate it. He could give it out freely or demand compensation for giving it out. Since farming was the chief profession of the Benin people and it required land, the *Oba* was highly patronised and the people, therefore had to make very large farms for the *Oba* annually. This contributed immensely to strengthening the economic power of the

> *Oba* and the state. It also made land readily available for the people to farm.[xxii]

The availability of land boosted agriculture and it became a lucrative venture in pre-colonial Benin. In addition to "the cultivation of crops, they reared and kept varieties of livestock such as fowls, goats, sheep, the dwarf cows, dogs and engaged in different handicraft. Apart from dogs, the other animals were sources of meat."[xxiii]

The Right Hand as a Symbol of Economic Prosperity

There is strong evidence of conscious thinking on handiwork and its place in individual economic prosperity among the people of Benin in the Pre-British era. Handiwork or industriousness was symbolised by the hand, which was thought to be the ultimate bringer of material wellbeing and societal status. The people of Benin saw the right hand as 'the harbinger of material prosperity and societal status.'[xxiv] The right hand in this context is the extremity of the arm that share in performance, skills, deeds and achievements. R. E. Bradbury explains that the conception of the hand as the giver of economic prosperity and societal status is associated with the hand or arm and that the right arm is frequently specified among the people of Benin Kingdom.[xxv] The people of Benin philosophized that the right hand is the ultimate bringer of material prosperity and societal status, and consequently achievements through the works of one's right hand was value and strongly encouraged. In order to inculcate the spirit of diligence and discipline, these thinkers cultivated honour and reverence for the right hand as a reward for the achievements that were attained through personal efforts. Reverence and adoration for the hands was so solemn that the right hand became a symbol of worship, to whom prayers for prosperity was addressed. The relic of these beliefs and of the reverence for the hands survived till this day and it is known as *ikegobo* or *ikega-obo*.



Ezomo's Ikegobo
Source: "Ezomo's Ikegobo and the Benin Cult of the Hand**"**[xxvi]

Rewarding industriousness through Ikegobo of the hand was an outstanding part of the culture of the Benin people. This culture is versatile and it "includes the values, ethics, morals, aesthetics, principles, belief, and behaviour that define phenomena and form a framework that guards the behavioural sciences and their theories."[xxvii] These morals and other aforementioned components of culture also help to define any experience or history and provide practical schemes for the explanation of man's actions for which Ikegobo is easily noticeable. Thus, cultural elements such as the *ikegobo* and what it stands for are crucial in understanding man and his behaviour, because they are the tools, capabilities, or habits acquired by him to live harmoniously in society. Ikegobo can also be understood through language, arts, symbols and other networks of dynamic "attributes that direct and train perception, reasoning, interaction, and behaviour that form collective practices and joint interpretations of social phenomena."[xxviii] Nosakhare Isekhure explains that *ikegobo* is the 'Benin alter of the hand' and that it documents personal deeds, valour and achievements of the holder as way of 'encouraging him and others to work harder,' achieve more and get Ikegobo for their prestige and devotion.[xxix] *Ikegobo* is an altar, which Benin people dedicate to the adoration and commemoration of the hand, which was regarded as a symbol of personal efforts

and accomplishments. Sweet Ufumwen Ebeigbe observes that the "practice stems from the Benin belief in the hand as the symbol of a person's ability to attain great achievements in life. Consequently, only eminent personalities establish *ikegobo* for their personal devotion."[xxx] In 1961, R. E. Bradbury undertook a detailed study of the *ikegobo* of Ezomo, the chief commander of the Benin army, which was made around the 17th century and opines that the bronze shrine of the right hand is one of the 'most ambitious, if not technically the most accomplished, castings' known in Benin.[xxxi]

The Benin thinkers see the right hand as the epitome of achievements. Ikega is a sacred object representing human hand, the wrist and an anklet of cowries. Wealthy men have a carved Ikega stool with the right hand carved at one corner, on which they put their hands during Ihieku ceremony "*O khon mu obo yan Ikega*" translated as he has war so successful that he puts his hand on the stool of *ikega*. *Iwina obo* translated as the work of hand was honoured above all other possessions and achievements. The right hand was reverence as a symbol of success and social achievement judged in terms of wealth and prestige of an individual in the context of human society and the world in general. It symbolizes human vigour, enterprise and industry in farming, trading, military campaign or any other activity to which a man turns his hand. It implies personal responsibility and self-reliance in the society. It was reverence as the bringer of wealth and status by every man in the kingdom. Thus, *ikegobo* was decorated with the most outstanding *iwinobo* and "emblems of occupation, social position, achievements, prestige and successes are portrayed on them to show that the owner is a great achiever.''[xxxii] The prestige associated with *Ikegobo,* presentation to the society particularly the young ones have positive psychological implications for hard work and the creation of wealth in pre-colonial Benin.

The most outstanding achievements of the holder are clearly depicted for easy reading but do not capture the physical likeness of the person or his hand, instead encapsulate the attributes and call to mind their presence.[xxxiii] *Ikegobo* was highly designed and attractive and endowed with the best and most valued possessions and achievements of the holder and other attractive symbols that are linked with the worship of the hand are also explicitly portrayed on these *Ikegobo* altars. Some examples of these symbols include "the feather of a vulturine fish eagle which is

the Benin symbol of longevity, the tools of Benin blacksmiths (hammer or anvil) which symbolise industry, and kolanut (kola culmamata), the symbol of life."[xxxiv] Bradbury observes that the belief in the hand as the determinant of a person's position in the society and the associated symbols of reference was not peculiar to the people of Benin. According to him,

> "the cult object known as *ikega* or *ikenga* is found, in various forms, over a wide area of the central part of southern Nigeria on both sides of the Niger. It is known by the same name, with slight variations, among at least the Benin, Ishan and Urhobo-Isoko sections of the Edo speaking peoples, over a large part of Ibo country, among the Igala and among the Western Ijaw. Everywhere it is associated with the hand or arm (the right arm is frequently specified), and with the prowess, strength and enterprise of the individual worshipper"[xxxv]

The people of Benin kingdom reasoned that material prosperity is not achieved through fortune or accidents but by a well-articulated programme and the dignity of labour. Work in their view is a sure harbinger of prosperity and the ultimate cure to poverty and the associated shame and deprivations. There are several adages and sayings that attest to this fact. For example, *obo omwan o ze omwan ma ri ema oghede*[xxxvi] interpreted literally as 'it is a man's hand that saves him from eating pounded plantain"[xxxvii] is a common example of sayings that brings to fore, the belief in the right hand in attaining material comfort. The pounded yam was the king of food among the people of Benin and it was eaten almost on a daily basis specifically in the evening. Those with insufficient yam, *obo ehue* (lazy men) pounded it with the plantain or pounded the plantain or cocoyam alone depending on the degree of deprivation. Another saying is *A ma ru, ai re, o re ye okhokho zanzan iku-* meaning mother hen is continuously scratching the debris as a result of her belief that without achieving through personal effort, one should not eat. This adage is synonymous with *A ma mi eson ai mi uwa* – riches and wealth should not be experienced without first enduring hard work. This means that whatever achievement a man may have that he did not work for such as inheritance or cheer luck cannot be a measured of social status nor of his glory but "an item of shame." R. E. Bradbury explain this philosophical profession in a clearer style, "If one's father does something for one, he makes one ashamed i.e.,

by telling everyone how much one is beholden to him); if one's mother does something for one, she makes one ashamed; but if one's hand does something for one, it does not shame one."[xxxviii]

The Right Hand as the source of good fortune and Economic Class

Among the Benin People and in other areas of pristine sub-Sahara Africa, the right hand was thought of as the ultimate bringer of economic fortune and Class. Thus, *Ikegobo* was designed so elaborately expensive that it was only members of the upper economic class that could afford it. Very rare tree trunks such as those of the Akanta tree were used in constructing *Ikenga* among the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria. Ihediwa Nkem Chimee explains that this tree trunk was "not a very common tree for everybody to lay hands on and as such, having ones *Ikenga* done on it epitomized its possessor as a man of great" valour, fortune and economic wellbeing.[xxxix] It is thus clear that the people interpreted the works of one's hand as the criteria that qualified him as a member of the distinguished class of persons of high calibre in his society. In some parts of Igboland, especially in Mbaise, custodians of *Ikenga* must either be great titled men such as *Ala, dibia, Eze, Onye, Onye Ozo, Okonko, or Nze.* Hunters, farmers, traders and warriors who have made remarkable achievements in their communities also keep the Ikegobo in several African socities. For the Igbo, one's *chi,* can positively interact with the Ikenga to produce wonderful results of accomplishment in one's life. The understanding of the works of the hand as represented by the *Ikegobo* by researchers and commentators give credence to the view that the right hand was philosophically regarded as the ultimate bringer of great economic fortune and its resultant prized economic class. For instances, Meek observes that the "Ikenga is the embodiment of a man's strength of arm and accordingly of his good fortune."[xl] Similarly, Chukwuezi defines Ikenga as "the cult of the right hand which identifies with a man's diverse field of endeavour." [xli]

The works of the Hand, therefore in African thinking guarantees good fortune in trading, farming, ritual, hunting, war, creative arts, spiritual, economic, political, and military ventures as well as in the acquisition of chieftaincy positions and its attendant political responsibilities.[xlii] On the same notion of the importance of the works of the hands in attaining economic class, Starkweather describes the Igbo Ikenga using its prefixes as "I-ke strength and power, N-ga, place of strengths in

the owners' endeavours while Okechukwu Odita sees Ikenga "as the strength with which one moves" also pining his understanding of the idea of Ikegobo on the concept of strengths that heralded the achievements of the holder.[xliii] Also, Talbot defined Ikenga as "a symbol of success in trade, war, hunting and farming. Ikegobo, therefore epitomised the right hand through which a successful man, "hazards his way through the thick and tin of life." [xliv] According to Ihediwa Nkem Chimee, it is an aggressive masculine cult of the right hand which defines the realms of endeavour and achievements of the individual owner with a cosmic force that directs one's destiny on earth."[xlv] This is why the ownership of *Ikegobo* portrays high status, accomplishment, wealth and integrity. It is mostly owned by warriors and great men as a memory of their achievements. [xlvi]

The most outstanding achievements of the holder are clearly depicted for easy reading. Sweet Ufumwen Ebeigbe explains that these simplified depictions in the altar of the hands do not capture the physical likeness of the personages but they encapsulate their attributes and call to mind vividly their presence."[xlvii] She explains that "a chief's *ikegobo* normally convey his image in full regalia carrying a ceremonial sword, *eben* and he is surrounded by objects such as coral beads and *ube* drum which are status symbols of Benin chiefs and chests and containers which symbolise wealth." *Ikegobo* was highly designed and attractive and endowed with the best and most valued possessions and achievements of the holder and other attractive symbols that are linked with the worship of the hand are also explicitly portrayed on these *Ikegobo* altars. Some examples of these symbols include The motif of a hand with clenched fist and extended thumb, which signifies a person's ability to garner wealth with his or her own hands (prowess), the feather of a vulturine fish eagle which is the Benin symbol of longevity, the tools of Benin blacksmiths (hammer or anvil) which symbolise industry, and kolanut, the symbol of life.[xlviii] Bradbury observes that the belief in the right hand as the determinant of a person's position in the society and the associated symbols of reference was not peculiar to the people of Benin. According to him, the object known as Ikegobo or *ikenga* is found in various forms over a wide area in southern Nigeria and and the right arm is usually specified. It is "known by the same name with slight variations," among the Benin, Ishan and Urhobo-Isoko peoples as well as over a large part of Ibo speaking areas, the Igala and among the Western Ijaw. Constant among all the peoples that uses Ikegobo

is the fact that it is associated with the right hand or arm and with the prowess, strength and enterprise of the owner.[xlix]

Conclusion

This paper analyses the conception of the right hand as the ultimate bringer of material prosperity, good fortune and economic class among the Benin people of Southern Nigeria. Rewarding industriousness through Ikegobo was part of the culture of the Benin people. This culture was versatile and include both material and non-material objects and concepts transcending folklore, literature, music, dance, and other artistic paraphernalia to the totality of a people's norms, beliefs, raison d'être, ethos, values, codes of socially acceptable conducts, modes of life, religion, philosophy, and ideology. The culture of the thought on the hand, epitomising productivity and represented by the ikegobo also includes "communal education and technology, and it structures the way social institutions shape life, as well as cultivating and imposing behaviour that is communally transmitted from one generation to another."[l]

The paper contributes to the historiography of African economic thought by revealing the conscious thoughts on handiwork and its place in individual economic prosperity among the people of Benin in the Pre-British era. It shows how the people view and esteemed handiwork or industriousness and how they symbolised it by the hand regarded as the ultimate bringer of material wellbeing and societal status. The Ikegobo depicts the people's view of the right hand as the herald of material prosperity and societal status. Ikegobo and the hand it represented documented skills, deeds and achievements that were revered and emulated. The conception of the hand as the giver of economic providence and societal status also shows the thought of the people on the source of economic fortune and class attainment. The right hand was therefore recognised and appreciated as the source of good fortune and economic class. Thus, the Ikegobo that represent it and how it has been industrious was designed expensively and makes attractive.

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[iii] Kingsley Ufuoma Omoyibo and Ogaga Ayemo Obaro, "Applications of Social Control Theory: Criminality and Governmentality" *International Journal of Asian Social Science,* Vol. 2, No. 7, pp. 1026-1032.

[iv] G. Hegel, *the Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 93.

[v] Elijah Okon John, "Colonialism in Africa and Matters Arising - Modern Interpretations, Implications and the Challenge for Socio-Political and Economic Development in Africa" *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.4, No.18, 2014, p. 19.

[vi] The Gini Coefficient is a measure of income inequality. It is based on a number between 0 and 100; where 0 means perfect equality (everyone has the same income) and 100 means perfect inequality (one person has all the income, while everyone else has nothing). A higher level of Gini represents a higher level of inequality in the distribution of individual incomes.

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[xxxiii] Ebeigbe, "The Rhetorical Function of Portraits from Benin… p. 16.

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[xxxvi] In some districts, *Obo omwan o ze omwan ma ri ema ihokho* meaning your hand saves you from eating pounded cocoyam instead of pounded yam.

[xxxvii] In some districts, *Obo omwan o ze omwan ma ri ema ihokho* meaning your hand saves you from eating pounded cocoyam instead of pounded yam.

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