

Telling Stories From the Royal Altar Tusk

Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper (row 2)

Before Ewuare (eh-war-ay) became Oba, the young man lived deep in the forest to escape the people who had executed his father, Oba Ohen (oh-hen). He camped for a long time with his friends, and slept in secret places to hide from his enemies.

One night Ewuare fell asleep under a large tree. He awoke when he felt liquid drip on his face. A leopard in the tree above him was eating its prey in the night. Horrified, Ewuare then looked down and discovered that he was sleeping on a huge, coiled viper, a poisonous snake. Able to flee both the leopard and viper, Ewuare felt very fortunate and began to see his escape as a sign.

The Edo people believe that a viper is lucky, and it did, in fact, bring good luck to Ewuare. The Edo people also say that a leopard is like a king, so Ewuare believed that someday he would become the Oba. When he finally did become the Oba, he became so powerful that he is known to this day as “Oba Ewuare the Great,” and the viper and the leopard are among his symbols.

Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea (row 2)

Legend has it that the mid-fifteenth-century Oba, Ewuare (eh-war-ay) the Great, traveled to the coast of Benin in search of Olokun (oh-law-kun), god of the sea and a son of the High God. Olokun ruled the rivers and ocean, and he was very rich. When Ewuare arrived at the coast, he dove deep under the water. The first thing he saw was Olokun’s undersea palace glowing with mirrors, ivory, and polished brass. Then Ewuare saw Olokun, who wore a tall crown and wonderful clothes made of red coral beads. The two great rulers challenged each other to a contest of strength and quick wit. Ewuare was so clever that he won Olokun’s respect.

Ewuare took home many treasures. He took a tall helmet crown made entirely of red coral beads, and shirts and wrappers made of coral netting, just like those Olokun wore. He also took some magical brass containers called *iru* (ee-roo) that could talk. Ewuare built a new palace in the style of Olokun's palace of mirrors, ivory, and brass, and he dressed himself in Olokun's fancy clothes. Then Ewuare ruled the land just as powerfully as Olokun ruled the waters.

Oba Ewuare and his Coral Crown (rows 3, 4, 5)

When Oba Ewuare (eh-war-ay) returned from beneath the sea, he put on Olokun's tall helmet crown and coral clothes. He soon realized that Olokun's crown was very heavy. Oba Ewuare was not strong enough to wear the crown by himself, so he asked every man, woman, and child in the kingdom to help him carry his crown. He invented four daily greetings to remind them of this important job:

*“Ob-Owie (ohb ow-wee-ay)
— Help me carry it in the morning,
Be King of the Morning!”*

*“Ob-Avan (ohb ah-vahn)
— Help me carry it in the afternoon,
Be King of the Afternoon!”*

*“Ob-Ota (ohb oh-tah)
— Help me carry it in the evening,
Be King of the Evening!”*

*“Ob-Ason (ohb ah-sahn)
— Help me carry it in the night,
Be King of the Night!”*

And that is why no Oba can lead a nation without the help of his people.

Oba Ohen (row 5)

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), Ewuare's father, was paralyzed in his legs. Although unable to support his weight, the Oba's legs had strength of another kind. If his feet touched wet ground, nothing would grow there ever again. The supernatural power of Oba Ohen's legs was as dangerous as the electric shock of a mudfish, which can kill with a touch.

Oba Ohen selfishly tried to hide these supernatural powers from the Edo people. When the people sent a representative to learn the truth, Oba Ohen killed him. Because an Oba must be truthful with his subjects, the Edo people then executed Oba Ohen.

Since then, every Oba is believed to have inherited the awesome, supernatural power of Oba Ohen's legs, but an Oba must control this force with great care.

This narrative explains why any Oba can be pictured as the fish-legged Ohen and why his feet must not touch the earth when it is wet.

Ozolua the Conqueror and the Betrayal of Elaisolobi (row 6)

Oba Ozolua was a mighty warrior. In the late fifteenth century, he made the Kingdom of Benin grow and grow. For many years, Ozolua conquered one town, then another. To keep his army strong, he demanded more and more young men and more and more food and clothes from Benin City. Many of his people began to complain, and his soldiers also began to grumble. Even his best friend Elaisolobi (ee-lie-so-low-bee) begged him to stop fighting. They all said that the kingdom was big enough and that it was time to go home. But Ozolua would not listen. He always had to fight just one more town.

Although Elaisolobi was Oba Ozolua's best friend, he also loved the Kingdom of Benin. He decided that he must do something. Elaisolobi knew a secret about Oba Ozolua. Oba Ozolua never took off his iron armor, except when he took a bath. Elaisolobi told the enemy where to find Oba Ozolua bathing. The great conqueror was killed, the fighting stopped, and the kingdom was saved.