

# EDO NORTH

*Field Studies of the Languages  
and Lands of the Northern Edo*

Essays in Honour of  
Professor B. O. Elugbe

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## Discerning Northern Edo, Benin and Yoruba Linkages: Wood and Metal Staffs in Northern Edo

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### Introduction

Northern Edo land, Benin, as the land and people are known and Yoruba land are contiguous. In many towns in the northeastern parts of Edo land, Yoruba cultural influences are very strong. Indeed in many parts of northern Edo, so strong were Yoruba influences that place and family names at times changed from names in the local language to Yoruba depending on the level of influences and control and the time. Makeke was the name of a small town in that area in the early 19th century. It changed to *Ilutitun* sometimes in the 30's/40's. *Ilutitun* is a Yoruba word meaning "new town".<sup>1</sup> Nowadays the people of the town prefer their town to be called Makeke. I interviewed a man who changed his surname from *Kekere-Ekun* back to his original name, Akpe in the late 70's.<sup>2</sup> These influences tended to be expedient in that many people wanted to identify with the Yoruba at this time in order to be able to get education that was fast-growing and permeating the area. It was from Yoruba land that some of the earliest educational experiences seeped into Northern Edo area.

Just as the Yoruba have heavily influenced the people of the Northern Edo land, so also did the Edo of Benin kingdom affect them. Many parts of Northern Edo

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted an FGD in a local bar in Makeke, Edo State. On 18th July 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Mr. James Akpe, Ibadan. August 2002.

land claim traditional origins from Benin even though material evidences have not fully substantiated these claims. Also, the languages of all of present day Edo state are mutually intelligible suggesting that there was long connection between northern Edo and the Edo of Benin. Studies<sup>3</sup> in the languages of the area have established an incontrovertible North/South connection. The language spoken in the northern part is the older form of the language. Noting therefore that northern Edo land is situated in a cultural borderland area, it should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a phenomenon that applies to many areas that share borderline similarities between cultures. However, the case we are dealing with here is even more complex as we note that the Nupe from the north also interacted with considerable influence with northern Edo populations. (see appendix 2, Fig. 1)

Apart from farming, which is easily the occupational, economic and subsistence preoccupation of pre-colonial inhabitants of the area, smiting and pottery played the leading roles of providing utilitarian objects among the people. There appears to have been some form of specialization in the organization of the vocations. The women within a particular community, Ojah, (Plate 1) specialize in the production of fired clay wares used as receptacles and containers by all the inhabitants of the region while on the other hand specialist men undertake smiting activities for the production of weapons, farm implements and insignias for religious worship and rank. This was and is still the exclusive preserve of the Uneme people. (see appendix 2, Fig. 2)

**Plate 1 : Ojah Pottery**



<sup>3</sup> a) Elugbe, B.O. (1979) Some Tentative Historical Inferences from Comparative Edoid Studies. *Kiabara*. Vol.2, Pp. 82-101. b) Personal communications with Francis Egbokhare and Ronald P. Schaefer.



Carving of wood is also a preoccupation of the people of northern Edo. However carving is less specialized than the other two vocations mentioned earlier although gender-specific carving was more commonplace among the men in the villages. They produced utilitarian objects like household utensils and furniture as well as some religious and social objects such as the masks that are often used in religious rites and festivals.

**Plate 2:** *Bronze figure from Benin thought to have been taken*



### **Political Background**

The administration of the various towns and villages in northern Edo is traditionally carried out on the basis of seniority. There, the oldest man in a particular quarter in the community was charged with the responsibility of dealing with personal and group conflicts and interaction-challenges as well as handling welfare issues within his compartment. This peculiar style of administration underscores and queries



the much talked-about structural, but largely assumed, relationship of the Northern Edo towns and villages and the ancient Benin kingdom which has a centralized political system. We now know that Benin kingdom was at its peak sometime between the mid 14th century and 1897 when it fell to the British Army. Benin City is situated about 160 kilometers south of the area of this study. It is interesting to note that most of the traditional accounts of the origin of the northern Edo people suggest a questionable south-north movement to their present locations. Interestingly this remains so in spite of the vast and obvious fundamental cultural differences between the people. Although the languages spoken are mutually intelligible, studies of the languages and dialects of the area confirm that the variation spoken in northern Edo land is an earlier form of what is today spoken in Benin City. Benin City has since the introduction of British rule after the 1897 war grown to be a huge sprawling modern city while most of the towns and villages in northern Edo land are still by far underdeveloped in terms of modernity. According to Chief Nosakhare Isekhure, the Isekhure of Benin, Benin City is today administered by a monarch whose authority was derived from the *odionwere* system, basically leadership by age or gerontocracy, of the *Ogiso* period of Benin history.<sup>4</sup>

What these obvious political structural differences have created is the need to try to understand the nature of the relationships between northern Edo land and Benin City. As I have already noted earlier, extensive studies of some of the languages and dialects from the area have been carried out. The implications of the results of the studies tend to contradict the traditional accounts of the origin of the people of northern Edo land. Consider that the forms of the languages spoken in the northern parts of Edo land are the more complex forms of the Edoid class and therefore according the linguistic theories the older form of the language. What then are the implications of this for our understanding of the positioning and movement patterns of people in the whole of the area? The baffling questions that therefore arise are how come the people who speak an older and more complex form of the same language now claim to be an extraction of the people who speak a more modern, less complex form of the language? Why and when did they start to trace their origins from Benin? It is true that dialectical difference in a language can occur due to diffusion, but from what direction did the diffusion come, is it a south-north diffusion or a north-south one or indeed could we be dealing with waves of diffusions over a very long period of time?

This paper seeks evidences from the material culture of the area, especially the metal and wooden staff, to understand the nature of the relationship of the people of northern Edo land and Benin City, now a center of excellence in traditional court art and a huge cultural complex that has had tremendous influences on its immediate

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<sup>4</sup> Chief Nosakhare Isekhure, The Isekhure of Benin (1989) Benin Traditional Government in Papers of the symposium 'The Benin People' for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Coronation of Omo n'Oba Erediauwa, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin held at Urokpota hall, benin City. December 15 and 16, 1989.



surrounding environment. The wood and metal staffs, objects of great prestige, power and authority are not only common among the various communities in northern Edo land, but they are also in common use among the larger Yoruba groups around and beyond northern Edo.

Understanding how these objects are used, the symbols that are put on them and also their official cultural uses will help us in making some clearer statements about the relationships between northern Edo land and Benin City. The Nupe and the Igala are situated further north of the northern Edo are also believed to have been influential in the history and culture of the Northern Edo but the scope of this study does not cover them although there is indeed a good potential of extending this study to include them in the future. However, this study is limited to the Yoruba, the Edo of Benin city and the Northern Edo. These areas are in the southwestern part of Nigeria in present day Edo and the western Yoruba states in about the same geographical area. (See appendix 2 )

The Benin kingdom with its seat of government at Benin City, and Ife, traditional root of origin of all the Yoruba and a place with strong manifestation of some of the best examples of naturalistic traditional art in Africa are practically equidistant from the northern Edo areas under reference. Both are today major towns and places of high cultural associations among their people. According to Egharevba<sup>5</sup>, chronicler of Edo history in his narration suggesting a connection between Benin and Ife, brass casting in Benin is said to have originated from Ife when the *Oba* Oguola who wished to introduce brass casting into Benin so as to produce works of art similar to those sent him from Ife, sent to the *Ooni* of Ife for a brass caster. Iguegha, a 'very clever' brass caster who it is reported to have 'had many designs', was sent to Benin to teach the people the art so as to aid them in the preservation of their records! Also, in an earlier account also by Egharevba<sup>6</sup>, the present ruling dynasty is reported to have had links with Ife. In yet another report it is said that when an earlier Benin dynasty, the Ogiso dynasty, ran into trouble with the people of the town it sent to Ife for a ruler and again the Oni sent his son, Oranmiyan to rule over the town. But finding the town too difficult to run, Oranmiyan bore a child by a Benin lady and ceded the town to his son, leaving Benin to found Old Oyo. As one can easily now make out, the stories of Benin/Ife connection are rife with issues of bail outs rather than contact induced connections.

In Ife, ancient capital of the Yoruba, archaeological investigation by Willett<sup>7</sup> at "orun oba ado", a quarter in Ife meaning heaven (or place of the burial) of Benin kings, support the Benin oral tradition by Egharevba to the effect that the heads of deceased Benin kings was sent to Ife for burial at supposedly the site Willett excavated. Apart

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<sup>5</sup> Jacob U. Egharevba (1969) *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan University Press (Fourth Edition) Pp. 11-16.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob U. Egharevba (1969) *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan University Press (Fourth Edition) Pp. 6-11.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Willett (1967) *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. Thames and Hudson.



from this, a tiny bronze figure (Plate 2) found around the Benin palace as well as all the early bronzes that are believed to be stylistically related to the older Ife bronzes are believed to confirm an Ife/Benin connection on stylistic and technical bases. So, the situation we can justifiably assume on the bases of cultural diffusion theory, is that these two major centers played a major role in the political, social and cultural development of the areas between them. Owo most certainly confirms this. This assertion is based on the assumption that the whole area existed contemporaneously. In this case, it should be a worthwhile attempt to study the arts and culture of all the peoples between both places to fully understand the cultural dynamics of the entire region being discussed.

Between Ife and Benin in the direction of northern Edo is the town called Owo. In its own right, Owo is a fairly well developed town today. Although evident visual connections are easily discernible in the political and administrative culture of Owo, Benin and Ife, some spectacular art works were also brought to light in Owo. Ekpo Eyo<sup>8</sup> excavated some of the distinguishable cultural spots in the town some forty-fourty-five years ago and exposed some of the most spectacular arts that combine both Benin and Ife stylistic traits. Many of the works were done in clay but a lot more exquisite ones are done in ivory which were originally thought to be of Benin origin are now been ascribed to Owo. Indeed the place has been described as the cultural transmission point in the transfer of the technology of brass casting to Benin from Ife. In addition, some specialized studies of the royal culture of the town have confirmed an incontrovertible court connection with the Benin monarchy and his court.

### Material Culture Objects

I shall now discuss the objects (wood and metal staffs) in the Yoruba and the Edo context before seeking their effects in northern Edo land. In most of Yoruba land, staffs, clubs, pokers and cutlasses constitute a large percentage of Yoruba metal sculptures and they have various symbols of association that range from strict religious to pseudo-religious significance.<sup>9</sup> Although not originally intended as art, many of the traditional metal works and woodcarvings are now generally taken as manifestations of material culture and historical studies of them are being undertaken. These objects have for a long time now gained the attention and interest of scholars, especially anthropologists and lately art historians both of who now recognize them as art. The original intentions of the makers of these objects would most likely have been for them to be merely utilitarian, to use them as supports (in which case their need would dictate their shapes and length sizes to that of a typical made-to-fit or adjustable cane), or for defense (where it is most likely to be long and pointed for piercing) or as it

<sup>8</sup> Ekpo Eyo (1974) Recent Excavations at Ife and Owo and their Implications for Ife, Owo and Benin Studies. 3 Volumes. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

<sup>9</sup> C.O.Adepegba (1991) *Yoruba Metal Sculpture*. Ibadan University Press.



would appear it later evolved, as symbols of authority, rank and high positions (where it is surpassed it would condition them to be highly decorated with prestigious cultural symbols in form at least, if not in content). These staffs are very closely associated with the culture of the Yoruba and represent an important aspect of their culture. They will now be studied individually.

The *osanyin* staff, the *orisa oko* and the *orere* are a few of the many staffs of the Yoruba that this paper will look at to understand their functions in their producer culture. The staff of *osanyin* (Plate 3) is usually put in the ground in the shrine of *osanyin*, the god of medicine in Yoruba land. It is a long pole that is topped by bird representations in a kind of ring form.

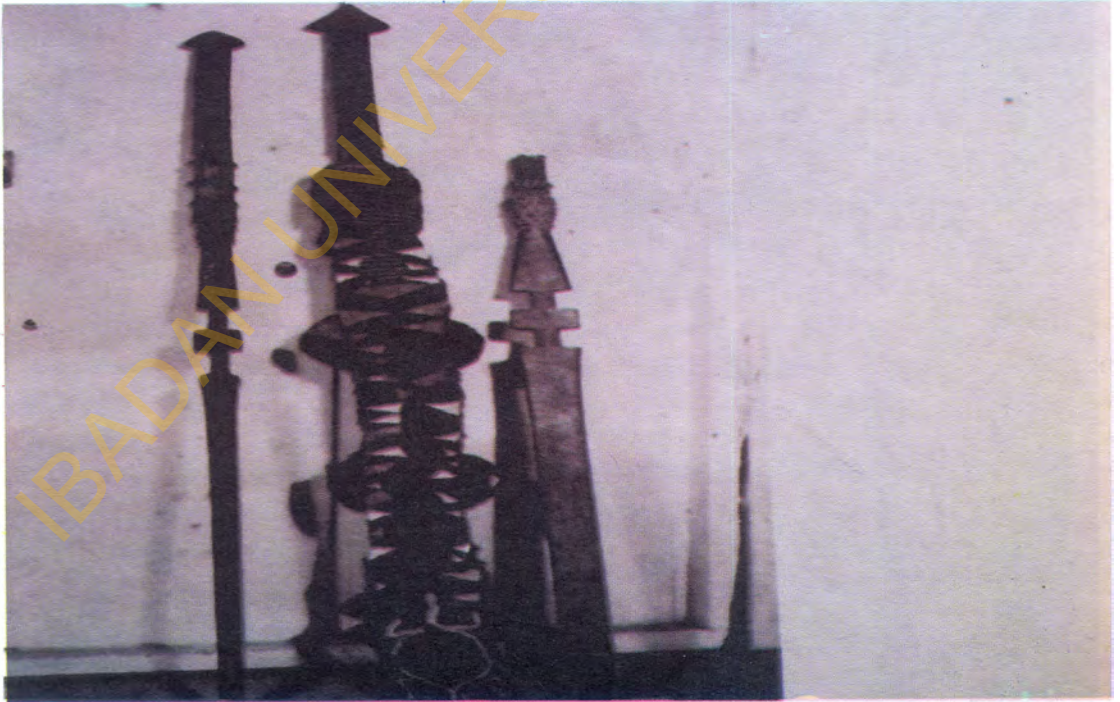
**Plate 3:** Close-up of an *Osanyin* metal staff from Adepegba





Some of them may have spike-like protrusions from the stem of the pole. They are meant to be stuck in the ground and hence a pointed end. According to Adepegba,<sup>10</sup> the central pole structure is used to represent the tree, which stands for the plants that are a major ingredient in the production of traditional medicines. The birds are also according to him, representative of the power of witches. They are believed to have the capacity to fly physically and are an essential ingredient in the efficacy of traditional medicines. The foregoing suggests the importance of the staff in the life of the Yoruba as everyone depended on traditional medicines for cures in the traditional setting. But while serving this purpose, the staff with its peculiar form also serves as identity, as support and as an insignia of prestige. It has intrinsic cultural value just as it has utilitarian value. In addition to the preceding ones, one of the purposes which such staffs, stuck in the ground, were meant to serve include, in my opinion, giving the shrine the prestige of a place that is of such importance to the life of the people and to identify the sacred space of the diviner or medicine man at any given time. The next kind of staff that is in use among the Yoruba is the *orisa oko* staff (Plate 4). *Orisa Oko* the god of agriculture. The women, and not the men, usually use the staff.

**Plate 4:** *Orisa – Oko metal staffs from Adepegba*



<sup>10</sup> C.O.Adepegba (1991) *Yoruba Metal Sculpture*. Ibadan University Press. p. 30.



Again what we find here is a situation that the staffs are used for identity and association. The staffs are quite similar in form to the major tool of the farmer, the cutlass, with which he produces the food that ensures continued life's sustenance. The staffs carry figural sculptures on the heads and they generally resemble the cutlass. They are always made in metals.

The third type of Yoruba staff that is in use that I have selected for this study is the *orere* (Plate 5). The *orere* is the staff of the god of wisdom, knowledge and divination, also known as *ifa*. *Ifa* is major in Yoruba world view. *Orere* are described, as some of the most beautiful staffs from Yoruba land. It is the principal object in the *ifa* shrine where it should always remain standing.

**Plate 5:** An *Orere Ifa* metal staff from Adepegba





Other times when the staffs are used include during the initiation ceremonies of the devotees. *Orere* is a thin pole that has a triangle facing downwards at intervals with a bird or bird representations topping it. Like the other two staffs already discussed, *orere* is specifically dedicated to a particular deity.

Having discussed these staff from Yoruba land, one should now make some clear statements about their use in the area. First is the fact that these staffs tend to be used specifically in the service of particular deities.

Next is the fact that the forms of most of the staffs do not conform to any particular styles that may be perceived from the deities they are used for except in the case of the *orisha oko* where its staff shows discernible and recognizable form of cutlasses, a basic farm implement. What appears to be more easily understandable is the fact that some of the images represented on the staffs are explainable in the light of the activities of the deity for which the staffs are meant. An example is the case of the *osanyin* staff where the birds and the tree representations on the staffs are directly relevant to the deity's work. These are in my opinion high cultural associations that are diffusible in the context of contact or conquest. It should therefore be possible to locate the same practice in areas where there has been a significant amount of interactions and in cases where a people were conquered and ruled over for a considerably long enough period to allow culture to permeate. A case in point is that of the Attah of Idah who wears the Benin bronze pendant, *ejube jaiulo*, (Plate 6) as part of his royal regalia. It is believed that at some point in time, Benin might have conquered the Igala and imposed the wearing of its pendant on the Attah to continuously remind them of their power over them. Returning to the issue of Benin whose people and their culture also had a huge impact on the northern Edo area; staffs are also profusely used there, but interestingly, just like and in similar ways as the Yoruba. Two of Benin staffs, *ukhure* and *osun* water god staff, will be used for this study while only the latter will be analyzed to show the relatedness between Benin and Yoruba cultures in their use of the staffs. The *ukhure* (Plate 7) is a staff that is an essential part of the shrines of the ancestors in Benin. They may be put in *aro-erha* and *aro-ije*, the shrines of the ancestor.

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Plate 6: *Ejube Jaiulo Bronze pendant*



The *ukhure* (Plate 7) is a staff that is an essential part of the shrines of the ancestors in Benin. They may be put in *aro-erha* and *aro-iye*, the shrines of the ancestor. According to Vogel,<sup>11</sup> *ukhure* is an object found in great numbers in Benin. Most common *ukhure* are made of wood with a human head carved at the top, a hollow rattle chamber containing a wooden clapper below and a characteristic segmented

<sup>11</sup> Susan Mullin Vogel (1978) *Art and Politics: A Staff from the Court of Benin, West Africa*. *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 13, p.87.



shaft resembling bamboo at the bottom. *Ukhure*, according to her, are kept in large numbers on family ancestral altar from where they are taken, shaken or banged on the ground for emphasis when praying or cursing. They are also sometimes carried by masked performers during certain festivals. There are no equivalents of this in Yoruba land.

**Plate 7:** *Some Ukhure in a shrine from Paula, Ben Amos*



The staff of the *osun* god in Benin (Plate 8) is actually a pointer to the similarities in the culture of Benin and the Yoruba rather than their northern Edo neighbors. Although this fact has been substantiated a number of times using both the



arts and culture,<sup>12</sup> it is particularly interesting that little or no such representations are known in northern Edo land with which both the larger cultures of Benin and the Yoruba interacted for a considerably long time. The *ukhure* is hardly known in northern Edo land and I was not fortunate to find any similarities with staffs that I came across there.

Plate 8: An Iron Osun staff, Paula Ben Amos



This brings me to the manifestations of staffs in some communities in Northern Edo land. At Ate, Ugbe and Uneme Ekpedo I studied some of the staffs that the people

<sup>12</sup> Frank Willett (1967) *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. Thames and Hudson See chapter XII, *Relatives in Bronze of Ife and Benin*.



of the town showed me and tried to compare them with those of the Yoruba and the Benin to find out if there are any possible connections or linkages between them. Considering that the people of northern Edo were very closely linked with the Benin and the Yoruba and for the fact that their traditional histories are traced to Benin and subsequently Ife is suggestive of some connection no matter how farfetched it may seem. My argument here is that if truly there was the kind of close filial contact and relationship between the communities in the Northern Edo and Yoruba or Benin, then we should have no difficulty finding close similarities in the artistic productions of all of them, especially in terms of style and forms. Indeed the purposes for which staffs would have been, made in northern Edo land would, in my opinion, tally with those reasons for which they were produced in Benin and in Yoruba land. I shall now take a look at the staffs that were made and were being used in northern Edo land in order to study their styles and forms.

First are the staffs from *Ate*. The *Ate* staffs (Plates 9, 10 and 11) are in wood; they are painted over with white chalk. They were not obviously to be used as supports because they were by far longer than normal person's staffs. The possibility that they might have been leaned around and held by both hands and used as supports was ruled out as unlikely for the reason that the staff were too thin to be so used. Then they had been kept in a local village non-specific shrine from where they were brought out and it seemed that the present inhabitants of the town do not know much about the staffs but only revere them as an indication of their long history and so preserve them as staffs of the authority of their leaders. According to some elders of *Atte* whom I interviewed, the *Atte* staffs have been with them since they first moved to their present location.

The staffs from *Ugbe* (Plates 11, 12 and 13) are also made in wood and bear a number of human figures on their top around the part from which the staff is supposed to be held. In one case, the figure of a woman is represented on the handle while in another case; a number of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures are set on top of one another. From the sizes of the staffs, they appear to be instruments of authority, prestige and rank rather than meant for any particular deity or as religious objects.

Also in *Uneme Ekpedo*, I was shown a metal staff in the palace of the king of the town. It is a metal staff in a pole-like shape. (Plates 14 and 15) It is topped with a bird figure and about two thirds way down it has some rattles installed. These rattles make significant noises as the carrier moves around with the staff. This staff is undoubtedly a sign of power and authority of the king but it is not of any major significance in terms of its age and production.



**Plate 9:** *Group of four wooden staffs from Atte, Northern Edo*





Plate 10: Two wooden staffs from Atte





**Plate 11:** A wooden staff from Atte





**Plate 12:** *Close-up of an Ugbe elder with a wooden staff*





Plate 13: An Ugbe elder with two wooden staffs





**Plate 14:** *Close-up of an Ugbe wooden staff*





Plate 15: An Ekpedo elder and a young man holding a metal-staff





The aim of the forgoing discussion has been to see whether or not there is any relationship whatsoever with the staff of Yoruba and Edo land and those of the northern Edo.

From my examination of some of the wood and metal staffs gathered from the northern Edo region, I am of the opinion that there is little or no relationship between the staffs. And this is surprising considering that the northern Edo region claims strong filial relationship with Benin City and very long contact with Yoruba land. Although there are strong traces of links between northern Edo and Yoruba land, there does not seem to be any relationship between the staffs from northern Edo and those of the Yoruba. Indeed what we have is that the purposes for which the staffs are used in Yoruba land appears to be considerably different from what they are used for in northern Edo land. In northern Edo land they appear to be used more as prestige and power insignias whilst in Yoruba land they are used in the service of particular deities.

Walking sticks and canes are today additional dress accoutrements of the rich, just as they are for those who truly require and need them. They come in all forms and shapes. Indeed they are now fashionable among young men who may not need them except for enhancing their power, prestige and position in society. The reference to these objects as 'staffs' rather than walking sticks or canes have implications for understanding their true purposes. As walking sticks, they may not carry the traditional significance associated with them. As staffs and with the old age of the staffs, they are now revered and have been worked into the cultural scheme-of-things of their present day owners and makers.

### Conclusion

Considering the long standing claims of a relationship between northern Edo land and Benin City, it is instructive to note that strong Benin elements of culture which should, at least, have been there to point to the so-called relationship are not present. What we have therefore is a situation whereby the languages (or dialects) are closely related, but many other aspect of the culture of Benin are absent in northern Edo land. One then wonders why having migrated from a centralized form of government in Benin as the traditional origins of the people claim, there is a limited number of extant manifestation of this form of government in northern Edo land. One also wonders why strong stylistic elements or indeed the type of the famous arts of Benin are neither done in northern Edo nor even known there. On the whole, this has drawn some attention to the possibility that the origin of the northern Edo may not be as it is often said; simply a movement from Benin City to found many of the communities of northern Edo land. There is a dire need for further research in the northern part of Edo land to be able to adequately answer the basic questions that I raised earlier and not until more evidence turns up may we begin to glean the true situation of relationships between the peoples of Northern Edo land, the Benin of Benin City and their Yoruba neighbors.



**E**do North: Field Studies of the Languages and Lands of the Northern Edo is a collection of research papers that emanated from interdisciplinary research developed over several years by faculty from the University of Ibadan and Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, USA.

The book comprehensively surveys and explores the topography, people, culture and languages and linguistic features of the Northern Edo and as well as its relationship with other cultures. This is a well researched collection of papers conducted over a period of time to bring to the fore the uniqueness and essence of a people, their heritage and world view.

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978-978-48855-8-4