

## Review : *Benin Studies under the Scalpel: Essays in honour of Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien(ed.) Uyilawa Usuanlele*

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The seventeen essays for this book are original texts written by a group of international and local Nigerian scholars relating to the many topics that Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien published about with his central focus being Benin, its past, present and even future. As the book states in the very beginning, there is a certain “celebratory mode of writings on Benin” (xv) that the reader encounters in every essay of this book. International acknowledgment of Benin studies, often found in curricula of African Studies internationally is brought together in this book with the “scholarly coverage of Benin studies by Benin and Edo scholars” (xvi).

The book introduces Ekhaguosa Aisien’s work, life and contributions in the first section. “Ekhaguosa Aisien and the Historiography of Benin,” spans 100 plus pages contains four essays. This introduction sets the tone for the remainder of the book. Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien is regarded as one of the “native” contributors to Benin Studies with over twenty works on “history, culture, arts, music, folklore, festivals, marriage, Christianity, and so on” (xviii). The introduction to the author honored gives an encompassing contextualization of his work in a way that encourages the reader to dive into Aisien’s oeuvre. It was fascinating to read about his life and how he became a renowned author on Benin history with a professional background as a surgeon, described in the first essay “Ekhaguosa Aisien: The Man and his Works.” The motivation for Aisien to develop the body of works referenced in this book is provided in the first chapter, notably an evening routine of listening to stories told by his father (even though he regarded them as not “fascinating” at the time) and research into art from Benin encountered in Augustus Pitt-River’s book along with the display of looted art works in the British Museum. Oral traditions, written material, and cultural heritage encounters are equally

contexts throughout the book for the various authors. The book grounds itself in a manifold of material. Academic research and texts are cited throughout all essays.; Oral traditions and songs are quoted and translated. Written documents are utilized and objects are described in detail as references for narratives. Photographs show dances and masquerades. Maps, drawings, and images are used for visualization. All of this is a testament to the multiplicity of disciplines encompassed by Benin Studies and grounded in written and spoken word. Jean Borgatti even offers videos as a reference for her description of Ovia Masquerade dance, giving the reader the opportunity to observe the tradition through the eyes of the author in the video shared.

The diversity of material in this book also mirrors the various disciplines that come together under Benin Studies: Anthropology, History, Language, Linguistics, Literature, Culture, and Art History. The chapters in this book organize the essays into specific areas, offering the reader a wide ranging overview, but one filled with very specific and detailed narratives.

It might be difficult to follow some of the narratives in the book without being familiar with Benin Studies, since the book covers such a vast history through the respective lenses of its eighteen authors. The many descriptions of historical accounts means that many of the same narratives were addressed from different perspectives. Recognizing recurring narratives, names, and places results in a slow weaving together of information into a recognizable and memorable pattern.

The book attempts to give an introduction to Aisien's work as well as to Benin Studies, but the reader without any prior knowledge of Benin Studies has some difficulty following the writing of the well-established authors. The book caters specifically to scholars with some knowledge of Benin Studies and therefore misses the opportunity to introduce the discipline to a wider scholarly audience. Positioning each text reflectively in the discipline being introduced would have accomplished this. Each essay relates to Benin in its own way but the essays as a group do not situate themselves with a clear meta-description to the positions they take. They are contextualized only by locating them under disciplinary topics, although there are also some inconsistencies between discipline titles and the subject matter covered.

However, the interweaving of various strands of knowledge in this book makes a fascinating encounter for the reader, not only at the levels of material and narrative. The authors are stitching together relationships between a past, present and potential future of Benin as well. Ekhatör's essay "Ame-Ogba: The Introduction and provision of Pipe-Borne Water in Benin City 1897-1940s" provides one example. He relates the present-day water scarcity in Benin City to historic processes and the colonial administration, mapping a precise history of water as a meaningful resource in the city through political developments. He looks at pre-colonial sourcing and storing water as it shifted from wells to pipe-borne water, a necessity for the colonial administration, and the present continuation of the "colonial Benin Water Scheme" since the 1940s. His "historical investigation was evoked by a folk song from early twentieth century colonial Benin, sung and documented by Aisien" (313).

The book separates Benin's pre-colonial past of Benin from its colonial/post-colonial history. Ekhatör's essay is linked to colonial and post-colonial Benin, whereas the essays "Intergroup Relations in the Benin and the Eastern Yoruba Region before 1900" by Odion Simon Ehiabhu and Joseph Nevandomsky's essay "The Benin Army and Armaments in Benin Cultural History" are placed in the pre-colonial section. Nevandomsky describes in detail the scale, organization and attire of the Benin Army, grounding his evidence in cultural artifacts such as royal arts and songs. Ehiabhu extends this detailed description of the Benin army in an investigation into its commercial, political relations, and cultural exchanges. The essay gives the reader introductory clarifications such as "Benin and Edo distinguish the land from the people" (193) and " 'Yoruba Kingdom' means an area occupied mainly by Yoruba-speaking people believed to have dispersed from Ile-Ife" (193). The reader can find overlapping narratives in Sections 2, 3, and 4, creating an interesting encounter for an initial engagement with Benin Studies. In Section 5, Language, Linguistics and Literature are the main focus, recalling the many songs and aphorisms cited in the Edo language throughout the book. The essay "Basic Linguistic Features in Edo Writing System: A Case for Uniformity" offers some unexpected information, telling us that the Edo language is only spoken in seven of eighteen Local Government Areas of Edo State. "Writing in the Edo Language was formally introduced by the early colonial authorities and missionaries" and the essay concludes that "[...] appropriate use [...] of

linguistic features is a must for anybody who aspires to do any writing in the language [...]" (336). The suggested "linguistic polishing [...] in order to keep it (the language) alive" (335) at the beginning of the essay continues with imperatives in the conclusion about making Edo a stronger written language.

Ultimately, the book is a rich resource for Benin Studies, defining it as a multidisciplinary field with diverse material, methods, narratives, and approaches. The audience for this book can be just as diverse, ranging from academic researchers and teachers to an interested public that would appreciate learning more about Benin and continuing their own study based on the density of information offered in this book.