

## INTRODUCING UMẹWAẹN

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Umẹwaẹn: Journal of Benin and Edo Studies*. The gestation of a specialized journal dedicated to the study of the Benin Kingdom and Edo-speaking people has been lengthy. The idea dates to the 1980s, when the major research institution in the former Benin Kingdom, the University of Benin, Benin City, closed down its Center for Social and Economic Research (CENSER). The university's humanities journals, such as *Aman* and the *Nigerian Journal of Humanities*, and the Bendel State Council for Arts and Culture's journal *Ivie*, which disseminated scholarship on the Benin Kingdom and Edo people, ceased production. These setbacks to Benin studies spurred private initiatives in journal publication. Aghama Omoreuyi—the late artist, writer, and curator of the National Museum, Benin City—published a few issues of *Benin Series* in the 1980s. The Institute for Benin Studies (a nongovernmental organization) followed with the *Benin Studies Newsletter* in the 1990s and early 2000s. The failure to sustain those journals is the *raison d'être* of Umẹwaẹn.

Umẹwaẹn is the Benin-Edo word for “philosopher” or “teacher of wisdom.” Historically, the umẹwaẹn was responsible for transmitting the history and culture of the Benin-Edo people to the younger generation, particularly the nobility. But during the period of colonial rule, the institution of umẹwaẹn was replaced with formal Western schooling.

*Umẹwaẹn* is now reincarnated as a research journal that aims to promote an undying interest in research and scholarship on the Benin Kingdom and the Benin Empire and the Edo-speaking people of Nigeria as well as their neighbors and those they influenced in the Gulf of Guinea area. Renowned throughout the world, Benin is one of the few ancient African kingdoms that survived the destruction of the Atlantic slave trade and Islamic onslaught. Benin's Edo-speaking founders developed an advanced culture, and during the many centuries of the kingdom's independent existence, Benin's sphere of influence encompassed the most of southern Nigeria and beyond. Benin was a formidable hegemon in the Gulf of Guinea region and has continued to be admired for its

exquisite artworks, which are the subject of studies by Art historians and Anthropologists worldwide. *Umẹwaẹn* is a peer-reviewed journal and will for now be published once a year.

*Umẹwaẹn* will provide a much-needed medium for scholars in both the global north and the global south who are studying the Benin Kingdom and Edo-speaking people and their influences. The journal will enable these researchers to share their findings, learn about new research and publications, and exchange ideas about this important field. It is also poised to address the lacunae in the scholarship in this research field, particularly in the areas of the culture, history, philosophy, politics, and economy behind the much-known visual arts that earned the Edo people global renown.

The inaugural issue has four articles, two book reviews, and two research notes. The first article, by Peter P. Ekeh, looks at the role Benin Kingdom played in the early phase of the evolution of the Atlantic World and the kingdom's influence in shaping the culture of the Western Niger Delta. This is followed by "The Ọwegbe Cult: Political and Ethnic Rivalries in Early Postcolonial Benin City" by Joseph Nevadomsky, which examines the Ọwegbe cult and explores its role in the political and ethnic struggles that characterized decolonization, state creation, and governance in the Western and Midwest Region of Nigeria. Nevadomsky shows how Ọwegbe was utilized to promote and defend the interests of some Benin political leaders who claimed to be championing the interests of the Benin ethnic group. The subsequent article, "The Pragmatics of Edo Praise Expressions" by Ẹsọhe Ọmọrẹgbẹ and Osaigbọvo Ẹvbuomwan, discusses some praise expressions in Edo culture, with emphasis on the praiser/extoller and the context and uses of praise expressions. The next article is "The Benin Monarchy: Olokun and Iha Ominigbọn" by Daryl Peavy, who employs the various levels of personal interpretation of Ominigbọn or Oguẹga divination to show the relationship that Olokun (the Edo divinity of the sea and prosperity) had with Oba Ohẹn (a fourteenth-century Benin king). Peavy argues that through coded meanings and names, the Benin monarchy strategically positioned Oba Ohẹn as the partial reincarnation of the Olokun deity.

The journal reviews two new books published in Benin City in 2014 and 2015. The first book, *The Benin-Ife Controversy: Clash of Myths of Origins*, is a selection of Internet and newspaper articles compiled by Wajeed Obomeghie. The articles form a debate on the origins of the Ife and Benin monarchies, a dispute that raged in Nigeria in 2004 and 2005 between partisans and intellectuals of Edo and Yoruba descent and beyond. The second, Ivie B. Uwalgbinoba's *Aspects of Edo Greetings: Uniqueness and Significance*, is a new work on the unique morning greetings of Benin families, a subject that has not previously received any scholarly attention. The two research notes address Victor Manfredi's translations of the late Chief Jacob Egharevba's corpus of Ominigbon or Oguęga divination epigrams and Gabriel Obazęę's compilation of a new Edo-English dictionary that promises to go beyond Hans Melzian's (1937) and Rebecca Agheysi's (1980s) with a larger word stock.

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