



Specializing Afrocentric Fields of Inquiry: Developing Ubiniology as an Africological Sub-Discipline

Daniel P. Roberts III¹

Abstract

It has been established by several African-centered scholars that African civilizations are central to orienting the way African scholars engage with African history, heritage and culture. On the scholarship of Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986), the bulk of this engagement has centered on the ancient  *h'py*: Hapi (Nile) Valley, and in particular on the Empire of *km.t*:  Kemet (Egypt). This paper argues that the discipline of Africology will advance by intentionally engaging with the history and culture of other classical African civilizations in an individual and systematic manner. The Kingdom of Benin, this article maintains, is a practical starting place for such undertakings, since there is more historical material—i.e., oral traditions, archaeology, artifacts, historiographical sources, etc.—to work with here relative to most civilizations elsewhere in pre-colonial Africa. To demonstrate the value of studying Benin from an Africological perspective, I use the administrative structure of Benin to demonstrate how the *Uzama Nihinron*—Benin's royal council—performs the same function as councils in other African states historically. I present Benin's administration as a case study in African cultural unity. Moreover, following the work of Osareñ Ọmọregie, I argue that the term “Ubiniology” should be used in reference to this scholarly, Afrocentric study of Beninese history and culture.

Keywords: Africology, Benin, Cultural Unity, Igodomigodo, Royal Council, Ubiniology

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Introduction

In November 1969, some 30 individuals, representing “a cross section of private and public institutions of higher learning,” attended the *Black Studies Directors Seminar* to develop “program designs and instructional formats as directors for Black Studies.”¹ It was hoped that a consensus for disciplinary clarity could be reached by identifying tangible, measurable objects for Black Studies to fulfill as an academic discipline. Four objectives for Black Studies were agreed upon, and they could be summarized as such: 1) Establishing the necessity of Africana Studies; 2) Teaching theory, analysis, criticism and pioneering scholars; 3) Generating new knowledge and codifying pre-existing knowledge; and 4) Preserving archival sources.² The discipline of Africology differs significantly from Black Studies and Africana Studies in the respect that it was conceptualized as “more than an aggregation of courses about African people,” but asserted “that there was enough in the study of African phenomena, meaning in the United States and everywhere else where African people exist, to warrant strong methodological and philosophical study.”³

By virtue of its nature, Africology fundamentally accomplishes all of these by default. The Afrocentric Paradigm is Africology’s guiding meta-theory, and within this, Ama Mazama points out how there are “a multiplicity of Afrocentric theories applied to a wide range of topics [...] since,

as discussed earlier, African Studies is devoted to all aspects of our lives.”⁴ There are several scholars whose research is crucial to the Afrocentric project, but, as Mazama noted, at its core “Afrocentricity inscribes itself firmly within the Diopian project for a new historiography [...] one that goes back to the beginning of life and civilization in Africa, and links all Africans back to that first development.”⁵ This orientation around the scholarship of Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986) assumes that African people’s shared historical and cultural experiences—trans-generationally and trans-continentially—offer a source of epistemological enquiry; thus, Afrocentricity champions “the idea of an African cultural matrix common to all African people.”⁶ What constitutes archival, classical or primary source material—outside of the overarching African cultural matrix—is subjective and largely relative to an Africologist’s research interests and specific area of study, since Molefi Kete Asante notes that “in Africology, language, myth, ancestral memory, dance, music, art, and science provide the sources of knowledge, the canons of proof and the structure of truth.”⁷

Asante continued by arguing that “the anteriority of the classical African civilizations must be entertained by any Africological inquiry, simply because without that perspective, our work hangs in the air, detached, and isolated or becomes nothing more than a sub-set of the

¹ James E. Turner, “Africana Studies and Epistemology: A Discourse in the Sociology of Knowledge,” in *Africana Studies: A Disciplinary Quest for Both Theory and Method*, ed. by James L. Conyers, Jr. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 92.

² Turner, “Africana Studies and Epistemology: A Discourse in the Sociology of Knowledge,” 92.

³ Molefi Kete Asante, “The Pursuit of Africology: On the Creation and Sustaining of Black Studies,” in *Handbook of Black Studies*, ed. by Molefi Kete Asante

& Maulana Karenga (Thousand Oaks, California, 2006), 322.

⁴ Ama Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” in *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, ed. by Ama Mazama (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003), 27.

⁵ Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” 22.

⁶ Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” 18.

⁷ Molefi Kete Asante, “African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline,” in *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, ed. by Ama Mazama (Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2003), 102.

Eurocentric disciplines.”⁸ In keeping with this position, the thesis of this paper is that the future of Africology rests in our ability to incorporate state- or empire-specific fields of study into the wider Afrocentric Paradigm, and that the Benin Empire, for a multitude of reasons, is the most practical civilization to engender such undertakings. My rationale for such a conjecture is rooted in the fact that the research conducted in (and about) Benin is more diverse in scope than almost any other place in pre-colonial Africa. This is largely because the ancestors of Benin told us much about themselves through their art, and what they didn’t display in their artifacts or the archaeological record was documented explicitly in the oral traditions of their descendants. In addition to this, the Europeans who visited them wrote detailed accounts of their sojourns in *Edo*, the state capital, and *Ughoton*, the port city. The synthesis of these sources give Benin a unique and unusual advantage over many civilizations elsewhere in Africa. To be sure, Robert Bradbury (1929-1969) said that he devoted his anthropological text to the Kingdom of Benin specifically because:

It was known to be one of the oldest and most stable of the larger political entities in the forest zone of West Africa and a well-established king-list of some thirty-seven rulers provided at least the framework of a tentative chronology, against which historical and traditional events could be plotted. Secondly, its four and a half centuries of contact with European nations held out hopes of a considerable body of archival material waiting to be brought to

light. Another important source of evidence lay in one of the most extensive bodies of African art in existence; an art which, moreover, is usually narrative in character and thanks to the imperishable nature of the media, covers, for Africa, a very long time-span.⁹

In lieu of this, scholarly focus on the Kingdom of Benin would open new dimensions of Afrocentric inquiry. Following the scholarship of Osareñ Solomon Boniface Omoregie (1933-2015), this paper uses the term *Ubiniology* to describe the systematic study of Bini (or *Edo*) history, heritage and culture. Molefi Asante (2003) noted that saying “Africology is a discipline does not mean that it is not without subject fields or interest ideas. There are seven general subject fields I have identified [...] communicative, social, historical, cultural, political, economic and psychological.”¹⁰ None of these fields of inquiry are truly separate from the others, and state-specific fields of study have the potential to show how all of these can be integrated for the development of Afrocentric sub-disciplines. In keeping with this, Ubiniology, if taken seriously, could start this process by being reworked as a sub-discipline of Africology. This would be a much-needed breath of fresh air, since I find no room for disagreement with James Stewart (1997) in his assertion that our scholarly “attention is focused disproportionately on classical African civilizations, and in particular on ancient Egypt or Kemet.”¹¹

To substantiate this position, this article will provide an abridged history of Benin, followed by a description of

⁸ Molefi Kete Asante, “African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline,” 103.


⁹ R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3.


¹⁰ Molefi Kete Asante, “African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline,” 104.

¹¹ Stewart, “Reaching for Higher Ground: Toward an Understanding of Black/Africana Studies,” in *Africana Studies: A Disciplinary Quest for Both Theory and Method*, ed. by James L. Conyers, Jr. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 117-118.

Ubiniology—as conceptualized by Osareṅ Omoregie—and the efforts that have been made to promote and sustain it. From there, brief comments will be made on three men who wrote on Benin from the perspective of culturally-centered agency, and their work is relevant to the study of Beninese antiquity. Finally, having established what Ubiniology is and whose work is central in fleshing it out, this article concludes with a demonstration of how one element of Bini culture—political administration—demonstrates the existence of the African cultural matrix and how more intentional engagement with specific civilizations can help further draw out the cultural unity that has always existed in Africa.

The Kingdom of Benin: A Brief Historical Overview

In order to demonstrate the relevance of Benin to Afrocentric inquiry and, in the same vein, give context to the subject matter encapsulated within *Ubiniology*, it is necessary to provide a short overview of the history of Benin. The Benin people's ethnic group is known as *Bini* or *Edo*. There is nothing that can be said conclusively about their early history or where their ancestors came from, but Bini scholars are (more or less) in agreement that that Benin's ancestral stock comprised of migrants from the  *h'py*: Hapi (e.k.a.¹² Nile) Valley. Jacob Egharevba wrote that “many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt to found a more secure shelter in this part of the world

after a short stay in the Sudan and at Ile-Ife, which the Benin people call Uhe.”¹³ Similarly, Daniel Nabuleleorogie Oronsaye argued that “the origin of Benin Kingdom and empire is traceable to some mystic developments in Egypt three thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Osareṅ Omoregie disagreed with the notion that the Bini came from  *km.t*: Kemet, arguing instead that “they were part of the Sudanic Negro mix from the Sahara, out of which Egypt drew its population and expanded its Nile-based civilisation.”¹⁵ Taking a less biased approach, Osayomwanbo Osemwegie Ero merely said that “the origin of these people has not been conclusively ascertained. This is because of the various stories that surround the origins and the different approaches that have been adopted towards the issue.”¹⁶ Moreover, Chief Ero argued that “our own research has revealed that several wards and communities in the Benin area, do not share Egharevba's view and claim to have no tradition of migration. Rather they claim that God created and put them in their present abode, where they have lived since creation.”¹⁷

Regardless of whether the process of statehood was engendered by the Bini themselves or migrants from elsewhere, Alan Ryder (1969) argued that “it seems clear that Benin City grew from a cluster of settlements on the site of the present town.”¹⁸ As is common in the oral history tradition of West African civilizations, it is generally believed that there were indigenes in the land later called Benin prior to the arrival of the Bini.

¹² The acronym e.k.a. means “Eurocentrically known as . . .” (Samuels 2021: 21). I adopted this literary convention from Talawa Adodo, PhD (f.k.a. Tristan Samuels), a Temple Africology alumnus.

¹³ Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1968), 1.

¹⁴ Chief D.N. Oronsaye, *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire* (n.p: 1995), 1.

¹⁵ Osaren S.B. Omoregie, *Great Benin I: The Age of Iso Norho (850 BC-600 AD)* (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 1997), 49.

¹⁶ Hon. (Chief) Osayomwanbo Osemwegie Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC-1200 AD* (Benin City, Nigeria: Nosa Computers, 2003), 1.

¹⁷ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC-1200 AD*, 3.

¹⁸ A.F.C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897* (New York: Humanities Press Inc., 1969), 3.

According to Omoregie, these were “an older group of Negroes” known as the *Ivbierinmwi Neka*, who the Bini “absorbed into their social complex or forced them out to Ugogo (Congo) where they were thought to come from.”¹⁹ Chief Osayomwanbo Ero, on the other hand, said that the indigenes were “two groups of people known as Efa and Emehe.”²⁰ Whoever they were, the Bini—through assimilation or warfare—spread throughout their territory through the establishment and merging of villages until a centralized state was formed. This state developed in the rainforests of southern Nigeria. The predominant ethnic group is Bini, but the Igbo and Yoruba have sizeable communities here as well. If not in its entirety, the origins of this state were owed partially to trans-continental contacts with other early cultures in West Africa. Chief Ero argued that the process of statehood here “was largely aided by [the] introduction of advanced iron technology in the area. Iron technology probably reached Benin from the Nok Culture area which witnessed a dispersal of people after the Nakuran wet phase of about 500 B.C.”²¹

According to oral traditions, the Edo state was ruled by a long line of kings and queens who bore the title *Ogiso* (Edo: “Sky King”). It was called *Igodomigodo*, after the first monarch, Igodo, who had “named the area under his control Igodomigodo meaning town of towns, because it was a merger of many towns and villages.”²² Igodomigodo was ruled by some 30 kings and queens before the collapse of the Ogiso Dynasty prompted local chiefs to send messengers to Oduduwa, the Oni (Edo: *Oghene*) of Ile-Ife, requesting that he send one of his sons to

Igodomigodo and start a new dynasty there. After successfully completing a test, Oduduwa sent his son Oranmiyan (Edo: *Oranyan*) to Igodomigodo around 1170 AD, where he married a woman named Erinmwinde, with whom he had a son named Eweka. Having quarrelled with the native ruling authorities, Prince Oranmiyan nicknamed Igodomigodo *Ile-Ibinu* (Yoruba: “land of vexation”), a term the Bini applied to their country and corrupted into *Benin*.²³

Since Oba Eweka had Yoruba ancestry, there was constant political friction between the monarchy and chieftaincy during his reign and those of his sons Uwakhuahen and Ehenmihen.²⁴ But during the reign of Oba Ewedō (ca. 1225 AD), the fifth Oba of Benin, political reforms were implemented which gave the Oba more authority and simultaneously decreased the influence of Benin’s royal council—the *Uzama Nihinrōn*.²⁵ Alan Ryder interprets this as meaning that the first rulers of the Oba Dynasty “lived under the shadow of the older regime” which was led by members of the Uzama Nihinrōn, who lacked respect for kingly authority until Oba Ewedō initiated a coup d’état.²⁶ Following Ewedō’s death, Benin was governed by a series of Obas who expanded national borders through military conquest. His son, Oba Oguola (reign ca. 1280-1295), commissioned “men to the task of digging trenches right round the city to keep out enemies” and, desiring “to introduce brass-casting into Benin so as to produce works of art similar to those sent him from Ife,” received a Yoruba artist named Igueha, who introduced the art of brass-smithing to

¹⁹ Omoregie, *Great Benin 1: The Age of Iso Norho* (850 BC – 600 AD), 51.

²⁰ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC – 1200 AD*, 3.

²¹ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC – 1200 AD*, 4.

²² Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC – 1200 AD*, 8.

²³ Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1968), 5-7.

²⁴ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 8-9.

²⁵ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 9-10.

²⁶ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 5.

Benin.²⁷ Consequently, it was during Oba Oguola's reign that "the practice of making brass castings for the preservation of the records of events" began.²⁸

Another giant of this period was Oba Ewuare (reign ca.1440-1473), whose accomplishments included the subjugation of 201 towns, the building of roads, erecting the innermost of the Benin City walls and ditches, organizing the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (State Council), the introduction of red *Ododo* cloth for royal attire and creating the *Ekohae* (Bachelor's Camp), where an Oba-to-be stays for 7 days prior to his coronation.²⁹ Ryder pointed out the significance of Oba Ewuare's decision to assemble the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* was, drawing attention to the fact that, having a place in state administration like the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (Palace Chiefs), "that influential part of Benin society which had in the past often organised resistance and rebellion against the ruler was given a permanent role in government."³⁰

Oba Orhogbua (reign ca. 1550-1578 A.D.), another military general, made it a habit to launch campaigns against vassal territories that failed to pay tribute, and he established an *Eko* (war camp) in Lagos Island.³¹ It was from this *Eko* that Oba Orhogbua sent expeditions to rebellious dependencies. When he was forced to return to Benin on account of a rumor that his son established himself as Oba in his absence, he established his grandson Esikpa as the Eleko of *Eko*.³² Benin's line of warrior kings ended with his reign, and 17th century Benin had become characterized by a political atmosphere where "the Oba increasingly delegated command of his armies to senior

chiefs."³³ His oldest son, Ehengbuda (reign ca. 1578-1606), took the throne after him, but did not lead his own military campaigns. Rather, he entrusted this to the Iyase, Ekpennede, who led expeditions against the Igbo and the Yoruba Kingdoms of Oyo and Akure.³⁴ During a voyage to the *Eko* founded by his father, Ehengbuda's "canoe was capsized and he was drowned in the river Agan (Aghan), about six days' canoe journey from Benin and two days from Lagos."³⁵ After his death, "it was arranged that the Benin war-chiefs or warriors be commanding the Benin troops henceforth and not the Obas of Benin any more."³⁶ Alan Ryder pointed out how this decree "hardened into custom, and the relatively secluded life to which the rulers of Benin had been adapting themselves now became more rigorously restricted and organized within the ample bounds of the palace."³⁷ Accordingly, the Oba's public image "was transformed from a figure of military might to one of supernatural powers," and while the Oba had always maintained a military and spiritual image, "the emphasis now shifted decisively to the ritual functions of kingship."³⁸ The Oba was now confined to the royal palace. It became customary that "he emerged briefly only once or twice a year", while his political influence waned, "that of the important chiefs, especially the leading members of the palace associations and the military commanders, rose correspondingly."³⁹ For the sake of brevity, our discussion of social and political developments in the history of Benin will end here. In 1897, Benin fell victim to a terrorist attack that resulted in the deposition of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (reign 1888-1897) and the establishment of a British

²⁷ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 9-11.

²⁸ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 11.

²⁹ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 13-17.

³⁰ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 8-9.

³¹ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 9-29.

³² Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 29.

³³ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 15.

³⁴ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 31.

³⁵ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 33.

³⁶ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 33.

³⁷ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 15-16.

³⁸ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 16.

³⁹ Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, 16.

protectorate over Benin. More information about this can be found in John Sagay's *Benin and the British Invasion*.⁴⁰

Ubiniology: State of the Discipline

This historical context is necessary in order to understand the totality of the subject material encompassed by the term *Ubiniology*. Osareṅ Omọregie coined this term and defined it as “the organised study of Benin history, language and culture.”⁴¹ He explained that this term was created when he “in the mid-1950’s embarked on an intensive research for reviving the integrity of the Benin nation.”⁴² There is a sizeable corpus of scholarly research on Bini culture, but it is important to note that neither the term Ubiniology or references to it as an academic discipline exist outside of Omọregie’s own written works. My basis for arguing that Ubiniology not only needs to be revived, but reworked within the framework of Africology is contingent upon this fact being clear.

Omọregie’s academic background includes a B.A. in *History* from the University of Nigeria Nsukka in 1963, and a M.A. and Ph.D. in *Educational History* from the University of Toronto in 1973 and 1980, respectively.⁴³ The little that can be gleaned from his own writings indicates that he was proactive in his efforts to garner recognition

for Ubiniology as a formalized area of study. The autobiographical information appended to *The Ironmakers of Great Benin*, for example, says that he “runs an educational institution known as Osbo University Academy in Benin City”, whose “main focus of academic pursuit is Ubiniology, the study of Edo history, language and culture”, and whose “School of Ubiniology is affiliated to Ambrose Alli University.”⁴⁴ From the autobiographical information on the back cover of *The Slaves of Odomuomu*, we learn that Omọregie founded and directed the *Osbo University Academy*, which was described as “a tertiary educational institution in Benin City, operating as an affiliate of Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma.”⁴⁵ Omọregie also self-published several books through a publishing company called *Neraso Publishers Limited*. Though the bulk of his scholarship focused on Benin, he covered other topics as well. His writings were “vast and touched on many disciplines, ranging from history through linguistics to literature derived from Benin and Edo history and culture.”⁴⁶

Omọregie spoke about other institutions he was connected to, although the extent of his involvement was never explained clearly. For example, the *International Society for Benin Studies* (I.S.B.S.), which was started in Benin City “was aimed at bringing about a rebirth to the civilization of Edo people.”⁴⁷ In order to

⁴⁰ J.O.E. Sagay, *Benin and the British Invasion* (n.p.: 1970), 14-35.

⁴¹ Osareṅ S.B. Omọregie, “Reaching Out for a Reawakening,” in *Great Benin: Handbook on Ubiniology*, ed. by Osareṅ S.B. Omọregie (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 2000), 7.

⁴² Osareṅ S.B. Omọregie, “Forty Q & A On Ubiniology,” in *Great Benin: Handbook on Ubiniology*, ed. by Osareṅ S.B. Omọregie (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 2000), 13

⁴³ Osareṅ S. B. Omọregie, *The Slaves of Odomuomu: A Novel About the Problems Posed by the Atlantic Slave Trade in the Old Empire of Great Benin* (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 2003), back cover.

⁴⁴ Osareṅ S. B. Omọregie, *The Ironmakers of Great Benin: A History of Unẹmẹ People* (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 1998), back cover.

⁴⁵ Osareṅ S. B. Omọregie, *The Slaves of Odomuomu: A Novel About the Problems Posed by the Atlantic Slave Trade in the Old Empire of Great Benin* (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 2003), back cover.

⁴⁶ Usuanlele Uyaliwa, “Obituary: Dr. Osareṅ Solomon Boniface Omọregie, 1933–2015”. In *Umẹwaṅ: Journal of Benin and Edo Studies* 1, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁷ Osareṅ S.B. Omọregie, “Forty Q & A On Ubiniology”. In *Great Benin: Handbook on*

accomplish this, the I.S.B.S. ran “its domestic programs with the EPR (Edo Peoples Renaissance) and its external programs with the WOFU (World Outreach for Ubiniology).”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, none of these institutions exist today. The Osbo University Academy is no longer connected to Ambrose Alli University, and none of the degrees listed on its official website have any correlation to Ubiniology.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ I have not been able to locate sources that speak to when or why the Osbo University Academy closed. Similarly, there are no Ubiniology degrees offered in any other Nigerian universities, and if record of this ever being the case existed, they have since disappeared. In the same vein, there is no record of media outlets—Nigerian or otherwise—speaking about programs related to the *Edo Peoples Renaissance* or *World Out-reach for Ubiniology*.

This leaves the current state of the field of Ubiniology disorganized, yet not totally dissolved. In 2016, scholars operating from a multitude of disciplinary backgrounds published the inaugural issue of the journal *Umẹwaẹn*. This journal was established to counter frustration at consistently seeing Benin-related publications fall out of circulation. This first occurred in the 1980s when the University of Benin closed its Center for Social and Economic Research (C.E.N.S.E.R.). The University of Benin shortly thereafter stopped circulating publications such as *Aman* and the *Nigerian Journal of Humanities*. This was followed by Aghama Omoruyi self-publishing a *Benin Series* during the 1980s; this, too, fell out of print. The Institute of Benin Studies’ *Benin Studies Newsletter*, which existed from the

1990s to the early 2000s also ceased publication. Consequently, *Umẹwaẹn* was conceived 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.”⁵¹ At the time of publication for this issue of *Imhotep Journal*, there are seven volumes of *Umẹwaẹn* that have been published, the first being released in 2016 and the most recent edition being released in 2022. Although it has been three years since an issue of this publication has been in circulation, its very existence speaks to a contemporary interest in the history and culture of Benin, however limited that interest may be. Moreover, the necessity of Ubiniology to be established as an academic discipline can be attested by the fact that in seven issues of a journal specifically focused on Benin, not once is the term *Ubiniology* ever used.

The Scholarly Foundations of Ubiniology

Ama Mazama suggested that it is “incorrect [...] to believe that Afrocentricity emerged in a vacuum”, particularly because Afrocentricity “has integrated the major principles of several previous philosophical systems.”⁵² Neither scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop or members of movements such as Garveyism or Négritude are Afrocentric in the truest sense of the word, but their work nevertheless provides useful models for the Africologist to build upon. In the same way, the historiography of Benin is deeply rooted

Ubiniology (Benin City, Nigeria: Neraso Publishers Limited, 2000), 25.

⁴⁸ Omoregie, “Forty Q & A,” 25.

⁴⁹ “College of Medicine,” Ambrose Alli University, Accessed November 28, 2024, <https://aauekpoma.edu.ng/academics/college-of-medicine/>.

⁵⁰ “Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension”, Ambrose Alli University, Accessed November 28, 2024, <https://aauekpoma.edu.ng/academics/post-graduate-studies/>.

⁵¹ “Introducing *Umẹwaẹn*.” In *Umẹwaẹn: Journal of Benin and Edo Studies* 1(1) 2016: 1.

⁵² Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” 10.

in the scholarship of pioneering Bini scholars such as Chiefs Uwadiae Jacob Egharevba (1893-1981), Osayomwanbo Osemwegie Ero and Daniel Nabuleleorogie Oronsaye. Nevertheless, nobody before Omoregie could be considered an Ubiniologist since neither the term nor the discipline existed. Jacob Uwadiae Egharevba is, doubtless, the foremost among these. On both sides of his family, he was directly connected to the two most important hereditary military officials in the Benin government, the Iyase and the Ezomo. Consequently, he had cultural grounding in relation to the country about which he wrote. But this is not what makes his work stand out in and of itself. Rather, the significance of his scholarship rests on the fact that Egharevba wrote over 30 books on Bini culture in both Edo and English. His seminal text is *A Short History of Benin* (1934), which was originally published in Edo as *Ekhere Vb'Itan* (1933). Professors Toyin Falola and Usuanlele Uyaliwa said that his work “succeeds in preserving and documenting the history and culture of his people in addition to diverting attention to moral values and political standards. He puts to extensive use Edo history, folklore, biographies, and social institutions to bring out moral and political values.”⁵³

Osayomwanbo Osemwegie Ero is another historian of particular interest to Ubiniology and Africology. According to his own testimony, he was born into “the great Ero family of Urubi, Benin City” and served as “one of the seven king makers in Benin Kingdom.”⁵⁴ He was a disciple of Jacob Egharevba, and in his *History of Benin*, which was focused specifically on the Ogiso Dynasty, Ero said that he found that “the

greatest information was from late J.U. Egharevba whom I personally worked with and discussed this period of Edo history for many years.”⁵⁵ Ero wrote the history of the Ogiso Dynasty because “the interest and the rethinking of many issues about the Benin materials necessitated a more comprehensive and radical changes in researches and the re-assessment and revision of the early evidences both oral and written which also required at any point on Ogiso era.”⁵⁶

Daniel Nabuleleorogie Oronsaye is the last Bini historian whose work I would like to highlight. Like Egharevba, Oronsaye was enstooled in Benin as a traditional chief. His *History of Ancient Benin* is particularly interesting to the Africologist because it was written as a deliberate attempt to build upon Diop's research. Oronsaye explains that, “Like a response to late Prof Cheikh Anta Diop's directive that writers of African history should link up with their Egyptian Origin, this is the first book that accounts for the causes and course of migration of people from Egypt to found Benin Kingdom and Empire.”⁵⁷

Since Mazama argued that as African people, “we do not exist on our own terms, but on borrowed, European ones,”⁵⁸ there is one final remark I wish to make concerning Omoregie. Aside from creating the term Ubiniology, his research is also significant in the respect that he actively chose to use Edo terminology in reference to African historical events and phenomena. For example, in several of his books, he applied the term *Iso Norho* (Edo: Rainy Sky) to the end of the Green Sahara (850 BC-500 AD), colloquially

⁵³ Uyilawa Usuanlele & Toyin Falola, “The Scholarship of Jacob Egharevba of Benin.” *History in Africa* 22 (1994), p. 316.

⁵⁴ Osayomwanbo Osemwegie Ero, *Egirama Edo Nogbae (Intensive Edo Grammar) for Schools and Colleges* (Ugbowo, Benin City: Osunero Consult Incorporated, 2003), back cover.

⁵⁵ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC–1200 AD*, xix.

⁵⁶ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC–1200 AD*, xix.

⁵⁷ Ero, *The History of Benin: Ogiso Dynasties, 40 BC–1200 AD*, back cover.

⁵⁸ Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” 5.

known as “the *Nakuran Wet Phase*.”⁵⁹ Similarly, just as Marimba Ani used the term *Maafa* (KiSwahili: Disaster) in reference to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,⁶⁰ Omoregie used the expression *Odumu* (Edo: demon of secret capture) in reference to the same; he argued that since the Triangle Trade “had all the trappings of a secret human hunt and capture, the name [...] was found appropriate to it.”⁶¹

Ubiniology & the Political Implications of Cultural Unity

Having provided a short overview of Beninese history, provided remarks on the little that has been done with Ubiniology as a discipline and some of the more prominent Bini historians, it is now necessary to demonstrate why Ubiniology needs to be reworked and how its subject matter is relevant to the Africologist. Molefi Kete Asante (2003) argues that “since Africology is not history, political science, communication, literary analysis or sociology, the student must be well grounded in the assumptions of the Afrocentric approach to human knowledge.”⁶² I have decided to demonstrate how Benin highlights African cultural unity through its political administration.

In *The African Origin of Civilization*, Diop argued that “contrary to the legend, the Negro king was not, and had never been, a despot with unlimited powers. In some places, he was invested by the people, with the Prime Minister an intermediary

representing the free men.”⁶³ As a case study in African-centered sociology, *Precolonial Black Africa* (1987) is a text that substantiates Diop’s assessment of the limitations of African kingship, as culturally and historically accurate. Diop argued that in a traditional African monarchy, “members of all castes including slaves were closely associated to power, as de facto ministers; which resulted in constitutional monarchies governed by councils of ministers, made up of authentic representatives of all the people.”⁶⁴ Nevertheless, since a king could not technically be forced to heed the advice of the royal council, their political authority “extended only to the stopping of abuses.”⁶⁵ Instead, “there were no revolutions in Africa against the regime, but only against those who administered it poorly.”⁶⁶ Diop based his conclusions on his home country (Senegal), but maintained that his conclusions nevertheless “hold true for the whole of de-tribalized Africa.”⁶⁷

This plays out in the history of Benin during the reign of Oba Oghen (reign ca. 1334-1370). In his 25th regnal year, “he became paralysed in his legs”, and in order to conceal this from his subjects, he ordered that “his attendants carry him to the council chamber in the palace before the arrival of the chiefs, and to take him therefrom after their departure.”⁶⁸ Emuze was the Iyase of Benin at the time, and being “very anxious to know why this change in the policy of the Oba had come about”, he hid in a secret place in the council chamber and discovered that the Oba was paralyzed. When Oba Oghen found out,

⁵⁹ Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” 16.

⁶⁰ Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality* (Baltimore, Maryland: Nkonimfo Publications, 2006), 12.

⁶¹ Omoregie, “Forty Q & A On Ubiniology,” 20.

⁶² Asante, “African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline,” 104.

⁶³ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), 23.

⁶⁴ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa: A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 2.

⁶⁵ Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, 76.

⁶⁶ Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, 2.

⁶⁷ Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, 1.

⁶⁸ Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 12.

he “ordered him to be instantly executed for having hidden himself to spy on him.”⁶⁹ When this was made known, “the chiefs rose to arms to avenge the cruel death of their leader” and dug a deep hole in Oba Oḡen’s “exact sitting place,” and after falling in which, Oba Oḡen was “stoned to death with knobs of chalk.”⁷⁰

Similarly, the royal council was known in Mali as the *Gbara* or “Great Assembly.” Djibril Tamsir Niane (1932-2021) described it as “a constituent assembly of the allies after their victory” over the Susu in the Battle of Kirina.⁷¹ The fifth law of the Kurukan Fuga—the constitution of the Mali Empire—states that “Everybody has a right to life and to the preservation of its physical integrity. Accordingly, any attempt to deprive one’s fellow being of life is punished with death.”⁷² Nick Nesbitt argued that this law is “fundamentally self-contradictory” because it “assumes an absolute distinction between human individuals and the sovereign, and his legitimate monopoly of violence, including capital punishment.”⁷³ This is a Eurocentric assumption. The Mansa of Mali was not (and had never been) above the law; Ibn Khaldun said as much when he spoke about Mansa Khalīfa and how he “was insane and devoted to archery and used to shoot arrows at his people and kill them wantonly so they rose against him and killed him.”⁷⁴

Again, the royal council of the Oyo Empire is known as the *Oyo Mesi*. This deliberative body had the authority to sentence the Alafin (Yoruba: Lord of the Palace) to death on account of abusing his or her power. If this happened, the Alafin would be ritually obligated to kill himself. Thus, Robert Smith (1988) noted that the Oyo Mesi “were even entitled to (or had come to be entitled) to pronounce a sentence of rejection on an Alafin, upon whose receipt (it was sometimes tactfully conveyed by a symbolic gift of parrots’ eggs) the king was bound to commit suicide.”⁷⁵ In order to prevent nepotism, it was obligatory that “the Aremo, the Alafin’s oldest son, should take poison on his father’s death, the intention being doubtless to protect the Oba and his officers against the possible ambitions of a prince who was usually associated with his father in the government.”⁷⁶

A discussion of the role and significance of the royal council elsewhere is beyond the scope of this paper. In brief, these councils existed in other Yoruba city-states, such as the *Oloye* in Ketu⁷⁷ and the *Agbanla* in Ijesha.⁷⁸ In the Yoruba Kingdom of Ijebu, state administration comprised of five associations representing the best interests of the people: the *Pampa*, who represented the common people, the *Osugo* secret society, the *Ilumaren* (an association of nobles and high-

⁶⁹ Jacob U. Egharevba, *Concise Lives of the Famous Iyases of Benin* (n.p.: 1947), 7.

⁷⁰ Egharevba, *Concise Lives of the Famous Iyases of Benin*, 8.

⁷¹ D.T. Niane, “Mali and the Second Mandingo Expansion” In *General History of Africa IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, ed. D. T. Niane (Berkeley, California: UNESCO, 1984), 134.

⁷² Mangoné Niang, “The Kurukan Fuga Charter: An example of an Endogenous Governance Mechanism for Conflict Prevention”. In *Inter-generational Forum on Endogenous Governance in West Africa* (Le Seine Saint-Germaine: OECD, 2006), 76.

⁷³ Nick Nesbitt, “Resolutely Modern: Politics and Human Rights in the Mandingue Charter,” *The Savanna Review* 1, No. 4 (November 2014): 13.

⁷⁴ J.F.P. Hopkins & Nehemia Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 333.

⁷⁵ Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 36-37.

⁷⁶ Hopkins and Levtzion, 37.

⁷⁷ E.G. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu: An Ancient Yoruba Kingdom* (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1956), 68.

⁷⁸ J.D.Y. Peel, “Kings, Titles & Quarters: A Conjectural History of Ilesha Part II: Institutional Growth”. In *History in Africa* 7 (1980): 228-231.

ranking chiefs), the *Odi* (an association comprised of the Oba's slaves), and the *Parakoyi* (comprised of people concerned with trade).⁷⁹ In the Kongo Kingdom, the royal council was called the *Ne Mbanda*.⁸⁰ Kongolesse cultural historian Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau (1934-2013) said that "an individual who is going to represent the community policy is publicly tested before being sent on any diplomatic mission. If he fails by misrepresenting the community he is buried alive in a public space."⁸¹ In Kuba, this council was known as the *Ngwoom Incyaam*.⁸² Following the innovative methodology Diop utilized in *Precolonial Black Africa*, these examples were cited only from states where African Spirituality was embraced. But the same patterns can be seen—only with minute variations—even in the Islamic states, as was the case with the *Majlis* in Kanem-Bornu.⁸³ Even in places where Islam was the central spiritual force, the duties of the African council were essentially the same, differing only in that roles once performed by practitioners of African spirituality were now held by Muslim clerics.

Conclusion

Ubiniology is the systematic study of Bini culture and the history of the Benin Empire. At present, no institutions teach Ubiniology as a field of study, and this article argued—on account of the breadth of historical materials available for Benin—that it not only needs to be revived, but established into Africology as a sub-discipline. There are culturally-centered scholars—such as Chiefs Egharevba, Ero and

Oronsaye—whose scholarship is particularly relevant, and these men offered a breadth of historical insight and research. Moreover, Ama Mazama spoke about a shared African cultural foundation. This article demonstrated how Benin exemplifies this common cultural manifestation with regard to administrative structure. It is hoped that further research will showcase how Benin exemplifies cultural unity in more ways than political organization.

⁷⁹ J.A. Oluşola, *Ancient Ijebu-Ode (A Short History for Schools)* (Ibadan: Abiodun Printing Works Limited, 1968), 30-31.

⁸⁰ Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 37.

⁸¹ Kimbwandende K.B. Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Principles of Life & Living* (African Tree Press, 2001), 77.

⁸² Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 120 & 145-151.

⁸³ Muhammad Nur Alkali, "The Political System and Administrative Structure of Borno Under the Seifuwa Mais," in *Studies in the History of Pre-Colonial Bornu*, ed. by Bala Usman & Nur Alkali (Zaria: Northern Nigeria Publishing Company, 1983), 110.

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