EDO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Edo is a Niger-Congo language in the Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo and Benue-Congo sub-classifications. It is also sometimes referred to as Addo, Benin, Ubini, Oviedo, Ovioba, or Idu. Proverbs and oral tradition are pivotal parts of Edo language and culture.

The Edo people are internationally recognized for their art. Ivory masks dating back to the Benin Empire are perhaps one of the Kingdom’s most memorable legacies. Brass works are also a cornerstone of Edo art and culture. Brass and Ivory works were often traditionally used to preserve history, honor deities, and add aesthetic appeal to architecture. Woodcarving, cloth weaving, and leatherworking are other art forms that the Edo people have excelled at creating.

Every year the Edo celebrate a festival called Igue which marks the beginning of the New Year. The Edo people traditionally used a lunar calendar as opposed to a Gregorian calendar, although the festival is now usually held at the end of each December. The festival begins after a period of fasting (Agwe) by the King. During this time, the king does not see visitors. At the end of the fasting, the community celebrates the coming of the New Year. The festival is characterized by thanksgiving and prayers for new blessings in the coming year. It is considered to be the climax of Edo cultural activities.

Here are some basic Edo phrases:

- Koyo.................................hello
- Vbo ye he?..............................how is it/how are you?
- O ye ese ..............................it is fine/it is good
- Wa hia dooh (wa dooh) .............greetings to you all
- I horen ..............................greetings accepted
- Obo kia ..............................welcome

An Edo woman in traditional attire
WHO SPEAKS EDO?
(PEOPLE AND HISTORY)

Some historians trace the Edo peoples’ roots back to migrants from the Nile River valley that went to present day Nigeria in the eighth century AD and established the Benin Kingdom. The Edo people, however, believe that they have originated from and lived in their current location for thousands of years. They argue that migrants have moved in and out of the Ed/Benin Empire over the course of the last few centuries. Many historical artifacts also support the Edo peoples’ claim. The kingdom was supposedly first ruled by Ogisos (“god’s of the sky”). The Ogisos established a monarchy that shared many similarities both religiously and politically with Ancient Egypt. They were the political, social, religious and economic heads of the empire. The first king who officially demarcated the Benin Empire in 1440 was Oba Ewuare (Ogidigan). The Benin Kingdom flourished for several centuries until it was dismantled by British colonialists in the 19th century. The Benin Kingdom’s control was spread by the Edos to other parts of present-day Nigeria via conquering territory. The Oba (king) of Benin was also known for settling leadership disputes outside of the Benin Kingdom.

Although Edo people are predominantly Christian, some are Muslims any many still practice their traditional religion. Historically, Edo traditional religion was practiced by all of society. In Edo traditional religion, there are two concurrent realms of existence: agbon, which is the visible and tangible realm of everyday life and erinmwin, the realm of ancestors and spirits. Osanobua is the almighty creator God and is reached through deities. Spirits and ancestors are believed to play a prominent world in agbon as they frequently enter the realm to intervene with the lives of humans. The Edo traditional religion shares some similarities with Yoruba traditional religion, particularly with respect to deities. Although the Edo people have been fully integrated into the Federal Republic of Nigeria, they still have a traditional ruling system of Obas and chiefs.

WHY STUDY EDO?

Edo is a Nigerian language spoken by over one million people living in southwest Nigeria. The area that the Edo people reside in is the former Benin Empire and is sometimes colloquially referred to as Benin (not to be confused with the Republic of Benin). Edo is also the name of the State in Nigeria in which the Edo people reside, the political capital for the Edo people and the name of their ethnic group. Edo is one of the main languages of Nigeria and is taught in primary and secondary schools. It is also widely used in television and radio programs, especially in Edo state. Furthermore, there are a large number of “Nollywood” films in Edo language. There are also large amounts of Edo people in the Diaspora in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. Students may wish to study Edo in order to effectively communicate with and understand a large indigenous population in Nigeria. They may also wish to study the language to learn about the history, culture, art or other notable legacies of the Benin Kingdom.

An Edo king

Edos celebrating the annual Igue Festival

Edo brass works

Edo brass works

Edo cultural dance

Photo credit: Eruogun Cultural Group & Dr. Ademola Iyi-Eweka