

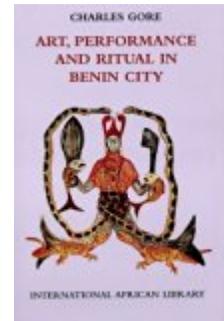
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles Gore. *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 248 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-3316-6.

Reviewed by Joseph Nevadomsky (Department of Anthropology, California State University, Fullerton)

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## Urban Cults and Charisma in a West African Kingdom

Gore's book signals an unanticipated shift in Benin studies, from the plethora of essays and catalogues on Benin brasses and ivories to an emphasis on ethnography and ritual. As essays on Benin art wane (except for resurfacing worn roads), and as directions in the study of African art stress the contemporary rather than the canonical, Gore's book is the ethnographic expression of that shift. At the same time, his account of current traditional charismatic healing and prophetic religious practices follows a distinguished lineage. The key materials are R. E. Bradbury's ethnographic studies and Philip Dark's research on art production, Graham Connah's work on Benin archaeology, and A. F. C. Ryder's archival work on Benin history from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. They conducted research under the auspices of the International Anthropological Institute (IAI) and the Benin Historical Research Scheme (BHRS).

Following Bradbury and others, Gore gives us a succinct but thorough background to Benin history and a review of the social structure in the context of present-day Benin society and politics. This includes not only the typical origin stories that are an unchallenged introduction to just about every essay on Benin art and history, but an exploration of how those origin stories reflect contemporary political reality; that is, how presumably solid oral traditions change according to historical times periods to augment periodic realignments of power. This is a solid integration of oral traditions and socio-political structures, the palace-town dichotomy, dispersions of power, and changing notions of hierarchy. Gore deconstructs

history so that his excursion is an explanation rather than an historical platitude. It de-ossifies the taken-for-granted assumptions that art historians use as foundational truths.

Beyond this frame, Gore explores how traditional religious practices are organized and play out today. This is a study of initiations as priests and priestesses, shrine configurations as expressions of individual talent, trance possession dances and performances. Gore did fieldwork for various periods of time over a decade or more, popping in and out as time and fortune permitted. His focus on visual arts includes personal configurations of ritual practices that incorporate song, dance, possession, and healing. It also includes the life histories of individual artists, techniques, styles, and social perspectives.

Gore slept at shrines, attended all night performances, and was initiated into religious groups. As an artist and anthropologist with good theory training by John Picton at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies and some occasional fieldwork help by academics resident in Benin, he has woven an analysis of agency, practice, narrative structure, and the individual trajectories of a cast of incredibly creative local priests, priestesses, and artists. It is the most significant ethnographic writing on Benin since Bradbury's *Benin Studies* (1973, edited by Peter Morton-Williams).

For a moment one thought that ethnographic work on Benin had disappeared with the gerontocratic generation of the aged and deceased members of IAI and BHRS.

Gore's book injects life back into the corpse. Not only does he resurrect it with his careful attention to ethnographic detail, his meticulous and artful fieldwork, and historical synopsis, but he also injects it with the narrative structure of postmodernism. That careful weaving of field data and theory gives his book the texture of a very fine, yet breathable cotton.

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