DEUTSCHES
ARCHÄOLOGISCHES INSTITUT

Edo|cation: Researching and Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Benin

Edo|cation is part of archaeological and cultural partnership between Nigeria and Germany in the framework of the restitution of the socalled Benin Bronzes in 2022. The joint learning and research project strengthens the partnership between the two countries and marks a groundbreaking step in restitution and sharing knowledge.

The Project

The Edo|cation project of the Commission for the Archaeology of Non-European Cultures (KAAK) at the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), in partnership with the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA), investigates the cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Benin in Edo State, Nigeria. Together with Nigerian colleagues the DAI researchers establish a training programme for digital archaeological methods, which includes the digitization of cultural landscapes from above using drones and the 3D documentation of historical buildings and objects.

The Earthworks of Benin

At the heart of the project are the extensive Moats of Benin, known in Edo as Iya. The Iya sourround Benin City and extend far into the landscape of Edo State, forming a network of linear earthworks. They are among the largest archaeological monuments in the world. However, the results of Edo|cation show that since the first mapping 60 years ago only half of the Inner City Iya remains. Due to rapid urban growth the destruction of the Iya is increasing exponentially. The research team has identified structural details of the historical gates and access routes to the city of Benin, and they have mapped historical settlements Oria, Udo and Ughoton. LiDAR flights in Ughoton, the kingdom's former port city, have uncovered previously unknown earthworks.

Community Mapping

Dialogues with the communities that have lived along the Iya for centuries highlight the cultural value of these endangered monuments for the population of Benin City. In the past, conservation measures, including programs to beautify the Iya, were already initiated by the Communities. The exchange with the Communities initiated by Edo|cation will be continued by MOWAA after the end of the project. "Over the last three years, we have done an excellent job as a team. I have learned a lot from the creativity, eloquence, organizational talent and knowledge of my Nigerian colleagues," affirms Christian Schepers, project manager of Edo|cation.

Documenting a Heritage Site of global significance

For the first time in 50 years, Edo|cation has produced highly detailed maps of the Iya, documenting features with an impressive accuracy of less than three centimeters. These maps are a significant contribution to the preservation of the Iya in Benin City, which is recognized as a national monument of Nigeria and protected by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). Furthermore, the maps play a crucial role in advocating for the Iya's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the 1990s, an initial application for this recognition was submitted but was ultimately unsuccessful. This updated documentation provides a clearer understanding of the Iya's historical and cultural significance and will be a key element in supporting its case for World Heritage status.

Digitization for cultural preservation

Using aerial imagery and precise 3D models, such as those provided by Edo|cation, a smaller team can document archaeological monuments more quickly and efficiently. Updated maps can be generated every two years to monitor the condition of the Iya. The data collected from both aerial and ground surveys can be directly shared with state authorities like EdoGIS, integrating into urban planning and development initiatives. This could establish a new interface for collaboration between authorities. Digital methods serve as the foundation for systematic and strategic planning in heritage conservation in Benin City.

Joint Learning

Nigerian and German archaeologists are collaborating to develop digital methods tailored to the specific needs of local archaeological research. This exchange of knowledge is further enriched through webinars and hands-on exercises, ensuring that expertise is disseminated as widely as possible. ONLAAH (Online Learning on African Archaeology and Heritage) is a free course available on the Coursera platform, developed by the DAI and integrated into Edo|cation. It equips participants with valuable insights into archaeology, heritage protection, and conservation across various African countries. As Sophia Fonseca, Project Coordination ONLAAH states, "this collaboration transcends mere technology transfer; it fosters a meaningful exchange in which both Nigerian and international professionals contribute to and benefit from shared knowledge, ensuring the sustainable protection of heritage. We are true partners, learning from one another." A chapter currently being developed together with Nigerian experts will highlight Nigeria's rich cultural heritage and offer insights into archaeology, heritage conservation, and research methodologies.

Project Movie "Edo|cation"

Edo|cation is funded by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany. In a joint declaration dated July 1, 2022, Nigeria and Germany committed to intensifying their collaboration in various fields, including archaeology. Since then, Edo|cation has developed extensive expertise in techniques such as Structure from Motion Photogrammetry, drone usage, LiDAR, and D-GPS measurements. For the first time in 50 years, the Iya of Benin are once again the focus of archaeological research in Benin City. This digital data enables more efficient preservation of the cultural heritage in and around Benin City. The Edo|cation team is also documenting the oldest surviving building in the city while engaging with local communities to learn and discuss their history and explore methods for preserving their cultural heritage. Additionally, Edo|cation is implementing a training program on digital methods in archaeology. The results and findings from the German-Nigerian collaboration over the past three years will serve as the foundation for future research projects and are showcased in the **project film "Edo|cation"**.

Prospects – „Futures of Archaeology"

On November 4th, MOWAA will inaugurate its new Institute in Benin City. During the opening event, Edo|cation will organize a guided tour of the Iya of Benin, showcasing the significant contributions of joint research and training initiatives to the Institute. Following this, the DAI will co-host the "Futures of Archaeology" symposium on November 7th and 8th. Organized by MOWAA and its partners, this symposium will address current findings and challenges in archaeology, as well as the preservation of cultural heritage, bringing together experts from Nigeria and neighboring regions.Additionally, the Edo|cation team is working on a scientific publication focused on the condition and structural details of the Benin Iya. The article is scheduled for submission in December and is expected to be published next year.

DEUTSCHES ARCHÄOLOGISCHES INSTITUT

Research Contact
Christian Schepers, M.A.
Christian.Schepers@dainst.de

Media contact
Doris Fleischer
presse@dainst.de
030/187711-120

_____

Picture credits
Fig. 1: Edo|cation: Intercultural knowledge transfer © *DAI KAAK // Schepers*
Fig. 2: Edo|cation: Joint learning with archaeologists from MOWAA and DAI. From left to right: O. Omogbai, J. Hubert, Jacobs B. and Adeshina O. © *DAI KAAK // Schepers*
Fig. 3: Edo|cation: Survey and D-GPS measurements in Benin City (Nigeria). From left to right: Diya A.S., J. Hubert, Ovie R. © *DAI KAAK // Schepers*
Fig. 4: Edo|cation: Documentation of a part of the trench ramparts of Benin with Ovie R. © *DAI KAAK // Schepers*
Fig. 5: Edo|cation: The Ogiamien House, one of the oldest surviving buildings in Benin City © *DAI KAAK // Hartl-Reiter*

Project film
© 2024 https://www.schwabenfilm.com/
Director and Camera: Sven Falge; 2nd Camera: Adeshina Olatubosun Oladimeji; Editor: Selina Schmalzl; Supervisor: Christian Schepers; 3D Photogrammetry: Jan Hubert and Christian Hartl-Reiter; Audio: Osaheni Akpata "Duno" and Envato Elements