

OBITUARY: PROF. JOSEPH NEVADOMSKY, 1942-2020



Taken from (<http://josephnevadomsky.blogspot.com/>)

Ọrriọvbe gha yiin ẹse, ọ gu ọmọ otọ ru - when the stranger performs well, he is grouped with the locals/indigenes.

Joseph J. Nevadomsky (1942-2020) was fond of proverbs. His email signature included the

Turkish proverb "*An honest man is always in trouble*" that evoked his character and personal history. The proverb above is one that an Edo friend saw as a fitting tribute. I first met Joe in 1979 in Benin City. He would have been covering the coronation of Oba Erediauwa then and I was carrying out research on aesthetic preference in Edo North. The first elections under the military government were taking place making life hectic, since there was voting every weekend. However, I spent little time in Benin City. I had no context there, but for some reason, I was driving with my 18month old son to Ibadan from Auchi, and found myself in Benin when it was getting dark. Not a good time to be embarking on a long road trip. Clearly, I needed a place to stay. There were not many hotels in Benin City at the time and I did not know my way around. I had an address for Joe, so I called on him and his wife Becky. (Before cell phones, so if you wanted to see someone, you called on them in person.) I only knew them by reputation. We were all young scholars at the time. Much to my relief, they grasped my situation immediately, and invited me to stay the night – an extension of that volunteer hospitality that Joe was steeped in, given his Peace Corps experience in Nigeria in the 1960s.

Since I was not involved in research on the court, we didn't cross paths much intellectually until I became a book review editor for H-AfrArts and discovered that Joe not only read voraciously but had a knack for writing short, pithy reviews—and doing them promptly. They were reviews, I might add, that needed little editing and while they may have included acerbic comments, they were never unkind.

We did get to know one another in Benin City in 2003. He had returned to deal with some family and property business and I was teaching at the University of Benin on my first Fulbright. We saw each other briefly at the 2007 opening of the exhibition *Benin Kings and Rituals* in Vienna – criss-crossing each other with our cameras whirring as the Austrian Edo community welcomed the Oba's representatives and celebrated the event.

Most recently we were collaborating on a book he had begun writing for Reaktion, a book he realized he would not be able to finish given the state of his health, and so suggested that I should send my two chapters on life beyond Benin to be included in the Festschrift for Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien—an example of his thoughtful and empathic attitude towards fellow scholars as well as students. Among my last communications from Joe, evidence of his unfailing quirky humor, was a link to a video on Santa Claus in Warri that he thought I might enjoy. This would have been just a few weeks before his death on January 15, 2020.

I could easily write several pages detailing his academic accomplishments. I will summarize, though, and note that Joe's Blog – a chronicle of his life and work with pictures (<http://josephnevadomsky.blogspot.com/>) – is still up online. It shows clearly how productive a scholar and teacher he was, and indicates the extent and variety of his background.

Joe was born in Pennsylvania, but, like so many young men, he followed the dictum "Go West, young man, go West" doing his undergraduate work at the University of San Diego, earning a BA with a triple major in English, History and Philosophy (1964) followed by two MAs (Education and Anthropology) as well as a PhD in Anthropology, all from UC Berkeley.

Although known to me and most of my colleagues for his work on the Benin Kingdom, he wrote his dissertation on changing patterns in marriage and the family in Trinidad and Tobago carrying out research in a predominantly East Indian village. That research was supported by an NMIH grant. Before undertaking graduate study, however, Joe spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Nigeria (1964-1966). He spent the academic year 1967-1968 as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Delhi in India, possibly accounting for his subsequent interest in the East Indian communities in the Caribbean. He continued along the academic path he had chosen, earning his PhD in 1977. Meanwhile, he went back to Nigeria with his wife, Rebecca Agheyisi who had trained as a linguist. He taught at the University of Lagos (1973-75) and then at the newly opened Federal University in Benin City (1975-1989)—and carried out much of the research that he has become so well-known for. Returning to the United States, he took a position in the Department of Anthropology at California State University, Fullerton (CSF). During his 30-year tenure at the university, Joe also taught courses at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, UCLA, USC, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He chaired the California State Universities International Exchange Program, a program that took him to Zimbabwe in 1993.

Joe's interests in the field of cultural anthropology ranged widely, and included art, material culture, ritual, symbolism, and architecture. Adept at academic research, fieldwork, and photography, Joe was above all a skilled and dedicated teacher. In recognition of this, he was awarded the Humanities and Social Science Distinguished teacher award from CSU in 2000. Ahead of his time, perhaps, and sensitive to the issues of repatriation surrounding the art of the Benin Kingdom, he was active in CSU's repatriation of Vigango ancestor figures to their original owners in Kenya.

Besides teaching in the classroom, he curated a number of exhibits in local museums and published more than 100 journal articles including essays and reviews. At least one-half of these focused on the Benin Kingdom. Among the most important was his ground breaking series on the Benin Coronation, a consequence of his integration into Edo society and a close relationship with Oba Erediauwa during his days as Crown Prince. He was also an active curatorial participant in the landmark exhibition Benin Kings and Rituals that opened in Vienna in 2007.

Perhaps one of his greatest contributions to the sustaining of Edo culture is his give of 20,000 photographs (his Benin archive) to the Elliot Elisofon Archive at the National Museum of Africa Art (Smithsonian). Not only will they go on "teaching," so important to Joe, but they will be made accessible on-line and therefore available to the Edo people. Joe will be sorely missed, but, as the Edo people say, "Owina gha wu, obọ re fo vbe agbon," that is, "When the craftsman dies, his craftsmanship lingers on in the world." For this, we are profoundly grateful.

Jean Borgatti

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Visiting Scholar - Clark University and Boston University

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