

# **Edo-Portuguese Relations XV-XVII centuries: A study on the intercultural encounter between Portugal and Nigeria**

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# **Edo-Portuguese Relations XV-XVII centuries: A study on the intercultural encounter between Portugal and Nigeria**

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## CONTENT

Acknowledgments	6
Abstract	7
Resumo	7
Introduction	8
Literature Review	13
Objectives and Methodology	24
Chapter Overview	29
Chapter 1: The Historical and Political Context	30
1.1. The origins of the Edo people of Benin	30
1.2. The Rise of the Benin Kingdom (Political and social structure of the Benin Kingdom)	32
1.3. Forging an Empire: The Military Campaigns of Benin's Powerful Obas	35
1.4. Benin's Economy in the 15th century (its economic base, its internal and regional trade networks)	37
1.5. Great Benin and its Borders	40
1.6. Benin Art	46
1.7. Benin Architecture	49
1.8. Benin's Religious customs and traditions	52
1.9. Portugal in the Age of Maritime Expansion	55
Chapter 2: The Genesis of the Encounter (c. 1485 - c. 1539)	77
2.1. First Contact and Early Diplomacy	77
2.2. Material Culture and Gift Diplomacy	80
2.3. Trade Diplomacy	85
Table 1. Imports and Exports to Benin Kingdom 1485-1539	87
2.3.1. Brass & copper (especially manillas, bars, and sheets)	88
2.3.3. Beads (coral and glass)	90
2.3.4. Ivory in the Edo-Portuguese Trade	91
2.3.5. Cowrie shells (currency)	93
2.3.6. Enslaved People (The Rise of the Transatlantic slave trade)	94
2.3.7. Firearms and gunpowder	98
2.4. Religious diplomacy	102
Chapter 3: The Intercultural Exchange in Practice	113
3. 1. Artistic culture exchange	113
3.2. Linguistic Exchange	130
Table 2. Portuguese Loanwords in Edo Language	133
Table 3. Example Nigerian Pidgin Sentences and Meanings	137
3.3. Agricultural Exchange	139
3.4. Religious Exchange	152

3.5. Technological Exchange	158
3.6. Toponymy (Place name exchange)	168
3.7. Identity Exchange	171
Chapter 4: The Evolving Relationship (Late 16th - 17th Century)	177
The Decline of Edo-Portuguese Relations 1539-1641	177
4.1. The Arrival of Other European Powers and its impact on Edo-Portuguese relations:	178
Table 4. Dutch items of Trade With Benin as noted by Dapper 1668	182
Table 5. Major Events Highlighted in This Discussion	189
Table 6. Goods Exported from Benin to Britain	191
Table 7. Imports from Britain to Benin	191
4.2. Benin's Refusal to accept Christianity	195
4.3. The West Africa's Climate and Disease Environment	199
Conclusion	208
References	214
APPENDIX I      MAPS	232
Figure I 1 – Fragment of a Chart, End of the 15th Century.	233
Figure I 2 – Map of the World, 1502.	233
Figure I 3 – States of the Bight of Benin interior, c. 1580.	234
Figure I 4 – Map of the Atlantic Ocean, 1613.	235
Figure I 5 – Map of the Atlantic Coast of Africa (Gold Coast, Slave Coast, Ivory Coast), 1670.	236
Figure I 6 – An Approximate Map of the Great Benin Empire 15th-17th Century.	237
Figure I 7 – Map of Benin City in Nigeria, 21st Century.	238
APPENDIX II: Chronological List of the Obas and Queen Mothers (Iyobas) of the Benin Kingdom	239
Chronology of the Obas of the Benin Kingdom	239
Pre-Imperial Obas of Benin (c. 1180 – 1440)	239
Obas of the Benin Empire (1440 – 1897)	239
Post-Imperial Obas of Benin (1914 – Present)	240
Chronology of the Queen Mothers (Iyobas) of the Benin Kingdom	241
APPENDIX III: Chronology of the Monarchs of Portugal	243
APPENDIX IV: Artefacts Arranged by Materials	246
Figure IV 1 – Head of an Oba.	246
Figure IV 2 – Equestrian figure, lost-wax cast in brass.	248
Figure IV 3 – Seated Portuguese, 15–16th century.	250
Figure IV 4 – Brass Figure of a Portuguese holding a musket.	252
Figure IV 5 – Three Portuguese Men.	254
Figure IV 6 – Portuguese Figure with Crossbow.	256

Figure IV 7 – Relief Plaque: Portuguese with Linstock and Five Manillas.	258
Figure II 8 – Relief Plaque: Upper Body of a Portuguese.	260
Figure IV 9 – Relief Plaque: Lower Body of a Portuguese.	262
Figure IV 10 – Portuguese with Two Manillas.	264
Figure IV 11 – Plaque with Portuguese Traders and Manillas.	266
Figure IV 12 – Plaque: Portuguese with spear.	268
Figure IV 13 – Bracelet: Portuguese Heads and Mudfish.	270
Figure IV 14 – Gilded cast brass armlet with raised design of Edo and European heads, leopards, and crocodiles.	272
Figure IV 15 – Cast brass armlet with raised design of European heads and mudfish.	274
Figure IV 16 – Pendant: Portuguese Horseman.	276
Figure IV 17 – Lidded Box: Portuguese Face.	278
Figure IV 18 – The Prophecy Bird.	280
Figure IV 19 – Crucifix.	282
Figure IV 20 – Esclave Enchaîné.	284
Figure IV 21– Brass Manila, horseshoe-shaped open bracelet (manilla).	286
Figure IV 22 – Queen Mother (Iyoba) Idia, Pendant Mask.	288
Figure IV 23 – Carved Elephant Tusk.	290
Figure IV 24 – Benin–Portuguese Oliphant	292
Figure IV 25 – Sapi–Portuguese Oliphant with Portuguese Coat of Arms	294
Figure IV 26 – Saltcellar with Portuguese Figures.	296
Figure IV 27 – Carved Ivory Salt Cellar.	298
Figure IV 28 – Half-Section Saltcellar	300
Figure IV 29 – Section of Luso-African Arts at Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga	302
Figure IV 30 – Long-handled ladle of carved ivory inlaid with brass.	304
Figure IV 31 – Ivory armlet inlaid with brass, carved with mudfish and European heads.	306
Figure IV 32 – 500-Year-Old Stone Sculpture, Cloister of the Jerónimos Monastery	308
Figure IV 33 – Benin in the 17th Century (1668) by Olfert Dapper	309
Figure IV 34 – Statue of João Afonso de Aveiro	310
Figure IV 35 – Description of João Afonso de Aveiro at Rossio Square (Praça do Rossio)	312
APPENDIX V Links of Digital Artefacts of some Museums	313
APPENDIX VI Flora and Fauna Exchanged	314

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## Abstract

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This work aims to study the relations between Portugal and the Kingdom of Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the early stages of Portuguese rise, and expansion, Portugal was one of the first countries to achieve navigation capacities to sail to other parts of the world. Thanks to Portugal's advancement in navigation technology, it soon achieved great possessions around the world, built relationships of both culture and trade with other kingdoms, one of which was the Kingdom of Benin in southern West Africa. Portugal's contact with the world led to cultural diffusion where the Portuguese took their culture, religion, and civilisation to the people they met, and they themselves became influenced by these people.

Despite the elapse of time, the impact of the early contact of the Portuguese with the people of Edo in Benin Kingdom can still be traced today in the 21st century when we look at several aspects of life such as language, artwork, and religion of these people. This doctoral thesis studies the cultural exchange and reciprocity between the two kingdoms and especially the aspects of life that were influenced by the Portuguese encounter with the people of Edo from the earlier years — it addresses how all these highlight our connection with each other. With these phenomena the thesis study aims to highlight that despite the extreme differences between Portugal and Nigeria today, our two nations still have a common history with the Atlantic Ocean being our patrimony.

Keywords: Portuguese expansion, Edo-Portuguese relations, cultural encounter, Edo-Portuguese artefacts, Religious history, Language impact, interculturality, reciprocity.

## Resumo

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Este trabalho visa estudar as relações entre Portugal e o Reino do Benim nos séculos XV-XVII. Nas fases iniciais da ascensão e expansão portuguesas, Portugal foi um dos primeiros países a alcançar capacidades de navegação para poder chegar às outras partes do mundo. Graças ao avanço na tecnologia de navegação, Portugal alcançou rapidamente grandes posses em todo o mundo, construiu relações tanto culturais como comerciais com outros reinos, um dos quais é o Reino do Benim no sul da África Ocidental. O contacto de Portugal com o mundo levou à difusão cultural em que Portugal transportou a sua cultura, religião e civilização às pessoas que conheceu, e o próprio Portugal se tornou influenciado por essas pessoas.

Apesar do decorrer do tempo, o impacto do contacto precoce dos portugueses com o povo de Edo no Reino do Benim ainda pode ser rastreado no século XXI quando olhamos para vários aspetos da vida, tais como a língua, a arte e a religião desses povos. Esta tese de doutoramento estuda o intercâmbio cultural e a reciprocidade entre os dois reinos e principalmente os aspetos da vida que foram influenciados pelo encontro dos portugueses com o povo de Edo desde os primeiros anos—aborda como estes evidenciam a sua ligação uns com os outros. Com estes fenómenos o estudo pretende destacar que apesar das diferenças extremas entre Portugal e a Nigéria de hoje, as nossas duas nações ainda têm uma história comum em que o Oceano Atlântico faz parte do nosso património.

Palavras-chave: Descobertas e expansão portuguesas, relações edo-portuguesas, encontro cultural, artefactos edo-portugueses, história religiosa, impacto linguístico, interculturalidade, reciprocidade.

## Introduction

This doctoral thesis, written under the programme *Insular and Atlantic History (15th–20th Centuries)*, explores the topic: "**Edo-Portuguese Relations (15th–17th Centuries): A Study on the Intercultural Encounter between Portugal and Nigeria.**" The subject falls squarely within the thematic scope of Atlantic history, a field concerned with the rise and expansion of European maritime empires—particularly Portugal—and their political, economic, and cultural engagements across Africa, the Americas, and beyond.

The **temporal focus** of this study—spanning the 15th to 17th centuries—is defined by the historical trajectory of Edo-Portuguese relations. It begins in **1485** with the arrival of João Afonso de Aveiro, marking the official commencement of contact between Portugal and the Benin Kingdom, and extends to **1641**, the end of Oba Ohuan's reign, a period of significant political upheaval. This time-frame encompasses the establishment of diplomatic and commercial ties, as well as the most intense phase of cultural interaction. Portuguese dominance in trade with Benin persisted until the late 16th century, gradually giving way to Dutch influence (Elugbe & Omamor 1991, 7).

Scholars such as Ryder (1969, 84) and Gunsch (2018, 20) highlight 1593 as a pivotal moment when the Dutch began to play a prominent role in West African trade. Dutch merchant networks organised expeditions to Guinea in **1593**, marking the Dutch entry into West African trade (Vila-Santa 2021, 5). Within a decade, contemporary observers reported active Dutch trading on the Gold Coast and Portuguese efforts at **São Jorge da Mina (Elmina)** to exclude 'all nations'—evidence of mounting competition that ended Portugal's exclusive control (De Marees, 1602/1987, 181).

This episode marked the beginning of a competitive trading environment in which African kingdoms such as Benin could negotiate with multiple European partners rather than relying exclusively on Portugal. By 1641, Portuguese dominant presence had effectively ended due to Dutch ascendancy along the Gulf of Guinea coast and the conquest of São Jorge da Mina. While the 18th–20th centuries are also relevant to understanding the broader narrative of Portuguese influence, this thesis focuses on the 15th–17th centuries. This focus allows for a more

precise and in-depth exploration of the **peak period** of Edo-Portuguese interactions without diluting the study's coherence and analytical depth.

The topic avoids the term 'Nigeria-Portuguese relations' for the 15th-17th centuries, as this designation refers to a political entity that did not yet exist; the modern Nigerian state was unified in 1914 following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern British Protectorates and the Colony of Lagos. Portugal's primary interactions and cultural exchanges were consequently with the coastal polities in the region later known as southern Nigeria, particularly the Kingdom of Benin.

The cultural exchange resulting from early contact between Portugal and the Benin Kingdom left an enduring legacy. As in other former Portuguese colonies such as Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, traces of Portuguese presence although certainly much fewer remain embedded in contemporary Nigerian society. The **Edo language** incorporates Portuguese loanwords; **Nigerian Pidgin English** preserves elements of Portuguese vocabulary, and the former capital city, **Lagos**, bears a name derived from the Portuguese word for “lagoons.”

Similarly, the capital of the Republic of Benin—formerly the Kingdom of Dahomey—bears the name **Porto Novo**, meaning “new port” in Portuguese. The widespread adoption of Christianity across Atlantic coastal societies further reflects this legacy, as the religion introduced by the Portuguese became dominant in many of these regions. These enduring cultural imprints were made possible by the Atlantic Ocean as a conduit for interaction, facilitated by Portugal's advancements in maritime navigation. Together, these features serve as living testaments to the depth and reach of early Afro-Portuguese contact.

Today, Nigeria is widely recognised as an Anglophone, shaped predominantly by British colonial rule, especially in education, administration, religion, and law. Nigeria achieved independence from the United Kingdom on 1 October 1960 – after nearly a century of British rule. As a result, many view Nigeria's cultural identity as predominantly Anglophone<sup>1</sup> and disconnected from Lusophone traditions. At first glance, modern-day Nigeria may appear to have little in common with Portugal or the broader Lusophone world.

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<sup>1</sup> Anglophone refers to English speaking, as Francophone for French speaking and Lusophone, Portuguese speaking

However, historical inquiry reveals a deeply rooted and explicit shared past. Long before contemporary geopolitical boundaries emerged, the territories that now constitute Nigeria—particularly the Kingdom of Benin—were engaged in meaningful diplomatic, commercial, and cultural exchanges with Portugal. This early encounter, facilitated by Atlantic navigation in the 15th century, positions Nigeria within the historical framework of the Lusophone world, even if that legacy has since faded from popular memory. As Alberto Vieira has eloquently stated, the Atlantic is not merely an expansive body of water—it is a vessel of long shared history, culture, and human connection (Vieira 2004, 219). In this context, it refers to all nations whose shores touch the Atlantic and who have participated in its long history of exchange and transformation.

The Atlantic, seen in its large water form as an ocean, played a vital role in the rise and expansion of the Portuguese Empire. Spain and Portugal were the first two European nations to master the newly improved navigation technologies. This advancement enabled both countries to reach distant parts of the world by sea. In an era without airplanes or jet travel, maritime navigation was the only viable means of reaching other continents. Thus, with the development of seafaring technologies, the path toward globalisation was laid. Interactions among cultures, societies, economies, and populations—based on interdependence—began to emerge on a global scale.

The Atlantic, seen as a vast and strategic body of water, served as a crucial and exclusive route through which Portugal could access the port of Benin and other ports across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These routes allowed Portugal to engage in trade, commerce, missionary activities, exploration, the dissemination of Portuguese customs, and political assertion in newly encountered territories. This expansive reach was exemplified in a number of significant exploratory achievements. A notable example is Vasco da Gama, who reached India by sea in 1498, having sailed from Lisbon around the Cape of Good Hope via the Atlantic (Fardilha & Fernandes 2016). Portuguese presence in Japan, though initially accidental—resulting from a shipwreck that brought two Portuguese explorers to the island of Tanegashima—soon intensified with the arrival of Christian missionaries and expanding commercial interests (Howe 1999, 11). Within the Atlantic itself, Portuguese explorers undertook numerous expeditions in the central

and southern regions, leading to the exploration of Atlantic archipelagos, notably Madeira, the Azores, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

The Atlantic, when conceptualised as a community, entails the examination of historical developments that unfolded across its geographical and cultural spaces. One such development is the early Portuguese presence along the West African coast, which can be traced back to the arrival of the explorer Rui de Siqueira in 1472, when he reached the Niger Delta in present-day Nigeria. Ediagbonya (2015, 207) points out that relations between the Portuguese and the people of the Benin Kingdom were not formalised in the early years. It was only in c. 1486, with the visit of João Afonso de Aveiro<sup>2</sup>—acting on instructions from King João II of Portugal—that more structured contact was established. Ryder (1977) suggests that the Portuguese king could have received reports about the existence of a significant kingdom in the region and sought to learn more about its ruler, people, religion, and products (Ryder 1977, 29). It was during this second visit that the Oba (King) of Benin at the time, Oba Ozolua, expressed interest in establishing trade relations with the European visitors (Ediagbonya 2015, 208).

On the western side of the Atlantic lay Brazil, a vast territory formally claimed by Portugal in 1500 during the expedition led by Pedro Álvares Cabral, accompanied by Franciscan missionaries (Livermore 1947, 231, 248). In the first decades of colonisation, Brazil attracted limited attention from the Portuguese crown, as gold had not yet been discovered. During this early phase, the region was valued primarily for its natural resources, including parrots, monkeys, and especially Brazilwood, which was exported to Europe for its red dye. The fertile land also allowed for the introduction of sugarcane, which became a cornerstone of the colonial economy. In later years this region became a major source of wealth for the Portuguese crown as new resources were exploited, commodities such as gold and cotton emerged alongside sugarcane and Brazilwood, reflecting the evolving patterns of trade and economic development in the colony (Livermore 1947, 248; Dodge 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> **João Afonso de Aveiro**, a Portuguese navigator from Aveiro was active in the 1480s. In 1485, he led an expedition to the Benin River, initiating trade and diplomatic contacts with the Kingdom of Benin. His voyage significantly advanced Portuguese knowledge of the West African coast and laid the groundwork for subsequent exploration and commercial engagement in the region. A statue of **João Afonso** stands in Rossio, Aveiro, commemorating his contributions to Portuguese maritime exploration. A picture of his statue is added in the catalogue of this thesis (see Figure IV 34, Appendix IV).

As economic activities expanded across the Atlantic, the transatlantic slave trade emerged, resulting in the forced displacement of people for labour. Alongside involuntary migration, significant numbers of individuals from Portugal and other European nations migrated voluntarily to the Americas. This movement facilitated widespread cultural exchange and the blending of languages and traditions, all profoundly shaped by Portuguese influence.

Over time, other European powers—such as England, France, and the Netherlands—emerged as strong competitors to Portugal, challenging its dominance both in the Atlantic and in distant regions such as India, Indonesia, and China. Although Portugal eventually lost control over many of its overseas territories, its influence remained deeply embedded in various regions. In Nigeria and throughout the Atlantic world—traces of Portuguese cultural, religious, and linguistic legacy continue to be evident today.

The next section of this study examines the relevant literature related to the research topic. It reviews the works of other scholars and situates the current research within the broader academic discussion.

## Literature Review

This study approaches the historical relationship between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal through the lens of **interculturality**, rather than from the more commonly explored themes of trade or artistic heritage. While numerous scholars have addressed aspects of the Portuguese presence in West Africa, few have examined in depth the **reciprocal cultural exchanges** and their implications for mutual identity, diplomacy, and historical legacy. Much of the historiography has tended to privilege a European perspective—emphasising Portuguese expansion and influence—yet an alternative perspective foregrounds **African agency** and cross-cultural negotiation.

From this perspective, the Kingdom of Benin is not a passive recipient of European contact but an active participant that shaped the terms of trade, diplomacy, and cultural interaction. This perspective allows us to see the encounter as a dialogue, in which both sides reshaped their identities and adjusted their political strategies. This approach emphasises **reciprocity**: Portuguese merchants gained access to pepper, ivory, and slaves, while Benin secured prestige, military technology, bronze and diplomatic leverage. By situating this study within an African-centered paradigm, the thesis reframes the encounter as a mutual process of identity formation and cross-cultural exchange, revealing that both parties contributed to the shaping of historical legacies in West Africa.

## Traditional Historiography and Eurocentric Frameworks

The earliest historiography of Luso-African encounters from chroniclers was dominated by Eurocentric perspectives that privileged Portuguese agency and reduced African societies to passive recipients of European influence. Zurara (1415–1474), in his *Crónica dos Feitos de Guiné* (1453/1896), presents Portuguese voyages as a Christian “civilising mission,” portraying African societies as culturally backward from a European perspective. Similarly, Duarte Pacheco Pereira (c. 1465 – c. 1533), writing around 1506, offers geographical and navigational observations of Africa, depicting the continent largely as a resource waiting to be explored and exploited by Europeans (Pereira c. 1506). Leo Africanus (c. 1485 – c. 1554), a North African diplomat and traveller, provides detailed ethnographic descriptions of West African societies in his *Descrittione dell’Africa* (first published 1550s), yet his work often frames these societies

through a European lens, emphasising their unfamiliar and “exotic” aspects (Africanus 1550/1896).

Jaime Cortesão and Charles Boxer, modern historians, following the Eurocentric approach established by earlier chroniclers, focus on political, diplomatic, and commercial histories of the empire, framed largely through European documentary sources (Cortesão 1968; Boxer 1969). These works were valuable for consolidating knowledge of Portuguese expansion but provide little insight into African perspectives, symbolism, or cultural agency. Cortesão highlights the complexities of Portuguese imperial expansion and its lasting influence on African societies (Cortesão 1968). While Boxer analyses Portugal’s global maritime expansion and its economic, political, and cultural impacts on Africa (Boxer 1969, xxi).

Malyn Newitt’s *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668* further **reformulated** this tradition by tracing the institutional and structural development of the Portuguese empire (Newitt 2005). Newitt highlights the contributions of African and Asian Portuguese, who formed a new hybrid identity. These individuals, located in the most remote parts of the empire, were responsible for maintaining an enterprise that sustained Portugal for centuries (Newitt 2005, 2). While recognising African and Asian agency the traditional Eurocentric perspective of historical writing was reshaped. Yet Newitt (2005) remained primarily concerned with the mechanisms of European imperial consolidation.

### **Shifts Toward African Agency and the Atlantic World**

From the c. 1960s onward, scholarship began to challenge this imbalance. Ryder (1969) provides a valuable overview of the interactions between Benin and European powers, especially Portugal, with emphasis on political structures, trade dynamics, and changing patterns of diplomacy. Ryder (1969) emphasises that the Oba and his chiefs were in full control of the trading system in the kingdom, exercising the authority to regulate markets and to determine the conditions under which European merchants could trade. The author arrives at this conclusion through a careful analysis of Portuguese archival records, missionary accounts, and earlier European travel narratives, combined with local oral traditions collected in Benin. Unlike traditional Eurocentric approaches that foreground European agency and portray African rulers as passive recipients of European influence, Ryder’s method incorporates African perspectives

and emphasises the kingdom's internal political structures. This allows him to reveal that Benin actively negotiated the terms of trade, shaping both the flow of goods and the behaviour of European partners.

One of the notable strengths of Ryder (1969) is his examination of the strategies of resistance employed by the Benin Kingdom against colonial encroachment. This adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, revealing the agency and resilience of Benin in the face of external pressures. Similarly, John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* represent a landmark, asserting African political agency and their active contributions to Atlantic culture, religion, and economy. Thornton (1998) challenges Eurocentric narratives by showing how African social structures, religious practices, and labor systems adapted to and impacted European colonial and economic expansion.

“African slaves came to the new Atlantic world to work and serve, and by their efforts and numbers made a significant contribution to the economy; they brought with them cultural heritage in language, aesthetics, and philosophy that helped to form the newly developing culture of the Atlantic world” (Thornton 1998, 129). Toby Green's *A Fistful of Shells* expanded this vision by situating West Africa within global economic systems and by foregrounding the resilience of African polities in shaping early modern trade relations. Green (2019) challenges Eurocentrism by showing that West African societies were active participants in global trade, politics, and culture long before European intervention, highlighting African agency and centrality in shaping the Atlantic world (Green 2019).

David Abulafia's *The Discovery of Mankind* reinforced this reorientation by showing that European encounters with indigenous peoples were shaped by misconceptions, myths, and cultural biases—revealing that the “discovery” of the Atlantic world was a complex process rather than a straightforward story of European superiority: “the Europeans met them for the first time, but they also met the Europeans for the first time. The encounters opened the eyes of Europeans to a vast range of practices and beliefs that no one had previously suspected to exist” (Abulafia 2008, 4). Abulafia highlights African states in the eyes of the Europeans as having large mounted armies with expansionist kings, and the Portuguese crown being content to treat the African kingdoms as partners of trade and Politics (Abulafia 2008, 92-95)

Newitt (2010) shifts away from Eurocentrism by emphasising African agency, negotiated relationships, and cultural exchanges, portraying the Portuguese presence as contingent, adaptive, and contested, rather than a straightforward story of European conquest. The author provides enough complexity and nuance to illustrate the mutual influence and interplay between Portuguese and West African societies (Newitt 2010). While Newitt (2010) effectively moves beyond strict Eurocentrism, a key gap remains in the central debate. Isabel Castro Henriques (2021), a pioneer in African studies in Portugal who introduced a course on the History of Africa at the University of Lisbon in 1974—critically addresses this gap by asserting that Lisbon's cultural and urban fabric is itself a profound Luso-African hybrid, highlighting the contributions of Africans to Portugal. Her *Roteiro Histórico de uma Lisboa Africana* demonstrates that the immense demographic and cultural contribution of African populations was not merely peripheral to the Empire, but central to the making of Portuguese identity, thereby completing the reciprocal geographical analysis of the early modern encounter.

Together, these authors open up a new way of writing history, one that sees African actors as genuine co-creators of Atlantic modernity, pushing back against the older Eurocentric narratives.

### **Diplomacy and Political Exchange**

Early chroniclers such as Francisco Álvares (1540) and Damião de Góis (1566), provide contemporary Portuguese accounts of African polities and cross-cultural interactions. Álvares's *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Índias* offers a detailed firsthand narrative of the Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia, while Góis's *Chronica do Felicíssimo Rei Dom Emanuel* documents diplomatic exchanges, tribute systems, and embassies involving African states. Together, their works constitute key primary evidence for understanding the political and diplomatic dimensions of early Portuguese engagements with Africa. Building on these foundations, modern scholarship has further emphasised the structured nature of Benin–Portuguese diplomacy. Metzsig (2012) and Aisién and Oriahki (2013) highlight rituals of gift exchange, envoy missions, and dynastic negotiation, complementing the work of Thornton (1992) and Green (2019), who situate political engagement not only in economic and agricultural interests but also in performative, symbolic exchanges that reinforced sovereignty.

Bondarenko (1992, 1999) highlights European bias in describing Benin, while also providing an anthropological-historical reading of the kingdom as a complex urban and political civilisation with diplomatic strategies embedded in cosmological frameworks of kingship. While Vila-Santa Braga Campos (2024) examines Portugal's maritime diplomacy, knowledge exchange, and espionage in the early modern period. His work provides context for understanding Portuguese engagement with West African polities, including Benin. It highlights the broader network of strategic, diplomatic, and cross-cultural negotiations in which Benin was involved.

### **Visual and Material Culture: Negotiation Through Art**

A parallel transformation has occurred in art-historical studies, which have redefined Benin's material culture as central evidence of intercultural negotiation. Foy (1901) aimed to identify the true origin of the Luso-African ivories by posing the question "Where do the Benin ivories come from?" Foy (1901) argued that these artworks could not have been made in Benin. Since the Portuguese coat of arms and Latin mottos were intended for Portugal, he suggested they were likely carved by Africans brought to Portugal, working under close Portuguese supervision, given the remarkable accuracy of the inscriptions.

Foy's study reflects Eurocentrism, interpreting Benin ivories through European origin and craftsmanship. Portuguese influence is emphasised, while African agency and cultural context are marginalised. Fagg (1959) hypothesised the possibility of these artefacts being created in Portugal rather than in Africa, but later rejected it suggesting other possible regions where the artefacts could have been created; such as Sierra Leone, Lagos in southern Nigeria, Porto Novo and Ouidah. This phenomenon later ushered in a turning point regarding Eurocentrism and focus on African agency.

Ezra (1992) notes that Benin ivory carvers, though traditionally associated with the Oba's court, did not work exclusively for royal commissions. From the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries, they also produced ivory artworks for European visitors (Ezra 1992, 247). Similarly, Fagg (1959) argues that these artworks were very likely "made for the use of Europeans and not of Africans, however exalted" (Fagg 1959, xi). Together, these observations underscore that the production of certain ivory works was directed primarily towards European patrons. Ezra (1992)

extends this discussion by identifying additional types of artefacts beyond those previously recognised, while also examining the stylistic nuances in Yoruba art, specifically Owo and Ijebu styles, which bear notable similarities to Benin carvings (Ezra 1992, 277).

In a complementary line of inquiry, Hart (2021) explores the origins of Afro-Portuguese artworks, highlighting distinctions among Sapi-Portuguese, Bini-Portuguese, and other Luso-African productions. Hart suggests that some of these artworks could have been produced in Cabo Verde, emphasising that family resemblances and shared features across workshops and villages indicate significant contact among artists. Hart posed the critical question: “how could this resemblance have happened if the artists were not in contact with one another?” This aligns with the earlier proposal by Bassani and Fagg (1988) that communities of ivory carvers in Sierra Leone may have interacted with artisans in Yoruba territories, enabling the transmission of stylistic features.

Ezra’s identification of Owo and Ijebu styles further illustrates this interconnected artistic landscape, showing both parallels and distinctions with Benin carvings. Amaral (2022) proposes a new term, “**Edo-Portuguese ivories,**” to better reflect the cultural context of production in the historical Kingdom of Benin. Moreover, Amaral (2022) like other contemporary writers, challenges traditional narratives and calls for a re-evaluation of the artistic identity of the Kingdom of Benin, recognising its contributions to global art history. Together, these studies underscore the complex networks of production, exchange, and stylistic influence that shaped West African ivory and Luso-African art.

Ezra (1992), Ben-Amos (1999), Plankensteiner (2007), Gunsch (2018) and Carthy (2021) emphasise that Benin’s visual culture did not merely record external influences but actively memorialised historical events and encounters with Europeans, embedding them in ritual and political frameworks. Philips (2021) similarly highlights the commemorative function of Benin’s brass plaques in constructing dynastic memory.

Scholars such as Horta et al. (2021), Amaral, L. (2021), Amaral, V. M.M. de (2022), and Hart (2021) have debated the hybrid character of Afro-Portuguese ivories and brassworks. These studies show how emblems such as Portuguese coats of arms, Christian crucifixes, saints, and the Virgin Mary were incorporated into Benin’s visual language not as signs of subordination but as

appropriated symbols reinterpreted within indigenous cosmologies. Foy (1901) and earlier Eurocentric cataloguers of this material culture, are thus recontextualised by more recent scholarship that foregrounds hybridity, syncretism, and artistic dialogue.

Cécile Fromont (2014), in *The Art of Conversion*, broadens this perspective by connecting Afro-Portuguese ivories and religious artefacts to Portuguese and Atlantic devotional contexts, highlighting art as a space of transcultural Christianity. This emphasis on symbolism and ritual aligns with José da Silva Horta's studies of iconographic fusion and interculturality in Afro-Portuguese art (Horta et al. 2021).

### **Ecology, Agriculture, and Environmental History**

Traditional historiography often treated the movement of plants and animals as a unidirectional consequence of Portuguese expansion, epitomised by Crosby's (1972) "Columbian Exchange." More recent studies, however, emphasise African agency in adopting and adapting crops. Alpern (1992) documents the introduction of cassava, maize, peanuts, and pineapples into West Africa, noting that adoption was selective and shaped by local needs. Thornton (1992) and McCann (2005) stress the dynamism of African agricultural systems, showing how new crops were integrated into preexisting calendars and practices. Carney (2001), though focused on the Atlantic rice trade, highlights the transfer of African agronomic knowledge, reinforcing the idea of reciprocal ecological circulation.

In relation to Benin specifically, Ediagbonya (2015) identifies Ughoton as a hub for crop introduction via Portuguese and regional networks, while Hogendorn and Johnson (1986) and Law (2004) show how cowrie shells — imported through Portuguese mediation — reshaped economic ecologies and ritual practices. Yet, research on Benin's micro-ecologies remains underdeveloped, with little integration of oral traditions, linguistic evidence, and iconography related to agriculture. This indicates fertile ground for exploring ecology as a dimension of diplomacy, ritual, and material culture, rather than as mere background to trade.

## Language and Intercultural Communication

The linguistic dimension of Benin–Portuguese encounters has been relatively underexplored but is increasingly recognised as a site of intercultural negotiation. Early work, such as Elugbe and Omamor’s *Nigerian Pidgin: Problems and Prospects* (1991), focused on the Portuguese impact on Nigerian Pidgin and Edo, reflecting a more customary Eurocentric perspective. In contrast, Imasuen’s *Languages in Contact* (1998) moves beyond this one-sided view to emphasise the reciprocal nature of Edo–Portuguese interactions, documenting both Portuguese lexical borrowings in Edo and Edo loanwords in Portuguese.

Similarly, Ladhams (2012) documents the survival of Portuguese-derived terms in West African pidgins and creoles, while also showing how Edo influenced Portuguese creoles in São Tomé and Príncipe. Together, these studies demonstrate that linguistic hybridity functioned not only as a practical tool of communication but also as a lasting cultural imprint of early encounters. These studies illustrate a shift in scholarship from viewing language contact as a unidirectional influence to recognising it as a negotiated, two-way process with enduring cultural and linguistic effects.

This body of work suggests that language itself functioned as a diplomatic and cultural instrument, enabling not only trade but also the negotiation of symbolic and religious meanings.

## Religious Perspective

Earlier historiography of Edo-Portuguese and broader West African religious interactions often portrayed the Portuguese as the principal agents of conversion, with Africans depicted as passive recipients. For example, the sixteenth-century chronicler **João de Barros** (1778, 174) recounts the conversion of the King of Kongo as a triumph of Portuguese missionary activity, emphasising European initiative in the spread of Christianity. Similarly, early missionary reports and colonial narratives tended to frame African rulers’ acceptance of Christianity as evidence of Portuguese “civilising” influence. Current historians, including Ward (2000), Benjamin (2009), and Adiele (2017), nuance this view by showing that African kings often accepted baptism as a diplomatic gesture, aimed at securing military aid and weapons from the Portuguese rather than reflecting sincere religious conviction.

Contemporary scholarship, exemplified by Odunlami and Oyenuga (2020), highlights African agency, showing that the Benin Kingdom selectively engaged with Portuguese religious practices, adapting them to local culture and political contexts. An example of this phenomenon highlighted by the authors is: the creation of a new hybrid religious tradition, African traditional religion and Christianity like the *Holy Arousa Church* (Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020, 150). This historiographic shift reframes religious encounters as negotiated exchanges rather than unilateral European impositions. Building on Ryder (1977) Odunlami and Oyenuga (2020) add an important dimension by emphasising the reciprocal nature of the Benin-Portuguese relationship, underscoring mutual respect and cultural appreciation (Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020, 145).

### **Intercultural and Global Perspectives**

The global and intercultural turn has provided the theoretical scaffolding for integrating these diverse dimensions. Serge Gruzinski's reflections on *mondialisation* argue for understanding early modern encounters as processes of globalisation and cultural hybridisation rather than unilateral expansion (Gruzinski 2004). The Art and its Global Histories series Newall (2017), including contributions by Peabody, Nelson, & Thomas (2021) situate African–European exchanges within a comparative framework that emphasises visual and symbolic negotiation across continents. This approach highlights how material culture, including artworks and ceremonial objects, functioned as a medium of intercultural diplomacy, memory, and identity. In the context of Benin–Portugal relations, such perspectives provide tools to interpret Benin's visual culture as both a local expression of political power and a site of engagement with European visitors, complementing studies of ivory carvings, brass plaques, and other Luso-African hybrid objects.

More recent global historians Sweet (2011) and Subrahmanyam (2012) have urged the integration of micro-histories of individuals—artisans, interpreters, missionaries, traders — with macro-histories of empire, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how interculturality was enacted in early encounters.

## **Critical Assessment and Gaps**

Taken together, these works illustrate the evolution of scholarship on Portuguese–African interactions. Early sixteenth-century chroniclers, such as Gomes Eanes de Zurara (1453/1896), João de Barros (1778), and Damião de Góis (1550s), provide firsthand accounts often framed through Eurocentric and empire-centered perspectives. Modern historians, including Cortesão (1954) and Boxer (1969), built on these narratives to analyse empire and European expansion. Subsequent scholarship has emphasised African agency and Atlantic frameworks, Thornton (1992), Abulafia (2008), Green (2019) and, more recently, intercultural and global approaches foregrounding art, language, diplomacy, and ritual (Fromont 2014; Gunsch 2018; Amaral 2021; Horta et al. 2021). Despite this, certain areas remain underexplored. While the influence of Portugal on Benin has been extensively studied, the reverse — Benin’s impact on Portuguese culture, and society — remains understudied. The symbolic and ritual dimensions of exchange, though increasingly highlighted, are still fragmented across disciplines. Finally, systematic integration of oral traditions, material culture, and textual analysis remains limited, with many studies still privileging European documentation.

## **Positioning of This Study**

This thesis positions itself within this evolving historiography by adopting an intercultural and comparative framework. It seeks to bridge the divide between European macro-histories of empire and African micro-histories of interpersonal encounters. By combining European written records with African oral traditions, visual culture, and linguistic evidence, the thesis highlights the reciprocal processes and material exchange through which Benin and Portugal negotiated values, practices, and worldviews in the 15th–17th centuries. While noting the numerous African impact and contributions on Europe and the Atlantic world in general, it further examines how the African population experienced and interpreted early European contact as active players rather than passive figures of Atlantic history.

## **Towards a New Perspective: Interculturality and Mutual Influence**

This study explores the Benin–Portuguese relationship beyond the framework of commercial exchange, examining the symbolic, ritual, religious, agricultural, and linguistic dimensions of **cultural exchange**. By combining textual and visual analysis with a comparative approach, it examines how diplomatic practices, artistic production, and the circulation of language and material culture may have reflected networks of meaning and influence. Adopting an interpretative lens of interculturality, the study considers the potential reciprocal processes through which Benin and Portugal may have negotiated values, practices, and worldviews at the onset of the early modern period, while remaining attentive to the need for empirical verification of such exchanges.

Furthermore, by investigating how Edo customs, art, crops, religion, and political models may have travelled—physically through African presence in Portugal or symbolically through diplomatic encounters—this work challenges mono-directional readings of early modern contact. It also contributes to broader debates on early globalisation, maritime connectivity, and Atlantic world studies, situating Benin not as a peripheral player but as a central actor in early modern intercultural diplomacy.

### **Research question**

What does a re-examination of Benin–Portuguese contact from an African perspective reveal about overlooked cultural legacies of the Atlantic world?

How can the study of relations between Portugal and Benin contribute to a broader understanding of Africa's role in constructing the cultural legacy of the Atlantic in the modern era?

## **Objectives and Methodology**

### **Research Objectives**

This doctoral thesis undertakes a historical-cultural study of the international cultural impacts of the encounter between Portugal and the Kingdom of Benin during the 15th–17th centuries.

Following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which established the legal equality and sovereignty of states, the influence of the Papacy on global power relations declined (Osiander 2001). European powers increasingly relied on bilateral and multilateral arrangements to shape international relations, while African polities—except Ethiopia—remained largely excluded due to colonial domination. The Berlin Conference of 1884 formalised Africa’s partition, undermining African sovereignty and excluding the continent from global diplomatic forums. European narratives often portrayed sub-Saharan Africa as primitive and devoid of historical consciousness, excluding its institutions from recognition as civilisations (Djaló 2009; Huntington 1991). Africa remained largely marginalised and was widely perceived as lacking any meaningful role in global political discourse.

This research departs from Eurocentric perspectives to examine the contributions of the Benin Kingdom to Portuguese culture and civilisation between the 15th and 17th centuries. Focusing on the bilateral interactions between Benin and Portugal, the study analyses how artistic, linguistic, and cultural exchanges shaped both societies. It considers the role of language in communication, including the incorporation of Portuguese loanwords into Edo and Nigerian Pidgin, highlighting linguistic innovations as instruments of cultural exchange.

In the artistic domain, the research explores the emergence of hybrid forms, particularly Edo-Portuguese ivories, which reflect the transfer of techniques, materials, and symbolic motifs. Portuguese trade increased the availability of brass in Benin, enhancing the scale and consistency of sculptural production, while Benin artisans incorporated Portuguese emblems and selected Christian motifs into their works. Some of these objects later entered Portuguese collections, revealing the circulation of artefacts and ideas across continents. This analysis also considers the

identity of craftsmen, the depiction of foreigners, training methods, and the networks through which artworks moved.

Overall, this thesis aims to demonstrate the sophistication of the Benin Kingdom through its cultural, social, and technological achievements. Using descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods, it examines the circulation of knowledge, artefacts, and practices, and investigates enduring legacies traceable in present-day Nigeria and Portugal. Ultimately, it challenges narratives that portray Africa as isolated or passive, affirming Benin's active role in global history and its contributions to world heritage.

## **Methodology**

This research is grounded in a critical examination of a broad range of primary sources to reconstruct interactions between Portugal and the Kingdom of Benin during the 15th–17th centuries. European sources include chronicles, official records, letters, and reports produced by Portuguese and other European chroniclers, explorers, traders, and missionaries: Gomes Eanes de Zurara's *Crónica dos Feitos da Guiné* (c. 1453 – 1456), Rui de Pina's *Crónica de D. João II* (c. 1481 – 1495), Garcia de Resende's *Crónica de D. João II* (c. 1530s), Duarte Pacheco Pereira's *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (c. 1505 – 1508), Dom João de Barros' *Décadas da Ásia* (1552 – 1563), and Olfert Dapper's *Description of Africa* (1668). African perspectives are accessed primarily through oral traditions, which preserve narratives of royal diplomacy, ritual practice, and cultural memory, exemplified by Jacob Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin* (1968).

Material culture was consulted extensively. Artefacts—including brass plaques, ivory carvings, and other artworks—were examined in collections held at the Museu de Arte Antiga (Lisbon, Portugal), the British Museum (London, UK), the Ethnological Museum (Berlin, Germany), the National Museum (Benin City, Nigeria), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, US), Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford, UK), World Museum of Culture (Gothenburg, Sweden), Weltmuseum Wien (Vienna, Austria), Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel, Switzerland), Glasgow Life Museums (Glasgow, UK), and MARKK – Museum am Rothenbaum (Hamburg, Germany). Where direct access was not possible, digital catalogues and

high-resolution images—including those available through the Digital Benin platform—enabled systematic study. Material culture was analysed through a framework focusing on typology, iconography, inscriptions, motifs, and stylistic features.

Accessing and interpreting primary sources presented challenges. Many documents were written in older forms of European languages, requiring careful reading of archaic vocabulary and phrasing. Primary sources often employ archaic orthographic conventions—for example, Portuguese texts use “v” for “u” and an “f” without a crossbar for “s.” Similar complexities occur in English, German, Dutch, French, and Italian sources, including those written in the historical German *Fraktur* script. These were interpreted with the aid of digital translation tools.

Furthermore, the relative absence of written sources authored by Africans for the period means that most documentation reflects European perspectives. This necessitated a critical approach attentive to potential biases, omissions, and interpretive frameworks inherent in the sources.

Direct engagement with primary source materials in their original languages was made possible through the application of the author's multilingual proficiency — cross-referencing them with available translated versions—many of which are accessible through publications by the **Hakluyt Society**. This organisation's extensive collection of translated primary documents has been invaluable in supporting this study. Where linguistic barriers proved particularly challenging, digital translation tools such as DeepL and Google Translate’s image recognition features were employed to facilitate accurate interpretation while maintaining fidelity to the original texts. This multilingual approach ensured a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the historical materials, overcoming linguistic constraints to enrich the study’s depth and breadth.

### **Documentary and Archival Analysis: Chronicles and Diplomats**

A central methodological focus is the analysis of diplomatic correspondence and archival collections. Key documents include Dom Manuel I’s letter to the Oba of Benin (1514), Duarte Pires’ letter to Dom Manuel I (20 October 1516), and a 1539 letter from Franciscan priests to King João III, providing perspectives on Portuguese–Benin relations and ecclesiastical interests in the region. These sources are preserved in original manuscripts at the Torre do Tombo

National Archive (Lisbon) and in transcribed form in *Monumenta Missionaria Africana* (Brásio Vols. I–X, 1952–1960). Other key collections consulted include *Descobrimentos Portugueses* (Silva Marques 1944–1973), *Documentos sobre a Expansão Portuguesa* (Godinho 1956–1962), and *Guia de História dos Descobrimentos e Expansão Portuguesa* (Pinheiro Marques 1987). Early Portuguese chronicles and official records were used to construct a timeline and contextual framework for Portuguese–Benin relations, while accounts from missionaries, merchants, and European travellers provided complementary evidence based on contemporary observations and oral traditions.

### **Artefactual and Ethnographic Sources**

Benin’s artistic production—including brass plaques, ivory carvings, and other artefacts—constitutes a vital body of primary evidence for this study. These objects are examined through a material culture framework, with particular attention to representations of Portuguese figures and symbols, inscriptions, motifs, and stylistic features.

Ethnographic methods were applied to interpret the sociocultural contexts of both Benin and Portugal, facilitating the analysis of cultural practices, beliefs, and symbolic systems that shaped historical encounters. This interdisciplinary approach draws on tools from history, anthropology, and art history, enabling a comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural interactions as reflected in both material and textual sources, encompassing religion, art, agriculture, trade, language, diplomacy, and historical identity.

### **Secondary sources**

Secondary literature was essential for contextualising and critically engaging with primary sources. African-authored histories, such as Egharevba’s *A Short History of Benin*, were used alongside modern Nigerian scholarship and European academic contributions. From Portuguese, Austrian, American, British, German, Nigerian, Russian, and other international historiographers, a comprehensive framework for the study of Benin has emerged, including: Amaral (2022), *The Luso-African Ivories of the Kingdom of Benin (16th–17th Centuries): A Historical-Artistic and Material Study* (Portugal); Gunsch (2018), *Benin Plaques* (United States); Bondarenko (2007), *Benin in the Perceptions of the Europeans* (Russia); Barbara Plankensteiner

(2007), *Benin: Kings and Rituals* (Austria); Ryder (1969), *Benin and the Europeans* (United Kingdom); Aisién and Oriakhi (2013), *Great Benin on the World Stage: Re-Assessing Portugal-Benin Diplomacy in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (Nigeria); Metzsig (2016), *Coral, Brass and Firearms: Material Commodities in Cultural Interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin around 1500* (Germany); and Odunlami and Oyenuga (2020), *Between Diplomacy and Imperialism: The Vestige of Portuguese Influence on Benin* (Nigeria).

Together, these diverse historiographical sources provide a multi-faceted framework for understanding the Kingdom of Benin, combining art historical, material, and socio-cultural perspectives. By integrating insights from European, African, and American scholars, this study situates Benin within both local and global historical contexts, ensuring a comprehensive and balanced methodological approach.

## Chapter Overview

This thesis is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Edo-Portuguese intercultural encounter, moving from foundational context to detailed analysis and ultimate synthesis.

**Chapter 1, "The Historical and Political Context,"** establishes the historical stage by detailing the political, social, and military sophistication of the Kingdom of Benin and outlining the maritime ambitions of Portugal in the 15th century. This chapter's purpose is to position the encounter not as a meeting between a "developed" and a "primitive" society, but as a diplomatic and commercial interaction between two distinct sovereign powers.

**Chapter 2, "The Genesis of the Encounter,"** analyses the initial phase of the relationship, focusing on the first contacts, the exchange of ambassadors and gifts, and the strategic establishment of trade networks. This chapter reveals how both sides approached the relationship as a matter of mutual interest and carefully controlled negotiation.

**Chapter 3, "The Intercultural Exchange in Practice,"** forms the analytical core of the thesis. It explores how the encounter manifested in tangible and intangible ways, from the selective adoption of Portuguese motifs in Edo art and the dynamics of agricultural, religious technological, toponymic and identity exchange, to the lasting linguistic legacies in the Edo language and Nigerian Pidgin.

**Chapter 4, "The Evolving Relationship,"** examines the later period of the encounter late 16th-17th centuries, analysing how the arrival of other European powers altered the dynamics of the relationship, and how the Oba strategically navigated these new challenges. This chapter highlights the resilience and agency of the Edo Kingdom in an increasingly complex Atlantic world.

Finally, the **Conclusion** synthesises the findings, directly answers the central research questions, and articulates how this study fills the existing gaps in the literature by providing a more nuanced, and agency-focused history of the Edo-Portuguese encounter.

## Chapter 1: The Historical and Political Context

### 1.1. The origins of the Edo people of Benin

Scholarly evidence suggests that the Edo people trace their origins to northern Africa, specifically Egypt. According to Egharevba, many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt to find a more secure shelter in this part of the world after a short stay in Sudan and Ile-Ife, which the Benin people call Uhe. Before coming here, a band of hunters was sent to inspect this land; they met some people who were already living there (Egharevba 1960, 1). Egharevba highlights that the migration took place in 2 waves, the first being from Sudan, through the present-day Nupe land in the 7th century, the second wave was from Egypt through the Sahara and Ife at the beginning of the 8th century (Egharevba 1965, 8f).

Bondarenko and Roese highlight that linguistic and archaeological evidence indicate that the Edo people's presence in West Africa predates the period suggested by myth (Bondarenko and Roese 1999, 543). Drawing on Darling's work, they note the relationship between the Edo language and languages such as Igbo and Yoruba. Edo is believed to have developed from a protolanguage located near the Niger-Benue approximately 3,000–6,000 years ago, and subsequent migrations to the west and east likely caused the split into proto-Yoruba, proto-Igbo, and proto-Edo (Darling 1984/1, 63, as cited in Bondarenko and Roese 1999, 543).

Hence, it can be understood that Edo separated from the Kwa languages. As noted by the authors of *Nigerian History and Culture*, also cited in Bondarenko and Roese, “the Kwa group consists of languages such as Yoruba, Edo, Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Nupe — speakers of these languages separated from a same parent stock” (Bondarenko and Roese 1999, 544). Baumann & Westermann (1967) highlight that the Kwa languages constitute a main group of Nigrific languages in West Africa, with the exception of Krou. These languages all have outlines of nominal classes formed by prefixation; they are similar to the semi-Bantu languages, and sometimes the resemblance is such that the boundaries are blurred. In Cameroon, they are Ashakou, Dama; in Nigeria, Jukun, Ijaw, Ogoni, Gbari, Ibirra, Idoma, Edo of Benin, Yoruba, among others (Baumann and Westermann 1967, 311-312). Bondarenko and Roese (1999) are convinced by linguistic evidence that the emergence of these ethnic groups took place in or near the areas they occupy, citing Olaniyan and Armstrong (Olaniyan 1985, 17, as cited in

Bondarenko & Roese 1999, 544; Armstrong 1967, 127f, as cited in Bondarenko & Roese 1999, 544).

Archaeological evidence, as argued by Es Andah, also shows that the Kwa peoples lived in the region for a period of almost 4,000 years (Es Andah 1976, 12, as cited in Bondarenko & Roese 1999, 545). This evidence supports linguistic evidence about the origin of the Binis. Yet, the version about migration from Egypt and Sudan cannot be dismissed completely. Bondarenko and Roese highlight that some elements of Edo culture linked to rituals, symbols, and art appear to originate from northeast Africa, 1st century A.D Egypt, as well as Nubia and Meroe. “The ibis, a Benin royal symbol, has parallels in its portrayal in Egypt too. The Bini harp resembles those from Meroe” (Bondarenko and Roese 1999, 547). There is also a remarkable similarity between the Benin sword and the Khopesh (a weapon commonly used among the Babylonians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians) (Roese 1992, 375, as cited in Bondarenko & Roese 1999, 547). Different armed conflicts in Egypt could have forced some people to migrate southwards. Hence, both authors agree that Egharevba is possibly right about the migration from Egypt, despite linguistic and archaeological evidence proving otherwise.

All major theories regarding the origins of the Bini people offer plausible explanations. The hypothesis of emigration from Egypt or Sudan appears credible, particularly when considered in light of the broader human tendency toward migration—a phenomenon well documented in early human societies and still observable today. Additionally, both the linguistic and archaeological theories are compelling, as they suggest a long-standing presence of the Bini in the region, dating back between 3,000 and 6,000 years.

The Egyptian migration theory is particularly illuminating, not merely as a historical proposition but as an illustration of how successive populations may have merged with indigenous Edo (Bini) groups to form a unified sociocultural identity. Such integration reflects a common anthropological pattern in the evolution of complex societies.

A modern parallel can be seen in the United States of America, where individuals from various national and ethnic backgrounds are recognised as Americans through processes of migration and social integration. Whether individuals are native to a region or arrived through migration, as in the case of the United States, they may come to share a common national identity. Similarly, in the context of Benin, it is plausible that some groups inhabited the area for

thousands of years, while others may have migrated and integrated with the existing population. This supposition helps explain the existence of multiple versions regarding the origin of the Benin Kingdom. Rather than privileging one narrative over the others, this integrative perspective allows for the coexistence of all three accounts, suggesting that each may represent different aspects of a broader historical process that shaped the identity and formation of the Benin people.

Today, Benin constitutes one of Nigeria's major ethnocultural groups, contributing significantly to the country's cultural diversity and historical richness. The people are commonly referred to as the Edo, which is also the name of their language. In some historical and academic texts, they are alternatively identified as the Binis. The term "Edo" further denotes Edo State, a present-day geopolitical unit in southern Nigeria, whose capital is Benin City. According to the 2020 population census, Benin City ranks as the sixth largest urban center in Nigeria (The National Population Commission Nigeria 2022). Geographically, the historical Benin Kingdom was located within the tropical rainforest belt of southern Nigeria, near the lower Niger River.

The Kingdom of Benin should not be mistaken for the modern-day Republic of Benin (formerly known as Dahomey), an independent West African nation located to the west of Nigeria. Ancient Dahomey was under French colonial rule until 1960, after which the country adopted the name "Benin Republic" in reference to the historical Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria.

Additionally, the term "Edo" should not be confused with the former name of Japan's capital Edo,<sup>3</sup> Tokyo, Japan. Despite similarities in nomenclature, there are no historical, cultural, or linguistic links between the Edo of Nigeria and the Edo of Japan.

## **1.2. The Rise of the Benin Kingdom (Political and social structure of the Benin Kingdom)**

After looking at the origins of the people of Edo, the next question is "how was the evolution of the Benin Kingdom, and who were the Benin rulers?" Oral tradition maintains that the people of Benin were first ruled by the *ogisos* around 900 AD. Research has also supported the early history of Benin that the *Ogiso* kings were the founders of the Benin Kingdom around

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<sup>3</sup> The city was called Edo until 1868, when it was renamed Tokyo during the Meiji Restoration. The Japanese Edo served as the administrative center of the Tokugawa shogunate during the Edo period (1603–1868).

900 AD, and that these rulers were later replaced by *Oba* kings around the 11th and 13th centuries (Eisenhofer 1995, 143). Among the *Ogiso* kings, Egharevba (1968) highlights that Ogiso Ere founded many villages, such as Ego and Erua, and groups of craftsmen known as Onwina (traditional carpenters) and Igbesanmwan (carvers in wood and ivory).

Ogiso Ere introduced the royal throne (*ekete*), the chief's rectangular stool (*agba*), the round leather fan (*ezuzu*), the round box (*ekpokin*), the swords of authority (*ada* and *egben*), beaded anklets (*eguen*), and collars (*odigba*), an undecorated crown, and domestic wares of wooden nature such as bowls, mortars, plates, and pestles (Eisenhofer 1995, 144). Other Ogiso kings after Ogiso Ere were Orire, Akhuanhuan, Ekigho, Oria, Emose, Orhobo, and Obioye (Egharevba 1936, 9–10).

Egharevba notes that the last Ogiso was Ogiso Owodo, who was banished, after which there was an interregnum. When Evian and Ogiamwen ruled the kingdom, it was known then as Igodomigodo (Egharevba 1953, 4). Ediagbonya (2015, 207) similarly highlights Ogiso Owodo as the last Ogiso of the Ogiso dynasty. Egharevba highlights that the Oba dynasty could be traced from the Yoruba sacred town of Ife, where Oba Eweka I (c. 1180–1246), the first Oba of Benin, originated. Eweka I had come at the request of the title holders of Benin (elders), who asked that the wise prince be sent to rule amidst the unsatisfactory reign of Evian and Ogiamwe (Egharevba 1936, as cited in Eisenhofer 1995, 148).

Eisenhofer suggests that, since the Benin Oba dynasty traces its descent from Ife and the Oba of Benin is regarded as a brother to the Yoruba kings of Ife, the founder of the Benin monarchy is understood to have been a Yoruba prince (Eisenhofer 1995, 149). Other Obas after Oba Eweka I included Oba Uhuakhuwen (c. 1246–1250), Oba Ehenmihen (c. 1250–1260), Oba Ewedu (c. 1260–1274), Oba Ewuare (c. 1440–1473), Oba Ozolua (c. 1480–1504), and Oba Esigie (c. 1504–1547), among others; for a more complete list, see Appendix II.

Eisenhofer (1995) highlights lapses and inaccuracies in Egharevba's various editions concerning the origins of Benin kingship and the beginning of ivory carving. In some editions, ivory carving is ascribed to Oba Ewuare, while in others it is attributed to Ogiso Ere. Eisenhofer (1995) calls attention to the fact that future studies must pay closer attention to these differences. Bradbury (1959) also notes several discrepancies about dates in Benin history. Bradbury arrives at a conclusion that from 1715 onwards, one can be sure that Egharevba is approximately

correct. However, in the period before this, there is no sufficient evidence to date certainly about Obas Ewuare I and Oba Orhogbua, who are believed to be from the 15th and 16th centuries (Bradbury 1959, 285). These inaccuracies regarding dates of kingship of the Benin monarchs could be challenging, evoke confusion, and lead to mistrust.

Although gaps are evident in Egharevba's various editions, it cannot be concluded that these accounts are entirely incorrect or unreliable. The inaccuracies highlighted by Eisenhofer (1995) likely arise from the well-known challenge of limited written sources in early African societies. It is important to recognise that historical narratives often contain discrepancies due to variations in oral transmission and, particularly in the African context, the scarcity of written documentation. Such factors contribute to the inherent complexities and occasional lapses in the historiography of the region.

Egharevba's reliance on oral sources may account for some of the gaps present in his editions. Nonetheless, his works remain a valuable foundation for understanding Benin's history, especially given the limited documentation available from that period. While his accounts should not be accepted uncritically due to certain lapses, elements of truth and corroboration can be identified when his narratives are compared with Portuguese (European) sources, Benin art, and archaeological findings.

It is important to note that the Ogisos and Obas listed here do not represent the entirety of the dynastic rulers of the Benin Kingdom. Rather, the selection includes only those figures deemed particularly significant and relevant to the temporal scope of this study. This chronological limitation is intended to facilitate a more focused and in-depth examination of the historical period under consideration. A complete list of the Obas is provided in Appendix II. Further discussions on the legacies of selected Obas will be undertaken in subsequent sections of this thesis.

### 1.3. Forging an Empire: The Military Campaigns of Benin's Powerful Obas

How was Benin able to achieve and sustain regional dominance? Osadolor (2001) illustrates the evolution and structure of the Benin Kingdom's military system, tracing its institutional foundations to the reign of **Oba Ewuare** in the mid-15th century. The study explains how the centralisation of power under the Oba facilitated a disciplined and hierarchical military organisation that was vital for territorial expansion and political stability. Osadolor presents Benin's military as an organised and sophisticated institution embedded within its political and cultural systems (Osadolor 2001).

In both the pre-contact and period following initial contact, the Oba of Benin exercised centralised authority over the kingdom's spiritual and political spheres. As a semi-divine figure, the Oba's rulership was legitimised through religious ideology and supported by a hierarchical bureaucracy composed of palace officials and hereditary chiefs (Ryder 1969, 11). The Oba's word was law, and his authority extended across the political, judicial, and economic domains of the kingdom, ensuring stability and continuity in governance.

**Oba Ewuare**, who ruled approximately from c. 1440 to 1473, is widely acknowledged as a key state reformer who played a crucial role in the consolidation and expansion of the Benin Empire. Oba Ewuare rebuilt the capital city with great design around Benin City, including large walls, moats and clearly divided zones for different craftsmen (Bradbury 1969, 17–36).

Oba Ewuare is often recognised in historical literature as a pivotal figure in the rise of the Benin Kingdom's military and political dominance in the 15th century. During his reign, the kingdom extended its influence well beyond the Edo-speaking core, incorporating a wide range of surrounding regions. These included various towns and settlements in present-day Ekiti, Ikare, Efenmai, and areas within the western Igbo belt. Major urban centers such as Owo and Akure were also brought under Benin's control, reflecting the military strength and strategic reach achieved under Ewuare's leadership (Ryder 1969, 11).

**Oba Ozolua**, c. 1480-1504 — formally received João Afonso de Aveiro at his palace in c.1485 and established a relationship of trade. The Oba allowed trade with Europeans, and the Portuguese built a factory at the port of Ughoton, a maritime seaport where trade exchange was

mainly done. Oba Ozolua appointed Ohen-Okun, a prominent chief of Ughoton, to accompany João Afonso de Aveiro on his return journey to Portugal as an ambassador (Ediagbonya 2015, 209). This diplomatic gesture suggests that the Oba was not only open to cultural exchange but also actively interested in acquiring knowledge about Portugal, reflecting a strategic engagement aimed at fostering mutually beneficial relations between the two kingdoms.

**Oba Ozolua** expanded the kingdom — while in the north he conquered the Esan people, in the west he conquered the Yoruba city of Ijebu-Ode (Ryder 1969, 12). At the end of the 15th century, Oba Ozoula had maintained dominance over kingdoms such as Udo, Oyo, and Owo. Benin grew to the level of a regional power thanks to Ozoula's territorial expansion wars—booty and tributes gained from the conquered regions provided wealth for the Benin Kingdom (Gunsch 2018, 4).

**Oba Esigie** ruled c. 1504-1547. He was a pivotal figure who defeated his brother Arhuanan in a succession crisis with the help of his mother, Queen Idia, whom he later honored with the creation of the *Iyoba* title and her own palace (Egharevba 1968). One of the remarkable wars during Oba Esigie's reign was the war with the *Igalas*. His military victory against the kingdom of Udo and later the Igala Kingdom in the north affirmed Benin's political supremacy in the region (Osadolor 2001, 95–98).

Oba Esigie maintained formal relations with the Portuguese crown. This engagement facilitated the exchange of goods, knowledge, and religious missions. Esigie reportedly learned to speak Portuguese and interacted with missionaries and astrologers, indicating a sophisticated level of intercultural fluency (Ryder 1969).

**Oba Orhogbua** c. 1547-1580 is known to be the Oba of Benin who conquered and founded Lagos. Edo oral traditions suggest that Orhogbua had been prepared for the Catholic priesthood and faced a choice between continuing this religious vocation and assuming kingship, a transition that necessitated the abandonment of his Christian commitments. The elders reportedly informed him that he could not become Oba while remaining a priest, since in Benin cosmology the Oba is regarded as divine and therefore cannot serve another deity. In other words, a god should not serve another God (NEBO TV 2019, 12:10; EdoWorld 2026).

Oba Orhogbua called the town of Lagos, Eko, which means camp in the Edo language, because he camped there. He made excursions to the surrounding areas to conquer towns. Benin dominated important rivers and coastal areas in its territory (Gunsch 2018, 4). During the peak of its power in the c. 15th - 17th century, Benin had extended from the River Niger to the coast of the Kingdom of Dahomey — Osadolor suggests that the population of the Benin Kingdom at this time was approximately a million (Osadolor 2007, 73).

**Oba Ehengbuda**, c. 1580-1606, was a ruler of the Benin Kingdom known for maintaining the political stability and continuity of the kingdom during a period of relative peace. While less is recorded about dramatic reforms or military conquests during his reign compared to other Obas like Ewuare, Ehengbuda's leadership contributed to sustaining the structures of governance and the flourishing of Benin's arts and culture. His period is often seen as one of consolidation following earlier expansions, helping to preserve the kingdom's legacy before the arrival of more intensified European contact (Egharevba 1968).

**Oba Ohuan** reigned approximately from 1606 to 1641 as the Oba of Benin, succeeding Oba Ehengbuda. His reign is characterised by the continuation of political stability and the consolidation of the administrative reforms implemented by his predecessor. During Oba Ohuan's rule, the kingdom maintained its influence over neighboring territories and upheld diplomatic relations, including those with European traders along the West African coast. This period saw increased engagement with Portuguese and later Dutch merchants, which contributed to the growth of Benin's economy through trade, particularly in ivory, pepper, and slaves.

#### **1.4. Benin's Economy in the 15th century (its economic base, its internal and regional trade networks)**

The economy of the Benin Kingdom, preceding the significant arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15th century (around the 1480s), was already remarkably sophisticated and robust. Far from encountering a primitive society, Portuguese explorers found a powerful and economically vibrant state. This economic strength was rooted in highly developed internal and regional trade networks, advanced indigenous craft industries, a solid agricultural base, and centralised

governmental control over wealth generation and distribution (Ryder 1977, 2). The population of Benin was far larger than 15,000 during the 15th century (Hopkin 1973).

Benin served as a vital hub within extensive interregional trade routes across West Africa, facilitating the exchange of goods with various neighboring communities and extending connections northwards via trans-Saharan routes. This network involved a diverse array of commodities, including salt, iron, textiles, pottery, fish, yams, palm oil, kola nuts, and pepper. Evidence points to a well-established market-oriented production system, with large, bustling markets complemented by smaller local ones. The kingdom made use of a variety of indigenous currencies, such as wiring, rods, manillas and cowrie shells, indicating broad economic integration and long-distance trade connections. Before the Portuguese began transporting manillas and cowries by sea, cowrie shells were already being brought into West Africa from the Muslim regions north of the Sahara. Earlier on, some manillas may have been produced using copper sourced locally within West Africa. When the Portuguese arrived in Benin in the late fifteenth century, they encountered a preexisting system in which shells were used as currency (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986, 18; Law 2002, 57-58; Ryder 1969).

Fage (1962) maintains that by the 1470s and 1480s, trade networks were already well established in Lower Guinea between the Benin Kingdom and the Gold Coast. Among the key exports from Benin were textiles and beads, with **akori<sup>4</sup> beads** being particularly notable. This early exchange highlights the region's active participation in regional commerce prior to intensified European involvement (Fage 1962, 344).

Hopkin (1973) maintains that African towns served not only as homes for farmers but also accommodated skilled professionals such as artisans, transporters, innkeepers, and traders. These towns acted as central hubs for the circulation of diverse goods and played key roles as centers of administration and religion. In some locations along the Sahara-savanna boundary, trade became so dominant that these towns relied heavily on imported food supplies. Similar to medieval urban centers elsewhere, West African towns generated enough wealth to sustain a

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<sup>4</sup> The term *Akori beads* (also spelled *akorry*, *accorry*, *aggry*) refers to cylindrical or oval glass, stone or coral trade beads valued in West Africa from the early modern period. They are found in contexts stretching across the Gold Coast (now Ghana), the Bight of Benin and the Niger Delta. Their precise origin and material composition remain debated — some scholars suggest they derive from glass-making centres such as Ife, while others regard them as locally recycled or crafted objects (Kalous, 1967).

small leisure class and fostered the growth of sophisticated cultures, exemplified by the renowned bronzes from Ife and Benin (Hopkin 1973, 20).

A hallmark of Benin's economic prowess was its highly skilled artisan class, organised into guilds. These craftspeople were particularly renowned for their metalworking capabilities, excelling in intricate brass and bronze casting to produce sculptures, plaques (the famous Benin Bronzes), and other objects. This sophisticated industry predated extensive European contact, though later Portuguese trade provided an additional source of metal raw materials (Dark 1973). Furthermore, the kingdom demonstrated advanced iron smelting and forging capabilities, producing tools and weapons on a large scale. Other significant crafts included ivory carving and wood carving (Ezra 1992).

Underpinning these economic activities was a strong agricultural base, with staple crops like yams, palm oil, and kola nuts thriving in the fertile rainforest environment. According to oral traditions and written sources, the Oba (king) and his officials exerted substantial control over the economy, collecting taxes and tolls on trade goods (Osadolor 2001, 83). This ensured the accumulation of wealth that supported the royal court, administration and military. The Oba often maintained royal monopolies on high-value goods such as ivory and pepper, further solidifying the kingdom's economic power. Consequently, when the Portuguese arrived, they encountered a well-organised and prosperous state whose existing wealth and extensive trade networks were of immediate interest to them. This oral source interpretation is also supported by European written sources which described Benin's remarkable size, order, and organisation at the time of early European contact, including Duarte Pacheco Pereira (c. 1505–1508), João de Barros (1552–1563), and Olfert Dapper (1668)

Therefore, the concurrent emergence of Benin's economic growth after contact with European traders in the 15th century may suggest a correlation; however, this temporal alignment should not be mistaken for direct causation. Prior to sustained European interaction, the Kingdom of Benin had already established a dynamic and expanding economy, underpinned by regional trade networks and strategic military campaigns. These campaigns not only secured territorial expansion but also facilitated the accumulation of wealth through war booty and tribute, reinforcing Benin's economic and political ascendancy independently of European involvement.

## 1.5. Great Benin and its Borders

How large was the Benin Empire, and where did its borders extend? When viewed on a contemporary map, the territory currently identified as Benin appears relatively small, prompting skepticism about historical accounts that describe the kingdom's former scale, influence, and grandeur. This skepticism is heightened by the fact that European writers often referred to Benin as an empire or as "Great Benin." For example, the Dutch writer Olfert Dapper described the kingdom as "Great Benin" while detailing the road leading to it (Dapper 1686, 308). The same author further explained that this designation was due to the kingdom's perceived greatness (Dapper 1686, 495). A French captain likewise compared Benin City to the foremost cities in France (Landolphe 1823, 48). This perception is also reflected in the title of *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors* by Henry Ling Roth (Roth 1903).

Indeed, the Europeans were impressed by Benin's greatness. Iliffe (1995) maintains that "When the first Europeans arrived, Benin was the major state of the West African forest and they were deeply impressed by its wealth and sophistication (Iliffe 1995, 78). Albuquerque (1994) maintains that Benin was a regional power during the arrival of the Portuguese, and it is found in the extreme part of the Gulf of Guinea (Albuquerque 1994). Several neighboring kingdoms were required to pay tribute to the Oba of Benin following their subjugation. Such practices, among other indicators, can be interpreted as characteristics that justified Benin's designation as an empire.

The English dictionary explains an empire as a group of states or countries, ruled by a single monarch. In this context, Benin exercised authority over numerous neighboring territories under the centralised rule of a single monarch, the Oba. This political structure aligns with common definitions of an empire. While European travellers and writers frequently praised the grandeur of Great Benin, they were often unable to precisely define the extent of its territorial boundaries. Dapper (1668), in the opening of his description of Great Benin, noted that the extension of the kingdom could not be entirely known for someone who was only travelling in this region. Similarly, Barbot (1732, 15) observed that the Nigritia region, which included the Kingdom of Benin, comprised numerous black nations, each ruled by its own king— neither

Europeans nor local Africans could give a precise account of all these kingdoms. Accordingly, this section tries to illustrate the territorial extent of the Benin Empire between the 15th and 17th centuries based on facts.

It is posited that the western borders of the Benin Empire extended as far as the territory of ancient Dahomey, corresponding to the present-day Benin Republic. In the east, it could have included the Igbo lands, Biafra, and Itsekiri. In the north, Oyo, Igala, Jukun, Efik, Idoma, among others. To evaluate this hypothesis concerning the territorial extent of the Benin Empire, two primary lines of analysis will be employed: (1) military conquest and expansion, and (2) linguistic and cultural evidence.

### **1. Military Power Conquest**

If “Great Benin” was as expansive as historical accounts suggest, it would be expected to have subjugated a significant number of neighbouring polities. Indeed, both oral traditions and historical narratives recount episodes of Benin’s military expansion. One such example is the reported conquest of the Esan peoples, who occupied territories to the north of the kingdom. Esan was conquered in c. 1445, the second half of the 15th century (Okoji 1994, as cited in Osadolor 2001, 238). The conquest of Owo is also noted in this same century. Ezra notes that during the mid-15th century, Owo came under the influence of Benin as part of Oba Ewuare’s military expansion (Ezra 1992, 277). Another frequently cited example of Benin’s military campaigns is the Idah War, in which Benin decisively defeated the Igala c. 1515.

In the mid-16th century, under the leadership of Oba Orhogbua, the Kingdom of Benin extended its influence westward by conquering neighbouring territories in the campaign known as the Conquest of Eko (Lagos), an event that consolidated Benin’s regional power and facilitated control over trade routes (Erediauwa 1984). Eko, which means camp, lay in the lands of the Yorubas; hence, Great Benin conquered the Yorubas, one of the largest ethnic groups of Africa. Olukoju (2018) maintains that during the reigns of Oba Orhogbua, c.1547-1580, and Oba Ehegbuda, c.1580-1606, Benin invaded and conquered the settlement, leaving their imprint/mark such as monarchy, chieftaincy titles, and demographic make-up. Examples of Benin legacies which were left behind were place names such as Idun-tafa and Idumota (Olukoju 2018, 141).

Further evidence of Benin's conquest and influence can be observed in western Igbo lands. This influence is reflected in ceremonial practices and institutions adopted from the kingdom, such as the regalia of local chiefs (Afigbo 1981, 19). Afigbo (1981) notes that the Benin Kingdom extended its influence over parts of Igbo-speaking areas, particularly in the western Igbo or Anioma region, suggesting that these incorporations may have occurred around the 16th century (Afigbo 1981). Some Igbos refuse to admit their defeat to the Benin Kingdom; however, Afigbo's (1981) explanation makes it more understandable that these conquests could have occurred only in the western part. This argument is compelling given that the Igbo people inhabit a broad geographical area characterised by diverse dialects and notable regional variations.

The zenith of "Great Benin's" regional influence may be situated in the 16th and 17th centuries, when its political and military power appears to have been at its height. During this period, the kingdom attained a level of expansion that justifies its characterisation as an empire. However, rather than exercising direct control over all surrounding polities, Benin's authority likely varied in form and intensity, ranging from military domination to tributary and diplomatic relationships. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that by the 16th and 17th centuries, the Benin Kingdom had extended its influence beyond the conquest of Lagos (Eko) and other neighbouring territories, incorporating parts of the Yoruba-speaking regions within its sphere of influence.

However, by the 18th and 19th centuries, the Oyo Empire had emerged as the dominant power among the Yoruba polities, enabling it to assert its independence and pursue expansive territorial ambitions. As Lawal (2015) observes, the empire stretched from the middle Niger region southwestwards, incorporating a diverse range of Yoruba and non-Yoruba groups (Lawal 2015).

The 18th and 19th centuries also correspond to the period during which Benin is known to have weakened due to numerous wars. Ezra (1992, 22) notes that a growing Yoruba kingdom conquered many territories that had previously been under Benin's influence. In Porto Novo, a city in present-day Benin (ancient Dahomey), the majority of the population speaks Yoruba (Athayde 2017). Logically, in the 16th century, Porto-Novo may have been part of the Yoruba lands due to its geographical proximity to Lagos (formerly Eko). Just as the Portuguese name Lagos replaced the indigenous name Eko, Porto-Novo replaced the city's native names — Ajáshe in the Yoruba language and Hogbonu in the Goun language (Athayde 2017, 197).

Canto (1869) makes reference to the existence of Yorubas in this area in his description of the topographic and ethnographic district of São João Batista de Ajudá in Uidai — the Portuguese built another trade post here, as they did in Mina. The author describes that Uidah borders to the west with the plains furrowed by the Volta River and the Ashanti Empire; to the east and separated from the Yarriba by large lagoons, which end in Lagos “*Confina a oeste com as planícies sulcadas pelo rio volta e com o império achanté; a leste e separado do Yarriba por grandes lagoas, que terminam em Lagos*” (Canto 1869, 48). One may note that Yoruba at this time was known as Yarriba. Johnson (1921) highlights that this ethnic group was first known to the Europeans as Yarriba through the explorers of northern and central Africa. The term is used in old records like Webster Gazetteer “Yarriba” in West Africa, east of the Dahomey area 70,000 sq miles (Johnson 1921, xix). Canto’s (1869) geographical account aligns closely with our hypothesis regarding the precise location of the Yoruba and helps to corroborate the spatial relationships of West African polities, thereby establishing the phenomenon of clearly delineated territorial zones.

Osadolor (2001) maintains that at the peak of the Benin empire’s splendour, the empire extended its boundaries to the Niger River in the east, and the sea in the south, and established sovereignty over Yoruba areas in the west and south west up to the border of what was to become Dahomey (Osadolor 2001, 81). This analysis demonstrates a connection among three cities in the neighboring territory—Uidah, Dahomey, and Porto Novo—thereby indicating the potential extent of Benin’s political influence and territorial boundaries during the height of its power in the 16th–17th centuries. The building of the fortress in Uidai significantly enhanced trade in the region, particularly given the involvement of human trafficking (slave trade) alongside valuable goods. This region, being under Benin rule, facilitated the trade and politics of the Portuguese in the region due to their long ties and diplomatic relations with Great Benin.

The Benin Empire was large, and none in the region could be compared to it due to its size. Fage & Tordoff (1997) compare the power of Benin with other states like the Gold Coast; the kingdom was larger than other kingdoms in this part of West Africa. In fact, the power of Benin was felt as far west as Lagos, where, around the middle of the 16th century, a Beninese dynasty had been installed and enjoyed a certain supremacy among the Aja states. Other states and coastal kingdoms, such as those on the Gold Coast, were very small, rarely extending more than

400 miles (640 km), and among the Ajas, there was little effective political authority (Fage and Tordoff 1997).

## **2. The Edo-Yoruboid culture in the region**

This second hypothesis explains how the similarity of the cultures of the people in the region is related to the Yoruba, which was itself influenced by the Edo. The Yorubas are in southwestern Nigeria, the Benin Republic, ancient Dahomey, and Togo. In identifying the origins of the peoples of this region of West Africa, Darling notes that the Yoruba had split from the same proto-language group that gave birth to proto-Yoruba, proto-Edo, and proto-Igbo, among others (Darling 1984, as cited in Bondarenko & Roesse 1999, 543).

Earlier in this study, a linguistic approach to the origins of the Benin people was noted and considered a plausible explanation for the region's ethnogenesis. It can be further posited that these communities are more closely connected through cultural and dynastic ties than through linguistic affiliation. It is therefore suggested that the observed cultural similarities likely reflect the enduring influence of the Benin Empire following its prolonged dominance across the region. Lawal maintains that the Yoruba states, Benin and Dahomey, have dynastic ties (Lawal 2015).

The Yorubas constitute a segment of the Dahomey population, speaking the same language and sharing cultural traditions with the Yorubas of Nigeria, who were historically part of the Oyo Empire. To be more specific about the similarities, different examples of these people's culture are presented to show the strong connections. Examples of *Edo-Yoruba-like* culture are: Arts and religious practices, dance, language, and clothing/fashion.

Ezra (1992) highlights the artistic traditions of the Yoruba kingdoms, particularly Owo and Ijebu, as demonstrating significant affinities with the art of the Benin Kingdom. Owo artworks—especially in ivory and terracotta—show notable parallels to Benin art in their naturalistic human forms, royal iconography, and ceremonial regalia. Similarly, Ijebu artistic productions reflect symbolic and ritual elements consistent with Benin's courtly aesthetic. These similarities point to sustained artistic exchange and cultural interaction among these regional centers. Ezra thus positions Owo and Ijebu as important nodes within a broader network of a

**shared artistic and political heritage** across these West African kingdoms (Ezra 1992, 277–301).

Until 1951, when Fagg William identified the similarities and differences of the artwork, the Benin bronzes, looted in 1897, were thought to be all from Benin, Edo. It is important to note that the arts produced in Yoruba towns and surrounding areas were similarly influenced, resulting in notable stylistic and thematic parallels. In the western region, particularly in Dahomey, artworks exhibit distinct characteristics, notably in the scale and proportions of sculptures. However, they share important similarities with Benin art, such as the use of materials like ivory and wood, as well as the representation of human and animal figures often accompanied by narrative or symbolic meaning.

In regard to the clothes and fashion, Owo regalia is similar to that of Benin red beads, both coral and jasper (Eyo and Willett 1980, as cited in Ezra 1992, 277, fig. 10; Poynor 1976, as cited in Ezra 1992, 277, figs. 1–2). This similar regalia could be seen among Yoruba communities in the neighbouring Benin Republic today and beyond.

In regard to language, the Yoruba people speak the Yoruba language in the respective places where they are spread in the region. Mpofo, Fadipe, and Tshabangu (2023) maintain that Yoruba is a major language in Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo, Gambia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, etc (Mpofo, Fadipe, & Tshabangu 2023, 291).

In regard to religion, this ethnic group believes in traditional religion worshipping gods like Shango, Esu, Oya, Orisa, Oludumare, among other deities (Mpofo, Fadipe, & Tshabangu 2023, 291). It is important to note that the same deities are worshipped by the Yorubas of the Benin Republic. Verger notes Oya, Orisa, and Shango, among other Yoruba deities worshipped in this region and in diaspora Brazil and Cuba (Verger 1995, 163). Verger described ceremonies taking place at the Shango temple, the god of thunder at Uidah, including a dance of the Shango deity held in West Africa as well as in Bahia (Verger 1995, 121). This illustrates an extended influence of culture from the Yorubas back in Nigeria and in other regions such as the Benin Republic, among others.

It is important to reiterate that the Yoruba region was significantly influenced by the Benin Empire during the 15th–17th centuries. Empires are known to always leave imprints, legacies, or vestiges of their presence in places they had dominated. A clear example could be seen with the

European powers, Britain, and its former colonies, like the US. Due to British influence, the US speaks English and has adopted many English customs. Another example is Portugal and its colonies, such as Angola and Brazil, among others. We see the Portuguese heritage and marks left behind, such as language and culture. In a similar way, we see the Benin Kingdom heritage imprinted in the regions of Yorubaland and beyond.

With the cultural resemblances identified in religion, language, dances, arts, and clothing of the Yoruba ethnic people of Dahomey, Ouidah, Porto Novo, these similarities are unlikely to be coincidental; rather, they represent an extension of both Yoruba cultural influence and the dominance of the Benin Empire. Benin controlled the largest territory and was frequently referred to by European travelers as Great Benin. Hence, the cultural hypothesis also defends that the borders of the Benin Empire extended until the regions of ancient Dahomey, which is today the Benin Republic.

Based on the aforementioned hypotheses of Benin military conquest and Edoid cultural similarities, one is convinced to say that the Benin Empire once extended broadly, reaching as far west as Dahomey, eastward to the Igbolands and Itsekiri, and northward to the Igala and other neighboring groups during the 15th–17th centuries. Although the present-day territory identified as Benin appears limited in size, and late 18th century traveler accounts may not fully reflect its former grandeur, this is attributable to the empire's decline and loss of political power over time. As with many empires, the contraction of Benin's borders corresponds with its period of collapse and diminished influence (see Appendix Figure I 6).

## **1.6. Benin Art**

The artistic production of the Benin Kingdom during the pre-contact and the years following contact reflects a sophisticated visual culture deeply embedded in political authority, religious belief, and historical record-keeping. The royal court was the principal patron of the arts, and most artworks were produced within guilds associated with the palace (Dark 1973). These works—especially in brass, ivory, wood, and terracotta—served multifaceted purposes: as dynastic documentation, ritual objects, and as markers of political power and legitimacy. Gunsch

(2018) observes that the sustained production of palace reliefs over several centuries indicates that the documentation of history has remained a central objective of Benin's artistic tradition into the contemporary era (Gunsch 2018, 53). This context helps to explain why plaques and other artworks depicting Portuguese figures are widely believed to have been produced during the period corresponding to the initial Portuguese presence in Benin.

Prior to any contact with the Portuguese in the 15th century, Benin's artisans had already established a sophisticated tradition of metal casting and plaque production rooted in indigenous aesthetic and ritual systems. As Jeffrey (1951) observes, although later plaques came to feature European figures, this innovation emerged only after a well-developed corpus of purely local forms and iconography had long existed (Jeffrey 1951, 87). Other Benin plaques depicting local figures and narrating indigenous stories were produced prior to Portuguese contact. Jeffrey notes that the origins of Benin bronze casting can be traced to Ife, suggesting that the Benin acquired the foundational techniques from this Yoruba center. He cites historical evidence, including Egharevba (1936), who records that Oba Oguola c.1274-1287 sought to introduce brass casting in Benin, inspired by works sent to him from Ife. Oba Oguola sought a brass smith — Igue-igha was sent to him as the brass Smith. Igue-Igha was very clever and left many designs for his successors. He is still worshipped by the Benin brass smith until today as a role model. Hence, the beginning of brass casting in Benin is ascribed to the period of Oba Oguola (Egharevba 1936, 18, as cited in Jeffrey 1951, 89).

Jeffrey (1951) points out that the origin of the brass casting is from Ife; however, excavations and exploration done from 1910–1912 in Ife didn't show that this great art was typical of the Ife people (Jeffrey 1951, 89). Jeffrey suggests that this skill of brass casting could have been introduced by the Arabs, making reference to Yoruba's origin as descendants from one of the kings of Mecca who were banished because of paganism. The method that was used was known as the wax process or *cire perdue* (Jeffrey 1951, 89). This method has been similarly used by other tribes in Nigeria who descended from the east. *Cire perdue* was a Middle-East invention well established in Egypt about 1600 B.C. Jeffrey cites the work of Temple and one other colleague, only known by the initials C.L., who affirms that brass art was not introduced to Benin from Europe, based on the fact that the old West-African bronzes have a different amalgam to the European formula (Temple & Temple 1922, as cited in Jeffrey, 1951, 90).

Gunsch (2018) highlights that Egharevba's insistence that Oguola invited a bronze-caster from Ife is controversial—many of Egharevba's peers had believed that bronze-casting had already existed in the Oguola era, based on incidental references to bronze. Egharevba maintains that the purpose of Oguola's bronze commissions was "for the preservation of the records of events" (Egharevba 1968, as cited in Gunsch 2018, 46). Gunsch further compares Egharevba's version with that of Captain Ernest Percy Stuart Roupel. The latter was a resident in Benin in 1897 who collected information from courtiers during an interview with them. The courtiers dated the bronze to the period of Oba Esigie (c.1504-1547) and his son Orhogbua (c.1547-1580). Courtiers reported that a man named Ahammangiwa, who was white, came with the Europeans during the reign of Esigie and made plaques and bronze works for the king (Read & Dalton 1899, as cited in Gunsch 2018, 46).

Since Ahammangiwa is described as white, it is possible that he could have been misunderstood for a Portuguese by some scholars. Jeffrey highlights that Ahammangiwa is assumed to be Portuguese and is believed to have taught the Bini bronze casting, however, there is insufficient evidence to say that Ahammangiwa is Portuguese (Jeffrey 1951, 89). Jeffrey's interpretation appears plausible, particularly considering that the name *Ahammangiwa* does not resemble a Portuguese linguistic form. Furthermore, the description of Ahammangiwa as "white" may have referred to a lighter skin tone rather than European descent. This distinction is significant, as some indigenous inhabitants of Benin are naturally lighter in complexion, a characteristic that some traditions attribute to migratory origins from the east. Based on these observations, it is reasonable to consider that Ahammangiwa may have been a native of Benin rather than a foreigner.

Oba Orhogbua asked Ahammangiwa to commemorate his killing of the neighbouring king in bronze casting (an event which was a retaliation because the neighbouring king had killed Orhogbua's messenger). This phenomenon strengthens the belief that events or happenings were commemorated in artwork at the request of the Oba. Curnow (2021) maintains that Oba Esigie had commanded his brassworkers to cast the Oro bird on a stylised branch after the conquest with the Idah forces during the Igala invasion c.1515 (Curnow 2021, 149). This bird soon began to appear on many plaques and artwork carvings—Curnow notes that the Oro bird also became Oba Esigie's personal emblem and appeared in many forms and places extending from Ugie Oro to architecture. This Oba's palace had many exotic brass sculptures (Curnow 2021, 154).

Beyond their function as historical records, the arts of the Benin Kingdom also held significant religious and ritual value. Bronze heads representing deceased Obas were prominently displayed on palace altars, serving both to affirm dynastic continuity and to commemorate royal succession. Dark (1973) notes that each Oba commissioned a bronze head of his predecessor as an act of homage, placing it on a sacred altar within the palace. This practice formed part of the memorial tradition honoring past rulers. However, Dark also observed that the number of bronze heads does not always correspond precisely to the number of Obas, suggesting complexities in the tradition's evolution or representation (Dark 1973, 81).

In sum, the artistic traditions of the Benin Kingdom in the pre-contact period reflect a sophisticated system of visual expression deeply embedded in political authority, religious belief, and historical documentation. The emergence of artworks later depicting Portuguese figures during the 16th–17th centuries illustrates the kingdom's responsiveness to external encounters, while the continuity of royal and ritual art underscores its internal coherence and cultural resilience.

Through the bronze plaques, commemorative heads, and ceremonial regalia, Benin developed an enduring artistic legacy that not only recorded its dynastic history but also articulated its worldview and engagement with both local and foreign powers. These artistic expressions remain critical to understanding the kingdom's identity, diplomacy, and socio-political structure during a transformative era in West African history.

## **1.7. Benin Architecture**

Architecture, as commonly understood, encompasses the art and practice of designing and constructing buildings. In addressing Benin's history, one of the remarkable aspects that should not be ignored is the Benin architecture, the Great Benin city walls, streets, and houses. The absence of local written sources presents challenges for studying many aspects of Benin's history; however, in the areas of architecture and urban design, the accounts of 17th century European travelers have provided valuable guidance for scholars seeking to reconstruct the city's layout and architectural features. Some examples are Dutch traveller Dapper Olfert and

Portuguese ship captain Lorenzo Pinto. Dapper Olfert, a Dutch traveller, wrote about Benin City, describing its architecture, city plan, people's culture and norms in the 17th century.

Dapper (1668) narrates that the city is enclosed with walls of 10 feet in height and made of a tree palisade, with fascines in the middle intertwined in the shape of a cross, and lined with graff clay. On the other side of the wall lined with bushes, which extends from one end of the wall to the other, serves as a natural rampart for this city. There are several gates, which are eight or nine feet high and five feet wide: these are made of wood, all in one piece, and turn on one foot like the hurdles that close the courtyards. The king's court is square, and on the right side when one enters the gates of Gotton (port Ughoton). Dapper (1668) compares the city directly to some places back in his home country, the Netherlands,

*"Het hof des Konings is vierkant, en staet aen de rechte zijde der Stadt als men de poorte inkomt van Gotton: is wel zoo groot als de Stadt Haerlem, en omringt met een byzondere muur, als om de Stadt loopt. Het is vertrekken der hovelingen, en begrijpt schone en lange vierkante galderyen, omtrent zoo groot als de beurs t'Amsterdam, doch d'een groter, als d'ander, die op houten pylaren rusten, van onderen tot bovenin met gegoten koper beslagen, daar op d'afbeeldingen hunner oorloghs-daden en worden zeer reindelijk onderhouden"* Dapper (1668, 495).

**English translation (my own translation from the Dutch):** The king's court is square and stands on the right side of the city when entering the gates of Gotton. It is as large as Haarlem and is surrounded by a distinctive wall encircling the city. The court contains chambers for courtiers and long square galleries, approximately the size of the Amsterdam stock exchange, though some are larger than others, resting on wooden pillars and studded from bottom to top with cast copper. These display representations of military deeds and are meticulously maintained.

The houses are near one another and arranged in very good order. Houses have roofs, awnings, balusters, and are shaded with palm leaves and bananas. There are large galleries within and several chambers whose walls and floors are made of red soil. Dapper also admits to how well and clean the houses in Benin were kept

*“zeer zinnelijk opgemaakt; welke zij met waffen en wrijven zoo glad en essen weten te maken en onderhouden, als eenigh muur in Hollant van kalk kan gemaekt worden, en blinken als een spiegel ” (Dapper 1668, 496).*

**English translation (my own translation from the Dutch):**

The walls are elaborately finished; the craftsmen manage to make and maintain them so smooth and even, using tools and rubbing, that they resemble any lime wall in Holland, shining like a mirror.

Lourenço Pinto, a Portuguese captain in 1691 (1674?), describes Benin by drawing comparisons with his homeland, just as Dapper does. Lourenço Pinto narrates that “Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses” (*Acta Sacrae Congregationis, Acta Generalia*, vol. 64, f. 55, no. 27, 20 April 1694, as cited in Ryder 1977, 113).

French traveller Capitaine Landolphe (1823) describes the city of Benin noting how it was as big as one of the first of the French cities “*La ville de Bénin est aussi grande que l’une des premières de France, et peuplée d’environ quatre-vingt mille âmes*” (Landolphe 1823, 48). The city of Benin is as large as one of the largest cities in France, with a population of around eighty thousand inhabitants.

Benin built walls which expanded as much as 16,000 kilometres around the capital. The walls were a mosaic of 500 interconnected settlements and boundaries. The Benin walls were four times longer than the Great Wall of China. It is estimated that the building could have taken 150 million hours for its digging and construction (Pearce 2022, 96). The streets were well paved and equipped with big lamps mounted up high—this provided light at night around the Palace.

The Benin walls represent one of Africa’s most significant precolonial architectural achievements (Metropolitan Museum of Art n.d.). However, much of the associated traditional domestic architecture has not survived into the present. This loss may be attributed to the

perishable materials used in construction—such as mud and timber—which were vulnerable to environmental degradation and the impact of prolonged internal conflicts. Over time, these structures naturally deteriorated and disappeared from the landscape.

Archeological research and excavations done on the Benin walls in the early 1960s were among the first of their kind in order to study the wall's nature. Connah (1963) reported that the research identified three concentric layers of walls, the outer two being ascribed to Oba Ogoula, who ruled (c. 1280-1295), and the inner wall is ascribed to Oba Ewuare (1440-1473). Connah suggests that the Dutch traveller Dapper could have described the inner or 1st wall, which then was already grown with trees (Connah 1963, 472).

### **1.8. Benin's Religious customs and traditions**

This subheading examines the civilisation of the Benin Kingdom, with a focus on its religious beliefs, ritual practices, sacrificial festivals, culture, and traditions. As previously noted, the divine status of the Oba is central to Benin's sociopolitical and religious systems. The Oba was regarded not merely as a political ruler but as a deity, elevated to a status that required absolute reverence. Ordinary subjects were forbidden from making direct eye contact with the Oba unless explicitly permitted—an indication of the sacred nature of kingship in Benin cosmology. The historical account of Oba Orhobua being confronted with the choice between his throne and his faith underscores the profound intertwining of political authority and religious identity in Benin society. “The people of Benin believed that the Oba did not need to eat nor sleep” (Sheehan 1951, 32). Hence, he is divine. When an Oba dies, some local people are sacrificed by being buried with the Oba in order to serve him in the world beyond.

The Edo people worship Ju-ju and idols, which could be known as a form of African traditional religion and performing fetishism. Pinnock notes that the fetish priest exercises numerous and unlimited powers over both the king and the subjects. They perform sacrifices of fowls, goats, bullocks, and humans of all ages and both sexes to their gods. The sacrifices could be done on several occasions—for example, to commemorate the late king, or as an offering to the king. It could be done in times of drought to seek the gods to send rain or in times of excess rain in order to ask the gods that the rain should stop (Pinnock 1897, 36).

Dapper mentions human sacrifices in his description of Benin, particularly during the burial of an Oba. He maintains that when the king dies, a sepulchre was created in his palace, so deep—the body is thrown into this pit, with the servants of the deceased king who are offered to accompany their master in order to serve him in the other world (Dapper 1686, 312). The people used for these sacrifices are criminals, but innocent people could also be used for sacrifices to the gods. Dapper (1686) maintains on this topic.

*“Le Nouveau Roi institué à l'honneur de son prédécesseur des fêtes annuelles qu'on célèbre par des sacrifices de plusieurs personnes trois, quatre ou cinq jeunes hommes. On en tue 23 par jour qui sont presque tous des criminels dignes de mort, qu'on garde pour cette solennité. Quand le temps des sacrifices approche et qu'il n'y a pas un nombre suffisant de ces malheureuses victimes, le roi fait faire la nuit un rondeur pour saisir tous ceux qui vont dans les rues sans flambeau,”* (Dapper 1686, 312).

**English translation (my own translation from the French):**

The new king instituted, in honour of his predecessor, annual festivals marked by the sacrifice of several individuals, three, four, or five young men. Twenty-three are killed each day, almost all of them criminals deserving of death, who are reserved for this solemn occasion. When the time of the sacrifices approaches and there are not enough victims, the king orders a night patrol to seize anyone who goes into the streets without a torch.

This account, as well as those of other travellers who went to Benin like Miss Kingsley and Pinnock, enable us to understand some horrors of “sacrifices” in the customs of the Benin people. Pinnock maintains that one of the principal gods is Malaku, the god of water. Pinnock notes that in crossing the creeks, it was usual to see a young live chicken tied by its leg to the branch of a tree as an offering to the deity, in order to appease the turbulence of water to allow their canoes to pass safely (Pinnock 1897, 38).

Kingsley (as cited in Pinnock, 1897) reflects on the terms “juju” and “fetish,” noting that they are not originally native English words but were created by the locals after contact with the Portuguese and French. She ascribes the word “fetish” as being coined by the old Portuguese

explorers from the word *Feitiço*—they had used it to describe the objects the local people worshipped. “ju-ju” comes from the French *jouet*, meaning toy or doll (Pinnock 1897, 40). The local people of Benin created these objects, worshipping and venerating them and performing rituals with them. It may be inferred that there is a significant relationship between the arts of the Benin Kingdom and its religious beliefs, as many artworks exhibit spiritual symbolism or ritual significance. However, this does not imply that all juju or so-called “fetish” objects were exclusively created for religious purposes.

Sheehan (1951) maintains that the African traditional religion is well intertwined with the world of spirits and supernatural powers. “The everyday life of spirits and humans is connected for the people of African kingdoms” (Sheehan 1951, 38). Some important gods of the Edo people of Benin are “Ogun” and “Osun.” Ogun is known as the god of Blacksmiths—this god is associated with the forging of metals, while Osun is equally powerful; his spirit lives in the plants of the forest, the plants could be used by fetish priests to deal with witches who threaten humans at night (Sheehan 1951, 38).

This section has outlined the origins, political and social structures, territorial organisation, military strength, economic success, religious practices, and artistic and architectural achievements of the Benin Kingdom. Together, these elements demonstrate that Benin was a highly organised and sovereign polity with a centralised authority, complex institutions, and a defined territorial presence. From this section, it is evident that Benin was well-prepared to engage with neighboring states and European powers, particularly Portugal. This section laid down the foundation for us to understand in the subsequent chapters that Benin’s interactions were shaped by diplomacy, strategic agency, and mutual interest. Far from being a passive or primitive society, Benin emerged as a confident state that approached its relationship with Portugal on equal terms. Recognising this context is crucial for interpreting the nature of Benin–Portuguese relations in the chapters that follow.

## 1.9. Portugal in the Age of Maritime Expansion

### i. The Motivations for Portuguese Maritime Expansion “Technological Innovations”

One of the driving forces behind Portuguese maritime exploration and expansion was the advancement in navigational science acquired in Portugal. Albuquerque (1969) highlights the significant influence of Arab astronomy and the role of Jewish intermediaries in transmitting this knowledge. During the 12th and 13th centuries, as industrial cities in Europe became increasingly consolidated, there emerged a growing intellectual interest in scientific inquiry, particularly in the fields of astronomy and navigation, which laid the groundwork for later exploratory ventures.

This period witnessed a significant revival of interest in classical knowledge, marked by a concerted effort to recover ancient Greek manuscripts that had been neglected for centuries. Many of these texts had been preserved, translated, and transmitted through Arab intellectual traditions. Consequently, regions such as the Eastern Byzantine Empire and Islamic Spain—where Islamic scholarship and cultural continuity endured—became crucial sources for rediscovery. Christian scholars of the time, eager to access this knowledge, traced these manuscripts through Islamic centers of learning.

Since most Western scholars lacked proficiency in Greek or Arabic, the texts were translated into Latin, thereby making classical knowledge accessible to a broader European audience (Albuquerque 1969, 154). Among these recovered works is the *Sententie Astrolobi*, one of the earliest known Latin treatises on the astrolabe. The astrolabe, a sophisticated scientific instrument, was instrumental in navigation due to its ability to measure time, determine the altitude of the sun and stars, solve terrestrial problems, and assist in geographic mapping. Its practical applications made it an essential tool for explorers during the age of maritime expansion.

The advancement of navigation technology in Portugal was significantly influenced by developments in astronomy and geometry. This scientific foundation played a crucial role in enabling Portugal's maritime expansion. Christian intellectuals, drawing upon translated classical and Islamic works, successfully applied this knowledge to improve navigational practices,

thereby contributing to Portugal's emergence as a leading seafaring power during the Age of Exploration (Albuquerque 1969, 158).

Portuguese sailors embarked on their voyages equipped with a sophisticated understanding of astronomy and geometry, as well as navigational instruments derived from these disciplines. Al-Rodhan emphasises that these maritime undertakings were fundamentally grounded in scientific knowledge—knowledge that was, in large part, the result of a collaborative intellectual legacy shared by Jewish and Muslim scholars (Al-Rodhan 2012, 100). Bassani and Fagg (1988) maintain that the great European voyages to Africa, the Far East, and the Americas were made possible by Arab science diffusion into Western culture, which occurred during the Islamic presence on the Iberian peninsula. Without the astrolabe, the voyages could not have been possible (Bassani and Fagg 1988, 35).

## **ii. The Motivations for Expansion “God, Gold, Glory”**

Following the *Reconquista*,<sup>5</sup> Portugal exhibited a strong ambition for development, maritime expansion, and the conquest of overseas territories. A central objective of its exploratory missions was to locate the legendary Christian kingdom in East Africa, with the aim of securing alliances and advancing the Christianisation of Muslim-dominated regions of Africa. The capture of Ceuta in 1415 by King João I marked a significant turning point and is widely regarded as the beginning of Portuguese overseas expansion. As Galvão (1555/1862) notes, Dom João I, accompanied by Infante Dom Duarte, Dom Pedro, Infante Dom Henrique and several nobles of the realm, departed from Lisbon and successfully seized Ceuta—establishing Portugal's first stronghold on the African continent (Galvão 1862, 60).

Canto (1869) records that in the 15th century, during the reign of King Duarte (Duarte the Eloquent), Portuguese explorers—motivated by a spirit of conquest and religious fervour—successfully navigated beyond Cape Bojador, an achievement long considered the boundary of the known world. This breakthrough marked a decisive turning point in the history of European expansion, opening the way for Portugal's systematic exploration and eventual domination of the West African coast. Guided by the motto “the glory of the Portuguese nation,”

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<sup>5</sup> The Reconquista (711–1492) was the centuries-long effort by Christian kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula to reclaim territory from Muslim rule. It ended with the capture of Granada in 1492, reinforcing Christian identity and shaping Iberian expansion overseas.

these expeditions were driven not only by territorial ambition but also by a mission to disseminate Christianity and extend the ideological and geopolitical influence of the Portuguese crown (Canto 1869, 1)

## **Madeira Islands**

Under the patronage of Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador, Portuguese navigators reached the **Madeira Islands** c. 1418. Historical accounts note that upon their arrival, they encountered a chapel, monument, and memorial attributed to Robert Macham, an Englishman presumed to have reached the islands before the Portuguese (Galvão 1555/1862). This exploration, while anecdotal, highlights the broader context of early Atlantic exploration and the competitive nature of European maritime expansion (Galvão 1555/1862, 58). Geographically, the **Madeira Islands** lie closer to the European mainland and the Mediterranean basin. As noted by Vieira et al (2001), the islands were already known to Mediterranean seafarers prior to Portuguese arrival. Therefore, the landing of the Portuguese in Madeira in 1418 should not be understood as a discovery in the strict sense, but rather as part of a broader effort to incorporate the Atlantic world into the sphere of Western Christendom (Vieira et al. 2001, 8).

*Funchal-Madeira Story Centre* maintains that the island of Madeira was explored in the 13th century by the Mediterranean and that by the 14th century the maps/charts of Italian and Catalan travellers marked Madeira along with the Canary islands (Funchal-Madeira Story Centre 2007, 10). Overall (1870) notes that the Madeira Islands were reportedly first explored by an Englishman around 1351, but were later formally colonised by the Portuguese under the direction of Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador in 1433 (Overall 1870, 538).

Thus, while the Portuguese may not have been the first to arrive on the island, they were the first to formally establish a permanent settlement under the authority of a centralised government. By dispatching settlers under royal directive, the Portuguese crown effectively asserted sovereignty over the territory and its resources.

The Portuguese established a formal settlement on the island of Madeira under the explicit directive and authority of the reigning monarch. Zurara maintains *Elle fez povoar no grande mar Occiano cinco ilhas, as quaes ao tempo da composicom deste livro estavam em*

*rezoada povoracom, especialmente a ilha de Madeira* (Zurara 1453/1841, 30). In addition to Madeira, numerous other Atlantic islands were systematically settled and colonised by the Portuguese under the authority and directive of the Crown.

Another version of the discovery is told by Cadamosto, an Italian explorer—a firsthand source. According to Cadamosto and crew, when they arrived at Madeira on 28th March 1455, they observed that the island had been discovered 24 years earlier by Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador and that the island had been uninhabited before that time (Cadamosto 1550/1944, 10).

## **Azores**

In 1439, King Dom Afonso V granted his uncle, Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador, permission to settle on the islands of the Azores, which had long been discovered. A letter from Dom Afonso V in the Azores archive records the concession for settlement on the seven islands, dated 2 July 1439 (Arquivo dos Açores 1878, 5).

Albuquerque (1969) highlights that the question of whether the Açores Islands were discovered before Portuguese occupation in the 15th century remains unresolved among historians of the history of discoveries. He points out that Portuguese sources from the 15th century only refer to the settlement and offer little evidence of any prior discovery (Albuquerque 1969, 129). With the exploration of many islands in the Atlantic, the Portuguese began settling on the islands, including the Canary Islands, which were first explored by the Castilians in 1402. Paszkiewicz (2003) maintains that the Portuguese followed the footsteps of the Castilian conquerors in the Canary Islands and had rivalry over the islands until 1479 (Paszkiewicz 2003).

The Azores Islands were discovered by Portuguese explorer Diogo de Silves in 1427. The islands lie in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. São Miguel is the largest and most inhabited, lying to the east, along with the Island of Santa Maria. Flores and Corvo Islands lie on the west; Graciosa, Terceira, São Jorge, Pico, and Faial are in the centre. Zurara (1453/1896) maintains that these islands were possibly noted on the maps as part of the islands of the Atlantic. However, only the record of the voyage of Diogo de Silves in 1427 was preserved. Moreover, the

record of the latter is the only source where we can see a complete colonisation and exploration of the entire islands (Zurara 1453/1896).

Dutch explorer van Linschoten (1596/1885) wrote a description of the Azores islands, also known as the Flemish islands. “They are also called the Flemish islands, meaning *of the Netherlanders*, because they were the first to inhabit the islands and their offspring remained there in great number, they inhabit the *Ribera dos Flamengos*, the Flemish river” (Linschoten, 1596/1885, 276). Given that the Dutch explorer's account dates to the late 16th century, his version of the exploration of the Azores Islands may be less credible than the Portuguese narrative due to the date of record taken occurring after that of the Portuguese in the early 15th century. Therefore, despite the elements of truth (Linschoten 1596/1885) may have in his description, it should be approached with caution due to potential bias.

Earlier, before the arrival of the Portuguese, the Azores Islands were described by early sailors as being positioned 10,000 miles away from Africa (Plutarch Sectorius as cited in Zurara 1453/1896). After the discovery of the islands by the Portuguese, they began to settle on the islands.

The Portuguese narrative regarding the exploration and settlement of the Azores is particularly compelling due to the abundance of corroborating sources. Additionally, the geographical proximity of Portugal to the islands further substantiates the argument that Portuguese settlers were the first to migrate to and inhabit the Azores.

## **Cabo Verde**

In 1462, three Genoese explorers arrived on the islands of Cabo Verde, historically known as Gorgades, Hesperides, and Dorcades. Upon their arrival—coinciding with the feast days of respective saints—the islands were subsequently renamed Santiago, Maio, and São Filipe (Galvão 1555/1862, 74).

Sir Richard Hawkins, an English explorer, in his observations on a voyage into the South Sea, 1593, notes the Cabo Verde Islands as those of the Portuguese. There are two groups from these islands, one of them lies out of the trade route, in the more western side, the others lie in four score leagues; these were Santiago, Maio, Boa Vista, Sal, and Brava. They belong to the

kingdom of Portugal, and the people of this nation inhabited the island. The local populations engaged in trade with Guinea and Benin, with the primary commercial activity centered on the buying and selling of enslaved individuals (Hawkins 1847, 47). The Portuguese have stores of sugar, salt, rice, cotton, wool, and cotton-cloth, amber-greece, cyvit, oliphants, brimstone, pummy stone, sponge, and some gold. Hawkins (1847) notes that Santiago is the main island, which has one city and two towns with their ports. The city was also called Santiago, from which the island derived its name. It was situated at the bottom of a pleasant valley.

The towns were Playa (Praia) and Santo Domingo. Hawkins (1847) maintains that the towns were burnt to the ground and taken by an Englishman in 1585, Sir Francis Drake, and in 1596 Santiago was seized by Anthony Shryley, also an English general. The second is called Fogo - fire, because on that night the volcano burned so that the flames could be seen twenty leagues off in the sea. The bread they spent was bought from Portugal and Spain, while saving rice and maize, also called guinea wheat by the English at that time. The Island of Brava on the west has a great river, but the fruits were few and substantial, like plantain, potatoes, and coconuts.

The Islands of the Atlantic are argued to have been known to other people, like Arab navigators or Africans, before the arrival of the Portuguese. Vieira (2001) maintains that, from the 6th century BC onwards, various accounts attest to the presence of Mediterranean coastal peoples in the Atlantic. Carthaginians and Arabs before the arrival of the Portuguese *A Partir do século VI a.C. diversos testemunhos evidenciam a presença dos povos ribeirinhos do Mediterraneo nas águas do Atlântico. Cartagineses e árabes preludiarão a expansão dos portugueses e castelhanos do século XV* (Vieira 2001, 8). Albuquerque & Santos (1991) suggest that these could have been short visits or occasional settlements which were forgotten and had no record of exploration until the arrival of the navigators of the 15th century, 1456 - 1462, Diogo Gomes, Diogo Afonso, Diogo Dias, Alvise Cadamosto (Albuquerque & Santos 1991, 23). Much of Guinea was like an extension of Cabo Verde; the slaves were bought from Guinea and taken to the Cabo Verde Islands by the Portuguese. From the Cabo Verde Islands, slaves were still traded to other parts of the kingdom, such as Brazil and Portugal itself. Hence, Cabo Verde served as a centre where the slaves were assembled after being captured from the interior of Africa. As of the period around 1511-1513, a total of 2966 slaves were destined to Portuguese ports (Serrão n.d., 274).

Christopher Columbus, on his third voyage, described his route from Spain to Madeira, the Canary Islands, and onward to the Cabo Verde islands (Columbus 1493/1870, 132). Sailing southward, he crossed below the equator and, upon reaching the latitude of Sierra Leone in Guinea, reported the extreme conditions: the heat was so intense and the sun's rays so fierce that he felt as if he might be burnt. Even when it rained and the sky was heavily clouded, he continued to suffer the same oppressive heat (Columbus 1493/1870, 133).

The weather here is very different from that of Europe, as it is very warm. Hawkins notes that the Islands of Cabo Verde are situated in one of the most unhealthy climates in the world (Hawkins 1847, 45). Due to its heat, the inhabitants fend themselves with thick clothes—Hawkins maintains that even the moon of these hot countries (in the islands as well as on the coast of Guinea) was hot such that it shines, causing pain, and its burning could be felt at night (Hawkins 1847, 46). Such a climate is due to the geographic location of the archipelago, which lies in close proximity to Africa.

## **Guinea**

Zurara's chronicle of the conquest of Guinea describes the challenges, triumphs, and exploration made during the voyages of the Portuguese along the coast of Africa in the 15th century. In 1444 and 1445, under the licence of Infante Dom Henrique, a number of ships sailed and several commanders achieved notable success. Dinis Dias, Nuno Tristão, among others, reached Senegal. The navigators were faced with hostility from the Moors on several occasions; however, they succeeded in fending themselves. When they sailed at the pace of 80 leagues, they came to the coast of Guinea. The African men on seeing them arriving, ran down to the shore and got ready with their shields and *assegais*<sup>6</sup> such as men ready for war (Zurara 1896, 136). Zurara notes that the Portuguese men would have turned back if the tempest on the sea allowed them, so they were forced to continue.

The Moors lay waiting, and when the Portuguese arrived at shore, they discharged their arms; however, the Christians were not hurt, they took the arms from them and used them as if they were theirs. When some Moors fell dead on the ground, others began to flee, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Assegais (also spelled assagai or assagay) are lightweight, slender spears or javelins traditionally used by various African peoples, particularly in Southern and Central Africa.

Portuguese went after them. At their plea for mercy, they no longer killed the Moors. They decided to follow the men back to their settlements. On reaching near the settlements, the people made loud noises in their native tongues, which signalled to their wives and children so that they could flee to safety. However, they could not get that far, and they were held captives, 12 men and women (Zurara 1896, 142).

Barbot (1732) maintains that the part of Nigritia (Nigritia meaning the land of the Negros-blacks), also called North-Guinea, in reality starts from an island formed by the Atlantic Ocean on the west and the rivers of Senegal and Gambia on the North. There were so many black nations with kings ruling over them, and neither the Europeans nor Africans living there could give an exact account of all these black nations (Barbot 1732, 15).

Nyendael's description of Guinea maintains that Guinea is an extremely large country spread over several hundred hours of journey, it contains many kingdoms, small and large with people under a government "*Guinea ist ein überaus großes Land und in einige hundert Stunden ausgebreitet worringen unzehl nahe Königreich gross und klein befindliche sind nebst vielen anderen Folken, die einige Regierung der von eine Republik brauchen*" (Nyendael 1708, 5). Portugal maintained its trade relationship with these kingdoms in the region; the trade involved trafficking humans, also known as the slave trade. The slaves from Guinea were sent to Cabo Verde, where it was decided whether they would be taken to the New World, the Americas, or Europe.

### **Sierra Leone, Sherbo**

Sierra Leone on the map could be seen in the closest proximity to Guinea; it falls under part of Negroland (Guinea) which the Portuguese explored in the 15th century, as described by Zurara. It is referred to as "the southern coast of Guinea" (Zurara 1841, xxix). Under King Afonso V of Portugal, some men were sent to explore the Guinea coast into the interior. Pedro de Sintra and Suero da Costa, along with other explorers, arrived here in 1461. The name Sierra Leone is believed to have been derived from Portuguese, as it is believed that Pedro de Sintra was met with a growl of lions which sounded like thunder around the summits of the mountains in the lands (Zurara 1453/1841, xxix). Hence, the name Sierra comes from the Portuguese serra - mountain range and leone - lions.

The Sherbo Islands are actually in the Atlantic Ocean in the southern region of Sierra Leone. The island is separated from mainland Africa by the Sherbo River in the North and the Sherbo Strait. Barbot (1732) maintains that the Portuguese traded in the Sierra Leonean and Sherbo waters among other coastal cities of Guinea, buying slaves, wax, Elephant teeth, and red wood (Barbot 1732, 83). There are forty to fifty criminals banished from Portugal; these criminals are sent to these places where they suffered from the climate as part of punishment, (Barbot 1732, 83). Such were the ways by which the Portuguese crown made the discovered lands inhabited by its population.

### **Ghana (São Jorge da Mina)**

Following the accession of King João II in 1481, a royal mandate was issued to establish a significant commercial fortress, or *feitoria*, at São Jorge da Mina. This stronghold, known today as Elmina Castle, was commissioned and constructed under the leadership of Diogo de Azambuja, serving as a pivotal center for Portuguese trade and strategic presence along the West African coast (Pereira 1937, 119). São Jorge da Mina was the first trading fortress of its kind established in the region. Its establishment significantly facilitated Portuguese commerce, enabling the annual export of approximately 170,000 doubloons of high-quality gold and other valuable goods to Portugal, thereby greatly enhancing the kingdom's wealth and influence (Pereira 1937, 120).

Albuquerque (1994) notes that São Jorge da Mina—also referred to as Castelo de Mina is situated near present-day Cape Coast in Ghana. Construction of the fortress commenced in 1482. It functioned as the principal administrative center for all Portuguese establishments along the Gulf of Guinea Coast, collectively known as “Mina,” which extended from Cabo das Palmas to the Volta River (Albuquerque 1994, 738).

The influence of São Jorge da Mina extended eastward to the Benin Kingdom, primarily through the slave trade. During the tenure of the contract between the Portuguese crown and Fernão Gomes, Portuguese navigators João de Santarém and Pedro Escobar first explored this region in 1471, initiating gold trade with the indigenous populations. The establishment of São Jorge da Mina underscores the significant economic importance that this trade held for the

Portuguese Empire (Albuquerque 1994, 738). Fernão Gomes was officially entrusted with the administration of trade and exploration activities in the Gulf of Guinea, assuming responsibility for recruiting and financially supporting explorers under his jurisdiction. His leadership significantly advanced Portuguese commercial expansion, resulting in substantial success in establishing and consolidating trade networks throughout the region.

Ballong-Wen-Mewuda (1993) highlights a strategic shift in Portuguese policy following Fernão Gomes's appointment, marking a new phase in the history of Portuguese exploration. This era is characterised by clearly affirmed gains and profits, alongside a notably less confrontational approach toward African kingdoms compared to earlier periods. Ballong-Wen-Mewuda maintains that "*... le discours portugais ne va plus résider dans la force des armes, mais il va utiliser le dialogue, la persuasion, la ruse commerciale*" (Ballong-Wen-Mewuda 1993, 49). The Portuguese no longer based their relation on the use of force but rather dialogue, persuasion, and commercial trickery.

The decision by King D. João II to commission the construction of the São Jorge da Mina fortress was integral to his early policies aimed at securing effective crown control over the overseas territories confirmed to Portugal by the Treaty of Alcáçovas in 1479 (Albuquerque 1994, 738).

During the war initiated by Dom Afonso V against Castile in 1475, Portugal's precarious position in the Gulf of Guinea became evident, as the conflict underscored the vulnerability of its claims to the neighboring kingdom's territories. The opposition was resolute in its efforts either to seize these strategic locations or, at a minimum, to disrupt Portugal's maritime connections with Tugal. Recognising the critical importance of the gold traded along the Mina coast to the Portuguese economy. Queen Isabella of Castile aimed to deprive Portugal of this vital resource, which was essential for sustaining its war efforts. To achieve this objective, she emphatically asserted Castile's primacy in the discovery and claim of African territories.

The Treaty of Alcáçovas, signed in 1479, was a pivotal peace agreement between the Iberian crowns of Castile and Portugal. Under the terms of the treaty, the Portuguese crown, represented by Dom Afonso V, formally recognised the Canary Islands as the possession of the Castilian crown under Queen Isabella. In reciprocation, the Castilian crown acknowledged

Portuguese sovereignty over the Azores, Madeira, Cabo Verde archipelagos, and the Guinea Coast.

The trade with the local populations encompassed the exchange of various goods, including lanbens, red and blue cloth, brass bracelets, handkerchiefs, coral, red shells, white wine, and blue beads (Pereira 1937, 120). The exact meaning of "lanbens" remains unclear, as it does not correspond to any known commodity or term in historical trade records. Given the context of the trade items listed—such as red and blue cloth, brass bracelets, handkerchiefs, corals, red shells, white wine, and blue beads—it is plausible that "lanbens" refers to a type of textile or garment.

Pereira provides a detailed account of the Benin Kingdom, situated approximately 200 leagues inland from the Portuguese trading post at São Jorge da Mina. He emphasises the vast territorial extent of the kingdom and notes its frequent military engagements with neighboring polities (Pereira 1937, 126).

### **Uidai, Dahomey**

The Portuguese in Dahomey established trade relations, which mainly included the buying of slaves and valuable stones, among others. Hence, the kingdom built a trade post. Canto (1869) maintains that in 1680, a fleet left Lisbon towards Dahomey with building materials in order to construct the fortress São João Batista de Ajudá. *Partiu de Lisboa uma frota, composta da nau Madre de Deus e fragata Santa Cruz que levou a seu bordo o novo governador e todo pessoal material, artilharia, munições e aviamentos necessários para começo à fortaleza (Canto 1869, 2).*

The first governor of this city, Ouidah, where the fortress was built, was Jacinto Figueiredo de Abreu. The governor, along with other personnel, stopped at São Tomé e Príncipe in order to stock up their provisions, later arriving at the port of Arda in March (Canto 1869, 2). This trade post played a great role in the transatlantic slave trade for the Portuguese due to its position. Slaves from the interior were brought to the trade post before being shipped to Bahia in Brazil. Canto (1869) notes that until 1811, annually about twenty to thirty ships from here came to Brazil and were charged forty contos reis by the customs (Canto 1869, 3).

The establishment of Portuguese trading posts, or feitorias, along the West African coast created critical nodes for the exchange of goods beyond human cargo, including ivory, precious stones, fruits, and a variety of food products. These posts enabled a transcontinental flow of commodities that significantly influenced local economies and agricultural practices. Notably, the introduction of new food crops, such as cassava and maize—originating from the Americas via Portuguese trade routes—transformed African diets and farming systems, enhancing food security and diversifying agricultural production.

This historical exchange underscores the integral role of early European-African commercial networks in shaping economic and cultural landscapes on both continents. The finding highlights how these interactions contributed to long-term socio-economic transformations in West Africa beyond the often-emphasised transatlantic slave trade.

### **São Tomé e Príncipe**

In 1472, the Islands of **São Tomé and Príncipe** were explored by the Portuguese. Standing under the line with the firm land, also wherein is the Kingdom of Benin, reaching to the Cape de Santa Catarina—the man who discovered these islands was called Sequeira (Galvão 1555/1862, 75).

These are islands in the Atlantic, found in the southernmost part around the coast of Nigeria, in West Africa. Galvão (1555/1731) in the treaty of discoveries notes on the discovery of these islands by the Portuguese explorer Fernão Pó. *“Descobrio Fernão do Pò a ilha que se chama como elle, e neste mesmo tempo forão descubertas as Ilhas de São Tomé e Príncipe que estão na linha e na terra firme o Reyno de Benij até o Cabo de Caterina que está da parte Sul em três grãos, e o que fez este Descobrimento de S. Alteza chamavale Sequeira”* (Galvão 1555/1731, 25–26).

The São Tomé’s National Press notes that the topic of who discovered these islands is questionable, highlighting the possibility of Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek, and Carthaginian sailors. Among other possible sailors are Ano Bom and Fernando Pó. Fernão Gomes, and more likely João de Santarém and Pedro de Escobar during the reign of King Dom Afonso V. São Tomé was discovered on 21st December 1471 while Príncipe was discovered 17th January

1472 “*O nome de descobridor é tão incerto, que já disso se queixava o grande João de Barros e outros com mais probabilidade atribuem esta honra a João de santarém e a Pedro de Escobar no reinado de Senhor Rei d. Afonso V*” (Matos 1916, 7–8).

The Portuguese established a trade with the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, where there were sugarcane farmlands on which slaves worked. The islands also served as a link in the interregional trade operated on the coast of West Africa by the Portuguese. Vogt (1973) notes the traffic of slaves between São Tomé and the Mina Castle during the beginning of 16th century, “the first recorded contact to supply São Jorge with slaves from São Tomé was about 1500 and by 1514 the supply of all slaves for the gold trade passed into the hands of António Carneiro, the grantee of the Island of Príncipe” (Vogt 1973, 456).

Resende (1553/1902) highlights how the Islands of São Tomé became populated by the Portuguese and Castilian Jews—these were sent to live there after being banned due to religious motives. *No anno 1493 el Rei deu a Alvalro de Caminha, a Capitani da ilha de São Tomé de juro de herdade...e porque os judeus castelhanos, que de seus reinos se não saíram nos termos limitados, os mandou tomar por captivos segundo a condição da entrada e lhes tomou os filhos e filhas pequenos e assi eram captivos e os mandou tornar todos christãos e com dito Álvaro de Caminha os mandou todos a dita ilha de São Tomé...pudesse com eles povoar a dita ilha* (Resende 1553/1902, 37).

The king gave Alvalro de Caminha leadership of the Island of São Tomé...and because the Castilian Jews had not left the kingdom under the limited terms, he ordered them to be taken captives, he sent them all to the said Island of São Tomé...he could populate the said island with them. Hence, one could say that the Portuguese crown populated the islands and other overseas territories not only with its native population but with the Jews (non natives). These were people who were no longer needed in Portugal due to their religious beliefs and refusal to convert to Christianity.

Serrão (1995) notes that at the beginning of Dom Pedro's reign, there was a shortage of people on the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe; hence, exceptionally, a certain number of exiled people were sent there. The governor asked for more men to fill the garrison and mechanical trades. In the kingdom, no one volunteered to go live there, for fear of the climate or insecurity. The situation was serious, as the decrease in trade had reduced the income of the islands, which

were unable to maintain military and spiritual expenses. This contingency determined the provision of March 11, 1673, which established free trade in the archipelago for five years, so that residents could freely trade the fruits of the land and receive others from foreign kingdoms, as long as they considered themselves allies of Portugal (Serrão 1995, 285).

## **Angola**

Diogo Cão is said to have arrived in Angola along with other explorers in 1482 after Kongo. The relationship was established—at this time, it was a normal relationship, as in other kingdoms where trade and evangelisation were main objectives. Ekeh (2016) notes that the king (Ngola) of Angola had resisted the pressure of conversion to Christianity during the 1520-1560s. The missionaries were tired of verbal persuasion, hence they recommended a policy of “conquest before conversion,” and by 1570, Portugal officially declared Angola a colony (Ekeh 2016, 21).

Cavazzi (1690) maintains that Luanda is the capital of Angola and that the people made wars from where they got many slaves, which they traded with the Portuguese (Cavazzi 1690, 105, 158). Kenny (1982) notes the building of schools by the missionaries in Luanda, “Paulo Dias was given the feudal revenues from nine districts—the revenues included farm produce and 300 slaves per year. The Jesuit priests kept 100 slaves for the building and maintenance of the school, sold 150 in exchange for needed supplies, and 50 after teaching them the faith (Kenny 1982). One can say that the situation in Angola was hostile. Ekeh (2016) maintains that “in Angola the Portuguese were becoming more violent and in one year they had killed 4000 and enslaved 1400... they made war and captured slaves themselves on a vast scale using them as a means of exchange.”(Ekeh 2016, 22).

Davidson (1961) maintains that there were “one million slaves from Angola in the first century of European contact, together with a further half a million from neighbouring Kongo. These slaves were trafficked, as reports suggest (Davidson 1961, 150).

## Benin

In the late 15th century, after a Portuguese explorer arrived in Benin, Corrêa's version notes that in 1484, during the reign of Dom João, the king of the Benin Kingdom came to Portugal. The black king and many of his household became Christians (Corrêa 1869, 8). Barros mentions that it was an ambassador of the king and not the King of Benin himself who had come to Portugal (Barros 1552/1920, 39). The King of Portugal, Dom João II, got a lot of information about the Christian king in the east, India, and its affairs from the African ambassador. During that time, the king was desirous to learn about Prester John and his kingdom, whom he imagined to be a Christian and lord of great riches. It was thanks to this information from the Benin ambassador that Dom João II became more interested and sent his men to learn and explore towards eastern Africa and India (Corrêa 1869, 8; Barros 1552/1920, 41).

Barbot (1732) wrote on the Benin Kingdom, saying that Benin in general is called Dermones/Ethiopes by ancient geographers, and a mountain separates it from Ardra, Aranga mons. Benin shares a border with Alkomy, Jaboe, Ifago, and Oedobo in the north-west. The kingdom of Gaboe is an eight-day journey from Oedo (Edo), the capital city of the Benin Kingdom. It bounds towards the east on the lands Awerri and Forcado, among several countries that all paid tribute and depended on Benin, except Awerri and Ufa. Barbot suggests that it may well be extended as far as the Aethiopian Ocean (Barbot 1732, 357). Benin extends about 200 leagues from north to south and about 120 leagues from west to east. It was difficult to travel because most parts were wooded.

The lands around the metropolis of Edo, and the seaside, are inhabited by many people. Barbot maintains that the Portuguese first explored this kingdom during the reign of Dom João II. Vasconcelos, a Portuguese author, noted it was 80 leagues long and 40 leagues wide (Barbot 1732, 357). The geographical description appears to be in disparity since the number of leagues does not correspond to the number of leagues mentioned by other authors. Blake (1942) notes that Windham, Lok, and Towerson's narrative on Benin had errors. These described Benin vaguely as a country being under the equinoctial line, whereas the mouth of the Benin River is actually 5° 46' N. Hence, a serious error (Blake 1942, 257). Such discrepancies may have arisen from varying systems of land measurement employed in the travelers' respective countries. Nyendaël's account, for instance, appears to describe distances in terms of travel time—measured in hours—rather than the use of leagues, which was common in other reports.

Despite the inaccuracies in the measurements, they all gave an estimated geographical description of the location, and other travellers could go to Benin to trade.

Godinho (1981) notes on the trade and economic situation between Benin and Portugal at the city of Ughoton, Benin's large trading port "*Em Ugato ou Gato, cidade de uns 200 fogos, situada a algumas léguas da foz do rio Formoso, que conduz à capital. João Afonso fundou provavelmente em 1486 uma feitoria donde se comprava com Benim a 9 léguas mais para o norte. Além do tráfico de escravos e do resgate de marfim, os portugueses compravam sobretudo a pimenta. As três espécies de mercadorias eram pagas com manilhas de latão ou de cobre*" (Godinho 1981, 152). Besides the demand for slaves and ivory, the Portuguese mainly bought Benin pepper, which they called *pimenta de rabo* for the pepper's tail-like shape. These in trade were paid for, using brass copper shackles as the currency of exchange.

Barbot (1732) notes that Alvarez, at his first visit to Benin, established relations with the king of Benin, who promised to become a Christian; however, after some years of commerce, the Portuguese realised how little success their efforts were in converting the people due to Benin's civil and religious concerns (Barbot 1732, 357). Portugal–Benin relations experienced a slowdown due to these concerns. Moreover, the climate, which caused health problems for Europeans, forced the Portuguese to withdraw from Benin despite the establishment of a trading post. As Godinho (1981) notes, "*Devido ao clima insalubre, a feitoria teve de ser abandonada ainda no reinado de D. João III, mas o trato continuo*" (Godinho 1981, 152).

## **Kongo**

Barros notes on the exploration of the Kingdom of Kongo and on its king, "*El Rey por causa do tempo em que Diogo Cão limitou sua tornada por os nossos não padecerem algum mal, mandou que tornasse logo, levando muitas cousas a El Rey de Kongo, e com ellas lhe encomendava que se quisesse converter à Fé de Cristão*" (Barros 1778, 174). Many good things were sent to the king of Kongo from the Portuguese crown, and he was asked if he wanted to convert to the Christian faith. Diogo Cão was well received by the king of Kongo. Castleden maintains that the mouth of the Kongo River was explored by the Portuguese in 1483 (Castleden 2020, 14).

Rui de Pina maintains that the king expressed his desire of a relationship “*enviou ao dicto Rey de Kongo, que era bem pollo sertoão, per Mesegeiros Christãos, hu rico presente de cousas desvairadas, noteficandolhe os homens da dieta armada serem del Rey de Portugal, que com todo o Mundo tynha paz, e amizade, e assy mandava buscar a sua, por lhe dizerem o Rey que era, desejando teer com elle, e com seu Regno, e gentes delle, todo bõo trato e prestaça...Os quaes Messegeiros foram do Rey muy honrradamente tratados, e recebidos com tanta, e nova alegria, que com o prazer que com sua vista e perguntas recebia, nom os deixava partir*” (Brásio 1952, 1: 33). Rui de Pina’s version also highlights the joy and happiness at the reception of the Portuguese in Kongo. Moreover, the king of Kongo also sent ambassadors who went with numerous gifts to meet the king of Portugal in Lisbon.

Resende (1553/1902) notes the warm and festive reception at the king’s court in Kongo. The day the Christians entered the court they were welcomed with noise and party, all singing many praises of the king of Portugal and his greatness with great joy and raising their hands towards the sea as if showing towards Portugal they said with great shout “ long live the king and lord of the world, and God will add to him for he is such a friend and lord of our king (King of Kongo). *E sobre isto todos da corte fizeram grandes festas, e alevantavam todos as mãos contra o mar, como que mostravam Portugal, dizendo com grandes gritas: - Viva o Rei e senhor do mundo, e Deus o acrecente, pois é tão amigo d’El-Rei nosso Senhor* (Resende 1553/1902, 6).

Kongo accepted the Portuguese and the new religion in a more appealing and sincere way to the Portuguese crown. This phenomenon helped foster great interstate diplomatic relations between Portugal and Kongo. The king of Kongo took a Christian name, he also renamed the capital city Mbazakongo to a Christian name; São Salvador. This topic will be addressed in greater detail later in the study, highlighting the differences between the Kingdoms of Benin and Kongo regarding their reception of Christianity and how these differences shaped the continuity of their respective relations with Portugal.

### **Abyssinia (Ethiopia)**

Although Ethiopia is not geographically located in West Africa or within the Atlantic sphere, its significance to the Portuguese crown warrants particular attention in this study. Ethiopia was historically identified by Europeans as the legendary Christian kingdom of Prester

John. This perception imbued the kingdom with considerable strategic and religious value for Portugal. As part of its broader imperial and religious agenda during the Age of Exploration, Portugal sought to establish diplomatic and military alliances with Ethiopia. These efforts were primarily motivated by the desire to forge a united Christian front against the expansion of Islamic powers in Africa and the Red Sea region. Ethiopia, therefore, held a vital position in the Portuguese crown's vision of geopolitical and religious influence beyond the Atlantic world.

Francesco Alvarez's *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia* (1520–1527) provides a firsthand account of Portugal's efforts to establish diplomatic and religious ties with the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia. In his account, Alvarez describes the delegation's arrival in Ethiopia and notes the death of Duarte Galvão, the leader of the mission, who died en route at the Island of Kamaran in the Red Sea" (Álvares 1881). They arrived at the Island of Maçua on a Monday of the octave of Easter on the 7th of April 1520 (Álvares 1540/1881, 1). The following day, there came two people from the town Arquiquo who informed them that the land belonged to the Christians and to a lord called Barnagais, a subject of Prester John. Moreover, the Moors of Maçua and Arquiquo fled to the mountains whenever Turks who hurt them came to this port.

The people had chosen not to flee because they heard that Francisco and his men were Christians. On the 13th of April, early in the morning, the priests returned from the beach, and the governor, with his captain, along with the priests, passed to the Island of Maçua. And he ordered mass to be said in the principal mosque; later, the governor asked that the mosque be renamed Mary of Conception (Álvares 1540/1881, 6). This practice reflects a broader trend observed in southern Iberia following the Reconquista, wherein former mosques were systematically converted into Christian churches, often rededicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary—a symbolic act underscoring both religious transformation and the assertion of Christian dominion.

Portugal completed its reconquest from Muslim rule earlier than Spain, with the final Muslim stronghold in the Iberian Peninsula—Granada—falling to the Spanish Crown only in 1492. The southern regions of Iberia had been under prolonged Arab-Muslim rule since the 8th century, following the invasion of 711 AD. In the aftermath of the Portuguese Reconquista, there emerged a determined effort to prevent a resurgence of Islamic influence. As Portugal began to acquire overseas territories and expand its imperial reach, this objective was coupled with the

ambition to convert non-Christian populations, establish strategic alliances, and ultimately weaken or eliminate residual Moorish power and influence. Leo Africanus notes Prester John as *Prete Ianni*, whose kingdom was sometimes under attack. The Turks took the ports of the Red Sea from him, and sometimes the Moors molested them greatly, leading to the captivity of Abyssinians, where they were made to become part of the Muslims (Africanus 1550/1896, 1021).

Prester John was already determined to destroy Mecca and cast out from it the sect of Mohammed (Álvares 1540/1881, 264). Hence, it was of great hope to join forces with the Portuguese in fighting the Muslims. Africa, on the other hand, was faced with two religions from Europe and the Middle East (although Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity existed before the arrival of the Europeans). The arrival of foreign philosophy and religious ideologies led to a strong political and religious conflict, since the religions became crucial for civilisation. Ogot notes that Christianity and Islam became political forces in the region where they were not known earlier (Ogot 1999, 43). Both Christianity and Islam were often introduced by foreign political powers not solely for spiritual purposes, but also as instruments to achieve broader political and strategic interests. Religious conversion was frequently tied to the establishment of alliances and the consolidation of control, as populations sharing the same faith were more likely to adopt shared norms and be integrated into the expanding influence of the sponsoring power. Resistance to such religious impositions often led to conflict, indicating that religious propagation was closely linked to political objectives.

Francisco Alvarez's description continues that the captain general of Portugal (who was in charge of India territory) arranged and met with Barnagais, they were both happy and thanked God for their meeting. Barnagais expressed how they had had it written about the coming of the Portuguese (Christians) from distant land to meet Prester John, and that they will build a well, there will be no more moors. Then Barnagais took a cross and he swore on the sign of the cross by which Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, in the name of Prester John and in his own name, that he will help the Portuguese, he will help the men and affairs of Portugal, all who came to his port. He will also take the Ambassador Mateus (Álvares 1540/1881, 6). The Captain General gave Barnagais arms, clothes, and rich stuff. Barnagais gave the captain a horse and a mule of great price (Álvares 1540/1881, 7).

Portugal at this time had access to spices from India, among other natural resources, and as the first European power to reach India by sea, it profited from the rich finds. The following gifts were sent to Prester John: a gold sword with a rich hilt, four pieces of tapestry, some rich cuirases, a helmet, and two swivel guns, four chambers, some balls, two barrels of powder, a map of the world, and some organs (Álvares 1540/1881, 10). These were later handed to the Prester, and Francisco himself was able to meet the Prester John (Álvares 1540/1881, 188).

The meeting with the legendary Christian sovereign Prester John—long imagined by the Portuguese crown to reside in the highlands of Ethiopia—was regarded as an epic and long-anticipated event. This long-standing aspiration for an eastern Christian ally was finally realised with the Portuguese Embassy to the Ethiopian Kingdom. The establishment of diplomatic relations was marked by the mutual exchange of gifts, a key component of early modern diplomacy that conveyed respect, goodwill, and political intention. These diplomatic ties were shaped by both religious and political motivations, as the two Christian kingdoms sought mutual support in their shared struggle against surrounding Islamic powers. The alliance reflected a broader strategy by the Portuguese crown to build a global Christian network to counterbalance Muslim expansion and assert Portuguese influence in the region.

From all the exploration accounts presented above, an African perspective on the Atlantic world and early Portuguese contact reflects a complex mixture of both positive and negative experiences. The arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century marked the beginning of significant cultural, economic, and political transformations across West Africa (Law 2002, 345). On one hand, these encounters facilitated trade, technological exchange, and diplomatic relations, such as those established with the Kingdom of Benin and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Europeans introduced profound disruptions, including the transatlantic slave trade, armed conflicts, and, in later centuries, violent colonial domination driven by European competition over African resources and territories (Rawley 1981, 426). The legacy of Portuguese contact, therefore, is remembered with both appreciation and ambivalence, shaped by its varied and far-reaching consequences for African societies.

Early Portuguese contact with Atlantic Africa brought expanded trade opportunities; the exchange of luxury goods such as precious stones and crafted items, alongside the transmission of cultural practices. More significantly, one of the most enduring legacies of this period was the

establishment of formal diplomatic relations between European and African polities. This included the mutual exchange of ambassadors, emissaries, and gifts, practices that underscored the political agency and sovereignty of African kingdoms such as Benin, Kongo, and Ethiopia.

These engagements marked a new era of intercontinental diplomacy, shaped by both political and religious motivations, in which African and European states recognised one another as legitimate counterparts. The 15th century thus inaugurated a form of early modern diplomacy across the Atlantic, enabling reciprocal learning in the areas of governance, language, religion, and trade. The Atlantic world, therefore, became not only a zone of economic exchange but also a conduit for cross-cultural interaction and mutual influence.

Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, sub-Saharan Africa maintained contact with other external civilisations, notably Arab traders and scholars. Arab influence had extended into regions such as the Gold Coast, Mali, and Songhai, where commercial and religious exchanges led to the progressive spread of Islam throughout parts of West Africa. However, despite this sustained presence, Arab actors did not establish enduring political structures or formal administrative control over these regions.

As Coquery-Vidrovitch observes, it was the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to disembark on the coast of Guinea, marking a new phase in direct maritime contact between West Africa and Europe (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1965, 14). This perspective appears plausible, as the absence of Arab political structures or formal interstate relations along the coast of Guinea suggests that. While Arab influence was present through trade and religion, it did not translate into sustained political dominion. Had such governance existed, it is likely the Portuguese would have encountered Arab-controlled territories upon their arrival in the region.

This section has sought to contextualise the political, economic, and ideological frameworks that underpinned Portuguese expansion during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It has been shown that this expansion was neither spontaneous nor haphazard, but rather the product of deliberate maritime strategy, religious ideology, and scientific advancement. As Portuguese ambitions expanded—first into the Atlantic archipelagos and then along the West African coast—a coherent imperial vision began to take shape. Understanding this broader context is essential for interpreting the nature of Portugal's engagement with the Kingdom of Benin. It positions their encounter not as a unidirectional encounter between a dominant

European empire and a peripheral African polity, but as a historically grounded interaction between two sovereign and politically organised powers, each pursuing its own strategic interests.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides the historical background necessary to understand the initial encounter between the Kingdom of Benin and the Portuguese crown in the 15th century. While the encounter itself is not addressed here, the knowledge presented offers essential context for the chapters that follow. It does so by presenting two parallel narratives: first, the political, social, and military sophistication of the Kingdom of Benin, and second, the maritime ambitions, diplomatic strategies, and technological advancements of Portugal during its early expansion into the Atlantic.

The Kingdom of Benin is depicted as a powerful and highly organised polity, with a centralised political structure, a disciplined military, defined territorial borders, vibrant artistic and architectural traditions, and a complex religious and cultural system. Far from being passive or isolated, Benin actively engaged in diplomacy, warfare, and regional commerce, maintaining dynamic relationships with its neighbours and responding strategically to external contacts, including the Portuguese.

In parallel, the chapter traces the rise of Portugal as a leading maritime power following the Reconquista. Motivated by religious, economic, and geopolitical goals, the Portuguese crown undertook a series of overseas explorations, successfully reaching and establishing settlements in Madeira, the Azores, Cabo Verde, the Gulf of Guinea, São Jorge da Mina, Benin and parts of Central Africa, such as the Kingdom of Kongo. These voyages were supported by advances in navigational science and a growing imperial ideology, reinforced through diplomatic mechanisms including treaties, feitorias (trading posts), and ambassadorial exchanges.

The framework presented here equips the reader with the knowledge required to interpret the political, commercial, cultural, and technological exchanges that are explored in the subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter 2: The Genesis of the Encounter (c. 1485 - c. 1539)**

### **2.1. First Contact and Early Diplomacy**

What mutual interests and strategic considerations led to the successful establishment of early diplomatic relations between the Benin Kingdom and Portugal? As Ruffini (2017) explains, diplomacy entails the actions through which a state promotes and defends its interests and values in its interactions with other states, typically through negotiation and dialogue rather than through the use of force. Diplomacy refers to the conduct of dialogue, negotiation, and formal representation in relations between sovereign states (Ruffini 2017, 6). In early interactions between Portugal and the Kingdom of Benin, this entailed the mutual representation of each polity in the other's sphere of influence.

Galvão (1555/1731) notes the arrival of one Rui de Sequeira, who reached the Kingdom of Benin in 1472 in the course of exploratory ventures associated with the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe (Galvão 1555/1731, 25). This visit occurred during the latter part of Oba Ewuare's reign. Despite the significance of Sequeira's mission, it did not immediately result in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Portugal and Benin. It was the subsequent arrival of João Afonso de Aveiro c.1485 during the reign of Oba Ozolua (c.1480–1504) that sustained contact and a more structured diplomatic relationship began to emerge.

João Afonso de Aveiro was received by Oba Ozolua with courtesy and protocol fitting a foreign envoy. The Edo monarch, known for his military prowess and strategic leadership, recognised the opportunity for long-distance trade and diplomatic advantage in his engagement with Portugal. Oba Ozolua granted Afonso de Aveiro an audience at his court, during which gifts were exchanged and discussions held regarding possible trade relations and missionary activities. The Oba expressed interest in acquiring foreign goods, particularly brass and copper, in exchange for pepper, and ivory (Ediagbonya 2015).

Oba Ozolua responded to this encounter by sending an Edo ambassador named Ohen Okun to Portugal. The ambassador was a man from a seaport named Ughoton, a man of good knowledge and good judgment (Ediagbonya 2015, 209). This act was emblematic of Benin's

early diplomatic strategy: initiating reciprocity and mutual engagement through formal representation. His journey to Portugal, likely in the late 1480s or early 1490s, marks one of the earliest known instances of a West African emissary received by a European monarch.

Ohen Okun—often described as a man of good speech with great public speaking skills, carried symbolic and political weight, representing political interests of the Benin court. Good public speaking skills can be linked with persuasion and also important for a diplomat in order to be able to achieve a state's interest. Kurbalija (2013) notes that since the ancient times when representatives of tribes at war tried to arrange for a truce with endless discussions and negotiations, the common aim of diplomacy has always been persuasion. The better a diplomat is at persuading, the more successful they will be at furthering the cause they represent (Kurbalija 2013, 16).

In Portugal, Ohen Okun was well received by the Portuguese monarch. Resende (1553/1902, 148) maintains that many festivities were held for the Edo ambassador. This enthusiastic reception and festivities extended to the Edo ambassador can be interpreted as a deliberate and strategic effort by the Portuguese court to demonstrate respect for the Benin Kingdom. This was a clear signal of their intent to forge a significant alliance with a powerful new African ally. Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) maintain that Ohen Okun's mission to Lisbon was a success, he spoke eloquently well when he was received at the court in Lisbon, he informed them enormously about Benin (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 111).

Barros (1552/1920) notes that among many things Dom João II learned from the ambassador was the existence of a powerful ruler in the East called the **Ogané**. Among the pagan princes of the regions surrounding Benin, the Ogané was held in a position of authority similar to that of the Supreme Pontiffs. According to tradition, when a new Oba came to power, ancient custom required the sending of ambassadors with a grand gift to notify the Ogané of the predecessor's death and the new ruler's succession. The Obas looked to this **sovereign** for formal confirmation. As a sign of this approval, the Ogané would send a staff and a brass headdress—resembling a Spanish helmet—to serve as a scepter and crown. He also provided a brass cross to be worn around the neck as a holy object, similar to those worn by the commanders of the Order of St. John (Barros 1552/1920, 40).

Resende (1553/1902) maintains that Ohen Okun had brought gifts to the king and the king honourably sent him in a good caravel, and upon departure he granted him rich clothing for him and his wife, and other things (Resende 1553/1902, 148).

In premodern times there were many hardships when a state tried to maintain relations with other states. Due to the absence of rapid communication and reliable transportation, diplomatic engagement required considerable time, planning, and negotiation. The agency of sovereign rulers, kings, emperors, and queens was thus indispensable in initiating and sustaining these early transcontinental exchanges, often under arduous and uncertain conditions. Murray (1855), and Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) aptly describe the difficulties of early international relations. These challenges were acutely felt in the nascent diplomatic ties between the Benin Kingdom and Portugal. The immense geographical distance and technological limitations of the era meant that a single diplomatic exchange could take months, if not a year or more (Murray 1855, 2; Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 108).

**Challenges of Long-Distance Communication made it Complex.** The journey by sea from Lisbon to the Bight of Benin was fraught with danger. Ships had to navigate treacherous coastlines, unpredictable weather, and the ever-present threat of piracy. A single letter from the Portuguese court to the Oba could take several months to reach its destination. The return journey, with the ambassador's response, would take just as long. This lengthy communication loop made real-time negotiation and rapid diplomatic responses virtually impossible. The long periods between messages probably left room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, as both sides operated with limited knowledge of the other's culture and intentions.

Murray (1855) notes that during the early ages, communication between different states was rare and not important in times of peace. Similarly as Aisién and Oriakhi (2013), Murray (1855) highlights that the difficulty and dangers of moving from one place to the other and the uncertainties that one could meet on the road—all contributed to dissuade relations between states (Murray 1855, 2).

The exchange of gifts between the Portuguese and the Benin monarchs played a central role in initiating and solidifying diplomatic relations and commercial alliance. The Oba of Benin reciprocated the offerings of the Portuguese with gifts of great value, reflecting a mutual recognition of status and respect. In intercultural contexts, the giving and receiving of gifts often function as a universal form of communication—one that transcends language barriers and

fosters mutual understanding and alliance-building. This practice served not only as a gesture of goodwill but also as a diplomatic tool that facilitated the establishment of trade and broader political engagement.

Significantly, no evidence suggests the use of coercion or military force during this early phase of contact, hence highlighting the essentially diplomatic nature of Portugal's initial engagement with the Benin Kingdom.

## **2.2. Material Culture and Gift Diplomacy**

Gift diplomacy is the use of gifts to establish or strengthen the relationship between both groups of people and governments. The biblical narrative recounts that during Queen Sheba's visit to King Solomon, she presented him with a wealth of distinguished gifts, a hundred and twenty talents of gold, a very great quantity of spices, and precious stones. King Solomon gave Queen Sheba all that she desired, *1 Kings* 10:10 (The Holy Bible 1952, 308). The story of Queen Sheba illustrates the significant role of gift-giving in strengthening diplomatic relations and securing desired outcomes. This practice, deeply rooted in tradition, has been adopted by monarchs and governments across cultures. When leaders present valuable gifts during official visits, it is often a strategic gesture symbolising respect, goodwill, and a calculated expectation of reciprocal benefit or alliance.

Metzig (2016) argues that objects played a key role in the establishment of intercultural diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal in the 15th century. The author highlights that the exchange of gifts between both kingdoms helped to overcome cultural differences and gain trust. The Portuguese came with coral beads and scarlet wool clothes. These exotic goods were uncommon to Benin and could have aroused curiosity and interest of the locals. The Edo appeared to demonstrate considerable respect and admiration for the imported European goods. The author highlights the reputation of European items in Benin, and how these objects could serve not only as bribes but a nonverbal communication tool which could cool relations between both groups (Metzig 2016, 32).

As Metzig (2016) observes, the Portuguese, arriving at African ports from a distinct cultural and linguistic background, could not initially communicate effectively with the local

populations, as their language was unfamiliar to the hosts. However, this linguistic barrier was mitigated through the exchange of gifts, which served as a symbolic medium of communication and goodwill. Metzsig (2016) notes that the Portuguese gave gifts to the Oba and other dignitaries in order to facilitate their ability to trade. The Oba decided a trading volume depending on the value and quantity of gifts received (Metzsig 2016, 35).

Hence, the Portuguese were compelled to observe the formal protocols of the Oba's palace prior to advancing their commercial and missionary objectives, demonstrating that the Edo did not perceive them as autonomous actors with inherent authority to operate independently of the Oba's sanction. The ritualised exchange of gifts, through which the Portuguese monarch ostensibly engaged the Benin ruler, further underscores that these interactions were structured around **negotiated diplomacy and strategic economic alliance**, rather than unilateral or colonial ambitions. Collectively, these practices reflect a sophisticated system of intercultural engagement in which political authority, ceremonial protocol, and trade were inseparably intertwined.

In 1505, Dom Manuel I presented Oba Esigie (c. 1504 – 1547) with a caparisoned horse, richly adorned with silks, linens, caps, hoods, and coral beads, as part of a diplomatic exchange. This gesture symbolised aristocratic status, power, and reciprocity in the early Benin–Portuguese relations. The horse was highly significant given Benin's historical scarcity of equines due to environmental constraints like tsetse fly–infected terrain. Thus, the gift was both pragmatic and symbolic, reinforcing diplomatic ties through ceremonial grandeur and courtly prestige. As a material source from African historiography, attached below is a piece of artwork that commemorates the Oba on a horseback. The artwork could be found in the British Museum.

The depiction of the Oba on horseback in this artwork is not merely ornamental but constitutes a visual narrative of significant historical events and royal activities in the Benin Kingdom. Such representations served as a medium through which important happenings—whether political, military, or ceremonial—were memorialised and transmitted, thereby embedding the history of the kingdom within its artistic traditions. Barbara Plankensteiner (2007; 2010) discusses equestrian imagery—including the Oba on horseback—in the context of court rituals and royal symbolism in *Benin: Kings and Rituals*, particularly noting

the connection to Oba Esigie, the first ruler known to appear on horseback (Plankensteiner 2007, 448-450; Plankensteiner 2010, 16)



*Image 1. Equestrian figure; lost-wax cast in brass. Male figure wearing elaborate feathered headdress with upright finial (see Figure IV 2, Appendix IV).*

*Source: The British Museum*

[figure | British Museum](#)

In the artwork, one could see a man believed to be Oba Esigie seated on a horse, his headpiece, lavishly adorned with parrot feathers—this demonstrates meticulous craftsmanship and a high regard for naturalistic detailing. Seated with regal composure atop his horse, the rider conveys grace, energy, and poise—qualities that are mirrored in the noble bearing of the equine.

While the Oba received the gift and rode on the horse, the horse could have later died likely due to tsetse fly infestation. Moreover, the humid environment of Benin could have made it difficult to sustain horses since tropical climates with high humidity and heat pose significant challenges to sustaining horses (McKeever 2001). In regards to the adornments on the horse, while they were primarily ceremonial and decorative (e.g., coral beads, silk coverings), it's possible they also offered limited protection against insect bites—though they were not specifically designed to guard against tsetse flies, whose bites often penetrate even thick coverings.

These diplomatic exchanges, particularly the mutual offering of gifts, strengthens the argument of this thesis indicating that the interaction between the two polities was not characterised as that between a superior European kingdom and primitive African kingdom, but rather by mutual recognition and negotiation of interests. Given the rarity of horses in Benin, the gift of a horse was highly significant and conferred notable prestige upon the Oba. Riding on horseback in the Portuguese world could have been associated with power and nobility, hence the Oba was to ride on the horse possibly as an **intercultural exchange** showing the prestige which the Portuguese monarch had towards the Oba.

In the 16th-century in Portugal, horseback riding was a profound symbol of status, power, and nobility, deeply embedded in the social and military fabric. It was central to aristocratic education, military might, and cultural events like tournaments, reflecting the nation's values and social hierarchy. In the previous century, **Dom Duarte I** (1431) had written *Livro da ensinança de bem cavalgar toda sela* (**The Book of Horsemanship**). This work addressed the principles and methods of horsemanship and remained a cornerstone of noble equestrian culture.

Further evidence of great esteem the Portuguese monarch had towards the Oba could be seen in the respectful language tone used to address him in the opening of his royal correspondence. In the letter of Dom Manuel I to the Oba of Benin, dated 20-11-1514, the

Portuguese King Dom Manuel I starts the letter by addressing the Oba of Benin, Oba Esigie as “powerful” and “noble”

*Poderoso e nobre Rey de Beny. Nos Dom Manuell per graça de Deus Rey de Purtugall, e dos Allgarues, daqueem e dallem mar, em Africa, Senhor de Guinee e da conquista, nauegação, comércio de Etiopia, Arabia, Persya e da Imdia,...*  
(Brásio 1954, 4: 88)

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

Powerful and noble King of Benin. We, Dom Manuel I, by the grace of God, King of Portugal and the Algarves, both on land and at sea, in Africa, Lord of Guinea and the conquest, navigation, and trade with Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India...

An analysis of the tone suggests a relationship of mutual respect, pointing to an interaction between the two monarchs that was framed in terms of relative equality rather than hierarchical subordination.

Other gifts as noted by Metzsig (2016) include; "a necklace of Indian beads as well as high quality textiles and clothes, including a marlota short cloak made of orange taffeta and white satin, six linen shirts and one piece of blue Indian silk" (Metzsig 2016, 36). Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) note that the Portuguese monarch also sent several variables to Benin including a catholic catechism (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 112).

The King of Benin Oba Esigie **reciprocated** the Portuguese monarch’s gestures by sending gifts of his own, including a bronze cross frequently cited by art historians. Benin historian Egharevba (1934/ 1968) notes that the Oba, having encouraged the art of bronze casting, sent such a cross to the King of Portugal (Egharevba 1934/1968, 28; Gunsch 2018, 5).

The Portuguese monarch, Dom Manuel I, could have regarded the cross not merely as an artistic object but as a powerful symbol representing his two primary goals in Africa: establishing trade and spreading Christianity. The gift suggested that the Oba of Benin was not a pagan ruler, but one who was open to European religious influence, which the Portuguese saw as a major success in their search for the fabled Christian kingdom of **Prester John**. The cross,

therefore, served as a tangible sign of a successful diplomatic and religious mission, legitimising Portugal's expansion and trade efforts in the region.

While the Palace of the Oba served as a place where the Portuguese were received and negotiations were made, the port Ughoton served as the place where trade items were exchanged. Gifts played an important role in improving diplomatic ties between Portugal and Benin, facilitating trade that contributed significantly to the prosperity of both kingdoms. Hence, one could say that trade and diplomacy were the mutual interests and strategic considerations which led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between both entities. The next subheading will address early trade exchange between the Edo and Portuguese.

### **2.3. Trade Diplomacy**

What was the nature of the early trade relationship as controlled by the Oba in Early Edo-Portuguese relations?

Trade diplomacy is a specialised form of international relations where commerce is not merely an end in itself but is strategically used as a tool to achieve broader political, military, and economic objectives (Wayne 2019). It involves a complex interplay of negotiation, persuasion, and the cultivation of alliances, often through the exchange of goods and technology. Its distinction from simple commerce is that the value of the exchange extends beyond the monetary, encompassing strategic leverage and the enhancement of a state's international standing.

The relationship between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal was characterised not by passive commerce, but by active and often tense trade diplomacy. This exchange serves as a seminal case study in pre-colonial West Africa of how trade was strategically leveraged by two sovereign powers to pursue divergent economic, political, and military objectives. The diplomatic interactions were fundamentally reciprocal, with both the Oba of Benin and the Portuguese crown engaging in negotiations, persuasion, and the cultivation of alliances to secure their respective interests.

This section examines the principal commodities exchanged between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It critically examines the trade

items which were exchanged in local markets, in both polities, highlighting the structural transformations they introduced, as well as the continuities that persisted within each society's economic and sociopolitical framework.

### **The Diplomatic Framework of Exchange**

Trade was the primary vehicle for diplomacy. The Benin court, under the absolute authority of the Oba, maintained a sophisticated and formalised diplomatic protocol. The Oba controlled all contact with foreigners, and trade was conducted through royal agents (Ryder 1977). The Portuguese, in turn, were represented by official envoys, including traders and missionaries, who were tasked with negotiating access to markets and influencing local policy. The establishment of this structured framework underscores that the relationship was not merely a transactional exchange but a strategic interaction between two distinct political entities (Ryder 1977).

The reciprocity of this diplomacy was evident in the mutual attempts at persuasion. The Portuguese offered a direct route to European markets and access to coveted goods, while simultaneously using the promise of advanced military technology, particularly firearms, as a powerful incentive for religious and political concessions. The Oba, however, was a skilled negotiator. He responded with his own form of diplomacy, dispatching ambassadors to Lisbon to directly engage with the Portuguese monarch (Aisién & Oriakhi 2013, 112). This move was a clear demonstration of Benin's political skill and its desire to operate on an equal footing. It allowed Benin to present its own terms, bypassing intermediaries and directly appealing for the goods it most desired. The Oba may have believed that sending representatives directly to Lisbon would produce more favorable outcomes in the negotiations over the firearms trade. This episode provides a useful entry point into the broader discussion of trade relations between Benin and Portugal.

## Trade

Scottish economist Adam Smith defined trade as a natural extension of the human ‘propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another’, a process through which individuals and nations **specialise** in what they produce best and exchange for mutual benefit. Smith argued that free trade, guided by this principle, increases efficiency and the wealth of nations (Smith 1776). In simple terms, one could say that trade involves exchanging with someone one item for another. Benin exchanged goods which they were good at producing in exchange for Portuguese goods. Similarly, Portugal traded goods they were skilled at producing or had in abundance, creating a mutually beneficial exchange. The exchange of commodities between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal can be broadly categorised into two groups: goods such as pepper, ivory, and enslaved individuals, which were highly sought after by the Portuguese; and brass manillas, textiles, and firearms, which held particular value for the Edo people. In order to clearly examine the nature of trade between the two polities, below is a table created with a detailed account of the commodities exchanged.

**Table 1. Imports and Exports to Benin Kingdom 1485-1539**

<b>Imports to Benin (from Portugal)</b>	<b>Exports from Benin (to Portugal)</b>
Brass & copper (manillas, bars, sheets) – used for Benin’s brass castings and as trade currency.	Pepper – important early export, highly valued in European markets.
Beads (coral and glass) – symbols of royal power and used in regalia.	Ivory – tusks and carved ivories highly prized in Europe.
Cowrie shells – imported via Portuguese Indian Ocean networks, later used as currency.	Enslaved people – supplied intermittently, especially from the 16th century onward.
Firearms & gunpowder – muskets/arquebuses introduced by the early 16th century.	

The table above illustrates the wide range of goods exchanged between the Benin Kingdom and Portuguese traders from 1485 to 1539, reflecting both economic and cultural interactions. Following the pattern of reciprocity, the further description of the section will present one import good from Portugal followed by one export good from Benin immediately.

### **2.3.1. Brass & copper (especially manillas, bars, and sheets)**

Brass and copper formed the essential metal base for Benin's sophisticated brass casting industry. Manillas, the horseshoe-shaped copper-alloy bracelets, served a dual purpose: they were both a primary form of trade currency and a raw material that could be melted down to produce the famous Benin Bronzes, including plaques, statues, and ceremonial objects. These metals were highly valued in the kingdom for both economic and artistic purposes, reflecting Benin's advanced metallurgical skills. Recent scientific analyses, including isotopic and compositional studies, have traced much of this brass back to Portuguese sources—demonstrating that European imports played a significant role in sustaining Benin's metalworking production from the 15th to 17th centuries (Metzig 2016). This trade not only supplied the materials for art and currency but also facilitated cultural and technological exchanges between West Africa and Europe.

The image below depicts a brass manilla, an object that played a significant role in West African trade networks from the 15th century onward. This particular example, housed at the Ashmolean Museum, exemplifies the intricate craftsmanship and standardised forms that facilitated its use as both currency and a medium of exchange in commercial and ceremonial contexts. The manilla's composition and design not only reflect local metallurgical knowledge but also the broader intercultural connections established through trade with European merchants. Unlike earlier manillas, which may have been locally produced prior to Portuguese contact, these imported brass manillas gained greater value and became widely used in trade exchanges between the Benin people, their neighboring societies, and European traders. They functioned as a key form of currency, particularly in the context of the slave trade (Pereira 1937, 72; Hogendorn & Johnson 1986; Law 2002)

Looking at the image of this manilla, it is interesting that when one flips it to the left, it resembles the Euro mark (€) without its equal sign (=) on the European common currency bank note (C). Apparently, there is no historic connection between the two (manilla and euro sign), however it was mere coincidence—and even very interesting coincidence because the manilla served as a currency for many economic transactions in West Africa, its image is linked to trade and economy. Similarly, the Euro sign € or image when represented entails its link to trade and economy.



*Image 2. Brass Manilla, horseshoe-shaped open bracelet (manilla) (see Figure IV 21, Appendix IV).*

*Source: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Brass Manilla, West Africa, accessed August 2025.*

### **2.3.2. Pepper in the Edo–Portuguese Trade**

Pepper was one of the earliest and most important exports from Benin in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It had high value and was highly prized in Portuguese and wider European markets for its culinary and preservative qualities. Portuguese traders obtained it in exchange for goods such as brass manillas, beads, and other imported items. Its significance in early Atlantic trade highlights Benin's role as a key supplier of valuable commodities during the 15th–17th century relations.

According to Ryder, the Oba maintained strict control over this commerce by requiring inhabitants to sell all surplus pepper to his royal factors, who alone were permitted to deal directly with the Portuguese. Ships from São Tomé and Príncipe could purchase pepper in the rivers, but always through this royal monopoly system (Ryder 1969, 38).

The spice was collected from the hinterlands and transported to the port at Ughoton, from where it entered Portuguese shipping routes. Between 1498 and 1505, the Portuguese factory at Antwerp was supplied annually with about seventy-five quintals of Benin pepper, underscoring its significance in Atlantic trade networks (Ryder 1969, 38).

More detail on the use of Benin pepper and its impact on Portuguese cuisine will be discussed in Chapter 3, under the subheading on agricultural exchange.

### **2.3.3. Beads (coral and glass)**

Beads, both coral and glass, were central to Benin's political and cultural life in the 15th–17th centuries. Coral, imported via Portuguese networks from the Mediterranean, symbolised royal authority and vitality, reserved for the Oba and elites in regalia such as crowns, collars, and chest ornaments. European glass beads, especially Venetian, also entered through Portuguese trade and were quickly integrated into existing bead economies; Benin had long exported cloth and *akori* beads to neighboring regions before the arrival of the Portuguese (Fage 1962, 344–345). The advent of the Portuguese beads hence was an exotic bead which supplemented/added to the already existing type of beads in Benin.

Crucially, West Africans reworked imported glass beads. As Fage notes, they “would break the glass beads into shorter pieces and grind the rough edges on stones... thus perhaps producing ‘ground-beads’” (Fage 1962, 344). This shows both an established beadworking tradition and African agency in transforming imports. Together, coral and glass beads reinforced elite display, royal ritual, and Benin’s integration into wider Atlantic trade, while also reflecting local innovation in reshaping foreign materials.

#### **2.3.4. Ivory in the Edo–Portuguese Trade**

Vogel (1988) notes that the first artefacts of ivory to be brought from West Africa to Europe, Portugal were brought during the last years of the 15th century. Import duties for the years 1504-05 at the port of Lisbon show that on eighteen occasions merchants paid tax on ivory spoons and salt cellars (Vogel 1988, 13). Ivory formed one of Benin’s most valued exports in the 15th–17th centuries. Duarte Pacheco Pereira notes in *Esmeraldo de situ orbis* that ivory was found “in abundance due to the many elephants” in the region (Pereira 1937, 72). European demand was strong, particularly for finely carved items such as saltcellars and spoons that circulated as luxury tableware. These items combined fine craftsmanship with exotic appeal, making them sought-after commodities for European elites. Horta et al. (2021, 16) maintain that the production and ownership of ivory materials as symbols of prestige was shared among elites in the Atlantic world.

Although direct testimony of Benin’s ivory trade in the sixteenth century is scarce, later records shed light on its structure. A British report from the 1890s, cited by Ryder, states that “half of the ivory went by custom to the Oba”, while the remainder was tightly regulated through religious and political restrictions (Ryder 1969, 273). The wording “*by custom*” suggests that this was not a recent innovation but a long-established practice, pointing to the Oba’s traditional monopoly over ivory. It is therefore reasonable to infer that, as with pepper, the Oba controlled both the collection and sale of ivory during the earlier Portuguese trade period.

This system ensured that ivory, like other key commodities, reinforced the Oba’s authority while serving as a major channel of exchange with Portuguese merchants. Below is a photograph of a half section of an ivory saltcellar housed at the Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon. Salt cellars like this one came to Lisbon during the early 16th century and could have been used

as a domestic tablewares. Araujo (2021) maintains that "Saltcellars were essential in their festive tableware and held a prominent position at feasts and grand receptions among the various luxury artefacts acquired by the great European noble houses" Araujo (2021, 238).

### **Half section saltcellar**



*Image 3 Half section of an Ivory saltcellar (see Figure IV 28, Appendix IV).*

*Source: Photograph was taken by the Author at Museo Nacional de arte Antiga Lisbon Portugal  
12th August 2023*

Manso et al. (2021) report that the 2016–2017 excavations at Campo das Cebolas in Lisbon uncovered five fragmented Afro-Portuguese ivory objects—a salt cellar, three spoon or fork handles, and an unidentified artefact—dating to the early 16th century. Campo das Cebolas was an area predominantly inhabited by nobles and members of the royal household during the 16th and 17th centuries (Manso et al. 2021, 673). The authors suggest that these artefacts provide

insight into the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they were used. They conclude that, rather than serving as decorative items, these objects functioned as everyday tableware in noble households (Manso et al. 2021, 542).

Thus, Manso et al. (2021) reinforce Araujo's assertion that ivory wares were primarily used by the nobles, highlighting how these luxury items served as markers of status and taste. Beyond their aesthetic and utilitarian value, the circulation of Benin ivory in Portugal illustrates the intertwined nature of trade and diplomacy: economic exchange was inseparable from social prestige and cross-cultural interaction. The presence of these goods in elite households demonstrates how diplomatic contacts and mercantile networks not only facilitated material trade but also influenced cultural practices and perceptions, creating a tangible link between Benin and Portuguese societies.

Ivory thus functioned both as a **valuable export commodity** and a marker of Benin's artistic sophistication, contributing to the kingdom's prominence in early Atlantic trade networks.

### **2.3.5. Cowrie shells (currency)**

In the early phase of Edo–Portuguese relations, the Oba of Benin maintained close control over external trade by regulating access to imported goods, including cowrie shells brought by the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean. Duarte Pacheco Pereira noted in the early 16th century that cowries were already used as money in Benin, with wealth measured by their possession (Pereira 1937, 72). This currency was not freely circulated but was integrated into the royal economy: cowries were collected, taxed, and redistributed by the Oba through his officials, ensuring that foreign imports reinforced his central authority. Thus, even as Portuguese networks introduced new trade items, the nature of the relationship was defined by the Oba's monopoly over circulation and exchange, a system that preserved his political dominance while linking Benin to wider commercial currents (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986)

Hogendorn & Johnson (1986, 18) maintain that when the Portuguese first reached Benin in the late fifteenth century, they encountered cowrie shells already in use as currency. From around 1515 onwards, Portuguese merchants began introducing the *moneta* cowrie from the Indian Ocean, which became increasingly widespread in West African trade networks (Hogendorn &

Johnson 1986, 19). Cowries served a dual function: they were valued for adornment as well as circulating as currency, and in later decades they became deeply embedded in exchanges, including the slave trade (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986, 19). From the late 16th–17th centuries, cowries (imported to West Africa via Portuguese routes from the Maldives) circulated widely on the Slave Coast, including the Bight of Benin (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986).

The cowries were important currency for trade just as manilas for Portuguese trade (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986, 30). They were lighter, smaller in shape making it easier for day to day trade. However the value of the cowries in comparison to the manilla was not the same, meaning that manilla was more valued. Law (2002) maintains that the exchange rates of manillas (iron bars) and cowries is not indicated, however, prices of slaves suggest that originally in the mid 17th century one iron bar was equivalent to 4000 cowries ( Law 2002, 50).

### **2.3.6. Enslaved People (The Rise of the Transatlantic slave trade)**

The Atlantic slave trade, also referred to as the triangular trade due to its geographic pattern, was a complex maritime network that connected three continents. Driven by the rising demand for labor from European powers, this system began the first step of journey with ships loaded with manufactured goods departing from Europe. Upon arriving at the coasts of West Africa, these vessels exchanged their cargo—which included manilas, textiles, firearms and alcohol—for enslaved people. The second step of the journey, known as the Middle Passage, involved the brutal and dehumanising transport of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to the Americas. The third step, in the New World, these individuals were exchanged for raw materials such as sugar, tobacco, cotton, and rum, which were then transported back to Europe. These raw materials were vital for European industries and fueled further economic expansion. This cyclical, three-part exchange gave the trade its distinctive triangular shape. The Portuguese were one of the first Europeans to start the Transatlantic slave trade. Rodriguez (1997) maintains that Portugal and Spain became aware of African slavery during the period of Moorish domination in Iberia. Subsequently, when the Portuguese began exploring the African coastline under the direction of Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador, they initiated trade of enslaved Africans (Rodriguez 1997, 16).

Recapitulating the question in this section of the thesis; what was the nature of the trade as controlled by the Oba ? The focus is on the shifting nature of this trade and the policies enacted by the Obas of the Benin Kingdom regarding the export of enslaved people. How did the Oba's policies and the kingdom's internal dynamics evolve in response to European demands, thereby highlighting the complex role of African agency in the broader Atlantic system.

The nature of the trade suggests that enslaved persons constituted a politically regulated and fluctuating aspect of Benin's early commerce with the Portuguese. According to Duarte Pacheco Pereira, Portuguese merchants in Benin could acquire captives for twelve to fifteen manillas each (Pereira 1937, 72). This account confirms the existence of a structured market and the prominence of manillas as a recognised medium of exchange. Such selective participation underscores the diplomatic dimension of Benin's trade regulation: the Oba sought to balance external economic engagement with Portuguese traders while safeguarding the kingdom's internal stability and political hierarchy. Thus, while the slave trade expanded elsewhere along the West African coast, in Benin it remained a carefully managed and politically mediated enterprise rather than an open or indiscriminate commerce (Ryder 1977).

The Oba exercised strict control over this trade and decided how and where the source of captives came from. While some slaves were obtained from wars and raids against neighbouring towns and kingdoms from the interior lands, other captives were from the Benin Kingdom. By 1516, markets for enslaved persons in Benin were separated by sex, and within a few years a ban on the export of male slaves was firmly established. According to Ryder, this prohibition persisted until the late seventeenth century, indicating a deliberate royal policy to conserve male manpower for the kingdom's military and economic needs (Ryder 1969, 45). This policy could be seen still active in place as noted among the trade exchanges in Dapper's description of Benin in the 17th century "*des femmes esclaves car ils ne veulnet pas vendre des hommes*" meaning female slaves because they do not want to sell male slaves (Dapper 1686, 310) Female slaves were more exchanged, alongside other goods such as pepper, ivory, and manillas.

The Oba's prerogative to determine the gender of captives surrendered for exchange serves as a potent signifier of his monopolistic control over regional commerce; such regulatory agency reaffirms his status as a formidable sovereign within an autonomous kingdom. Ryder (1977) and

Graham (1965) maintain that the sale of male and female slaves was split into two in order to manipulate trading conditions with the Europeans (Ryder 1977, 45; Graham 1965, 20). It is therefore important to acknowledge that, at various points in their engagement with European powers, African rulers such as the Oba of Benin actively exercised political agency and strategic authority in shaping the terms of intercultural relations. This policy of the Oba shaped both Portuguese priorities and the broader Edo–Portuguese diplomatic trade.

**The Shift in Portuguese Focus:** For Portuguese merchants driven by maximum profit, Benin became a less attractive trading partner. The Oba’s restrictions on both gender and quantity prompted the Portuguese to shift their primary slave-trading operations to other areas of Africa where rulers were willing to engage in a less controlled, higher-volume trade. Other African kingdoms with which Portugal traded were Kongo and Angola. These kingdoms were also less powerful compared to the Benin Kingdom and hence the Portuguese could use force to acquire their desired goal regarding slave trade. The shift of Portuguese strategic attention toward more profitable and accessible alternative supply zones for enslaved labour (notably Angola and Kongo) precipitated a quantifiable decline in bilateral commercial and diplomatic engagement with the Kingdom of Benin. Newiit (2005) argues that due to Obas unwillingness to export many slaves and ban on sale of male slaves, the trade between Benin and the Portuguese was a small-scale coastal trade (Newiit 2005, 52). This infers that slave trade with Benin did not last for a longer period of time.

**The Internal Impact on Kingdoms:** How did the increasing demand for slaves change the internal political and social structures of African kingdoms? Did it lead to the rise of new power centers or the collapse of existing ones?

The demand for enslaved people led to a surge in the acquisition of firearms from Europeans. Rulers who controlled access to these weapons gained a decisive military advantage, enabling them to conquer neighboring states and centralise power. This led to the rise of highly militarised states, like the Kingdom of Dahomey, where warfare and the capture of people became central to state policy and economic survival (Law 2002). Just as in Ancient Egypt, the military campaigns were an important source for the trade. Similarly in West Africa, the

transatlantic slave trade led to many military campaigns and wars in order to satisfy the demand for slaves to the buyers (Rodriguez 1997, 243).

Coastal states and rulers became powerful intermediaries. They controlled the flow of goods and people between European traders and the African interior, accumulating immense wealth and influence. This created a new political hierarchy where coastal rulers held disproportionate power over the inland kingdoms that supplied enslaved people. Law (2002) describes how coastal kingdoms like Allada, Whydah, and Dahomey gradually centralised power, monopolised trade with Europeans, and exercised control over interior tributaries and dependent kingdoms. This reinforced coastal dominance over inland zones.

The wealth generated by the slave trade created a new class of powerful elites. Their commercial success enabled them to consolidate political power and grow wealthy. Their wealth financed additional weapons, with which they subdued neighbours and extended political control. The Atlantic trade enhanced the warrior class, these individuals were often military commanders, and merchants, who amassed fortunes and challenged traditional social hierarchies based on lineage or spiritual authority (World Together 7, n.d.) Their power was directly tied to their ability to provide enslaved people to Europeans. The slave trade's relentless demand for human beings led to constant warfare, raids, and economic disruption, which contributed to the decline or outright collapse of many kingdoms (Northrup 1978; Nunn 2008).

Competition for control of trade routes and the need to acquire enslaved people for exchange led to frequent and destructive wars between rival kingdoms (Araujo 2025). These conflicts drained resources and manpower, weakening states and making them vulnerable to more powerful, militarised neighbors. While some states prospered, others saw their traditional economies—based on agriculture, local manufacturing, or internal trade—undermined. Communities that were frequently raided lost their population and were unable to sustain their agricultural base, leading to famine and social breakdown. These economic transformation were the long-term economic consequences of the slave trade on West African states (Nunn 2008; Araujo 2025).

In Benin, however, a selective participation highlights the diplomatic dimension of trade regulation: the Oba sought to balance external economic relations with Portuguese merchants while preserving the internal stability and power structures of Benin. Therefore, even as the slave trade grew more dominant in other parts of the West African coast, in Benin it stayed under strict control, shaped by political considerations rather than operating as a free-for-all market.

The Impact of the slave trade in Benin may not be a direct cause for the decline of the kingdom. Graham (1965) observes that the slave trade was only active for about thirty years after the opening of the Portuguese factory at Ughoton. Graham (1965) contends the widely held view that the expansion of the slave trade was the principal driver of depopulation and moral decline in Benin. While acknowledging that the slave trade exerted demographic and social pressures, he contends that the evidence does not definitively support it as the kingdom's chief cause of decline. Instead, Graham emphasises the significance of internal dynamics—such as political instability and economic challenges—as more decisive factors shaping Benin's transformation during the 17th and 18th centuries (Graham 1965). Whilst the influence of the transatlantic trade upon the Kingdom of Benin is undeniable, this study prioritises a framework of African agency to demonstrate that the Obas were not merely peripheral participants, but active architects who rigorously managed these commercial interactions to serve the crown's interests. At the same time, internal factors like political stability and economic management, combined with intercultural exchanges with Portugal, shaped Benin's development, highlighting a nuanced interplay between external pressures and indigenous governance.

### **2.3.7. Firearms and gunpowder**

The issue of firearms traded with Benin is highly controversial. Ryder (1977, 52) argues that the Portuguese mission to convert the Oba failed, and as a result, the crown did not send arms; Benin therefore had to smuggle weapons from São Tomé. Adiele (2017, 431) similarly notes that the mission was unsuccessful because the Oba refused baptism, leaving the missionaries disappointed. On the contrary, Roese and Smith (2000), document multiple references to cannons in Benin, indicating their use as early as in the 16th century, with Portuguese origins (Roese & Smith 2000, 110).

The depiction of Portuguese musketeers within Benin's artistic corpus, corroborated by the Oba's diplomatic correspondence, suggests that his persistent entreaties for firearms—leveraged by a calculated openness to baptism—successfully persuaded the Portuguese crown to provide weaponry, a concession ultimately solidified by his formal acceptance of Christianity. Ryder's conclusion that the mission failed and Benin received no weapons could be seen as somewhat hasty. When trade between the two kingdoms slowed down, the Oba sent a second delegation to Dom Manuel I of Portugal to revive relations. The ambassadors on this occasion were Dom Jorge and Dom António, both baptised Edo Christians (Aisién & Oriakhi 2013, 112). Ryder (1961, 234) likewise notes that Dom Jorge and Dom António were baptised Christians sent by the Oba to Portugal.

Oba Ozolua's mission also sought to reengage with the matter of Christianity and conversion, a strategic move viewed as crucial for obtaining arms from Portugal. Dom António and Dom Jorge endured an uncomfortable voyage and arrived in Lisbon in a poor state. While the ambassadors completed their mission, their success was only partial: the King of Portugal arranged for an envoy to accompany them back to Benin, bringing with them all necessary vestments, altar furnishings, and books. However, the king refused to provide arms, a decision explained in his letter to the Oba.

*...Vos fazemos saber que ouuimos Dom Jorge, vosso embaixador, em todo o que de vosa parte fallou, e muyto nos prouue com sua vynda a nos, pera por elle sabermos a booa vomtade que dizees que teemdes pera cousas de noso seruico. E recebeemos muyto prazer com todo o que de vosa vomtade nos dise...*

*E por tanto com muy booã vomtade vos emviamos os cleriguos que nos emviastes pidir; os quaeés leuã todas as cousas que sam neçesareas pera vos emsynare e asy vosas gemtes ao conheçimêto de nosa fee. E esperamos em noso Senhor que vos dará sua graça pera ho conhecerdes e nella vos salluardes — que as cousas deste mumdo todas pasam e as do outro duram pera seenpre. E muyto vos encomédamos que assy folguees de receber os emsynos da fee dos christãos, que tenhamos rezam de como Rey muyto nosso amigo fazeer. **Por que quamdo virmos que nas cousas da christymdade vos pohendes como boó e fiell christaão, nam averá cousa em nosos Regnos com que nam follgareernos de vos aproveitar, asy darmas, como bõbardas-e todas as outras cousas da guerra, pera cotra vossos jmigos, de que teemos tamtas como vos dirá Dom Jorge vosso embaixador.***

*As quaeés agora vos nam enviamos, como elle nos requereo, porque a ley de Deus nollo defeende emquamto estaeés...*(Brásio 1954, 4: 88).

The excerpt presented contains only the portions of Dom Manuel I's letter to the Oba of Benin that are directly relevant to this section of this study. It does not represent the full content of the original correspondence.

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

We let you know that we heard Dom Jorge, your ambassador, regarding everything communicated on your part, and we greatly appreciate his kindness to us; through him, we recognise the goodwill you express towards matters of our service. We receive much satisfaction from all that you have conveyed.

Accordingly, with great goodwill, we send the clerics you requested; they will convey all that is necessary to instruct you and your people in the knowledge of our faith. We hope in our Lord that He will grant you his grace to understand it and be saved therein — for all worldly things pass, while those of the other endure forever.

We also entrust to you that, should you receive the teachings of the Christian faith, we will consider you a good and faithful Christian; in that case, there will be nothing in our kingdoms that we will withhold from you. Likewise, we shall provide you with assistance in all other matters of war against your enemies, as many as Dom Jorge, your ambassador, can report. At present, we do not send these, as he requested, because God's law forbids it while you remain in your current state.

The Oba's expectation of securing Portuguese weaponry remained largely unfulfilled; this diplomatic impasse resulted in significant frustration, as the crown's strategic objectives were thwarted by Portuguese reluctance. From the Portuguese perspective, the viability and success of trade with Benin were closely tied to the kingdom's willingness to embrace Christianity. As a result, Dom Manuel I persistently urged the Oba to accept Christian doctrine. Although certain members of the Benin court reportedly converted, this partial compliance did not satisfy the Portuguese, who viewed the Oba's personal conversion as essential to solidifying both spiritual and diplomatic relations.

With all information above, yet one cannot say that there was never access to firearms and guns in Benin. The next Oba of Benin after Oba Ozolua was Oba Esigie. As seen earlier in this study, Oba Esigie sent a bronze cross to Dom Manuel I in reciprocity as a diplomatic gesture. Scholars widely accept that Oba Esigie was more open to the topic of Christianity. Aremu (2018) maintains that the mission of Christianity during the reign of Oba Esigie was a success. Oba Esigie had genuine interest in Christianity hence his son and two of his nobles were baptised and became Christians (Bradbury 1967 as cited in Aremu 2018, 85) Moreover, about four churches were built in Benin during the reign of Oba Esigie (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 112; Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020). It is convincing to suggest that with the missionaries sent to Benin and churches and schools built, for a short period of time, Portugal could have traded firearms with Benin. In other words Portugal could have let Benin have access to firearms having that Benin had fulfilled the condition for which the trade was allowed. The scenario indicates that this phase was brief, possibly concluding in 1539 when missionaries reported to the Portuguese monarch that the Oba's acceptance of Christianity was insincere and that he had reverted to idolatry. The art representation of these weapons show that the Benin artist could have had first hand experience observing the weapons. These material sources strengthen the hypothesis about the short period of Benin access to Portuguese firearms in trade.

Later in chapter 3 under **technological exchange**, the impact of the Portuguese firearms on the Benin Military will be discussed in more detail and argumentative way. It was important to highlight the nature of the firearms trade and what role the Oba played in trying to get the arms from Portugal.

In conclusion, the early trade relationship between Benin and Portugal was carefully managed by the Oba, reflecting both strategic control and diplomatic skills. By regulating access to valuable goods such as ivory, pepper, and later firearms, the Oba ensured that trade served the kingdom's political and economic interests rather than allowing foreign powers to dictate terms. This controlled engagement illustrates Benin's ability to balance commercial opportunities with sovereignty, setting a precedent for a trade diplomacy that was mutually beneficial yet firmly under the Oba's authority.

## 2.4. Religious diplomacy

How did Portuguese missionary zeal and the Benin Kingdom's own spiritual beliefs influence the nature and outcomes of their early diplomatic relations?

Religious diplomacy refers to the strategic use of religion, its institutions, and practices as a means of conducting international or intercultural relations. It involves the promotion, negotiation, or mediation of political objectives through religious language, missions, or conversions, often with the aim of securing alliances, expanding influence, or legitimising authority.

The Portuguese insistence on coupling religious engagement with their commercial and intercultural interactions in the Kingdom of Benin represents a clear instance of religious diplomacy, whereby spiritual and political objectives were strategically intertwined. This phenomenon played a critical role in shaping both the character and longevity of their bilateral relations. One of the main reasons why Portugal did insist on religion being first before other issues was due to Benin's interest in acquiring weapons.

The Benin Kingdom was primarily interested in acquiring Portuguese firearms to enhance its military strength. Portugal was not allowed by the Pope to give weapons to non-Christians, hence Portugal conditioned the supply of firearms on specific conditions that the people become Christians before getting access to the weapons. This condition is often linked to Portugal's broader religious and political agenda of the 16th century. It was Portuguese foreign policy by which many African kings had to embrace Christianity in order to negotiate for having firearms.

Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) maintain that "*The Portuguese foreign policy statement to Benin was: accept Christianity and have both guns and iron. Christianity therefore became a bargaining tool for Portugal in her diplomatic relations with Benin – a cultural foreign policy instrument*" (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 111). This foreign policy constituted a significant factor undermining Edo-Portuguese relations.

As discussed earlier in the section on Benin religion, the kingdom possessed an established spiritual framework in which the Oba was revered as a divine figure. Benin's cultural identity was long deeply intertwined with its indigenous religious beliefs and practices, making the acceptance of a foreign religion particularly challenging for its people.

It is important to emphasise that this situation differs from that of an atheist—someone who does not believe in any deity—who might be considered entirely devoid of engagement with spirituality or the concept of a supreme being. Although the Edo people already adhered to a system of belief, Portuguese missionaries nonetheless classified their religious practices as idolatrous and pagan.<sup>7</sup> The widespread classification of Benin religion as “pagan” reflects a deeply entrenched Eurocentric bias. Western sources focused on practices such as human sacrifice—particularly during royal funerals—as exemplified in the letters of Franciscan priests in 1539 and Dapper’s 1668 account. Hegel (1848) reinforced this perspective by contrasting African “magic,” which he claimed lacked a moral conception of God, with European notions of religion. Such portrayals contributed to the enduring perception of African traditional religions as primitive or godless, obscuring their complex spiritual and ethical systems.

The Oba was revered as a powerful, almost supernatural figure, and in some interpretations, even as a deity (Sheehan 1951). This perception was likely reinforced by his military successes and the extensive network of kingdoms under his control, leading his subjects to view their ruler—and what they venerated—not as subordinate or in need of replacement. It is plausible that members of the Benin court wondered why the Portuguese could not reciprocate by recognising or participating in Edo religious practices, including the veneration of their deities. The expectation that Benin should adopt foreign spiritual norms posed a significant challenge, as it implicitly questioned the Oba’s sacred authority as the ultimate mediator between the divine and his people.

Why should the Edo be compelled to abandon the ancestral traditions that had long sustained their greatness and legitimised their empire merely to secure friendship with a foreign power or to acquire weaponry? Equally, one might ask why the burden of religious accommodation was not placed upon the Portuguese. The letter from the franciscan missionaries to King **João** III 30 - 8 - 1539 supports the intuition that the Oba and his court could have asked these questions. In this letter, the missionaries complain of how they were put in a room with so many idols around them.

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<sup>7</sup> A broader term historically used by Christians (and sometimes Muslims) to describe religions outside the Abrahamic faiths. Idolatry is often considered a feature of pagan religions, but paganism can include beliefs that do not involve physical idols.

*“Pos nos per ospedes e casas getios co muytos idolos e feitçeiros e guardas sobre nós, dode todos pas per çima de nós, de noite e de dia..”* (Brásio 1953, 2: 80)

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

He placed us in houses full of idols and sorcerers, with guards over us, so that everyone remained close to us, night and day.

The Oba may have intentionally positioned the missionaries near the Benin idols in a gesture of **reciprocity**, either to encourage their exposure to his religion or to allow them firsthand experience of the rituals central to Benin’s religious practices. Portugal’s efforts to advance its religious norms through diplomatic channels encountered firm resistance, as the Edo people’s religion, deeply embedded within their cultural and traditional framework, could not be easily supplanted.

**It is difficult to supplant a community's religion particularly within a brief period.**

When cultural practices are deeply integrated with religious beliefs, individuals tend to preserve and carry their faith with them regardless of changing circumstances. Verger (1995) addresses some worship and cult practices of African traditional gods *Orishas* and *Vodouns* at former slave coasts in Africa and at Bahia in Brazil, the bay of all saints. In this publication Verger notes that these gods were brought by the Africans to Bahia during the slave trade (Verger 1995, 13).

Despite the brutal conditions of slavery, which deprived Africans of their freedom and forcibly transported them to the Americas, they carried with them their culture, traditions, and religion. How could enslaved individuals carry their religion when their hands and feet were bound in chains? The answer lies in the nature of religion itself—it encompasses spiritual and moral practices that are intangible, residing within the spirit and hearts of people. Therefore, religion could not be physically taken but was deeply ingrained and sustained internally just as culture. Their religion was embedded in their hearts and minds, and it was carried with them in spirit during their forced displacement. This underscores the idea that religion forms an integral part of a people's cultural identity, one that cannot be easily altered or abandoned, regardless of the conditions in which individuals find themselves.

Similarly to the Portuguese—who maintained their Christian practices both in the metropole and overseas as an intrinsic part of their heritage—the enslaved Africans taken from the West African coast to Brazil continued to uphold their own religious traditions. This

persistence underscores the deep-rooted nature of spiritual belief within a people's way of life. In the case of Benin, this cultural and spiritual resilience helps explain why the Oba found it difficult to fully embrace a new religion. Because the Oba was venerated as a divine figure within Benin's traditional cosmology, the acceptance of Christianity would have constituted a direct challenge to his spiritual authority and legitimacy.

Initially, the Obas of Benin did not consider Christianity a priority; their main concern was acquiring firearms. After several unsuccessful attempts to obtain weapons and iron from Portugal, the Oba and his court finally realised that such trade was impossible due to a prohibition imposed by the Papal Bull. Recognising this restriction, the Oba decided to comply with Portuguese conditions and therefore requested that missionaries be sent to Christianise his people. João de Barros's *A Primeira Década da Ásia* (as cited in Brásio 1952, 1:53) notes that the Oba of Benin had asked the Portuguese crown for missionaries, and these were duly dispatched. Barros, however, observed that the Oba's true intention was to gain power over his neighbouring states through Portuguese support, which ultimately caused the mission to fail.

*Rey de Benij mandou pedir a ElRey, que lhe mandasse lá Sacerdotes pera o doutrinarem em Fé...*

*Mas como ElRey de Benij era mui subjecto a suas idolatrias, e mais pedia a os Sacerdotes por se fazer poderoso contra seus vizinhos com favor nosso, que com desejo de Baptismo, aproveitaram mui pouco os Ministros delle, que lhe ElRey lá mandou (Brásio 1952, 1: 53).*

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

The King of Benin requested that the King send priests to instruct him in the faith. However, as the King of Benin remained strongly attached to his idolatrous practices, and sought the priests primarily to strengthen his position against his neighbors through our favor rather than from a genuine desire for baptism, he made little use of the missionaries sent by the King of Portugal.

The King of Benin remained deeply devoted to his traditional religion and cultural practices—described by the Portuguese as idolatrous. Observing the Oba's steadfast adherence to his beliefs, the Portuguese concluded that his invitation to missionaries stemmed from political

motives rather than a sincere interest in conversion. This created deep mistrust. The Portuguese questioned why a ruler who had refused Christianity for so long was suddenly inviting missionaries, leading them to view his request as a dishonest trick to get weapons.

This thesis, adopting an African-centred perspective on Euro-African encounters, contends that the Oba's request for missionaries should be understood not through the lens of European assumptions, but as a deliberate component of Benin's broader political strategy aimed at safeguarding the kingdom's sovereignty and asserting African agency. At that moment, inviting missionaries was the only viable option for the Oba. Rather than interpreting this as planned deception intended to obtain weapons and iron, it should be understood in light of the earlier discussion in this subheading on **the difficulty of changing deeply held religious beliefs**. Religion is a deep-rooted nature of spiritual belief within a people's way of life. The Oba did not really try to take advantage of the Portuguese in order to have weapons and defeat his enemies, he was faced with the reality of difficulties as in the examples made earlier with the slaves and with Portuguese themselves.

The Papal Bull prevented Portugal from fulfilling Benin's request, and with limited alternatives available, the Oba's decision to invite missionaries became a strategic means of safeguarding the kingdom's sovereignty while still pursuing his primary objective. Before continuing this argument and addressing a counter argument it is important to look at the Papal Bull in detail.

### **Papal bull (Sale of arms to only Christian kingdoms)**

A papal bull was an official decree issued by the Pope, sealed with a lead bulla (hence the name "bull"). In the late medieval and early modern periods, papal bulls carried immense authority in Christendom, shaping political, religious, and even economic relations. In the context of Portugal and Benin, papal bulls—especially those issued in the 15th century—granted Portugal rights over newly "discovered" lands, sanctioned Christian missionary activity, and regulated the trade of goods, including weapons, with non-Christian peoples such as Benin. For example:

**Dum Diversas (1452)** and **Romanus Pontifex (1455)**, issued by Pope Nicholas V— these bulls authorised Portugal to conquer and subjugate non-Christians, monopolise trade along the African coast, and restricted the sale of arms to “infidels.” The bull effectively gave Portugal both a spiritual justification and a legal monopoly over trade and expansion in Africa, including the right to decide under what conditions weapons could be sold. Crucially, *Romanus Pontifex* and *Dum Diversas* both confirmed Portugal’s monopoly and carved out (and limited) commerce with non-Christians by prohibiting the export of war materials “iron instruments, wood for construction ...arms” to Muslims and pagans without a royal license (Davenport 1917, 1: 12). And who whoever infringed the bull were to be faced with penalties (*Romanus Pontifex* 1455)

Therefore it was clear that both papal bulls, particularly *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), established that arms and military supplies should not be provided to non-Christians, effectively ensuring that non-Christian rulers would not gain a strategic advantage over Christian powers. Moreover, Portugal selling weapons to Benin before conversion meant that Portugal was going to face the penalties for infringing the instructions. Adiele (2017) maintains that this policy created a direct link between religious conversion and access to Portuguese weapons, making baptism a prerequisite for receiving military support (Adiele 2017, 429). West African monarchs including those of Asante, Benin, Dahomey, and Senegambia who sought Portuguese guns and gunpowder to defend against rivals or Islamic incursions were therefore often compelled to adopt Christianity as part of these agreements (Adiele 2017).

Baptism became not only a religious act but also a diplomatic instrument: some kings negotiated to be baptised alongside their subjects, integrating the ritual into formal diplomatic exchanges. This arrangement illustrates how Portuguese religious diplomacy was intertwined with military and political strategy, using conversion as a mechanism to secure both allegiance and access to arms, while reinforcing the broader objectives of European expansion in West Africa (*Romanus Pontifex* 1455; Adiele 2017, 429).

Ward (2000, 201) maintains that, for many African kings, baptism functioned primarily as a diplomatic gesture rather than a genuine religious commitment. Similarly, Benjamin (2009) notes that even when the Oba permitted his son and selected chiefs to undergo conversion, this was insufficient in the eyes of the Portuguese, as they insisted that the Oba himself be baptised to

legitimise the process fully. This posed a serious challenge to the Oba since he is considered a god himself.

Recapitulating the hypothesis, **Benin's refusal to convert to Christianity stemmed from the inherent difficulties of altering its deeply rooted religious system.** As Benin's cultural practices were profoundly intertwined with its traditional beliefs, it would have been impossible for the Oba to genuinely embrace the new faith, even if he had wished to do so. What may appear as resistance to Christianity among African kings was often strategic diplomacy rather than a genuine attempt to mock or reject the new religion.

The case of the Kingdom of Kongo serves as a vital counter-argument; here, the Portuguese were largely satisfied with the king's conversion. This case suggests that Benin's resistance to Christianity cannot be explained simply by the idea that religious beliefs are too deep-rooted to change, especially as other African rulers successfully adopted the faith.

Dunbar highlights that in the Kingdom of Kongo, King Nzinga embraced Christianity, adopting the Christian name João I in honor of the Portuguese monarch João II. Nzinga also raised his son and heir as a Christian, and upon ascending the throne, he declared Christianity the official religion of the state and renamed the capital São Salvador (Dunbar 2022, 208). These examples illustrate how selective acceptance of Christianity by African rulers could serve both diplomatic and political objectives, enhancing alliances with European powers while consolidating internal authority.

Dunbar (2022) observes that Kongo's acceptance of Christianity functioned as 'a ticket into the Western political and economic world,' serving as a necessary step to gain the trust and benefits of European powers. In practice, this strategy enabled the Kingdom of Kongo to cultivate stronger relations with Portugal than Benin did. Although the Oba of Benin accepted Christianity, he did not change his name or adopt a Christian name, and while his subjects could convert to Christianity, Christianity was not declared the state religion of Benin. This contrast highlights the differing approaches of African kingdoms to European diplomatic and religious pressure. While Kongo leveraged conversion for political and economic advantage, Benin maintained greater cultural and religious autonomy (Dunbar 2022, 208).

Kongo's acceptance of Christianity was more appealing to the Portuguese; however, as Dunbar notes, the Kongolese interpreted the new faith through the familiar framework of African spirituality, resulting in a syncretic blend of religious practices. This hybrid form of Christianity

demonstrates that, for many Africans, religious observances are deeply intertwined with cultural identity, making it difficult to separate people entirely from their traditional practices. By integrating Christian rituals with local customs, the Kongolese—and other African groups—were able to meet European expectations while retaining essential elements of their cultural heritage (Dunbar 2022, 208).

The image below depicts a material source that illustrates the Kingdom of Kongo's engagement with Christianity: a bronze crucifix carved during the 16th century. Although it has been noted that Oba Esigie of Benin sent a bronze cross to the King of Portugal, such instances appear to have been exceptional, and crucifixes were rarely produced by Benin artists. In contrast, in Kongo, these bronze crucifixes were more frequently created by local artists, which explains their prevalence in collections today.



*Image 4. Crucifix: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art (see Figure IV 19, Appendix IV).*

Source: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

The Metropolitan Museum of Art maintains that Kongo crucifixes merged Christian symbolism with traditional Kongo cosmology, turning the cross into a spiritual conduit rooted in local beliefs. Artists reinterpreted European models, giving Christ Africanised features and flattened limbs. In 1491, King Nzinga's conversion to Christianity strengthened ties not only with Portugal but also with the Vatican, enabling Kongo rulers to join an international community of leaders while synthesising Christianity with indigenous spiritual traditions rather than abandoning their own beliefs (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999).

Kongo was able to engage with Christianity in a more compelling way, because their approach was carefully managed, blending Christian practices with traditional beliefs to create a hybrid system. However, the fact that Kongo did not entirely abandon its indigenous traditions reinforces the hypothesis that these beliefs were deeply rooted and could not be easily displaced.

Moreover, Kongo was a smaller polity when compared with Benin. Benin's resistance to the new faith also reflected its sovereign identity and political autonomy. As a larger, powerful imperial state with considerable military strength, the Oba was not easily influenced by foreign powers to adopt great transformative changes. Benin's reluctance or inability to meet European expectations regarding Christianity gradually weakened diplomatic engagement, undermining trust and commitment in Edo-Portuguese relations (Ediagbonya 2015, 207; Ryder 1977, 48-51). The Oba's adherence to traditional belief systems and rituals, in which he was revered as a divine figure, made full religious transformation incompatible with the kingdom's ideological foundations (Ryder 1977, 50). Consequently, missionaries faced growing resistance, and the Portuguese failed to secure a lasting religious or political presence in Benin, as evidenced by the Franciscan missionaries' letters to Dom João III in 1539.

In conclusion, the Portuguese missionary zeal and the Benin Kingdom's spiritual beliefs shaped the early diplomatic relationship in profound ways. While the Portuguese sought to extend their religious and political influence, Benin's adherence to its own spiritual and cultural framework created significant boundaries to foreign intervention. This dynamic led to limited success for missionary efforts and reinforced Benin's sovereignty, demonstrating that diplomacy

in this period was as much about negotiating belief systems as it was about political or economic interests. This situation underscores the limits of early European influence and sets the stage for examining the kingdom's approach to trade diplomacy with Portugal.

## **Chapter Summary**

This section has critically examined the formal commencement of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal in 1485, emphasising the strategic and reciprocal nature of the engagement. Rather than a colonial imposition, the relationship was grounded in calculated diplomatic exchange and mutual commercial interests. Diplomacy in this context was addressed in three interrelated forms. **Material diplomacy** was expressed through the circulation of prestige items, which functioned not only as commodities but as symbolic tokens of authority and connection. **Trade diplomacy** involved direct negotiation and regulation, with the Oba controlling key exports such as pepper, ivory, and enslaved persons, and setting the terms under which Portuguese merchants could operate. **Religious diplomacy** was pursued through the negotiations around Christianity and baptism, in which spiritual conversion was closely tied to access to European military resources, particularly firearms. By exploring these mechanisms of negotiation, the formulation of policy, and the structure of diplomatic dialogue, the section underscores the agency of both parties and frames their interaction as a deliberate and sovereign undertaking within the broader context of early modern interstate relations.

This section challenges the view that the Oba's actions were a deliberate strategy to obtain weapons. Rather than adhering to this widely accepted Eurocentric interpretation, it argues from an African perspective that Benin's poor response to Christianity reflected the deeply embedded role of religion in daily life and the enduring strength of cultural traditions, which could not easily be abandoned or altered. Even in Kongo, where conversion seemed more successful, Christianity was adapted through existing traditions, showing that old beliefs were not abandoned completely but blended with the new faith.

## Chapter 3: The Intercultural Exchange in Practice

### 3. 1. Artistic culture exchange

The contact between the Benin Kingdom and Portugal in the late 15th and early 16th centuries gave rise to a striking material and aesthetic synthesis, particularly visible in the arts of the Edo court. The integration of foreign symbols and materials—most notably Portuguese figures, religious iconography, and brass manillas into Benin’s visual culture marked a dynamic and deliberate process of intercultural translation, whereby foreign forms were appropriated, re-contextualised, and assimilated within indigenous frameworks of meaning.

One of the most visible manifestations of this interplay is the representation of Portuguese soldiers, merchants, and missionaries in Benin’s bronze plaques and ivory carvings, many of which were produced between the late 15th and 17th centuries. These figures, often identifiable by their distinct European attire, long coats, ruffled collars, boots, and firearms—appear alongside Benin dignitaries, leopards, and court officials, occupying visual space within sacred and political narratives. Far from being passive records of foreign contact, these representations were curated by the Edo court to emphasise the Oba’s capacity to engage with and incorporate foreign power.

Underlying these iconographic exchanges was a crucial material foundation: **brass manillas** — already mentioned in the previous chapter — they are horseshoe-shaped objects used by the Portuguese as a form of currency and trade medium. As documented in the correspondence of Portuguese traders and confirmed by archaeological finds, manillas were one of the most consistently traded items from the late 15th century onward. Their value in Benin extended beyond commerce. The raw brass from manillas was melted down and reworked by Edo bronze casters—organised under the royal guild system—into commemorative heads, plaques, and ritual objects used in ancestral altars and palace shrines (Dark 1973). The material thus acquired both spiritual and political significance, reinforcing the authority of the Oba and the continuity of dynastic memory.

The increased availability of brass through intercultural exchange fundamentally altered the material economy of Benin’s artistic production. Prior to Portuguese contact, the kingdom’s

metalwork relied upon local sources or trans-Saharan copper—evidence from Medieval West Africa confirms the existence of advanced copper-alloy casting as early as the 9th or 10th centuries (Shaw 1970). The significance of copper in precolonial Africa was multidimensional, as it integrated economic, political, and spiritual life rather than serving purely utilitarian or decorative functions (Herbert 1984).

Portuguese imports vastly increased the quantity and accessibility of brass, allowing for a flourishing of large-scale sculpture and increased standardisation within court art. Yet, despite this influx, the technical and symbolic conventions of Edo metalwork remained indigenous (Odiahi 2017). The Benin Kingdom's guild of bronze casters (*Igun Eronmwòṅ*) preserved indigenous lost-wax casting techniques and produced artworks that recorded history, served ritual purposes, and ensured continuity across generations (Odiahi 2017).

In sum, the artistic and material interplay between Benin and Portugal was not characterised by one-sided cultural diffusion but by reciprocal reconfiguration. Portuguese forms and materials were appropriated, transformed, and embedded into Edo symbolic systems, thereby reinforcing rather than undermining local sovereignty and identity. The intercultural dynamic was thus neither wholly absorptive nor resistant, but one of creative negotiation, where art served as both a medium of power and a record of contact.

This section presents a critical art-historical analysis of selected works produced between the 15th and 17th centuries, focusing on the visual and material manifestations of cultural hybridity resulting from the sustained contact between the Kingdom of Benin and the Portuguese crown. Through close formal and iconographic examination, the study aims to uncover how cross-cultural exchange shaped artistic production and symbolic representation within the Benin court. Finally, the section addresses the longstanding question of why Afro-Portuguese pieces display striking similarities.

### **I. Queen Mother Iyoba Idia Ivory Mask:**

The term *Iyoba* refers to a queen or queen mother in Edo society and denotes a highly esteemed female title within the political and ritual hierarchy of the Benin Kingdom. According to Kaplan (1993), the first to bear this title was **Iyoba Idia**, the mother of **Oba Esigie**, who reigned from 1504 to 1547 CE (Kaplan 1993, 76). Her elevation marked a significant turning point in the institutionalisation of female political authority at the Benin court.

The ivory mask of Queen Mother Idia—now housed in institutions such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Seattle Art Museum—is widely regarded as one of the most iconic masterpieces of Benin court art (Kaplan 1993, 77). Produced in the early 16th century, likely under the patronage of Oba Esigie, the mask served both as a commemorative portrait and as a potent emblem of state ideology. It honors Idia not only as the king's mother but as a powerful political and military actor in her own right. Idia is remembered in Edo oral tradition as the first woman to lead an army into battle, wielding both martial and mystical power to secure her son's position during the Idah War (Kaplan 1993, 76).

Kaplan (1993) further emphasises that "the iconography of court art and works identified with Idia frequently invoke the Portuguese who, like Idia, contributed to the expansion of the kingdom under Esigie and its wealth" (Kaplan 1993, 76). This parallel underscores her instrumental role in Benin's territorial and economic expansion during a period marked by increasing foreign contact and internal consolidation.

Carved from ivory—a material reserved for the most elite courtly commissions—the mask exemplifies the technical brilliance and symbolic sophistication of Benin royal art. The face is rendered with serene, idealised features typical of Benin portraiture and is marked by **scarification patterns** on the forehead, likely identifying her lineage and spiritual status. Below the chin are **bands of coral beads**, symbolic of royal authority and divine investiture. These coral regalia also signal Benin's participation in maritime trade networks, particularly those facilitated by Portuguese contact.

The headdress and crown of the mask are adorned with **stylised mudfish** and **bearded Portuguese heads**. The **mudfish**, a liminal creature capable of living both in water and on land, has long served in Edo cosmology as a symbol of the Oba's dual nature—both mortal and divine. According to the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, “because the Portuguese live both on land and in the water, mudfish represent the king's dual nature as human and divine. The Portuguese, having come from across the seas, were considered denizens of the spirit realm who brought wealth and power to the Oba” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2023). This belief was shaped by the Portuguese's arrival by sea, an act that, to Edo observers, linked them to the **spirit world** and the **maritime realm**. Their frequent presence along the coast and command of seafaring technologies positioned them in the Benin imagination as extraordinary, even supernatural beings.

The inlaid metal elements—often copper or iron—within the eyes and facial features of the mask heighten its visual intensity and spiritual resonance. These details may also allude to Ogun, the deity of war and iron, further reinforcing Idia's association with both martial prowess and mystical protection.

While the mask was not designed to be worn in the conventional sense, it likely functioned as a ceremonial pendant displayed during royal rituals, including the Ugie Iyoba festival, which celebrated the role of the Queen Mother. As such, it operated not only as a visual expression of dynastic continuity but also as a political instrument affirming the divine right of the Oba and the legitimacy of his maternal lineage.

In sum, the ivory mask of Queen Mother Idia stands as a monumental object of imperial representation, embodying themes of political strategy, gendered power, and cross-cultural encounter. Its iconography illustrates the deep entanglement between indigenous beliefs and external influences, offering compelling insight into how Benin artists localised foreign elements within a distinctively Edo visual language. The mask remains a powerful material witness to the aesthetic, spiritual, and political complexity of 16th-century Benin (see Figure IV 22, Appendix IV).

## II. Plaque with Portuguese Traders and Manillas

This brass plaque, dated to the mid-16th century, originates from the royal court of Benin (in present-day Nigeria) and is attributed to the highly skilled brass-casting guild known as the *Ìgùn Èrònwòṅ*. With dimensions measuring approximately 18 inches in height, 7¾ inches in width, and 1 inch in depth (45.7 × 19.7 × 2.5 cm), the work is classified as a metal sculpture and is currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, having entered the collection as a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls in 1991 (Ezra 1992, 145).

This richly cast plaque depicts Portuguese figures holding manillas—metallic, bracelet-like objects made primarily of copper, bronze, or brass. Manillas functioned as a form of proto-currency and became a central medium of exchange in West African commerce. Hence, their inclusion in Benin's court art—especially in the hands of the Portuguese—denotes not only commercial exchange but also the symbolic projection of foreign wealth and power within the Benin Kingdom (Araújo 2021, 243).

The figures in the plaque exhibit distinctly European physiognomy and attire: pronounced aquiline noses, beards, moustaches, long flowing hair, and elaborately styled clothing, all characteristic of Portuguese mercantile elites of the time. These physical and sartorial markers serve to distinguish the figures as foreigners, likely Portuguese traders, and contribute to the broader iconography of power, authority, and external engagement in Benin's visual lexicon. Ezra (1992) contextualises the plaque within the Perls Collection, highlighting its significance as part of a corpus of royal court artworks that reflected and documented Benin's diplomatic and commercial encounters with Europeans.

As Araújo (2021) explains, the use of manillas in Edo society extended beyond mere economic utility; they functioned as social markers and ceremonial objects, often associated with wealth, status, and ritual. By depicting Portuguese merchants holding manillas, the artwork not only reinforces the foreigners' role as agents of economic transformation but also subtly asserts the Oba's control over these foreign interactions by encoding them into royal iconography. This integration of European elements into Benin's court art exemplifies a broader intercultural dialogue mediated through visual culture and underscores the strategic role of artistic production

in negotiating political and economic power during the early modern period (see Figure IV 11, Appendix IV).

### III Seated Portuguese Figure

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This brass figure, currently housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, originates from the Kingdom of Benin (in present-day Edo State, Nigeria) and is dated to the 15th–16th century. Measuring approximately  $4\frac{7}{8}$  inches (12.4 cm) in height, it is a fine example of Benin court sculpture from the early period of sustained contact with Europe. As Ezra (1992) notes, the figure forms part of the Perls Collection and was donated to the museum by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls in 1991.

The figure depicts a male Portuguese visitor to the Benin Kingdom during the era of early contact. He is portrayed seated on a square platform, adorned in elaborate 16th-century European dress—comprising a brimmed hat, buttoned doublet with flared shoulders, patterned sleeves, a ruffled collar, breeches, and boots. The representation of the facial features—such as the long, beak-like nose, flowing hair, moustache, and beard—clearly marks him as European, more specifically Portuguese, given the stylistic and historical context.

Notably, the figure's seated posture carries symbolic weight within Edo cultural codes of hospitality and hierarchy. In traditional Benin society, offering a seat to a visitor is a gesture of welcome, dignity, and respect—akin to the modern phrase "have a seat," which conveys acceptance and hospitality. By representing the Portuguese in this manner, the artwork not only identifies them through their attire and physical traits but also signals the esteem in which they were initially held. This early treatment is corroborated by the correspondence of Portuguese official Duarte Pires to Dom Manuel I of Portugal 1516, who affirmed the warm reception and honorable treatment afforded to Portuguese visitors at the Benin court.

*“Rey de Beny(m), é muito grande verdade, porque el Rey de Beny(m) quer bem a quem lhe dyz bem de uosa alteza e deseja de ser muito uoso aamigo e numqua fala em que outra sena em cousas de noso Senhor e asy toma tam grande prazer e todos os seus fjdalgos e suas gentes, o qual uosa alteza o **saberá cedo e o bem que nos faz o Rey de Benj(m) e por amor de uosa alteza; e asy nos cata mujta***

*onra e nos poem a comer com o seu filho à mesa e nenhuma cousa do seu paço nos ná esconde, sena tudo as portas abertas...” (Pires 1516/1952, 369)*

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

The King of Benin is truly good, because he loves those who speak well of Your Highness and wishes to be a very good friend. He never speaks about anything other than matters concerning our Lord, and thus takes great pleasure in our company, as do all his nobles and his people. Your Highness will soon learn the good that the King of Benin does for us, motivated by love for Your Highness. He honours us greatly, invites us to dine with his son at his table, and hides nothing from us in his palace, keeping all doors open.

Duarte Pires noted the **favour** shown by the King of Benin, “the king honours us greatly and invites us to dine with his son at his table, and hides nothing from us in his palace, but keeps all doors open. Thus, the sculpture serves both as an ethnographic portrait of a European foreigner and as a cultural document encoding how the Benin Kingdom perceived and engaged with the Portuguese. Their depiction in fine clothing, seated in a composed and honored position, reflects the kingdom’s recognition of the Portuguese as significant diplomatic and commercial guests during the 15th and 16th centuries. This visual language, mediated through brass artistry, underscores the Oba's sovereign control over external relations while also celebrating the civility and structure of Benin’s courtly decorum in its dealings with foreign emissaries (see Figure IV 3, Appendix IV).

**IV Brass Figure of a Portuguese Soldier holding a Musket**

This brass figure of a Portuguese soldier, dated to the late 16th or early 17th century, is attributed to the Edo brass-casting guild and originates from the Court of Benin. It is part of the British Museum collection (Object no. Af1928,0112.1) and stands approximately 37.5 cm tall. Cast using the lost-wax method, the sculpture exemplifies Benin’s technical excellence in bronze work and reflects how foreign presence was visually interpreted and localised in court art.

The figure portrays a European soldier bearing distinct Portuguese features: a long, beak-like nose, curled hair, a moustache, and a beard. He is shown holding a musket, a symbol of

European technology at the time. His dress consists of a plumed hat, doublet, puffed sleeves, breeches, and boots—elements characteristic of 16th-century European military attire.

This representation not only demonstrates the Benin court's familiarity with Portuguese appearance and material culture, but also how these elements were integrated into local visual language. The inclusion of the musket underscores the impression such objects made on the Benin elite, reflecting the kingdom's awareness of foreign technology and the power it signified.

The sculpture does not merely document an encounter but interprets it through Benin's own artistic and cultural lens, capturing how the Portuguese were both observed and represented as part of a broader imperial narrative within the kingdom's visual culture (see Figure IV 4, Appendix IV).

#### **V. Saltcellar with Portuguese figures 15h -16th century**

This intricately carved ivory saltcellar, attributed to the Edo artist known as the *Master of the Heraldic Ship*, represents one of the most telling visual documents of Benin's early contact with the Portuguese. Produced between the early to late 16th century, it features four standing European figures, dressed in characteristic 16th-century attire—doublets, puffed sleeves, breeches, and wide-brimmed hats. The central figure is particularly notable for wearing a Christian cross pendant and holding a sword and spear, surrounded by two attendants rendered in profile. The object is currently housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession No. 1972.63a, b).

The iconography reveals important intercultural themes central to this thesis. First, the presence of the cross signifies an acknowledgment of the Portuguese as Christian emissaries, resonating with historical records of missionary intentions in Benin (Pires 1516). The sword and spear, though martial in appearance, are not depicted in a threatening posture, but rather as symbols of prestige, reflecting the high status accorded to early Portuguese visitors. The seated posture seen in other works, as well as the composure of these figures, suggests deference and respect, consistent with documented Benin diplomatic protocols during this period.

Moreover, as Araujo (2021) and Kaplan (1993) argue, objects such as this saltcellar—produced for Portuguese patrons but carved by Edo artists—demonstrate a hybrid

visual language. They reflect how Benin interpreted and reframed the Portuguese presence, simultaneously affirming local artistic agency while catering to European tastes. This saltcellar thus offers an exceptional case of material diplomacy, where religious symbols, trade relationships, and representational aesthetics coalesce into a singular art form rooted in mutual recognition.

It is generally more convincing to identify the represented figures as Portuguese rather than Dutch, English, or French, primarily due to the period in which the artworks were created. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish sustained contact with Benin in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—the very era when these depictions of foreigners first appeared. While other European nations became active in the region from the late sixteenth century onwards, several stylistic details strongly support a Portuguese identification. The high-crowned hats, puffed sleeves, long tunics, and the presence of crossbows or early muskets are characteristic of late fifteenth to early sixteenth-century Iberian soldiers. Similarly, the figures' beards and hairstyles reflect Portuguese fashions of the period. The inclusion of cross pendants further reinforces this interpretation, given the Portuguese emphasis on missionary activity during that time (see Figure IV 26, Appendix IV).

## **VI. Pendant: Portuguese Horseman**

The Portuguese equestrian pendant is a notable example of Benin's artistic response to early European contact. Crafted between the 16th and 19th centuries, this brass pendant depicts a mounted Portuguese horseman, reflecting the Benin Kingdom's engagement with European traders and mercenaries during the Age of Exploration (The Metropolitan Museum of Art n.d.). The piece was likely produced by the royal brass-casting guild, *Ìgùn Èrọnmwọ̀n*, using the lost-wax casting technique, a method that allowed for intricate detailing and dynamic forms (The British Museum n.d.).

The pendant's design features a European rider adorned in attire indicative of Portuguese influence, such as a broad-brimmed hat and a fitted tunic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art n.d.). This attire suggests direct observation of Portuguese individuals in the region. The

horseman is depicted in an equestrian posture, a motif that holds significant symbolic meaning in Benin art, representing martial prowess and divine kingship. By integrating a foreign figure into this indigenous symbolic context, the pendant illustrates how the Benin court appropriated European elements to reinforce its own political and ideological narratives (The British Museum n.d.).

The material used for the pendant, brass, was imported into the Benin Kingdom, often in the form of manillas—through Portuguese trade (The Metropolitan Museum of Art n.d.). The pendant, therefore, serves not only as a piece of artistic expression but also as a testament to the Benin Kingdom's diplomatic and economic interactions with European powers during the early modern period (The Museum Journal n.d.). Such pendants commemorated the Oba's control over external alliances and the cosmopolitan breadth of his court (Ezra 1992) (see Figure IV 16, Appendix IV).

### **VII Portuguese Figure with Crossbow (British Museum)**

This plaque shows a Portuguese with a crossbow in one hand and a dead bird in his other hand. Curnow (2021) suggests that in the Idah war when the Oba had ordered the Oro bird to be shot down, it was a Portuguese who shot the bird down (Curnow 2021, 149). The man is identified as Portuguese by his clothing and facial features, long hair, thin nose, and bearded chin. The clothes appear like those of the 16th century, the Portuguese figure is wearing a jacket without sleeves, also known as Jerkin.

Bloshka's 16th Century tag, an online educational resource on historical household habits and customs, describes the jerkin as a short, close-fitting, sleeveless jacket worn by men over the doublet during the 16th and 17th centuries. Functioning as outerwear, jerkins were typically constructed from durable or warm materials such as leather and velvet (Bloshka n.d.). Doublet is an outer garment for the upper body worn over a shirt. One could see that the clothing appears like a skirt but also known as a gown. Nuun (1984), maintains that until the early 16th century the doublet was an undergarment rather like a modern waistcoat, from the mid 16th century the doublet was an outer garment, tight fitting to a very narrow waist—buttoned down the front,

from a high collar developing skirts of different length like as short to the hips or more, (Nuun 1984).

Such details of 16th century European customs may have been incorporated into these bronze artworks as a result of Edo–Portuguese relations. These diplomatic and commercial interactions facilitated mutual awareness of each other’s cultural practices, enabling a reciprocal process of cultural exchange that is reflected in the artistic representations. Examining the plaque in greater detail, one observes that the figure is depicted with a short knife positioned at the waist, seemingly sheathed or integrated into the shield. The background is intricately decorated with stylised floral motifs, each comprising a triad of leaves, suggesting symbolic or aesthetic significance (see Figure IV 6, Appendix IV).

### **Cross-Cultural Currents: Afro-Portuguese Artistic Interactions**

The term Afro-Portuguese ivories is ascribed to ivories of the cross-cultural artefacts of African origin with Portuguese features. It was first coined by William Fagg to show that the artwork is a collaborative art reflecting European and African cultures. Walker (2010) maintains that Afro-Portuguese art are cross-cultural carvings which show a mix of European and African motifs, where long-haired, sharp nose, jut-jawed Portuguese are represented (Walker 2010, 69). Wistreich & Fenlon (2019) maintain that the Afro-Portuguese horns always incorporate European images such as hunting scenes or fantastic unicorns, griffins or eagles-carried out in a West African or hybrid visual style (Wistreich & Fenlon 2019). Campbell (2019) observes that local Benin artisans adopted their carving traditions to the taste of what the Europeans wanted, ivory tableware, spoons, forks, beaded and braided imitations of the embellishments of Manueline architecture (Campbell 2019, 445).

As previously noted, Manso et al. (2021) and Araujo (2021) highlight that Afro-Portuguese ivory objects were both functional and prestigious, reflecting their integration into elite Portuguese households. Beyond utility, these artefacts illustrate a dynamic artistic exchange, whereby African craftsmanship was adapted to European tastes and social practices. Their circulation demonstrates a subtle but significant cross-cultural dialogue, revealing how trade and

diplomacy facilitated not only economic but also aesthetic and cultural interactions between Benin and Portugal.

The Afro-Portuguese artefacts could have at one point in history been regarded in Europe as being culturally of Portuguese origin and made in Portugal. Hence Foy (1900-1901) challenged the assumption of their Benin origin and defended that the artefacts were made in Portugal. Foy argued that the Luso-African artefacts were probably created in Portugal by some Africans under Portuguese supervision or they were created by the Portuguese themselves since the accuracy of inscription of coats of arms and other European emblems were too perfectly inscribed on the ivories (Foy, 1900–1901, as cited in Hart 2021, 123). Hart (2021) observes that the Afro-portuguese ivories has to be viewed in two distinct categories, the Beni-Portuguese ivories and the Sapi-Portuguese ivories also known as sherbo-portuguese. Amaral (2022) came up with the new term “Edo-Portuguese ivories” a variant for Beni-Portuguese because Edo is also the name of the Beni people — to more accurately reflect the cultural context of production of the historical Kingdom of Benin. Hence the artworks became also referred to as Edo-Portuguese instead of just Beni-Portuguese.

According to Harts (2021), Edo–Portuguese ivories reflect the carvers’ direct observation, in contrast to Sapi–Portuguese ivories, which appear to have been informed by European printed sources. This was because the Sapi-Portuguese works were mostly on oliphants, they represented images of which were most likely copied from European prayer books—some represented religious figures and the coat of arms. This strengthens the belief that the accuracy of inscription of these subjects were done for several hours by the artists. Hart (2021) expounded on the possibility of the copying of these images to have been done in Cabo Verde islands rather than in Sierra Leone. In Benin however the images depicted were rather of Portuguese men with their arms. This phenomenon distinguishes the artefacts of Benin from those of Sapi by the fact that the carvers were directly exposed to the images they inscribed on their artworks.

As Hart (2021) confirms, there is no doubt that the artworks are of Benin origin (Hart 2021, 127). The findings presented in this thesis align with and further substantiate this view. Following the question of the academic discourse/debate, “how has such strong family resemblance emerged among Afro-Portuguese artworks?” This resemblance/similarity of Afro-Portuguese artwork is noted by several authors, including (Bassani & Fagg 1988; Curnow

2021). Bassani & Fagg (1988) try to explain this resemblance by postulating the existence of an entire community of carvers who could have impacted the Yourubas. Hart (2021) identifies a critical empirical gap in this hypothesis, observing the complete absence of contemporary documentation to support it. Specifically, no extant records confirm the existence of a formalised community of carvers during this period. Consequently, this thesis suggests a more convincing hypothesis termed the *Portuguese patronage effect*, a more convincing explanation for the stylistic similarities observed in Afro-Portuguese artworks.

According to this hypothesis, the recurring features and visual motifs found across disparate works do not necessarily indicate that the artists collaborated directly or maintained contact with one another. Rather, these similarities can be attributed to the influence of Portuguese patrons, whose specific aesthetic preferences and functional requirements shaped the production of ivory, wood, and metal objects. The demands of the Portuguese market—ranging from tableware and devotional objects to decorative art—provided a framework within which local artisans in West Africa adapted their techniques and iconography, resulting in a recognisable “family resemblance” across artefacts.

As Ezra (1992) notes, from the 15th to the 16th centuries, ivory artworks were created specifically for the European market (Ezra 1992, 247). Hart maintains that it is logical to believe that the artworks may have been supervised by the Portuguese to ensure accuracy (Hart 2021, 135). Therefore, these facts suggest that the Portuguese played a significant role in the similarity or familial resemblance among Afro-Portuguese artefacts. Upon arriving in these African kingdoms, the Portuguese were fascinated by the local artwork and influenced its production by requesting the creation of certain artworks and cultural symbols. This contributed to the recognisable Afro-Portuguese resemblance. In this way, the *Portuguese patronage effect* highlights the central role of cross-cultural interaction and patronage in shaping artistic expression, demonstrating how external influences could unify stylistic outcomes without implying formal collaboration among the artists themselves.

The *Portuguese patronage effect* discussed here is a form of “reciprocal” influence rather than a one-sided exchange. As Bondarenko (1992) observes, “a culture realises itself through the prisms of others” (Bondarenko, 1992, 60). Portugal’s encounter with Africa enabled it to rediscover and define its own artistic identity, as elements of Portuguese art were reflected and

reinterpreted in African works, leading Portugal to a deeper understanding of itself and its art. The similarity of Luso-African artefacts is more convincingly explained by their shared connection to Portugal. Edo-Portuguese works often depicted Portuguese men and their weapons, while Sapi-Portuguese pieces featured the Portuguese coat of arms and Christian religious relics introduced by the Portuguese. These connections to Portugal are what justified the hybrid term “Afro-Portuguese artefacts.” While it cannot be said that African art directly influenced Portuguese art in general, it did provide Portugal with an expanded body of artworks associated with its name, contributing to the way Portugal is recognised in the world today.

Below are attached images to strengthen this argument, two ivory artefacts; one from Benin and one from Sierra Leone are presented. These artefacts, known as oliphants, include the Sapi-Portuguese oliphant featuring the Portuguese coat of arms and the Bini-Portuguese oliphant, of which both depict the coat of arms of Portugal. While notable differences exist—such as the Sapi-Portuguese oliphant’s whiter tone with animal motifs versus the milky coloration and human figures on the Bini-Portuguese oliphant—the primary similarities lie in the Portuguese coat of arms and the use of ivory as material. Without their shared connection to Portugal, these works would rarely be classified within the same category.



*Image 5: Benin Oliphant*

Source: Bassani & Fagg (1988, 158). *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in ivory*. Center for African Art; Prestel-Verlag (see Figure IV 24, Appendix IV).



*Image 6: Sapi-Portuguese rendering of Portuguese coat of arms on an oliphant*

*Source: Bassani & Fagg (1988, 114). Africa and the Renaissance: Art in ivory. Center for African Art; Prestel-Verlag. (see Figure IV 25, Appendix IV)*

Therefore, the *Portuguese patronage effect* helps to explain the resemblance between the two artworks. Rather than being coincidental, this similarity may be understood as an artistic example of the *reciprocal influence* that emerges when cultures come into sustained contact. In this context, interactions between Portugal, Benin, and Sierra Leone facilitated the exchange of artistic forms, materials, and symbolic elements.

The resulting artworks reflect this process of mutual engagement: while local traditions remained central, they were shaped in part by Portuguese presence and patronage, just as Portuguese artistic identity was, in turn, expanded through its encounters in West Africa. The Portuguese elements evident in these artefacts therefore contribute to their shared visual language and are key factors in their resemblance.

This phenomenon described here as the *Portuguese patronage effect*, supports the broader argument of reciprocity advanced in this thesis and helps to explain the family resemblance observable among artworks produced in West Africa during this period.

### 3.2. Linguistic Exchange

Which linguistic mediums facilitated diplomatic and commercial discourse between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal, and to what degree did language acquisition constitute a reciprocal process within this intercultural exchange? Elugbe and Omamor (1991, 5) note that in a first meeting between two communities, there is usually the creation of an underdeveloped language “pidgin language” to help them in communication. At the first formal meeting where Oba Ozoula received João Afonso de Aveiro at Benin court, the communication could have been done through a chain of translators in more languages or probably through pidgin Portuguese and Edo. The Portuguese would have relied on a translator who knew a coastal West African language, likely an Edoid language or a pidgin that had developed from earlier trade contacts.

The translator likely communicated with an interpreter from the Oba’s court who was fluent in Portuguese and in Bini (Edo), the language of the Benin court. This inference is supported by references to the use of interpreters in contemporary primary sources. In *The Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia*, Father Francisco Álvares, writing between 1520 and 1527, frequently refers to the use of interpreters in facilitating communication with local populations. One such interpreter, named Joam Gonzalvez, is mentioned repeatedly. As Álvares’s account illustrates, travellers operating in foreign polities required translators to mediate linguistic and cultural exchanges, and interpreters were therefore routinely requested to accompany diplomatic and missionary missions just as noted here. “*Then he began to talk to me about matters of our holy faith, he asked to bring apart with me two friars and our interpreter and the friar who conducted us as a third person*” (Álvares, 1540/1881, 135).

One could also insinuate that the Portuguese explorers and traders were in contact with local people in coastal West Africa and already became used to learning many vocabulary and even language while the latter struggled with Pidgin Portuguese. An Italian account preserved in Brásio (1954, 4:413) indicates that missionaries attempted to ensure the accuracy of African interpreters by asking Portuguese merchants proficient in local languages to confirm the translation.

*et cosi preghai alcune uolte ad alcuni mercadanti Portughessi che sappeuan benissimo la lingua loro, che con attentione ci ascoltassero la predica, et doppo all interprete, et hauendolo fatto mi rispossero che non manca una sola parolla haueua mutato ne scordatosi* (Brásio 1954, 4: 413)

**English translation (my own translation from the Italian):**

And so I asked some Portuguese merchants who knew their language very well to listen carefully to the sermon, and after the interpreter relayed it, they replied that he had not changed or forgotten a single word.

The translators were known as faladores (speakers, translators). Historical records confirm that Edo interpreters trained in São Tomé were employed in Benin-Portuguese diplomacy. These faladores would have served as the linguistic bridge constantly needed to help in communication (e.g., Aisién & Oriakhi 2013; Ryder, 1969).

Edo language was the main language spoken by the people of Benin Kingdom since its origin. After contact with Portuguese and due to the efforts of the Portuguese to evangelise and promote their culture, the Portuguese language was taught to the locals. The Obas Esigie and Orhogbua learned Portuguese, and could read and write in the Portuguese tongue (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 112). Missionary letters also attest to the instruction of the Benin elite. Duarte Pires' letter to Dom Manuel I, dated 20 October 1516, confirms that some sons and high-ranking nobles of the Benin elite received baptism and were taught to read and write. Since the missionaries were Portuguese, the language of instruction was likely Portuguese (Brásio 1952, 1:370).

Given prior experience of engaging with various African coastal societies, the Portuguese could have assumed the role of linguistic initiators in intercultural exchanges, teaching their language to facilitate diplomacy, evangelisation and trade. Therefore, when the Portuguese language became known in the Benin Kingdom, the use of words of Portuguese origin began to be incorporated into the Edo language as borrowed terms. The integration of foreign words into a language often occurs when concepts or objects do not exist in the local vocabulary, necessitating borrowing from other languages. This process is a natural aspect of human

linguistic and cultural interaction and continues to shape languages like English vocabulary shapes many languages today.

During the rise of Portugal and Spain in the 15th and 16th centuries, these European empires emerged as dominant global powers. In a manner comparable to the role of English in the contemporary world, facts suggest that Portuguese functioned as a global language and possibly language of science, technology, trade, and international communication. Historical documents, including correspondence, along with the influence of Portuguese on local languages and the continued use of Portuguese-based creoles, provide supporting evidence. As with global variations of English today, Portuguese developed regional forms across the Atlantic, including in the archipelagos of Cabo Verde, the Azores, Madeira, and São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as among communities engaged in trade and diplomatic relations with Portugal. This linguistic influence extended to local languages, contributing not only to the formation of Portuguese-based creoles, such as those in Guinea and Cabo Verde, but also shaping local languages like Edo and other African languages as they adopted Portuguese vocabulary.

Portuguese functioned as a lingua franca at the Port of Ughoton and throughout Benin, serving as the official language for communication with the Portuguese. This could be evidenced by letters exchanged between the Portuguese and Benin monarchs, which were originally written in Portuguese. Holm (1989, 270) notes that, since the 15th century, various Portuguese creoles had emerged along the African coast, serving as common languages for trade and communication. Consequently, many local languages in these communities were influenced by Portuguese, incorporating and borrowing vocabulary that became integrated into their linguistic systems. The people of Edo spoke a variety of Portuguese creole, reflecting the long-standing linguistic influence of Portugal on the region (Asemota 2015, 93).

The table below presents selected examples of Portuguese loanwords that were incorporated into the Edo language, demonstrating the linguistic influence resulting from trade, diplomacy, and cultural interactions.

**Table 2. Portuguese Loanwords in Edo Language**

<b>Edo</b>	<b>Português</b>	<b>English</b>
Èbilaosi	Blusa	Blouse
Èfákà	Faca	Knife
Èfenrhinyen	Farinha	Flour
Èkàpítè	Capitão	Captain
Èkófìè	Café	Coffee
Èkùyẹ	Colher	Spoon
Ètùhèrù	Tesouras	Scissors
Èviádó	Veador	Official inspector
Kpalava	Palavra	Word

(Imasuen 1998/1999, 44)

From the words presented in the table above, it can be observed that several Edo words begin with the vowel “È,” such as Èbilaosi, Èfákà, Èfenrhinyen and so on. These terms are all nouns, and the initial “È” represents a contraction of the definite article that typically precedes a noun in Edo grammar.

The transatlantic slave trade facilitated the movement of Edo-speaking individuals from Benin to São Tomé and Príncipe, leading to the incorporation of the Edo language into the local linguistic landscape. This integration significantly influenced the development of Portuguese-based creoles on the islands, notably Lung'Ie (Principense) and São Tomé Creole. Ladhams (2012) provides a comprehensive analysis, indicating that Edo contributed approximately 35% of the African lexical items in São Tomé Creole and 65% in Lung'Ie, with Yoruba contributing 6% and 10%, respectively. This substantial contribution underscores the Edo language's pivotal role in shaping the creole lexicon (Agostinho & Hyman 2021). The linguistic exchange between Edo and Portuguese speakers exemplifies a form of extended interculturality and reciprocity. Edo speakers not only imparted their linguistic elements to the creole languages

but also adapted to Portuguese linguistic structures, leading to a bidirectional flow of cultural and linguistic influences. This phenomenon highlights the dynamic interplay between languages and cultures in contact situations, where both parties contribute to and reshape the linguistic landscape. Imasuen (1998/1999) maintains that words from Edo, such as *inhame* and *èbábò*, entered the Portuguese language and continue to be in use today (Imasuen 1998/1999, 44).

### **Linguistic impact in Contemporary Nigeria**

Until the end of the 19th century, the people of Edo spoke Portuguese creole (Asemota 2015, 93). The Portuguese language also impacted **Nigerian Pidgin**, a contact language or creole which later developed in **southern Nigeria** as a primary means of communication. Nigerian Pidgin is composed of loanwords from Portuguese, French, English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, with English contributing the highest proportion at approximately 70 per cent. Ojaide and Ashuntan (2020) highlight the contributions of the Portuguese language to **Nigerian Pidgin** and note that it is the lingua franca of the Niger Delta. This influence can be identified as a remnant of the Portuguese legacy in Nigeria today.

### **Nigerian Pidgin English**

Nigerian Pidgin is a non-standard form of English incorporating words from other European and Nigerian languages; it is a variety used predominantly in southern Nigeria. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) note that Nigerian Pidgin cannot be simply defined in just a few sentences. "A pidgin is assumed to be some kind of a marginal language that arises to fulfil specific communication needs in well-defined circumstances (Elugbe and Omamor 1991, 45)

By the term marginal, it implies being minor or not a central language. It is some reduced or modified words and grammar of a main language used by locals for communication. Hall (1966) notes two conditions for a language to be considered a true pidgin; a reduced grammatical structure and vocabularies. Moreover, a pidgin is not native to those who use it. This means that the locals have their main language but use this reduced medium due to circumstances of the need of communication during encounters with other groups of different languages (Hall 1966, as cited in Elugbe & Omamor 1991). Nigeria is a multilingual country,

hence the need to use one common language during trade and other interactions becomes imperative.

The country has adopted English as an official language which is used in schools and offices. However, the local people who are not educated barely have the opportunity to learn English. These are mostly people who work in markets, bus stations, mechanic stores and others. Hence, for these people it becomes necessary to adopt the Nigerian Pidgin, since it is easier to learn. This population has used pidgin for so long that it is becoming native to the new generation. When pidgin becomes a native language of the community then it becomes creole language (Hall, 1966, as cited in Elugbe & Omamor, 45). Elugbe and Omamor (1991) maintain that Nigerian Pidgin is becoming creole language, in other words a native language or first language for the current generation of Nigerians in Warri and Sapele southern Nigeria (Elugbe & Omamor, 1991, 48).

Nigerian Pidgin is sometimes known as broken English, however, a broken English alone implies non-grammatically correct English or non-standard English language. This is different from pidgin because pidgin comprises more than one language. In the case of Nigerian Pidgin it is a pidgin for having the components of words from European and African languages; English, French, Portuguese, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo respectively. Odimegwu (2012) notes that most of the vocabularies of Nigerian Pidgin come from the English language, however, some words may not be easily recognised because some of the words are no longer in use in modern English or may have different meanings. The author highlights the participation of other European languages such as French, Portuguese and Spanish in the formation of Nigerian Pidgin vocabulary (Odimegwu 2012).

Examples of words from Portuguese vocabulary used in Nigerian Pidgin English are; **pequeno**, pikin - child, **sabe**, sabi-know, **das**, dash - give a present, **palavra**, palava - quarrel, issue (Odimegwu 2012; Elugbe & Omamor 1991, 48). Odimegwu (2012) notes on Spanish words such as chinch - bed bug derived from Spanish chinche and panya - a thing of inferior quality. In regard to French words boku - plenty, comes from the French beaucoup, and ju-ju - fetish which was coined from the French jujou toy or doll in French (Pinnock 1897, 40; Odimegwu 2012).

Words derived from major Nigerian languages, such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, include: from Hausa, *wayo* (tricks), *jara* (bonus) and *wahala* (problem); from Yoruba, *oya* (come on), *yeye* (worthless) and *oga* (master); and from Igbo, *okoro* (an Igbo person) and *una* (you plural) (Odimegwu 2012).

While words from Nigerian languages are generally retained in their original form, those borrowed from European languages frequently undergo modifications in spelling and meaning. This can obscure their origins, as the connection between their usage in Nigerian Pidgin and their original meaning in Portuguese or French is not always immediately evident. Examining these relationships, the changes and the resulting meanings provides a clearer understanding of their etymology and linguistic adaptation. A prominent example is the word **boku** (meaning 'many'), derived from the French *beaucoup*. It is used to express large quantities; for instance: "*food go boku for everybodi*" (there will be plenty of food for everyone). *Beaucoup* evolved into *boku* through the contraction of the vowel cluster "eau" to "o" and the simplification of "oup" to "u", hence *beaucoup* → *boku*.

A similar contraction of vowels applies to *juju*, where the French "ou" is reduced to a single "u", hence *joujou* becomes *juju*. Within African traditional religions, *juju* refers to a charm or spell. As these charms were often created in the form of small objects, the term was derived from the French *joujou* (toy), because the objects resembled playthings to European observers (Pinnock 1897, 40).

*Pikin* originated from the Portuguese *pequeno*. While *pequeno* functions as an adjective meaning 'small' in Portuguese, after being borrowed into Nigerian Pidgin, it underwent a semantic shift to become a noun meaning 'child'. The relationship between the two words stems from the association of childhood with smallness; thus, *pequeno* morphed into *pikin*. In this process, the vowels 'e' and 'ue' from *pequeno* were contracted into 'i', while the final vowel 'o' was elided to produce *pikin* (child). It is evident that, just as with the French examples discussed previously, the modifications occurred primarily within the vowels. This suggests that vowels are the phonetic elements most frequently affected when words are borrowed into Nigerian Pidgin.

*Dash* is derived from the Portuguese verb *dar* (to give). Specifically, it stems from the second-person singular conjugation *tu dás*. In European Portuguese, the terminal 's' is frequently

palatalised, resulting in a 'sh' sound ([ʃ]), unlike the 's' sound used in Brazilian Portuguese or standard English. This explains why the word *dás* was adopted into Nigerian Pidgin as *dash*, maintaining both the historical pronunciation and the meaning of giving or a gift. *Dash* functions as both a noun and a verb in Nigerian Pidgin. For example, in the phrase "*Na dash?*" (Is it a gift?), it serves as a noun. Conversely, in "*You dash am?*" (Did you give it to him?), it acts as a verb. Building on the discussions in Chapter 2 regarding gift exchanges between the Edo and the Portuguese, it is highly probable that the term *dash* was used extensively during these historical interactions to facilitate trade and diplomacy.

*Palava* (meaning quarrel or problem) is a common Nigerian Pidgin term—for instance, "*Na your own palava*" (It is your own problem). The word is clearly linked to the Portuguese *palavra* (word). This shift likely originated from the Portuguese expression *quero ter uma palavra contigo* ('I want to have a word with you'), which often implies a serious or contentious issue. Dictionary.com notes that this expression is from the late 1440s but no longer in use (Dictionary.com n.d.). The Collins English dictionary notes *palaver* as an argument, a trouble arising from an argument or loud confused talk. It is derived from the Portuguese *palavra-talk* from the Latin *parabola*, parable (Collins English Dictionary 2000, 1117).

The table below organises the examples into three columns: Nigerian Pidgin English, the corresponding standard English meaning, and the Portuguese translation.

**Table 3. Example Nigerian Pidgin Sentences and Meanings**

Nigerian Pidgin	English	Portuguese
Di man no sabi wetin you dey talk	The man doesn't know what you are talking about	O homem não sabe do que estás a dizer
You dash mi dis book?	Do you give me this book? / Are you giving me this book?	Dás-me este livro?
Oya vamos go your house	Come on, go to your house	Vamos, vai para tua casa

The table above illustrates sentence constructions in Nigerian Pidgin English that incorporate modified Portuguese and English words, exemplifying the contextual features of pidgin discussed earlier in this section. A marginal language or some reduced and modified words and grammar of a main language used by local people in communication. In the Nigerian Pidgin sentences given as examples in the table above, Portuguese and English words could be seen modified both in spelling and pronunciation. In the first sentence, “Di man” from English “The man” and “sabi” from Portuguese “sabe” represent this linguistic hybrid just as in the two other examples and many others.

The point highlighted here is that Benin’s contact with the Europeans in the 15th-17th centuries is responsible for this linguistic hybrid construction which the whole of Nigeria uses today, known as Nigerian Pidgin English. These words were introduced into the language of the local people during this period of history. Therefore, this language serves as a good example of a legacy that remembers Africa's relationship with Europe across the Atlantic ocean. Its combination of European languages; Portuguese, French, English and African languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba makes it stand out among other creoles or pidgins which are made of only two or fewer languages.

While Nigerian Pidgin English is a phenomenon of contemporary 21st-century Nigeria, and thus falls outside the 15th–17th-century temporal focus of this study, references to such modern legacies remain important. They allow for a broader understanding of historical continuities, illustrating how past cultural and linguistic interactions continue to influence present-day practices and the enduring impact of historical exchange networks.

### 3.3. Agricultural Exchange

The agricultural exchange between Benin Kingdom and Portugal during the early modern period exemplifies a dynamic form of intercultural interaction with profound consequences for local lifeways. As a direct outcome of transatlantic contact, new crops reshaped both food culture and agricultural practices in Benin Kingdom and Portugal respectively, leaving enduring marks on the socio-economic fabric of the kingdoms. Ediagbonya (2015) notes that trade relations with the Portuguese introduced crops such as sugarcane, bananas, maize, cassava, and pineapples to the Benin Kingdom (Ediagbonya 2015, 211). These foreign crops gradually became integrated into the local agricultural system and diet.

Ekeh (2016) further highlights the transformative impact of Atlantic commerce on Benin's foodways, particularly through the circulation of agricultural plants. Portuguese navigators and traders played a central role in these exchanges, moving crops intercontinentally: plantains and yams were transported from Africa to the Americas, while cassava, groundnuts, and maize were carried from the New World to West Africa (Ekeh 2016, 27). Odunlami & Oyenuga (2020), observed that tropical fruits such as coconuts, oranges, and pineapples were not only introduced but also successfully cultivated in Benin, becoming part of the everyday diet. This botanical assimilation was accompanied by linguistic adaptation, with local languages incorporating Portuguese loanwords to name some of these crops—terms such as *alimo* and *ediebo* are illustrative of this process of cultural-linguistic exchange (Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020, 152)

Maddison (2007) underscores the suitability of crops like cassava for African environments, noting its resilience to drought, pests, and poor soils. Cassava, introduced via Brazil in the early 16th century, became especially significant for its high yield and agricultural reliability (Maddison 2007, 221). Cassava in particular became integrated into local diets, where it is processed into garri, a staple food widely consumed across Nigeria and much of West Africa. Alpern (1992), in a critical revision of prevailing narratives, catalogues over seventy crops introduced to West Africa during the precolonial period—including Asian rice, sugarcane, peanuts, and guava—demonstrating the extent of botanical exchange facilitated not by colonial rule, but by earlier European maritime trade and cross-cultural contact. (Alpern 1992). Crosby's concept of *ecological imperialism* examines the transplantation of European flora and fauna into

newly encountered territories, highlighting both the environmental transformations and the consequent transmission of Old World diseases. While his framework recognises the benefits Europeans associated with introducing new crops, it foregrounds the ecological degradation and health crises these introductions often precipitated (Crosby 1986).

All these perspectives often overlook the reciprocal botanical and cultural exchanges across the Atlantic, including the transformative impacts that newly explored lands could have exerted upon Europe itself. Many studies fail to examine the preexisting sophistication of African agricultural systems, including those of the Benin Kingdom. These systems possessed indigenous ecological knowledge which may have, in turn, influenced European agrarian understandings and practices. Thus, agricultural exchange between Portugal and Benin was not a one-directional process of European imposition. Rather, it was part of a complex intercultural dialogue that reshaped the agrarian landscapes and food cultures on both sides of the Atlantic.

The present section of this study explores Africa's agricultural contribution to Europe—before addressing benefits of Portuguese contribution to Benin Kingdom's agricultural system. While scholarly focus has traditionally been on the introduction of Portuguese food crops to West Africa; What does a detailed analysis reveal about the arrival of Benin pepper in Portugal? How profoundly could Benin pepper have impacted the culinary landscape of Portugal? How did it offer an affordable and widely available alternative to the expensive black pepper monopolised by Asian trade routes?

### **Benin's Agricultural exports 1490s**

One of the earliest well known agricultural products to attract Portuguese interest was the **Benin pepper** (*Piper guineense*). In 1485, after João Afonso de Aveiro returned from Benin Kingdom with this long tailed pepper **Pimenta de rabo**, Galvão notes that it was the first of its kind to be seen in Portugal (Galvão 1555/1731, 25–26). Pepper was very important in Europe and sold at exorbitant prices—the advent of this pepper was like a breakthrough and could have been one of the main reasons that inspired the king of Portugal to want to establish a commercial relationship with the Benin Kingdom. Weiss (2002) notes that pepper was of great importance in Europe to season or preserve meats and to overcome the odours—peppercorns were very

expensive (Weiss 2002, 155). Godinho (1981, 145) maintains that due to their high cost, spices were consumed almost exclusively by the wealthy elite, despite a broader need for them. The widespread practice of slaughtering livestock in autumn and the spoilage of salted meats and fish required strong spices to make them palatable. As early as the 16th century, Portuguese texts, such as a "cooking treatise," document the use of spices like cloves, saffron, pepper, and ginger to season and preserve foods that would otherwise spoil or be inedible. Godinho's analysis demonstrates that spices were a crucial commodity not just for their exotic appeal, but as a practical necessity in medieval and early modern European cuisine.

Historical records indicate that pepper was a significant agricultural commodity of the kingdom, the Benin Kingdom was prosperous in its widespread cultivation and consumption of pepper (Ryder 1977). It was one of Benin's important commodities as both a domestic staple and a commodity of international interest. This indigenous crop was widely cultivated in the region's fertile soils and became one of the earliest African products exported to Europe, contributing to the spice trade and establishing Benin as a strategic trading partner. The popularity and success of Benin pepper was not accidental; it was the result of an already sophisticated agricultural system. Benin's farmers practiced intensive cultivation, managed seasonal cycles, and maintained well-organised local markets as well as cross regional trade which allowed for both subsistence and surplus production. Hopkins argues that West African agriculture, with origins in prehistoric times, was comparable in development to early agricultural centers like the Near East. During this period, the savanna was characterised by staple crops such as millet, rice, and fonio, whereas pepper, yams and palm oil formed the basis of subsistence in the forest regions. While contact with Europe played a significant role, there is strong evidence of an indigenous neolithic agricultural tradition in West Africa (Hopkins 1973, 29).

In addition to its agricultural and commercial significance, the terminology surrounding Benin pepper in historical sources requires careful clarification to avoid confusion with malagueta. Ficalho (1878, 16–17) notes that the term *malagueta* frequently appeared in texts from the 13th to 15th centuries but may have been misinterpreted by some writers. For example, Friar Odorico de Pordenone, who visited the East between 1320 and 1328, referred to a plant on the island of Java as *malagueta*, which was in fact cardamom rather than the pepper known by that name. This confusion helps explain the similarity between the substances and why the name

*malagueta* was later applied to the African pepper, mistakenly attributing an Asian name to an African product. Benin pepper is different from *malagueta* pepper, which originally referred to a different spice variety —often associated with the Guinea coast or the so-called grain of paradise *Aframomum melegueta* of the Zingiberaceae family. While *malagueta* became a generalised term during early European trade to describe several pungent spices, Benin pepper represents a local variety botanically classified as *piper Clusii* (Godinho 1981, 148).

Weiss (2002) maintains that botanically *malagueta* is known in English as melegueta pepper, or grains of paradise, in French as *malaguette*, in German as *malagettapfeffer*, in Spanish and Portuguese as *malagueta*, in Ghana, Twi as *famu wisa* and in Nigeria, Bini as *chie ado*. The classification of the genus *Aframomum* is still unclear, and numerous citations of specific species in existing literature may not be entirely accurate (Weiss 2002, 187). In the Edo language, the Edo (Benin) people refer to pepper as “Ekhien”, which is different from "chile" (Edofolks, n.d.). Godinho maintains that *Malagueta*, also known as Grains of Paradise, is a spice derived from the seeds of two species, *Aframomum Melegueta* and *Aframomum Granum-paradisi*, which were a crucial commodity in the early stages of this expansion (Godinho 1981, 148).

Villaud Bellefond argued that *malagueta* is originally a French word, coined because the French had identified the location where the spice was cultivated (Bellefond as cited in Ficalho, 1878, 18). Subsequently, the term came to be used for products from the African coast, including the grain of paradise. Moreover, the African populations themselves adopted the term *malagueta* through their interactions with the Portuguese (Ficalho 1878, 18).

After the formal establishment of trade relations between Portugal and the Benin Kingdom, more Benin pepper began to appear in Portugal in the late 15th century. Duarte Pacheco Pereira provides evidence that Benin pepper was a primary economic incentive for Portuguese merchants during the earliest phase of contact (Pereira c. 1505–1508). In *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, he records the exchange of brass manillas for this pepper, illustrating the commodity’s central role in early Portuguese trade in the region (Pereira 1937, 72). By the early sixteenth century, Benin pepper became a favoured spice in Portuguese cuisine, used across different social strata and featuring in both common household and courtly culinary practices, including royal preparations documented in the *Livro de Cozinha da Infanta D. Maria*.

As one could see in the manuscript of Infanta D. Maria of Portugal (1538 – 1577),<sup>8</sup> daughter of Infante Dom Duarte, the 4th Duke of Guimares (1515-1540) and granddaughter of Dom Manuel I. The manuscript contains a list of recipes for some eleven local Portuguese dishes from that time, two among which note pepper as an ingredient (Picadinho de carne de vaca, and Lampereia). This manuscript employed here as a primary source, was likely compiled in the mid-16th century and does not represent recipes for newly introduced dishes but rather a codification of established culinary traditions, many of which could have been evolving for over half a century or more.

The Cookbook of the Infanta D. Maria on Portuguese cuisine illustrate notable dishes that use pepper as seen below:

- **Lampréia:** Lampréia is a prestigious Portuguese dish made from lamprey, prepared with a rich sauce of spices, vinegar, turmeric, ginger, pepper, and parsley. The prominent use of pepper, valued for its pungency, underscores its status as a prized and luxurious ingredient.
- **Picadinho de carne de vaca:** is a traditional Portuguese beef dish slow-cooked with onions, pepper, garlic, olive oil, vinegar, and wine. In the 16th century, African spices—especially Benin pepper—added a warming heat and depth, showing how West African flavors became part of everyday Portuguese cooking beyond elite or ceremonial contexts.

Before the Age of Explorations, Portuguese cuisine, while rich in local produce, fish, and meat, was heavily reliant on a limited range of spices. The spice trade from the East was a luxury, making spices like black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), cinnamon, and cloves accessible only to the aristocracy and wealthy merchant classes. Although the use of spices predated European contact with West Africa, it was the Portuguese expeditions of the Age of Exploration that catalysed a profound intensification in the culinary application of these aromatic substances. This nuanced understanding is articulated by Guida Cândido, a scholar specialising in food heritage.

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<sup>8</sup> **A Infanta D. Maria, Livro de Cozinha da Infanta D. Maria.** Transcription of recipe "Pastéis de Pombinhos" accessed via *Els Gnoms* website, at: [https://www.elsgnoms.com/receptes/Livro\\_de\\_Cozinha\\_Infanta%20Maria.html#Pastéis+de+pombinhos](https://www.elsgnoms.com/receptes/Livro_de_Cozinha_Infanta%20Maria.html#Pastéis+de+pombinhos) (consulted on July 25, 2025).

Interviewed and cited in Vicente (2023, 45), Cândido underscores the pivotal role of Portuguese maritime expansion in transforming the gastronomic landscape through enhanced spice usage. The average Portuguese diet was seasoned primarily with local herbs, garlic, salt, and vinegar. The flavor profile was a blend of Moorish influences (saffron, almonds) and a rugged Atlantic character, but it lacked the pervasive, pungent heat that would later define Portuguese cuisine.

The indigenous *Piper guineense*—also known as 'tail pepper'—stood as a quite distinct spice from common black pepper (*Piper nigrum*). Benin pepper offered a similar but more complex and aromatic heat, with notes of cardamom and citrus that underscored its status as a prized and luxurious ingredient. Critically, Benin pepper may have been considerably more accessible and affordable than black pepper, which Weiss (2002, 155) identifies as notably expensive. This distinction was key: While black pepper was a more famous and established commodity in Europe the taste was not to be compared with pepper from Benin. Pereira (1937, 72) notes that Benin's pepper is more spicy than that of India. Godinho maintains the Benin pepper was stronger than that which grows in Calicut; its flavor is also so strong that one pinch of it tastes like half a pound of common pepper (Godinho 1981, 151-152). Apparently, one could say that the local people would choose Benin pepper for its taste and affordability over the common pepper, black pepper and other varieties. Godinho highlights that the Benin pepper *pimenta de rabo*, was a true pepper and could therefore compete dangerously due to its lower transportation and purchase cost compared to those of Malabar pepper (Godinho 1981, 154-155). Its availability at a lower price (when compared to other peppers) meant that it could be incorporated into the diets of the wider population, not just the elite. This facilitated bringing the invigorating taste of this unique, pungent spice to common households. Barros (2013) maintains that Portuguese cuisine with a window to the world has been a crossing point to diverse cultures; from the Arab influence to the periods of exploration in which the recipes were written, greatly contributed to unifying the cosmopolitan trait of the Portuguese (Barros 2013, 65).

The availability of *Piper guineense* had a direct and demonstrable impact on Portuguese cuisine, as evidenced by its use in dishes that emerged during this period. The *alheira* is a prime example of this cultural exchange. The *alheira* is a unique sausage that originated in the late 15th century among the Jewish community in northern Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity (Egginton 2023). The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* accounts the tortures the Jews went

through during the Portuguese Inquisition (Skolnik and Berenbaum 2007, 250). The Jews generally do not eat pork and with that they could be easily known. In order to not get suspected for being a Jew, they created a sausage that appeared to be made of pork but instead was filled with other meats like chicken and bread. What is crucial to this study is how it was seasoned. Egginton (2023) maintains that traditional pork sausages were seasoned with wine and pepper (Egginton 2023). The ingredients of *alheira* suggest that it was seasoned with a blend of pungent spice and garlic, among which Benin pepper was one. It provided the necessary kick and flavor profile to mask the absence of pork and create a satisfying, deeply-flavored sausage.

While there is no old document that clearly states that *alheira* was made using pepper from Benin, combined evidence such as the time of the creation of *alheira*, the popularity of Benin pepper during the time, its affordability, its colour which could disguise the meat in *alheira* and situation for which the Jews needed it are documentary evidence linking Benin pepper to the original Jewish creation of *alheira*. It is plausible that the spice, introduced into Portugal through West African trade in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, was among the ingredients used to flavour such sausages. Given *alheira*'s subsequent adoption by the wider Christian population, one may hypothesise that the inclusion of pungent spices like Benin pepper could have contributed to its distinctive taste and, indirectly, to the pepper's integration into broader Portuguese culinary traditions. The initial introduction of Benin pepper as a practical and economical alternative evolved into a deeply integrated and defining element of Portuguese gastronomy.

It can be argued that trade with Benin declined over time. Moreover, given that black pepper and other varieties were already available in Europe, the pepper used in the recipes may not have been exclusively sourced from Benin. While it is difficult to prove conclusively which pepper was used in a historical recipe like those in *Livro de Cozinha da Infanta D. Maria*, the semantic ambiguity of the term “pepper” (*pimenta*) in 16th-century texts often masked this substitution. That is, recipes refer generically to “pepper” regardless of its origin. From the recipes addressed in the works of (Barros 2013) and (Vicente 2023) it could be noted that except for black pepper, the recipes simply identify as pepper generally. Moreover, in the *Cook Book of D. Maria* —Galhina desfiada has black pepper identified as an ingredient, which is more

convincing that it has been differentiated from the normal pepper. However, this is not enough counterargument.

Various types of pepper existed in Europe prior to the advent of Benin pepper; however, the arrival of this spice in Portugal significantly expanded the variety of peppers available to the public. In this hypothesis, it is key to remember that the arrival of a similar commodity into the market often affects the demand and use of existing counterparts. Waldman and Jensen (2013) explain how the emergence of products that serve as close substitutes—particularly when they offer lower prices or superior attributes—can shift consumer demand away from incumbent products, thereby affecting market shares and forcing incumbents to adjust pricing or product strategies. This dynamic is modeled within the framework of product differentiation and market entry, emphasising substitution patterns among differentiated goods (Waldman and Jensen 2013, chs. 7–8). Hence, Benin pepper, prized for its greater heat and lower cost, may have redirected European demand away from other varieties, contributing significantly to its popularity in the market. This popularity in turn led the pepper to be used in the preparation of Portuguese cuisines in the 15th-16th centuries.

The penetration of *Piper guineense* into social and culinary practices of the period is further evidenced by primary sixteenth-century sources. Specifically, in a letter of *Mercê* addressed to Infante D. Luís (*Carta de Mercê ao Infante D. Luís*), dated 20 September 1542, the author references malagueta and Guinea pepper, also in a manner that distinguishes their usage. An extract from the letter is provided below:

“...Nos quaes no podera mandar resgatar, comprar, nem delles trazer malagueta e pimenta de Guiné, mas outra alguma sorte de especiaria” (Brásio 1954, 4:188)

Building on the earlier discussion regarding the misuse of the term *malagueta*, the 1542 *Mercê* document provides important evidence for the terminological distinctions emerging in the mid-sixteenth century. This document explicitly differentiates between *malagueta* and ‘Guinea pepper’, thereby supporting the argument that the pepper referenced in the *Livro de Cozinha da Infanta D. Maria* is more plausibly identifiable as Benin pepper. Hence, one is convinced that; the pepper in the two dishes is not black pepper because if it was, it could have been identified just like in the recipe of *Galinha desfiada*. The absence of an explicit reference to ‘Guinea

pepper’ in the cookbook may reflect the interchangeable culinary use of both *malagueta* and Guinea pepper in achieving the desired flavour profiles. However, the commercial prominence of *Piper guineense*—driven by its relative affordability and pronounced aromatic heat—provides strong evidence for its predominance during this period. Rather than requiring specific designation, its prevalence suggests that it had become a valued yet accessible staple, integrated into the culinary practices of the early sixteenth-century Portuguese court.

However, the dominance of this spice was eventually challenged by shifting geopolitical priorities. Although Ediagbonya (2015) observes that trade between Benin and Portugal declined by the mid-sixteenth century—likely leading to the gradual disappearance of Benin pepper from Portuguese markets—this did not spell the end of commercial relations. Rather, it represented a period of reduced engagement (Ediagbonya 2015, 214). The establishment of the Estado da Índia was closely linked to the Crown’s assertion of monopoly control over the spice trade, particularly Asian black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), reflecting a broader strategy of commercial prioritisation and regulation (Disney 2009, 150). While this policy privileged eastern commodities within official trade networks, it did not necessarily eliminate the circulation or use of alternative pepper varieties. In this context, the continued Portuguese presence in West Africa, together with sustained regional trade networks, ensured that the use of *Piper guineense* in Portuguese culinary practices was not entirely displaced. Interest in Benin pepper declined in later periods; however, this study focuses on the phase in which it held its greatest significance within Portuguese cuisine. This period—coinciding with the height of Benin–Portuguese relations—is crucial for understanding the spice’s culinary influence.

Finally, a recipe should be understood as a set of procedures and potential ingredients for preparing a dish, rather than a rigid inventory of a finished meal. Viewing a recipe in this light clarifies that the discussion should not centre solely on the exclusion of specific peppers, as multiple varieties were likely employed depending on availability. In this context, while some cooks might have opted for *malagueta*, others may have used Guinea pepper. However, this study contends that the prized *Piper guineense*—by virtue of being both more pungent and more affordable—was the most probable choice for the majority of Portuguese households during the late 15th until about mid 16th century. Its superior attributes and market availability made it the logical standard for achieving the bold flavour profiles found in these historic dishes.

Other agricultural commodities that were bought from the Benin Kingdom by the Portuguese include palm oil, cotton textiles, alongside the Benin pepper (Ryder 1977). Palm oil produced from oil palm trees native to West Africa although by the 15th -17th centuries was not yet in wide demand in Europe later by the 18th century became of industrial use in Europe (for making soaps and detergents). Earlier, palm oil appears to have been used in Portugal even for making soap until it was banned by the king as noted in Brásio (1954, 4: 622). Brásio (1954) does not disclose the name of the king in question, however simply highlights that the king prohibited soap made with ash and palm oil, which has great effect of making hands white and linen clothes whiter than ordinary soap (Brásio 1954, 4: 622). Ryder (1977, 37) highlights that cotton clothes were bought by Portuguese merchants to clothe their slaves and make awnings for their ships. These among others were the products records show to have been exchanged with Africans in the trade.

In addition to agricultural commodities, the Edo–Portuguese encounter facilitated the early modern biological transfer of African fauna to Europe. Among the most notable examples was the guinea fowl (*Numida meleagris*), a species indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa, which the Portuguese introduced to the Iberian Peninsula during the 15th and 16th centuries. The chronicler Gaspar Frutuoso, writing in the 16th century, referred to these birds as *galinhas da Guiné* among the exotic fauna brought to Madeira and subsequently to Portugal by Captain Rui Gonçalves da Câmara, a prominent figure in the early Atlantic expansion (Frutuoso 1586/2022, 250).



*Image 7: Picture of a guinea fowl from West Africa*

Source: Photograph created by author

This species later appeared in other European travel accounts. For instance, the Dutch merchant Pieter de Marees, in his 1602 description of the Gold Coast (*Beschrijvinghe ende historische verhael van het Gout Koninckrijck van Guinea*), noted the Guinea fowl among the “strange birds” observed in West Africa (De Marees 1602/1912, 139). The inclusion of such fauna in these early ethnographic and natural histories underscores the immediacy and sensory vividness of European encounters with the ecosystems of the Guinea Coast, revealing the intertwined trajectories of natural and cultural exchange that characterised early modern Atlantic contact zones.

In summary, the foregoing discussion illustrates how commodities such as palm oil and pepper entered Portugal and influenced aspects of everyday life among the Portuguese. These exchanges exemplify a broader process of cross-cultural interaction, in which material goods

served as conduits for the transmission of tastes, cuisine, and food cultural practices between Benin and Portugal.

The next section will explore the introduction of European crops into the Benin Kingdom, focusing specifically on the case of cassava and its subsequent integration into local agricultural practices.

### **How Crops introduced by the Portuguese change the diet in the Benin Kingdom**

The Portuguese significantly influenced the food culture of the Benin people. Many crops introduced by the Portuguese remain integral to local diets and culinary practices. For instance, cassava, introduced during the 16th century, is processed into garri—a staple food widely consumed across West Africa. Garri is produced by fermenting and frying fresh cassava roots, then prepared in various ways: it can be soaked in cold water with additions like sugar and milk to enhance flavor, or mixed with hot water and kneaded into a firm, moldable dough called eba. Eba, a type of fufu, is traditionally eaten with vegetable or okra soups, demonstrating how introduced crops have been fully assimilated and localised within Benin’s culinary heritage.

Garri is cheaper and affordable for many families. Aboh (2018) maintains that garri is flakes made from cassava through a vigorous process of fermentation and roasting, it is a starchy-staple food in Nigeria which could be seen as food for the poor or those in extreme conditions such as war and famine (Aboh 2018, 57). This could be due to the ease at which it could be obtained from cassava which is popular in this region. The introduction of cassava by the Portuguese illustrates the pivotal role of Edo–Portuguese trade relations in reshaping the food culture and cuisine of the Benin Kingdom. Following its adoption, cassava was incorporated into established culinary systems, with local expertise applied to develop preparations that were economically accessible and adapted to indigenous palates.

Cassava is not the only food crop introduced by the Portuguese which underwent diverse transformations; maize and potatoes could be seen prepared in very traditional African styles. These foods are sometimes roasted on bare fire. Potatoes just as yams could be peeled and fried

in vegetable oil or cooked and eaten in different ways adding some ingredients. These tuber crops could also be used to make fufu (dough, pounded starchy food) which is eaten with soup.

### **Cassava in Benin: Linguistic Evidence, Agricultural Adaptation, and Long-term Impact**

The introduction of cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) into the Kingdom of Benin—most likely in the early 16th century via Portuguese maritime trade routes is marked as one of the significant intercultural agricultural transfers between the Americas and West Africa (Maddison 2007, 221). Cross-referencing linguistic records offers compelling evidence of the plant's foreign origin and subsequent naturalisation. In the Edo language, cassava is referred to as "**èkèrè**" or "**èkèrè-igbin**", terms which differ notably from older nomenclature used for indigenous tubers such as yam (*isu* or *ikpè*).

Cassava's successful integration into Benin's agricultural systems was facilitated by its resilience and compatibility with local farming conditions. El-Sharkawy (2004) maintains that cassava can be produced adequately in drought conditions making it the ideal food security crop in marginal environments. Because of its relative high productivity under conditions of erratic rainfall and low-fertility soils, 250 million Africans depend on cassava as food. Cassava is highly tolerant to poor soils, requiring minimal labor and fewer inputs than traditional crops like yam (El-Sharkawy 2004). Its flexible planting and harvesting cycles allowed farmers to cultivate cassava alongside existing crops, rather than displacing them entirely. Sibomana et al (2020) observe that cassava became part of multi-cropping systems, grown in intercropped fields with maize, plantains, and beans, thereby enhancing food security and contributing to more stable subsistence strategies, Sibomana et al (2020, 1-14).

Rather than replacing traditional crops, cassava was integrated in a complementary way. While yam continued to hold ritual and *symbolic importance*<sup>9</sup> in Benin's cultural life, cassava assumed a more practical and economic role. It became the basis for widely consumed derivative

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<sup>9</sup>In Benin culture, yam holds symbolic importance as a sign of wealth, fertility, and social status. It is central to agricultural rituals and festivals, such as the New Yam Festival, which celebrates the harvest, honors ancestral spirits, and reinforces community bonds. Yams also serve as a traditional gift and offering, reflecting prosperity and respect.

products such as **garri**, **eba**, and **lafun**, which gradually embedded themselves in the regional culinary repertoire. The proliferation of these cassava-based foods reflects both adaptation and innovation within local foodways.

Owusu-Bennoah et al (1990) in a study focused on Ghana note that the long-term impact of cassava on landscapes and societies has been profound. Agriculturally, its cultivation reshaped land-use patterns, particularly in forest-savanna transition zones where shifting cultivation was practiced (Owusu-Bennoah et al 1990, 112). Plucknett et al (2013) maintain that it democratised food access: cassava's low maintenance made it a reliable crop for poorer households and communities with limited access to land or labor (Plucknett et al 2013, 47). Taiwo and Fasoyiro (2015) maintain that it also contributed to the rise of women-led processing economies, particularly in garri production, a development that restructured gender roles in some agrarian communities (Taiwo and Fasoyiro 2015, 3080).

In summary, the adoption of cassava in Benin and West Africa more broadly was neither incidental nor passive. It was a dynamic process involving linguistic accommodation, agronomic innovation, and sociocultural negotiation—resulting in lasting transformations of food systems, economic structures, and everyday life. Moreover, cassava's adaptability and high yield contributed to demographic growth by improving food security and reducing the risks of famine. As production increased, agricultural surpluses enabled local communities and regional networks to participate more actively in external trade, linking subsistence economies to wider Atlantic exchange systems.

### **3.4. Religious Exchange**

What were the successes of the Portuguese missionaries in Benin in the early years ?

Religion has already been discussed in this study within the framework of diplomacy, particularly regarding its influence on relations between the two polities. Within this context, however, the religious agenda eventually proved unsuccessful. This subheading, however, examines whether the attempt to Christianise the Benin Kingdom should be seen as a complete failure.

Furthermore, following the broader theme of reciprocity developed in this study, it is important to consider whether any forms of mutual exchange occurred within the religious sphere. Although the Portuguese mission did not achieve the full Christianisation of Benin, can it truly be regarded as an outright failure?

### **Conversion of Elites**

During the reign of Oba Esigie, there appeared to be a greater acceptance and accommodation of Christianity within the Benin Kingdom. Many scholars regard this Oba as being notably receptive to the Christian faith, partly due to his strategic interest in acquiring firearms through his relations with the Portuguese. A particularly symbolic gesture of this engagement was his sending of a bronze cross to the King of Portugal (Egharevba 1968, 28; Gunsch 2018, 5). The significance of the bronze cross was already discussed in chapter 2 earlier.

Aremu (2018) observes that Oba Esigie “showed a genuine interest in Christianity, going so far as to order his son and two nobles to be baptised” (Bradbury 1967, as cited in Aremu 2018, 85). This illustrates the Oba’s relatively tolerant attitude toward Christian missionaries and his willingness to allow significant conversions among the royal elite, including his own sons, reflecting both personal curiosity and a pragmatic engagement with European religious influences. These converts were baptised and educated in the Christian faith. Under his reign, churches were established in the capital and other major towns, alongside schools where both children and adults received instruction from missionaries. The curriculum extended beyond religious teachings to include Portuguese and Latin, alongside Christian doctrines and catechism (Aremu 2018; Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020).

### **Building churches and schools**

Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) maintain that more churches were built during the reign of Oba Esigie, the churches were built in Ogbelaka, Idunmwunerie and Akpakpava (Aisién and Oriakhi 2013, 112). Odunlami and Oyenuga (2020) maintain that the biggest of the four churches built in Benin, and the headquarters of the Benin Christian mission was the Cathedral on Akpakpava Road (Odunlami and Oyenuga 2020, 149). Aremu (2018) further observes that, despite the

Portuguese failing to secure widespread acceptance of Christianity among the Benin people, Oba Esigie's reign nevertheless witnessed a notable success in establishing a structured Christian presence in the kingdom. Aisién and Oriakhi (2013) note that Oba Esigie was the first Christian king of Benin, and his adoption of the faith positively influenced relations between Portugal and the kingdom (Aisién & Oriakhi 2013, 112).

Aremu (2018) argues that it was in response to this development that Oba Esigie instructed the missionaries to establish churches during his reign (Aremu 2018, 79). The largest of these churches may have functioned as a headquarters or cathedral, possibly overseen by a bishop. Supporting this view, Odunlami and Oyenuga (2020) note that the discovery of an Episcopal cross in 1897 — an artefact typically held only by a bishop — could indicate that the church served as a central ecclesiastical seat (Odunlami & Oyenuga 2020, 149).

The Roman Catholic Christianity introduced by the Portuguese struggled to take root in its authentic form, largely due to the limited commitment of the local population. As noted in a letter dated 1539 from Franciscan priests to Dom João III of Portugal, the Oba, despite previously accepting Christianity, reverted to the worship of idols and the offering of human sacrifices to his gods. Understandably, the local people, like the king, found it difficult to adhere fully to the teachings of the new faith. Caught between the traditional religious practices of Benin and the Christian doctrines introduced by the missionaries, the population developed a hybrid form of belief. This blending of African traditional religion and Christianity gave rise to a new religious expression, exemplified by institutions such as the Holy Arousa Church.

### **The Holy Arousa Church**

The Holy Arousa Church, located on Akpakpava Street in Benin City, is likely built on—or reconstructed at—the site of the original church cathedral established in the early 16th century during the reign of Oba Esigie. Architecturally, it resembles a modern Christian church, with clearly defined sections and an altar. Worship is led by the Ohen-Osa, a minister who conducts the prayers, while the congregation and choristers are seated along a central aisle. Services are typically held on Sundays. However, Holy Arousa diverges from traditional Christian practice in

a significant way: rather than directing prayers to the Christian God, worshippers offer prayers to Osa, the supreme deity of Benin. According to Akahoume (2018), the church is both established and maintained according to Benin monarchical traditions, reflecting a unique fusion of indigenous authority and Christian ritual (Akahoume 2018, 117).

Akahoume (2018) argues that this religious hybrid emerged because the Catholic church traditions introduced by the Portuguese were never fully consolidated. As a result, the gap was filled by Benin's indigenous traditions, which now form the basis of worship in the Holy Aruosa Church (Akahoume 2018, 117).

Although the Portuguese missionary efforts in the 16th century are generally regarded as unsuccessful, one outcome is evident: the southern region of Nigeria has remained predominantly Christian, while the north is largely Muslim. It can be argued that the Portuguese withdrew from Benin following the failure of their mission, and that the stronger Christian presence in southern Nigeria is largely attributable to later British and French missionary activities during the 17th - 19th centuries.

Indeed, the reintroduction of Christianity under Protestantism by the English contributed significantly to the consolidation of the faith in southern Nigeria. Isichei (1977) notes that in the late eighteenth century, there was a major movement among English Protestants known as the Evangelical Revival (Isichei 1977, 155). Protestant Christianity offered the local population a more flexible approach to worship, demonstrating that religious practices and traditions did not need to adhere strictly to Roman Catholic norms. By adopting Christianity under Protestant influence in ways that incorporated their own traditions, the people gradually became more receptive to the faith as a whole, including the Roman Catholic practices first introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century. In this sense, the Portuguese mission can be regarded as having laid the foundations for Christianity in Benin and, more broadly, in southern Nigeria—an early contribution that helps to explain the region's substantial Christian population today.

Therefore, although the Portuguese missions in the 16th century were largely unsuccessful and the missionaries eventually withdrew, the arrival of other European powers, such as the

French and the English, reinvigorated the Christianising mission in the region. Unlike the Portuguese efforts, these later missions were more successful and contributed to the consolidation of Christianity in southern Nigeria. Isichei (1977) notes that the growing interest in foreign missions in England led to the establishment of several missionary organisations, two of which played a key role in West Africa: the Church Missionary Society (CMS), founded in 1799 and run by Evangelical Anglicans, and the Wesleyan Missionary Society. Isichei further observes that the Catholic missionary revival, which began roughly a century later, also contributed by establishing numerous small missionary congregations in the region (Isichei 1977, 155).

The Catholic congregations that had the greatest impact on West Africa were the Society of African Missions, which developed from a congregation founded in France in 1844, and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Isichei 1977, 155). It is through these organisations that the Catholic Church maintains its presence in Benin today. In this sense, the work of the Portuguese missions can be regarded as indirectly successful, albeit over several centuries. The term “indirectly” is used because, although the local population did not fully accept or practise the faith with commitment in the 16th century, many have become devoted adherents in the 21st century, largely as a result of the efforts of later missionary activities building on the foundations of the Portuguese missionary works.

Today, the southern population of Nigeria constitutes the largest Christian community in the country. While this outcome may be attributed primarily to British and French missionary activities in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Portuguese introduction of Christianity in the 16th century nonetheless laid crucial foundations for the faith in Benin and southern Nigeria. As evidenced by the recorded conversions of chiefs and royal sons, alongside the construction of churches and schools, the mission initially demonstrated signs of success. Although the wider population did not fully embrace Catholicism and the mission faltered in the 16th century, these early achievements eventually paved the way for later Protestant missions. Consequently, the Portuguese endeavour cannot be regarded as a complete failure.

## **Reciprocity and Intercultural exchange**

While the religious influence of the Portuguese on Benin is often emphasised, the intercultural exchange between the two polities is equally significant. One notable example is the use of ivory sourced from Benin in the creation of religious relics for Portuguese Christianity. These include; cross, crucifixes and objects depicting saints or the Virgin Mary. These artefacts demonstrate how Benin materials were incorporated into European religious art, reflecting both the reach of Portuguese missionary and trade networks and the contribution of African resources to the material culture of Christianity. This exchange highlights African agency and creativity, showing that the relationship between Benin and Portugal involved mutual influence rather than a one-sided imposition of European culture. While the form and iconography of these objects remained distinctly European, the use of Benin ivory signifies the indirect participation of the Benin Kingdom in the Christian religious sphere, highlighting the interconnectedness of African and European cultures. This hybridisation not only reflects the movement of goods and materials but also underscores the complex ways in which African societies engaged with, and in some cases adapted to, European religious practices, even when formal conversion to Christianity was limited.

Moreover, the Benin artworks, particularly ivory carvings such as oliphants, functioned not only as objects of artistic expression but also as instruments of worship and ritual within the kingdom. Gore (2007) emphasises that art in Benin—including bronzes, masks, and carvings—is inseparable from ritual performance. According to Gore, these art forms are not merely aesthetic objects; they are deeply embedded in the social and spiritual practices of the community. The creation and use of such artworks were integral to rituals conducted by priests and priestesses, reflecting a dynamic interplay between material culture and religious performance (Gore 2007).

Barley (2010) highlights the role of Benin art, emphasising both the craftsmanship and cultural significance of these pieces, and shedding light on their function in ritual contexts as well as their influence on Western perceptions of African art (Barley 2010). Consequently, these artworks indirectly shaped European practices: in handling and preserving Benin objects, the

Portuguese engaged in a form of reverence and cultural appreciation that was unfamiliar in their own society.

While the Portuguese coat of arms on the oliphants was intended to assert European identity and authority, from another perspective, it is plausible to interpret the Portuguese treatment of these objects as a form of admiration—or even ‘idolisation’—of African craftsmanship. In engaging with the oliphants as significant or sacred items, even if their original religious context differed, this suggests a subtle instance of cultural reciprocity, where Benin religious and artistic practices may have influenced European perceptions and the ways they interacted with such material objects.

For example, ivory carvings in Benin, such as those of Queen Idia, were created for worship on the altar, reflecting her sacred status and the respect she commanded; her image was carefully preserved and honoured. In a similar yet distinct manner, the Portuguese inscribed their coat of arms on ivory objects. As an important national symbol, the coat of arms represented Portugal’s identity, values, and sovereignty. While the Portuguese did not worship the coat of arms as a deity, they preserved, respected, and honoured it. In this way, the care shown towards the ivory inscribed with the coat of arms bears a resemblance to the Benin practice of carving and honouring figures deemed sacred, demonstrating how both cultures used material objects to express respect and significance.

### **3.5. Technological Exchange**

What were the impacts of Portuguese firearms on the Benin military, economy, and politics? While Ekeh (2016) acknowledges the positive influence of Portuguese interaction on the kingdom’s economy, he disputes claims that they provided military assistance during the Idah War or exerted significant political influence on Benin. Ekeh (2016) argues that Benin historians have overstated the benefits of Benin-Portuguese relations, particularly regarding the existence of a formal military alliance between Benin and Portugal (Ekeh 2016, 15).

Ekeh (2016) references the works of a few like Iyi Eweka (n.d) and Osadolor (2001). While Iyi Eweka (n.d) —an online blog suggested that the Portuguese fought on the side of the Benin around the 1500 AD during the invasion by Idah forces, Osadolor (2001) defends that the Portuguese mercenary soldiers were recruited by Benin kings to help them win a foreign war against Idah and a domestic war against Udo. Ekeh (2016) refers to a widely cited piece of evidence for this event, namely Duarte Pires’ letter to Dom Manuel I dated 20 October 1516. In this letter, Duarte reports on the three priests who were sent by the Portuguese King Dom Manuel I to convert the Oba. When the priests arrived, the Oba was at war in Idah; at his request, they had to join him where he was and remained there with him for a year.

Ekeh (2016) highlights that nothing from this popularly cited letter indicates that these men were helping the Oba in military matters. Rather these Portuguese had come to instruct the Oba in matters of Christian faith. Hence this should not be carelessly misunderstood by scholars as military help (Ekeh 2016, 17). Ekeh’s conclusion that these individuals were solely responsible for instructing the Oba in Christian doctrine warrants a degree of skepticism. It raises the question of why the missionaries would remain for an extended period—up to a year—accompanying the Oba during wartime.

According to Duarte Pires’ letter, the Oba specifically requested that missionaries join him while engaged in the Idah conflict. Upon their arrival, the Oba informed them that he required time to contemplate “the great mystery” presented by their teachings (Brásio 1952, 1: 370). Such circumstances would likely have been sufficient for the missionaries to return to a safer location rather than remain with the Oba for an entire year. It is therefore questionable why they would choose to stay for such an extended period if their sole purpose was limited to “instructing in Christian faith,” as Ekeh asserts. Ekeh (2016) contends that “it would be reckless scholarship to infer from the ambassador’s letter that the presence of three Portuguese priests with the Oba of Benin at Idah constituted military assistance from Portugal ” (Ekeh 2016, 17). Ekeh (2016) postulates that it is unjust to attribute Benin’s leadership and power to any military or political alliance with the Portuguese.

Contrary to Ekeh’s (2016) reading, neither Iyi Eweka (n.d) nor Osadolor (2001) employ the term “*Benin–Portuguese military alliance.*” While both mention some form of military assistance, this does not imply an official alliance or support. Indeed it was going to be an

exaggeration if these authors used the terms "military alliance," however, it is in fact Ekeh's interpretation of this scenario that gives birth to the term "military alliance." This misunderstanding may have stemmed from the manner in which Benin scholars narrate the history. Osadolor (2001) observes that from around 1440 AD, Benin's military system underwent significant changes with the adoption of new technologies such as firearms and gunpowder, as well as the engagement of specialised personnel, including Portuguese mercenaries (Osadolor 2001, 20). This statement by Osadolor may have been misunderstood or misinterpreted by other authors, leading to the inference of the existence of a formal military agreement.

While acknowledging Ekeh's (2016) argument that claims of a formal military alliance between Benin and Portugal may be exaggerated, it remains essential to consider the "technological exchange" and military advantages that Benin derived from contact with the Portuguese. Historical evidence shows that the Portuguese monarch offered to supply firearms—vital for Benin's military campaigns against neighboring states—on the condition that the Oba accept baptism and convert to Christianity. Duarte Pires' letter to Dom Manuel I of Portugal, dated 20 October 1516, provides evidence suggesting Oba Esigie's willingness to embrace Christianity; it records the Oba's request for missionaries to baptise his household, and his elders (Brásio 1952, 1:370). The request for missionaries by Oba Esigie, as documented in this letter, indicates a willingness to embrace Christianity—specifically through the baptism of his son and household.

This request may be interpreted as a strategic move aligning with the conditions reportedly set by the Portuguese crown—namely, that the provision of firearms would follow conversion to the Christian faith. Although no direct documentation confirms the actual delivery of weapons in exchange for conversion, the possibility remains that such military support was rendered at some point. This development is supported by evidence that foreign weaponry, specifically firearms of Portuguese origin, were present in Benin by the early 16th century (Roese & Smith 2000, 110). These firearms were reportedly employed during the Idah War, contributing to the successful repulsion of the Igala forces (Osadolor 2001, 36, 87).

The representation of Portuguese figures bearing weapons in 16th-century Benin artworks further substantiates the argument for direct military or technological interaction between the two cultures. One such artwork, dated to the 16th century, clearly depicts Portuguese individuals

equipped with firearms. Given that Benin art traditionally served commemorative and documentary functions—this visual evidence is unlikely to be coincidental or imagined (Gunsch 2018, 19). Rather, it suggests that Benin artists rendered what they observed firsthand, indicating direct encounters with Portuguese individuals in possession of such weaponry.

The artwork below, created in the Benin Kingdom during the 16th–17th century, depicts a man identified as Portuguese by his clothing and facial features. He is heavily armed, carrying both a firearm and a sword. The artwork highlights Benin’s interactions with Portugal and the kingdom’s cultural and technological exchanges.



*Image 8: Plaque: Portuguese with spear. (see Figure IV 12, Appendix IV).*

Source: *The British Museum (16th-17th century) [Museum Number: Af1898,0115.12]*  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1898-0115-12](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1898-0115-12)

The hypothesis presented earlier and artwork above supports that the Oba later accepted to be converted and his engagement with the Portuguese led to an advantage where given weapons were employed to help win wars.

Ryder (1961) and Adiele (2017) say something different about the acceptance of Christianity in Benin and the reception of weapons from the Portuguese. Adiele (2017) says that the Benin mission was not successful because the Oba refused to accept baptism and the missionaries left Benin disappointedly (Adiele 2017, 431). Ryder (1961) asserts that the Portuguese supplied no firearms to Benin because the mission had failed (Ryder 1961, 237).

However, these studies do not examine how the Benin Kingdom nonetheless acquired firearms and cannons during the 16th century, nor do they explore the mechanisms of military adaptation and integration of foreign weaponry into Benin's armed forces. Ryder (1977) even hints at the possibility of firearms being illegally traded from Portuguese hubs, noting, for example, that gunpowder listed as merchandise on a ship's manifest suggested contraband supply from São Tomé (Ryder 1977, 68). However, this speculation is balanced against the official policy of the Portuguese crown, which worked to strongly prevent the smuggling of weapons into Benin.

Ryder ultimately concludes that, on the whole, these preventative measures were successful; therefore, the great military achievements of Benin armies in the sixteenth century "owed nothing to the use of firearms" (Ryder 1977, 52). If one concurs with these authors' position that "the Oba did not accept Christianity, therefore the Portuguese supplied no firearms," then the presence of firearms and cannons in Benin around the early 16th century remains unexplained. Moreover, the significance of the Oba's request for missionaries—along with the directive to build a church and convert his household, as documented in Duarte Pires' letter—requires further consideration.

These authors present strong arguments but have either deliberately or inadvertently neglected to address why Benin art depicts Portuguese figures bearing weapons. This omission underscores the need to consider Portuguese military assistance to the Benin Kingdom. Such support is plausible given the presence of Portuguese soldiers in Benin artistic representations and the Oba's consent to the Christian conversion of his household. While Ekeh (2016) engages with the works of Osadolor (2001) and Iyi-Eweka (n.d), it is notable that he does not address the portrayal of Portuguese soldiers in Benin art. Consequently, Ekeh's (2016) argument concerning

Portuguese involvement in military affairs appears less robust, as he discusses these textual sources and the widely cited Duarte Pires letter but fails to consider or interpret the significance of the Portuguese soldier depictions in Benin artifacts. What alternative explanations might be offered regarding these material sources?

It can be posited that even if the Portuguese did not provide direct “military assistance” to Benin, they likely supplied firearms or the technical expertise necessary for their use or creation. To further understand the presence of weapons in Benin, it is instructive to consider other scholarly accounts. Roese & Smith (2000) note multiple references to cannons in Benin, indicating their use as early as the 16th century, with Portuguese origins. Nonetheless, it remains possible that the Portuguese did not formally transfer these weapons, and that the Oba sought to acquire cannons independently around 1513 (Roese & Smith 2000, 110).

If the Portuguese did not formally transfer cannons to the local population, it is reasonable to conclude that they themselves operated these weapons. The use of such artillery by the Portuguese suggests their active involvement in supporting the Benin Kingdom, rather than mere ceremonial display. Supporting this view, Curnow (2021) recounts that during the Igala invasion, Oba Esigie and Queen Idia’s forces, with assistance from some Portuguese, employed a strategic ruse to repel the invaders. The visual deception effectively obscured the reality, leading the invaders to misinterpret the situation and subsequently withdraw (Curnow 2021, 147–148).

Curnow (2021) references two Portuguese individuals nicknamed Avan and Uti, with Avan meaning “thunder and lightning” in reference to his firearm, and Uti meaning “terror.” These men were known to have accompanied Oba Ozolua during military campaigns and shared meals with his son while in the capital. They are credited with founding Iwoki, the royal guild responsible for preserving astronomical knowledge and providing armed palace guards during royal ceremonies. Curnow also cites the Bradbury archives, suggesting that these figures may have been Duarte Pires and João Sobrinho (Curnow 2021, 149). Ryder (1977) also asserts that Duarte Pires resided in Benin alongside João Sobrinho. Given their connections with Príncipe, it is plausible that they were present in Benin to oversee António Carneiro’s interests (grantee of the island of Príncipe). Both individuals were closely associated with the Oba, providing assistance in military matters and potentially offering occasional support through the use of their own firearms (Ryder 1977).

Despite ongoing scholarly debate, several historians, including Egharevba (1960), Osadolor (2001), and Metzsig (2016), maintain that Portugal may have conferred a measurable military advantage upon the Kingdom of Benin through the transfer of European weaponry. The existence of Benin artworks depicting Portuguese firearms lends credibility to the notion that contact with Europeans enabled the Benin Kingdom to acquire firearms and technical knowledge. This opportunity likely contributed to Benin's military success in conflicts with neighboring kingdoms. Moreover, given the intrinsic relationship between politics and economy, it can be argued that Benin's engagement in international trade with European powers contributed significantly to its economic prosperity. This economic strength was subsequently translated into political influence, as evidenced by the kingdom's capacity to expand its territorial control, subjugate neighboring towns, and assert its authority through the imposition of Benin's political structures and policies.

Based on the evidence presented, this study maintains that contact with Portugal conferred military advantages upon the Kingdom of Benin. Artworks depicting Portuguese firearms support the view that European interaction facilitated the acquisition of weapons and technical knowledge, likely strengthening Benin's capabilities in regional conflicts.

### **Reciprocal impact on Portuguese Politics, Economy and Technology**

Portugal's engagement with Benin and Africa at large provided the Portuguese Empire with substantial economic benefits, which later translated into political influence and supported technological development. Trade fostered the growth of Portuguese society and infrastructure, while Africa supplied the labour force that underpinned much of the empire's economic expansion. Serrão and Oliveira Marques (1991) observe that after the abolition of Indian slavery in 1570, Portugal increasingly relied on its African colonies as the primary source of enslaved labour. Most enslaved people were taken from regions such as Guinea, Mina Castle, Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Angola, with Angola alone supplying approximately two-thirds of those sent to Brazil (Serrão & Oliveira Marques 1991, 7).

Trade with Benin formed an important component of the broader Portuguese commercial network. The kingdom exported enslaved people, ivory, and pepper—commodities that held considerable value within the Portuguese economy. As previously discussed, Pereira notes that captives captured during Benin’s wars commanded a relatively high value, illustrating both their desirability and the profitability such exchanges offered to Portuguese merchants (Pereira 1892, 149). Similarly, Barros records that substantial numbers of slaves were purchased at the Port of Ughoton (Barros as cited in Graham 1965, 321). Following the establishment of the Portuguese factory at Ughoton, the slave trade remained active for approximately thirty years, after which ivory and pepper emerged as the primary commodities of exchange (Graham 1965, 319).

The labour of enslaved Africans across Brazil, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe contributed significantly to the accumulation of wealth for the Portuguese economy. Products such as sugarcane were exported to European markets, generating substantial profits. Somerville (2017) argues that the slave trade integrated Africa into the emerging international economic system, and the utilisation of enslaved labour to build the Portuguese colonial economy consequently enhanced the empire’s **wealth** and **power**. Henriques (2021) highlights that Lisbon’s development during the Age of Discoveries—including palaces, churches, convents, commercial buildings, and urban infrastructure—was made possible through the wealth generated from Brazil’s gold and African labour, producing a city of remarkable architectural grandeur by the seventeenth century (Henriques 2021, 11).

In addition to material resources and human labour, Portugal benefited from the extraction of gold, ivory, and other raw materials. Estimates suggest that approximately 700 kg of gold were imported from West Africa annually during the 1500s (Peters 1986).

The consolidation of these economic benefits allowed Portugal to transform wealth into political power and technological advancement. Economic prosperity provided the empire with the means to maintain political influence, expand its maritime capabilities, and invest in technological innovations essential for navigation and warfare. Peers (1997) argues that the developing command economies of early modern Europe enabled rulers to efficiently mobilise economic resources, ensuring their armies remained fully equipped and their armouries properly maintained (Peers 1997, xxix). This aligns with McNeill (1982), who integrated technological

and organisational advancements from the military revolution with broader demographic, economic, and social changes, situating these developments within a global framework to examine long-term shifts in military power.

Black (2006) observes that among the European maritime powers of the early modern period, Portugal possessed the most formidable naval capability. This strength was founded on the development of robust sailing ships capable of mounting heavy cannon powerful enough to destroy the lighter vessels common in the Indian Ocean. Drawing on technological advances from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Portugal successfully integrated Atlantic and Mediterranean traditions of ship construction—combining the use of both lateen and square rigging—and made significant progress in navigation and position-finding at sea. These innovations afforded Portuguese vessels decisive advantages over other fleets, whether or not their opponents were similarly armed (Black 2006).

Portugal's advancement in technology—both in shipbuilding and in naval warfare—thus expanded markedly during its period of global ascendance. The establishment of dockyard facilities in colonial territories further enhanced this capacity providing their ships opportunities to replenish during long sails to Asia and beyond (Black 2006).

Drawing on the studies of Henriques (2021), Somerville (2017), and Peters (1986), it is evident that Portugal derived substantial economic advantages from its expansion, including wealth generated through trade, gold, and the labour of enslaved Africans. Building on this, the work of Peers (1997), McNeill (1982), and Black (2006) demonstrates how these resources were efficiently mobilised by rulers (Portuguese rulers), ensuring that their armies remained well-equipped and their armouries properly maintained, thereby fostering technological and organisational advancements from this cultural exchange.

While the technological gains for Portugal were largely indirect—emerging from the wealth and capital accumulated through trade—the benefits for Benin were more direct, particularly in terms of acquiring firearms. This dynamic exemplifies the concept of reciprocal exchange central to this thesis. Although the technological transfer did not flow directly from Benin to Portugal, it illustrates a broader pattern of interaction in which economic and material resources facilitated technological development across both societies.

Therefore, Edo–Portuguese relations exemplify a relationship of reciprocal benefit, realised in different forms and proportions. Portugal gained economic strength that underpinned its political and technological development, while Benin leveraged trade relations to access military technology and consolidate its own regional power.

### **3.6. Toponymy (Place name exchange)**

Toponymy, the study of place names, examines their origins, meanings, histories, and the ways in which they reflect cultural, linguistic, and geographical influences. The term derives from the Greek words *tópos* (place) and *ónoma* (name). By analysing place names, toponymy provides important insights into the historical, linguistic, and cultural forces that shape a region.

Lagos, a major city in southwestern Nigeria, presents a compelling case study in this regard: how did the place name “Lagos” originate, and what does it reveal about historical and cultural influences?

During the mid-sixteenth century, amid the expansion of the Benin Kingdom, Oba Orhogbua led an expedition to an island to the west of Benin. Upon capturing the island, he established a camp and named it Eko, meaning “camp” in the Edo language. The Oba remained there for an extended period, only returning to Benin at the insistence of his chiefs. Over time, the settlement developed into what became the state of Lagos (Ryder 1977, 14). When Portuguese explorers and traders arrived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they encountered the island’s extensive lagoons, creeks, and waterways, reminiscent of the lagoons in their homeland. Recognising this prominent geographical feature, the Portuguese named the area Lagos, reflecting both the physical landscape and their own maritime perspective.

Gordon (2003) asserts that the name of Nigeria’s largest city originated from the Portuguese designation “*Lago de Curama*”, with *lago* meaning “lagoon” or “lake,” reflecting the city’s location on a prominent lagoon (Gordon 2003, 69). Similarly, Olukoju (2018) notes that the name Lagos was assigned because the area’s landscape strikingly resembled a modest lagoon port in Portugal (Olukoju 2018, 148). Both accounts highlight the influence of Portuguese maritime exploration and geographical perception in shaping the European name for the city.

Geary (2013) observes that Portuguese was once spoken in Lagos, and that emancipated slaves returning from Brazil retained Portuguese names, reflecting their historical connection to the language and culture of their former colonisers. These freed slaves returned to Lagos around 1873, having been originally taken to Brazil during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Geary 2013, 46). King (1996) further notes that the adoption of the Portuguese name Lagos as the official designation of Eko reflects a broader colonial perspective, which positions Europe as the primary engine and architect of world history and the bearer of universal values, thereby shaping the cartographic and historical narratives of Nigeria's colonial past (King 1996, 135).

William (2018) notes that although the Portuguese eventually lost their territories in West Africa to the French, English, and Dutch, many cities continue to bear the Portuguese names assigned during their period of influence. Notably, the capital of Benin Republic, Porto Novo, and Nigeria's economic hub, Lagos. These places have retained their Portuguese names into the twenty-first century (William 2018, 115). Yearwood (2018) further observes that the Portuguese-named city of Lagos developed into the major port for Nigeria's western region, hosting more than thirty European firms by the outbreak of the First World War (Yearwood 2018, 17). These examples illustrate the enduring legacy of Portuguese maritime exploration and naming practices in shaping the urban and economic geography of West Africa.

Bigon (2016) notes that the Lagos Treaty of Cession on 6 August 1861 marked the formal beginning of British rule over the city. While many locals continued to refer to it as Eko, the Portuguese name Lagos became the official designation following annexation, as it was the name used by the British and other Europeans. The name was subsequently recognised and accepted by international European agencies operating in the city (Bigon 2016, 73). Today, Lagos continues to bear this name as Nigeria's economic capital, and it also served as the country's political capital from the British amalgamation in 1914 until the 1990s.

Building on the sources discussed above, the adoption of the Portuguese-derived place name Lagos can be understood as a form of cultural exchange, in which a foreign name was incorporated into the local landscape as a result of sustained interaction between the Portuguese and the Edo people. The arriving foreigners may have assigned this name not solely due to its resemblance but also because it was more readily articulated within the phonetic constraints of their own language than the local name.

Drawing upon the theme explored in this thesis, a striking similar example of cultural reciprocity in toponymy can be seen in Lisbon in the case of **Bairro do Mocambo**. Sweet (2013, 237) maintains that the name comes from the Kimbundu word *mocambo*, meaning “hideout” or “refuge”, reflecting the neighbourhood’s origins as a settlement for Africans—both enslaved and free—during the 16th century. This toponym is more than a simple label: it speaks to the presence and resilience of African communities in Lisbon and highlights an exchange of identities across continents (Although kimbundu is not originally from the Benin Kingdom however, from Angola in Africa).

Interestingly, this phenomenon mirrors the reciprocal naming practices found in West Africa, such as the connection between **Lagos** in Nigeria and **Porto Novo** in Benin. In both cases, European and African names travelled and transformed across borders, creating a layered cultural dialogue. **Bairro do Mocambo** thus stands as a Lisbon example of this transatlantic exchange, where African heritage left a visible mark on the urban landscape.

According to Henriques (2021), the neighbourhood was established by royal decree in 1593 and officially recognised in 1605 as one of Lisbon’s six original neighbourhoods, the **Bairro do Mocambo** encompassed the parishes of **Santos-o-Velho**, **Santa Catarina**, **São Paulo**, **Nossa Senhora do Loreto**, and **Chagas**. By 1742, it was listed as the twelfth of twelve city neighbourhoods, including the parishes of Santos and Nossa Senhora da Ajudá and nearby towns. From the late 16th century, the area attracted wealthy residents involved in African and Indian trade, combining mansions, convents, and the Mocambo settlement, which provided domestic labour. Today, the site of Mocambo corresponds to the Madragoa neighbourhood (Henriques 2021, 63). Sweet (2013) maintains that Bairro de Macambo is located in the present-day parish of Santa Catarina (Sweet 2013, 237). Although the name has been changed through its naming and later renaming, Bairro do Mocambo illustrates how toponyms carry stories of cultural encounter, adaptation, and resilience, serving as living traces of the historical connections between Africa and Portugal.

### 3.7. Identity Exchange

#### Afro-Portuguese Identity

What constitutes the Afro-Portuguese identity, and how did Africans contribute to its creation? Emerging through sustained encounters between Portugal and Africa, this identity was shaped by cultural exchange, diplomacy, and intermarriage. The unions between Portuguese settlers and African populations produced hybrid communities that integrated both traditions. As a result, Portugal today reflects a remarkable degree of racial and cultural diversity, a phenomenon rooted in its extensive global contacts during the Age of Discoveries. Newitt (2005) highlights how unofficial Portuguese settlements intermarried with local communities everywhere from China Sea to western Africa (Newitt 2005, 255). In Brazil, Guinea, Benin, Angola, Kongo, Swahili coastal islands, Indo-China, Japan, Indonesia, China among many others; Portuguese trade, Christianity, Portuguese language and the flora and fauna of other continents were exchanged by the Portuguese of mixed race, Luso-Africans and Luso-Asians (Newitt 2005, 255).

Enslaved Africans brought to Portugal became an integral part of society, contributing to the emergence of a multiracial population within the kingdom. Alongside their labor, they introduced cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions, thereby enriching and reshaping Portugal's already diverse cultural landscape. Henrique (2021) maintains that this cultural build up could be seen leading to a new cultural identity known as Luso-African identity.

This new cultural identity or the Luso-African identity in Lisbon and Portugal at large was formed through the immigration of Africans either freely or by coercion. Henriques (2021) notes that most Africans did not come of their own free will, seeking to carry out their own projects as happened with the Romans and Arabs—the Africans immigrated by the violence of slavery, captured or bought from Africa. For centuries they performed essential tasks, but also the hardest and most devalued in society. Inserted in all wealth-creating sectors, Africans, slaves or free, were a structuring element of Portuguese urban life (Henriques 2021, 13).

A “structuring element” of urban life, in this interpretation, signifies that enslaved Africans were essential to carrying out the daily tasks and labour necessary for the development of urban society. Their contribution constituted a vital labour force, underpinning the growth and

functioning of cities, and represents a significant aspect of social and economic life that should not be overlooked. More broadly, Africans contributed not only to the Portuguese population but also to the shaping and building of Portuguese society, leaving enduring social, cultural, and economic legacies.

While some studies do not emphasise the primary origins of enslaved populations, this thesis highlights their Benin Kingdom origin as per focuses on the Benin-Portuguese relations. The hypothesis posits that enslaved people from Benin were brought to Portugal, where they contributed to the labour force and broader societal development, playing a role in the racial diversity that ultimately shaped the Afro-Portuguese identity.

To support this hypothesis, it is important to note that the region where the Benin Kingdom was located was also known as the Slave Coast. Law (2002) maintains that the Slave Coast comprised the region from the mouth of the River Volta east to the Lagos channel, a distance of about 200 miles, it was roughly the western half of the Gulf or Bight of Benin (Law 2002, 13). Law (2002) notes that the region was known in Portuguese as “Rios dos Escravos” the Slave Rivers, originally used for the area east of Lagos and Benin Kingdom (Law 2002, 13). The place continued to be known as such, however, later there was a decline in slave trade and the focus moved to pepper, ivory and gum, therefore the use of the name shifted to the region in the west along the coast (Law 2002, 13).

From this perspective, the Benin Kingdom was part of the Slave Coast and was certainly one of the major regions where Europeans, especially the Portuguese, purchased slaves. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, writing circa 1505–1508 in *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, confirms the purchase of slaves from Benin: "*O Reyno de Beny será de oytenta leguoas de comprido & quarenta de largo & há mais tempo faz guerra aos vizinhos honde toma muitos catiuos que nós compramos a doze & quinze manilhas de latam...d'ay som trazidos ha fortaleza de São Jorge da Mina*" (Pereira 1937, 72). They bought slaves from Benin which were later taken to the fortress São Jorge de Mina in the Gold Coast where they exchanged for gold. Saunders (1994) maintains that the slaves brought from the Slave Coast and Benin were taken to the fortress created in 1482 where they exchanged for gold“... e, ai os escravos recrutados mais para leste ao longo da costa do rio dos Escravos e do Benim faziam parte dos produtos trocados por ouro até 1530 (Saunders, 1994, 27). Ryder (1977) maintains that a third destination for slaves from Benin was the slave market

of Lisbon, where they were brought for sale by agents of the Casa da Mina<sup>10</sup> and private contractors (Ryder 1977, 36).

The available evidence indicates that the Portuguese systematically procured enslaved individuals from the Benin region, as well as from other areas of the Slave Coast. These captives were transported to principal Portuguese fortresses and trading posts along the West African coast, where they were frequently exchanged for gold and other valuable commodities. Following these transactions, the enslaved people were conveyed across the Atlantic to Portugal, where they entered various sectors of Portuguese society. It is plausible that, during earlier phases of the trade, Portuguese vessels embarked with particularly large numbers of enslaved individuals from Benin, reflecting the region's centrality within the transatlantic slave trade networks. Saunders (1994) maintains "*em 1516 um funcionário régio sustentava que numa nau de aproximadamente 100 t ou 120 t tinha então carregado uns quatrocentos escravos em Benim embora os navios que habitualmente largavam de são Tomé para Lisboa carregassem apenas de cem a cento e cinquenta escravos acrescidos a uma grande carga de açúcar*" (Saunders, 1994, 32).

A royal official reported that a single ship departing from Benin could carry approximately four hundred enslaved individuals, whereas vessels leaving São Tomé for Lisbon typically transported between one hundred and one hundred and fifty captives. São Tomé functioned as an intermediary trading post, where enslaved people from the interior of the Benin Kingdom were sold before being conveyed onward by ship. Taken together, these accounts indicate that enslaved individuals from Benin were indeed transported to Portugal, with Lisbon serving as a principal destination. Magalhães (1997) notes that the majority of enslaved people in Portugal were concentrated in Lisbon or the southern region of Algarve, reflecting the logistical reality that Lisbon was the primary port for their disembarkation (Magalhães, 1997).

A further indication that enslaved individuals from Benin were brought to Portugal lies in the nature of their labour. Unlike the enslaved transported to the Americas, who were predominantly employed on plantations, those in Portugal were mainly engaged in domestic

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<sup>10</sup> The Casa da Mina originated from the Casa da Guiné, established in 1443 as a royal agency to oversee trade along the West African coast. With the foundation of São Jorge da Mina in 1482, it became known as the Casa da Guiné e Mina. In 1500, Dom Manuel I reorganised these bodies into the Casa da Índia, centralising royal administration of Portuguese overseas commerce in Africa, Asia, and beyond.

tasks. It is therefore plausible that the majority of these individuals were female, a supposition supported by historical accounts indicating that Oba Esigie (1516) prohibited the sale of male slaves, resulting in the Benin Kingdom primarily exporting women (Ryder 1977, 45). Female enslaved individuals would have been well-suited to domestic labour in Portuguese households, which required less physical exertion than agricultural work on plantations in the Americas. This distinction underscores both the gendered dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade and the specific roles assigned to enslaved people within different colonial contexts.

Henriques (2021) observes that Africans have been present in Portuguese society for centuries, performing a variety of tasks. However, because much of this labour was domestic rather than monumental, its physical traces are less visible compared to the enduring architectural and infrastructural contributions of the Arabs or Romans (Henriques 2021). Thomas (1997) further notes that enslaved Africans brought to Lisbon and other Portuguese cities engaged in a wide range of functions, and service helping in hospitals and monasteries (Thomas, 1997, 64). These accounts highlight the diverse roles of Africans in Portuguese urban life and the often under-recognised material and social contributions they made to society.

The visibility of the African presence in Portugal today remains fragile, largely because their integration occurred within the framework of everyday domestic and urban tasks. Unlike monumental works whose material traces endure over time, these activities left little lasting physical evidence. Moreover, Africans were frequently marginalised on the basis of racial difference, contributing to their social exclusion (Henriques 2021, 20). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the African presence in Portugal persisted from the fifteenth century onwards. Africans can also be identified in some Portuguese sculpture and monumental works dating from the sixteenth century, indicating that their contributions, while often overlooked, were nonetheless incorporated into the visual and cultural fabric of Portuguese society (see Figure IV 32, Appendix IV).

In a manner analogous to Luso-African ivories—whose identity is discerned through the synthesis of elements drawn from both African and Portuguese traditions—the Luso-African identity within the Portuguese population encompasses individuals of African descent who are integrated into Portuguese civilisation and hold Portuguese citizenship. The influence of

Edo–Portuguese interstate relations on the lived experiences of people in both Benin and Portugal has been the subject of significant scholarly attention. As discussed, these interactions yielded profound benefits and enduring impacts for both societies. Early contact between the two kingdoms played a pivotal role in fostering prosperity and in enriching cultural, religious, agricultural, and artistic practices, thereby contributing to the broader development of human society.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the cultural interactions between Benin and Portugal, focusing on artworks, language, agriculture, religion, technology, toponymy and identity. As the core of the thesis, this chapter presents the majority of the study’s findings on Edo-Portuguese intercultural exchange.

In the section on artworks, the chapter addressed the longstanding question of why Afro-Portuguese pieces display striking similarities. Using the *Portuguese patronage effect* hypothesis, it analysed examples such as Sapi-Portuguese and Benin-Portuguese oliphants, offering new insights that help bridge a gap in existing historiography.

Regarding language, the chapter showed that while the Portuguese introduced their language to local communities, they also learned African languages to communicate effectively. This mutual encounter facilitated the borrowing of words in both directions—from Portuguese to Edo, and from Edo to Portuguese creoles in São Tomé and Príncipe—and left enduring traces in Nigerian Pidgin English, still evident in contemporary usage.

In agriculture, the chapter highlighted reciprocal exchanges of flora and fauna: pepper, palm oil, and guinea fowl were taken from Benin to Portugal, while cassava, potatoes, and pineapples were introduced to Benin from the Atlantic. By tracing the use of Benin pepper in Portuguese cuisine—including *alheira* and royal dishes—the study addressed a gap in the historiography of the pepper trade.

The section on religion demonstrated a reciprocal influence, showing how European religious objects were produced with African materials and shaped European practices. Edo

religious and artistic traditions indirectly impacted Portuguese approaches to handling and preserving objects, reflecting a form of reverence unfamiliar in European contexts.

In technology exchange, the subheading documented 16th-century Benin cannons, reinforcing the historiography of military exchange and highlighting the economic and political benefits both societies derived from these transfers.

The subheading on toponymy highlighted the cultural exchange involved in adopting foreign names for cities. The African name *Bairro de Macambo* serves as an illustrative example, mirroring the reciprocal influence seen in the Portuguese names of Lagos and Porto Novo. This demonstrates how urban nomenclature reflects the intertwined cultural histories of the region.

Finally, in identity, the chapter revealed that Edo peoples contributed to the formation of Afro-Portuguese identity in Portugal, underscoring the dynamic and bidirectional nature of cultural exchange.

## **Chapter 4: The Evolving Relationship (Late 16th - 17th Century)**

### **The Decline of Edo-Portuguese Relations 1539-1641**

Ryder (1977) observes that by the 1530s, French incursions had begun to undermine the Portuguese monopoly along the West African coast, a shift that played a pivotal role in the gradual decline of Portuguese dominance in the region (Ryder 1977). Ediagbonya (2015) attributes the decline of Benin–Portuguese relations to a combination of factors: Benin’s refusal to adopt Christianity, the impact of adverse climatic conditions, and the failure of trade to deliver the anticipated economic benefits, resulting in unmet expectations on both sides (Ediagbonya 2015). Similarly, Metzsig (2016) emphasises that "the deepening of Portugal - Benin diplomatic relations failed because of different expectations on both sides. While the Portuguese hoped in vain to gain a Christian ally in West Africa; the Oba in Benin was disappointed due to denial of access to firearms" (Metzsig 2016, 52).

Collectively, these scholarly perspectives demonstrate that the erosion of the Edo–Portuguese alliance was not the result of a single failure, but rather a convergence of religious, economic, and strategic incompatibilities. The term “decline” here refers to a slowing down of relations between the two polities rather than their total collapse. This slowdown reduced the flow of trade and shaped the ways in which both rulers and ordinary people engaged with one another, rendering the relationship more guarded.

Building on this, the final chapter undertakes a comprehensive and critical examination of the multiple factors—religious, economic, strategic, and environmental—that contributed to the decline of these once-vibrant connections.

#### **4.1. The Arrival of Other European Powers and its impact on Edo-Portuguese relations:**

##### **The French in Benin**

The French were among the first Europeans to establish a presence along the West African coast, representing an early challenge to Portuguese commercial and political dominance. Ryder (1977, 68) notes that the Portuguese monopoly along the West African coast first faced disruption from the French, whose persistent incursions and acts of piracy date back to 1530. Supporting this, Blake (1969, 108) records that on 27 July 1530, the Dieppe merchant Jean Ango obtained a letter of marque against Portuguese shipping, granting French traders legal authority to recover their losses at the expense of the Portuguese. Ryder (1961) notes that around 1533, French interlopers began to appear at the coasts of Benin attacking Portuguese ships and breaking the Portuguese monopoly (Ryder 1961, 237). In 1533, two Portuguese vessels returning from the Mahin River to São Tomé were attacked and looted by French ships (ATT Corpo Cronologico, as cited in Ryder 1977, 68).

The French did not establish formal diplomatic relations with the monarchs of Benin; their activities were mainly commercial, focused on acquiring pepper for their own interests. However, the specific goods they brought for exchange with the Edo people, as well as the value of these transactions, remain unclear (Ryder 1977, 68).

Elugbe & Omamor (1991) maintain that the French made their first appearance on the Benin coast in 1539. Their subsequent direct engagement in commerce with Benin positioned them as rivals to the Portuguese, effectively undermining the latter's monopoly over regional trade (Elugbe & Omamor 1991, 7).

The influence of the French in Benin and southern Nigeria is far less significant than that of the Portuguese. Since no formal or well-documented relationship was established between the French and the Benin Kingdom, their cultural impact appears to have been minimal. This limited influence is reflected in the small number of French loanwords that entered Nigerian Pidgin English. In terms of religion, French missionaries, alongside other European efforts, made early

attempts at evangelisation in West Africa. As Isichei (1977) observes, it was during the 19th century that sustained missionary activity became more prominent, particularly under English and Protestant societies. French missions, by contrast, developed more gradually and were largely concentrated in selected regions, including territories that later became part of Dahomey.

The arrival of the French introduced Benin to an alternative European trading partner at a time when the Portuguese had long dominated regional commerce. Although the Edo elite were more familiar with the Portuguese and their language, the French entered the market pursuing similar interests, seeking ivory, pepper, and other commodities traditionally exported to Portugal. Their presence created a new atmosphere of competition, reshaping the established dynamics of trade along the Benin coast. Ryder (1977, 69) observes that the Oba and his chiefs clearly recognised that they were dealing with a distinct European group rather than their long-standing Portuguese counterparts, and they adopted a pragmatic attitude of openness, willing to sell to any foreign buyer.

While French involvement did not constitute the primary cause of the decline of Edo–Portuguese relations, it nevertheless contributed to the gradual weakening of Portugal’s privileged position. Documentation on French activities in Benin is relatively limited; by contrast, the Dutch and the English exerted a more decisive influence on the erosion of Portuguese dominance, both through the disruption of Portugal’s trade monopoly and more assertive challenges to its regional power.

### **The Dutch in West Africa (Benin 16th-17th centuries)**

The Dutch entry into West Africa could be understood as part of the broader Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648) against Spain and Portugal, during which Dutch merchants targeted Iberian shipping. In order to clearly understand the unfolding of events, how Portugal becomes part of Spain's unending wars with the Dutch, at this point it will be necessary for an explanation which clearly links many significant historical events to the other. In 1578 the Portuguese monarch King Sabastian I, lost his life in the Battle of Alcácer in Morocco. This led to the absence of a

direct heir to the Portuguese throne. Since he had no surviving children or siblings, the throne was contested, leading to a dynastic crisis. Eventually, Philip II of Spain claimed the crown, beginning the Iberian Union (1580–1640), during which Portugal was ruled by the Spanish monarch. This led Portugal to lose her independence in foreign policy and Portugal inherited Spain's enemies; the Dutch and English.

This political realignment unfolded alongside a broader transformation in European maritime ambitions, as emerging powers such as the Dutch, English, and French acquired increasingly sophisticated navigational skills and naval technology. In 1581, following their revolt against Spanish domination, the Dutch declared independence through the Act of Abjuration. However, this sovereignty was not recognised internationally, and conflict with Spain persisted until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Motivated by the need to assert their political autonomy as well as by an expanding maritime vision, the Dutch took to the seas not only in pursuit of exploration and commercial gain but also in direct challenge to the Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) monopoly over overseas trade and navigation—a monopoly rooted in the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494.

The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494 between Portugal and Spain under papal arbitration, was designed to settle disputes over overseas exploration and territorial claims. It drew an imaginary line about 370 leagues west of the Cabo Verde Islands: Portugal was granted rights to territories east of the line, including Africa, Asia, and later Brazil, while Spain was allocated lands to the west, mainly in the Americas. However, as maritime knowledge and navigational skills advanced, other European powers—particularly the Dutch, English, and French began to challenge this arrangement. The treaty, intended to preserve Iberian dominance, increasingly lost its effectiveness as these rivals ignored its provisions and asserted their own claims in Africa and beyond.

In 1593, Dutch merchant networks organised expeditions to Guinea on the West African coast, trading in goods of interest with local merchants and establishing a well-grounded commercial network (Ryder 1977, 84). These ventures not only expanded Dutch influence in the region but also directly challenged the Portuguese monopoly, signalling a shift in the balance of

power along the West African trade routes. Dutch trade soon extended to São Jorge da Mina and Benin, presenting a growing challenge to Portuguese dominance. In response, the Portuguese sought to exclude rival merchants from these centres, particularly at São Jorge da Mina, in an effort to maintain their monopoly over regional trade (Vila-Santa 2021, 5).

Dutch merchants rejected the authority of the Treaty of Tordesillas, asserting the principle that “the sea is free” (*mare liberum*). They argued that no nation had the right to prevent others from navigating the seas or trading with whom they chose (Grotius 1609, 7). Building on their challenge to Portuguese dominance in West Africa, the Dutch expanded their maritime ambitions further east. In 1595, Cornelis de Houtman led the first Dutch voyage to the East Indies, targeting Portuguese-controlled spice trade routes (Houtman et al. 1598/1745).

In 1621, the Dutch established the Dutch West India Company (WIC), formalising their commercial ambitions in Africa. Their approach in Benin differed markedly from that of the Portuguese. While the Portuguese built diplomatic relations and engaged in long-term cultural and religious exchanges, the Dutch focused almost entirely on trade. Their interactions with the Edo were largely transactional, aimed at securing commodities rather than developing lasting political or cultural ties.

According to Dapper (1668), the Dutch traded a wide range of goods with the people of Benin, including gold and silver clothing, red sheets and tapestries, drinking pots with red rims, oranges, lemons, and other fruits, red velvet, yellow copper bracelets, violet flowers, fine corals, iron bars, and crystal stones (Dapper 1668, 310). The table below summarises the key items that the Dutch brought to Benin for trade.

**Table 4. Dutch items of Trade With Benin as noted by Dapper 1668**

Category	Items
Textiles	Gold and silver cloth, red cloth and trefoil, red velvet, Groffier flannel, Harlem fabrics (very gummed and flowered), all kinds of fine cotton linen
Metal Goods / Jewelry	Yellow copper bracelets (weighing five and a half ounces)
Glass, Beads & Trinkets	Red glass earrings, Criftaline stones
Decorative Objects	Grilled mirrors
Spirits & Food	Oranges, lemons, other candied green fruits
Household / Utility	Drinking pots with red stripes on the edges
Currency / Exchange	Boesjes or shells from the India used as money
Coral / Precious Material	Fine coral
Flowers / Dyes	Lavender violet flowers
Metal / Raw Material	Iron bars

The table above first identifies the textiles imported by the Dutch along many items. Significantly, Dutch commercial engagement with Benin expanded the spectrum of European goods available to the Edo, thereby extending beyond the range of commodities hitherto supplied primarily by the Portuguese. Textiles, in particular, constituted one of the principal categories of Dutch trade. While the Portuguese brought clothes to Benin, these were not generally intended as trade items. Instead, clothing frequently appears in the records as part of the gifts the Portuguese presented to the Oba and his chiefs. Such offerings included Indian textiles and finished garments, among them a marlota—a short cloak fashioned from orange taffeta and white satin—together with six linen shirts and a length of blue Indian silk (Metzig 2016, 36).

The Dutch introduced a more diversified and consumer-oriented range of textiles, including luxury fabrics and printed cloths. Unlike the largely gift-oriented distribution of clothing by the Portuguese, these imports were made available for purchase, enabling local populations to access new materials alongside the traditional garments produced within Benin. Ryder (1977) observes that Portuguese ships occasionally carried clothing intended primarily to cover their enslaved labourers. With the arrival of the Dutch and later the English, however, the scale of textile imports increased dramatically, with thousands of clothes introduced not only for local use in Benin but also for resale along other parts of the African coast (Ryder 1977, 93).

While Portuguese influence in Benin and broader Nigeria is well documented, Dutch contact with Benin appears to have left comparatively little imprint. There is no evidence of enduring linguistic influence, nor any significant impact on religious or artistic practices. The most tangible legacy of Dutch engagement, however, lies in the introduction of Dutch textiles, which gradually became incorporated into local material culture and consumption patterns. These textiles continue to be regarded throughout Nigeria today as high-quality, prestigious, and culturally significant, commonly referred to as ‘Holland Wax’.<sup>11</sup>

Dapper (1668) further elaborates on the goods the Dutch received in exchange with Benin. These included stripped cotton textiles, which were subsequently sold on the Gold Coast, and enslaved women, as the Edo reportedly refused to sell men (Dapper 1668, 310). Like the Portuguese, the Dutch also placed considerable value on pepper, which remained one of the region’s most valued commodities (Ryder 1977, 85). Hence the Dutch exchanged the clothes, mirrors, flowers, drinking pots among other items listed in the table for Benin pepper, ivory and slaves.

The Edo were already familiar with a range of Portuguese imports, such as coral, beads, small metal objects, brass, bracelets, cowries, and manillas. Dutch trade, however, introduced novel items—including spirits (notably brandy) and mirrored glass—that were previously absent in Benin’s material culture. According to the Dutch ship captain Dierick Ruiters (1575–1640),

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<sup>11</sup> Holland Wax, refers to brightly patterned cotton fabrics that originated from Dutch wax-resist dyeing techniques. Introduced to West Africa through Dutch trade in the 17th century, these textiles became widely popular for their vibrant designs, durability, and cultural significance. They are now an integral part of fashion and ceremonial attire across Nigeria and other parts of West Africa. Also simply known as “Holland” it is usually the most expensive fabric in the market, it portrays the prestige of African women who use it in sewing their clothes.

brandy and wine were among the goods exchanged—as Ryder (1977, 86) observes, while wine failed to establish a foothold due to the existing availability of palm wine, brandy assumed a more enduring role. The adoption of brandy likely extended beyond mere consumption, becoming associated with elite rituals and ceremonial occasions, while mirrored glass may have influenced palace decoration and personal adornment, signalling both status and engagement with European aesthetics. These introductions illustrate how Dutch contact, although limited in linguistic or religious influence, shaped selective aspects of Edo material life and participation in broader West African and Atlantic commercial networks.

### **The Dutch West India Company in West Africa (17th Century)**

Established in 1621, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) was a semi-state corporate entity chartered by the States-General of the Netherlands. Its mandate encompassed the promotion and protection of Dutch commercial and territorial interests across the Americas and West Africa. Unlike private merchants, the WIC operated with extensive military, diplomatic, and economic authority, enabling it to negotiate treaties, establish forts, and, when necessary, engage in warfare to safeguard Dutch interests (States General of the United Netherlands 1621). The presence of the WIC in Benin altered the balance of European influence along the West African coast. Through the establishment of Dutch trade networks, the Edo were able to engage strategically with competing European powers, leveraging this position to secure more favourable terms for commodities such as ivory, pepper, and enslaved captives (Ryder 1977). The company's fortifications and armed vessels provided a relatively secure framework for Dutch commerce along the coast. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Benin maintained ultimate authority over inland trade routes and local markets, ensuring that control of regional commerce remained firmly in Edo hands.

The Portuguese persisted in their efforts to root out Dutch and other European competitors from the region. In response to these challenges, the Dutch established their own fortifications near the Portuguese castle São Jorge da Mina. Bachman (1969) notes that, confronted with vigorous Portuguese opposition to Dutch trade in 1612, the States-General commissioned the construction of Fort Nassau at Moure, situated slightly to the east of the Portuguese fort (Bachman 1969, 48-49).

## **The Dutch Capture of São Jorge da Mina, 1637**

For nearly a century and a half, the Portuguese had ruled the Gold Coast from the formidable fortress of São Jorge da Mina, constructed in 1482. Strategically positioned along the Atlantic shore, São Jorge da Mina was not merely a trading post—it epitomised Portuguese dominance in West Africa. From this bastion, caravels transported gold, ivory, pepper, and enslaved individuals across the seas, underpinned by the authority of the Treaty of Tordesillas.

Kenny (1982) observes that throughout the 16th century, the Portuguese successfully resisted English and French attempts to establish trade along the West African coast. However, following Dutch independence, the Dutch began to assert their presence in the region, including the construction of a fort at Moure to secure their commercial interests. The Portuguese tried to kick them out but it was in vain (Kenny 1982). The Dutch mounted their first attack on the Portuguese fortress São Jorge da Mina in 1607. Between 1615 and 1625, the fortress endured multiple assaults, including three separate attacks in 1615 and a major offensive in 1625 involving some 2,000 Dutch and African soldiers.

In June 1637, A Dutch fleet under Colonel Hans Coine arrived on the West African coast to attack the Portuguese at São Jorge da Mina. The force, which included 800 soldiers, 500 seamen, and up to 6,000 native auxiliaries, landed near Cape Coast on July 24th. Their initial objective was to capture the hill of St. Jago, which commanded the Castle of São Jorge da Mina. After a failed first assault that resulted in heavy Dutch casualties, a second, more successful detachment under Major Bon Garzon took the hill with minimal losses. The Portuguese briefly recaptured the hill before being repulsed, and the Dutch then used the position to bombard the Castle (Ellis 1893, 43).

The Dutch advanced to assault the town itself but were forced to withdraw due to heavy fire from the Castle. The next day, Colonel Coine demanded the Castle's surrender, threatening to put the garrison to the sword if they resisted. The Portuguese governor requested a three-day truce to gain time, but Coine, low on provisions, refused. Faced with an impending assault, the Portuguese garrison quickly surrendered (Barbot 1732, 166; Ellis 1893, 43).

The terms of capitulation were harsh. The Portuguese governor, garrison, and civilians were allowed to leave with only one suit of clothing and no weapons. All goods, gold, merchandise, and the majority of slaves were handed over to the Dutch. The Portuguese and their families were put on a Dutch squadron to be transported to the Island of São Tomé, marking the end of the Portuguese monopoly in the region (Barbot 1732, 166; Ellis 1893, 44).

The fall of São Jorge da Mina marked a pivotal shift in West African-European relations. The Dutch acquisition of the fort enabled them to dominate the gold and slave trade along the Gold Coast. This strategic foothold facilitated their expansion into the Bight of Benin, offering kingdoms like Benin alternatives to Portuguese trade partnerships. Consequently, Benin could leverage this competition to secure more favorable terms for copper, textiles, and luxury goods, thereby reshaping the region's diplomatic and economic landscape (Ryder 1977).

In 1641, another Dutch fleet, dispatched from their Brazilian base, successfully captured Luanda and São Tomé from the Portuguese. However, the momentum soon shifted. Following 1645, a marked decline in profits from the Guinea trade weakened the foundations of Dutch expansion in West Africa and Brazil. This reversal enabled the Portuguese to regain control of São Tomé and Luanda in 1648 and ultimately expel the Dutch from Brazil by 1654 (Boxer 1952, 253; Ryder 1977, 86).

By 1641, alongside the waning Portuguese influence in Benin due to the failure of their evangelising mission, Oba Ohuan's interest in Portugal was diminishing as he increasingly welcomed the commercial opportunities offered by other European powers. The interventions of the Dutch significantly undermined Portuguese control in the Gulf of Guinea, particularly at São Jorge da Mina, while simultaneously securing Dutch dominance over maritime routes to the Cape of Good Hope (Ryder 1977).

In 1648 the Peace of Westphalia ended the Eighty Years' War (Spain vs. Dutch) and the Thirty Years' War (religious conflicts in Europe). The Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) – a protracted struggle between Spain and the Dutch Republic. The Dutch sought independence from Spanish rule, fueled by religious tensions (Protestantism vs. Catholicism) and economic interests. The war had devastated much of the Low Countries, and its resolution allowed the Dutch

Republic to be formally recognised as an independent state, paving the way for its rise as a major maritime and commercial power.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) – a complex conflict largely fought in the Holy Roman Empire, initially between Protestant and Catholic states. Over time, it evolved into a broader political struggle involving most European powers, including France, Spain, Sweden, and the Dutch. The war was devastating, causing massive population loss and economic disruption across Central Europe.

The Peace of Westphalia introduced several transformative principles: Sovereignty of states: It recognised the political independence of states to govern without external interference, a key foundation for modern international law. Religious tolerance: Certain rights were granted to minority religious groups within states, easing sectarian tensions. Territorial adjustments: The treaties redrew European borders, transferring territories and formalising the independence of the Dutch Republic and Switzerland (German History in Documents and Images n.d.).

In broader context, the Peace of Westphalia **reshaped the European balance of power**. Spain's influence declined, while the Dutch Republic and France emerged stronger. For maritime powers like the Dutch, it meant freedom to expand overseas trade without the constant threat of Spanish intervention, accelerating the growth of the Dutch commercial empire. Although these events may initially appear unrelated to Benin, they significantly influenced Edo–Portuguese relations. The Dutch presence in Benin effectively began to supplant Portugal in its trading relationship with the kingdom, providing the Edo with a source of European goods.

This shift allowed the kingdom to exercise greater control over commerce, access a wider range of commodities, and capitalise on the rivalry among European powers to strengthen its economic position. It is important to note that, following the Treaty of Westphalia, the separation of religion and state in Europe was increasingly recognised, and religious tolerance emphasised. As a result, the Pope no longer possessed the authority to intervene in the political affairs of European states, nor could he dictate their religious or political decisions within the framework of the treaties.

As discussed in the section on religious diplomacy, the Papal Bulls had long provided Portugal with an ideological rationale for its territorial expansion in Africa. However, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) introduced a decisive shift in the European political landscape: by affirming the principle of state sovereignty and curtailing the universal authority of the papacy, it undermined the utility of Papal endorsement as a means of legitimising overseas expansion. For Portugal, as for other Catholic states, this shift required a move away from depending on Papal decrees and towards using secular diplomatic and legal means to justify and secure territorial claims in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

By affirming state sovereignty and curtailing papal authority over secular rulers, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) significantly diminished the Pope's capacity to intervene on Portugal's behalf in European or colonial disputes. Consequently, other European powers—such as the Dutch, English, and French—were able to pursue their interests with greater autonomy, unencumbered by the threat of papal sanction. This shift intensified competition in overseas trade and colonial ventures, contributing to the gradual decline of Portuguese influence in West African trade networks and in its relations with the Kingdom of Benin during the 17th century.

Below is a table to summarise the major events highlighted in this subheading

**Table 5. Major Events Highlighted in This Discussion**

<b>Step</b>	<b>Event</b>
1	Death of King Sebastian of Portugal in Morocco (1578)
2	Absence of a direct heir to the Portuguese throne
3	Iberian Union (1580–1640): Portugal brought under Spanish crown
4	Portugal loses independent foreign policy
5	Portugal inherits Spain's enemies (e.g., Dutch Republic, England)
6	Dutch attack São Jorge da Mina (1637) and other Portuguese strongholds
7	Crippling of Portugal's power and trade dominance
8	Weakening of Portuguese monopoly in Benin and wider West Africa
9	Peace of Westphalia (1648)
10	End of the Eighty Years' War (Spain vs. Dutch)
11	End of the Thirty Years' War (religious conflicts in Europe)
12	Recognition of state sovereignty → Religion separated from politics, Pope loses authority over secular affairs
13	New balance of power in Europe, affecting overseas trade and colonial strategies
14	Portugal loses monopoly of trade in West Africa and Benin
15	Edo-Portuguese relations decline

## The English in Benin

Aremu (2018) highlights that Benin's first contact with the British occurred in 1553 when the British crown sent two ships, *Primrose* and *Lion*, to the Benin River. The Oba of Benin warmly received the English and agreed to establish trade relations, exchanging pepper and enslaved individuals (Aremu 2018, 79). However, during the mid-16th century, the British faced significant challenges, including outbreaks of fever. Many crew members, including the captain, succumbed to the illness, leading Queen Mary to prohibit trips to Benin in 1556. Trade resumed later, and by 1591, British merchants gathered a cargo comprising 589 barrels of pepper, 150 tusks of ivory, and 32 barrels of palm oil, marking the beginning of sustained British-Benin trade relations (Aremu 2018, 79).

Welsh (1588) notes that during one voyage, the English obtained 159 *serons* or sacks of pepper and elephant teeth (ivory) from Benin. The crew brought with them a variety of goods, including linen and woollen cloth, assorted ironwork, copper manillas or bracelets, glass beads, and corals. Among the commodities taken back to England were palm oil, pepper, ivory, intricately woven cotton-wool cloth, and garments made from the bark of palm trees (Welsh 1588 in Hakluyt 1889, 316–317). Pepper initially attracted British interest, but over time other commodities, including ivory and enslaved individuals, assumed increasing significance in trade with Benin.

At Ughoton, the British purchased enslaved people at prices reportedly twice those paid by the Dutch, highlighting both the competitive nature of European commerce and the value placed on human labour in trans-Atlantic trade networks (Aremu 2018, 80). The British introduced various trade goods, including bracelets, necklaces, red caps, small glasses, belts, knives, hatchets, coats of mail, small bells, drinking glasses, mirrors, ironware, glass beads, and cowries (Aremu 2018, 83). This price differential suggests that the Edo exercised considerable agency, strategically negotiating with multiple European partners to secure better terms and extract maximum economic benefit from their resources.

**Table 6. Goods Exported from Benin to Britain**

Category	Items / Goods	Notes
Spices and Foodstuffs	Pepper	The primary commodity of interest in early trade
Ivory	Tusks	Highly valued in Europe for luxury goods
Palm products	Palm oil (barrels)	Used in Europe for cooking and soap
Human beings	Enslaved individuals	Purchased at premium prices, e.g., at Ughoton, sometimes twice what the Dutch offered (Aremu 2018, 80)
Coral	Fine coral beads	Used for royal regalia and European luxury markets

**Table 7. Imports from Britain to Benin**

Category	Items / Goods	Notes
Textiles & Clothing	Bracelets, necklaces, red caps, coats of mail, belts	Used as prestige items in courtly and ceremonial settings
Metalware & Tools	Knives, hatchets, ironware	Functional and for status symbols
Glass & Trinkets	Small glasses, mirrors, small bells, glass beads	Luxury and decorative items
Currency	Cowries	Medium of exchange to supplement local trade
Weapons	Firearms and ammunition	Unlike the Portuguese, the British supplied arms without objection (Aremu 2018, 83)

In contrast to the Portuguese, the British were willing to provide arms to Benin. They also set up institutions, such as the Court of Equity, which cooperated with local authorities to secure and protect British trading interests (Aremu 2018, 83).

### **Royal African Company (Founded 1660, Chartered 1672)**

A key English trading entity in relation to Benin was the Royal African Company (RAC). Founded in 1660 and formally chartered in 1672 by Charles II, the RAC held a monopoly over English trade along the West African coast. English merchants were encouraged by the words of the monarch, His Majesty King Charles II, to embark on commercial and exploratory ventures not only in Africa but also across the Americas.

In 1709, the Royal African Company operated under a policy in which the Crown encouraged English subjects to travel to the African coast at their own expense. They were invited to acquire lands—by purchase or conquest—build forts and settlements, and work to regain lost trade. In return, the king promised to grant them full rights over these lands, forts, and any trade they recovered. Acting on this mandate, English merchants ventured to Africa, established trading posts, took control of various territories, and brought back large quantities of gold from Guinea (The Royal African Company 1709, 1). This policy therefore affected the region, including Benin and the wider West Africa, leading to an increased presence of English merchants, shaping local trade patterns, and influencing interactions between European traders and African communities.

The RAC was heavily involved in the slave trade along the Slave Coast and in Benin, among other polities. This involvement inevitably created competition with other European trading companies, including the Dutch West India Company mentioned earlier. Law (2002) notes that the RAC faced rivalry from two English interlopers, as well as one French and one Portuguese vessel, highlighting the intense contest for control over trade in the region (Law 2002). The RAC notes that other commodities in the trade included gold, ivory, dyewoods, and wax. The company also maintained forts and “factories” along the Gold Coast; however, in

Benin, trade was conducted through Ughoton and local intermediaries rather than through permanent English forts. The company lost its monopoly over African trade in 1698 and soon went into decline (Royal African Company 1709).

The arrival of new European traders created intense competition with the Portuguese, who typically responded by attempting to drive them away. These new entrants offered goods at lower prices to local communities, undermining Portuguese commercial influence. Kenny (1982) supports this observation, noting that the Dutch in particular sold goods at lower prices and of higher quality at São Jorge da Mina. Such competition not only challenged Portuguese dominance but also reshaped trade networks and economic relationships across the Bight of Benin and neighbouring regions. When local communities could obtain goods more cheaply from the new European traders, they naturally preferred to trade with them. Ellis (1893) highlights that this posed a serious challenge to the Portuguese monopoly, particularly from English and French adventurers who offered lower-priced goods. In response, the Portuguese frequently attempted to expel their rivals from the coast, striving to maintain control over trade and safeguard their commercial interests (Ellis 1893).

The Portuguese forbade local communities from trading with these newcomers, punishing those who disobeyed by destroying towns. To counter the better-armed rival ships, they dispatched two large naval vessels from Portugal and stationed several galleys at São Jorge da Mina. These measures were intended to reassert control over trade and eliminate competition along the coast. The Portuguese captured and sank French and English ships; for instance, in 1582, they seized *La Esperance* and killed its crew in a brutal manner. A ransom of one hundred crowns was promised for every English or French head that local communities could deliver. As a result, the natives sometimes appeared to welcome these ships ashore, only to turn on them violently (Ellis 1893, 36). All these measures were aimed at discouraging the emerging maritime powers and securing exclusive Portuguese control over trade in West Africa.

Contrary to the claim that other Europeans sold cheaper and higher-quality goods as noted in (Kenny 1982), Portuguese captain João Roiz Roxo reported around 1618 that local communities preferred Portuguese goods over Dutch ones, valuing both their quality and price.

This suggests that Portuguese trade retained a competitive edge in certain areas despite growing European rivalry.

The extract from this report is provided below for reference:

*“...Tudo quáto os olamdezes leuao àquela costa a ueder he falço e contrafeito, e os negros se queyxao disto, dizemdo que se nós tiueramos resgate e que ueder, que antes acod[i]nao a nos que aos olamdezes, ipr omde se se mandarao a este castello muj tos uinhos e roupas e outras fazemdas, damdose por ora por preços acomodados...” (Brásio 1955, 6:345)*

**English translation (my own translation from the Portuguese):**

Everything that the Dutch brought to that coast to sell was false and counterfeit, and the Africans complained about this, stating that if we had goods available for trade, they would turn to us rather than to the Dutch. Consequently, large quantities of wine, clothing, and other goods were sent to this fortress, being sold, for the time being, at favourable prices.

It is important to critically assess historical sources. Roxo’s account—as a Portuguese captain—likely reflects his own commercial and national biases, potentially overstating African traders’ preference for Portuguese goods. The preceding Portuguese actions against European rivals indicate that such accounts formed part of a broader strategic effort. By depicting competitors unfavourably, the Portuguese aimed to reinforce their commercial dominance on the Gold Coast, bolster their reputation as reliable partners, and secure preferential treatment from African traders within a highly competitive market.

The arrival of Dutch, English, French, and other European traders introduced competition that challenged Portuguese dominance on the Gold Coast. Local Edo traders were able to compare prices, quality, and reliability, which reduced their dependence on Portuguese goods. Consequently, Portuguese influence and preferential trading relations with the Kingdom of Benin gradually declined over the course of the 17th century.

## 4.2. Benin's Refusal to accept Christianity

In the section on religious diplomacy, much emphasis was placed on the oft-repeated assurance that Christianity would grant Benin access to firearms, as the Portuguese restricted such weapons to Christian allies. This requirement, however, did not constitute a binding condition for the continuation of Edo–Portuguese diplomacy. The more critical issue, therefore, is to consider how Benin’s refusal to adopt Christianity as a state creed may have contributed to the eventual weakening, or even the decline of Edo–Portuguese relations in a broader sense. The Franciscan missionaries’ negative experiences reported in the late 1530s reveal that Portuguese influence was no longer welcomed unconditionally. Their difficulties show that Benin actively limited foreign interference in religious and political affairs, signalling a strategic assertion of autonomy that strained relations with Portugal.

On one hand, the treatment of Portuguese visitors suggests that Benin’s refusal to adopt Christianity gradually affected relations: early accounts, such as Duarte Pires recounts the Oba’s generosity and respect, noting that he was even invited to dine at court, while later missionaries reported hostility, hunger and mistreatment. On the other hand, this shift was not simply a sign of deteriorating ties; it reflected the Oba’s careful distinction between visitors’ intentions. Traders and envoys posed no threat to Edo’s spiritual or political order, whereas missionaries sought to impose a foreign religion, directly challenging authority and eliciting a more cautious or hostile response. As Metzsig (2016) notes, these differences in reception reveal how Benin balanced diplomacy with the protection of its religious and political autonomy, shaping the interactions between Dom João III of Portugal and Oba Orhogbua of Benin (Metzsig 2016).

The Franciscans’ 1539 letter indicates that by the late 1530s, relations between Benin and Portugal had already begun to sour, reflecting mutual disappointment between the two kingdoms. The following section presents key excerpts from the missionaries’ correspondence to Dom João III of Portugal, dated 1539. Some excerpts are provided alongside the original Portuguese text, drawn from Brásio (1953, 2: 79).

The Franciscan priests—Master Miguel, Friar António, and Friar Francisco—reported to the Portuguese monarch, who had sent them on a Catholic mission to Benin. Having spent

over a year there, they expressed complete doubt that the Oba had converted to Christianity. Instead, they observed that he continued to engage in human sacrifices, idolatrous rituals, and nightly invocations to malevolent forces. According to the priests, the Oba still sacrificed his people to “the enemy of man,” and on occasions when he summoned the missionaries, he would be anointed with human blood while practicing other superstitions and maintaining various abominations.

The Oba received them coldly, knowing they brought no gifts of earthly value and offered only spiritual benefits—things he did not appreciate. “*ho noso recibymento na foy cõ muyto cõtetamento, por saber que lhe na trazíamos dadiuas temporaés: desistimado as sprituaés, né nuca fez delias ha cota que diuera: se as bem*” (Brásio 1953, 2: 79).

The missionaries reported that, although the letter from the King of Portugal was presented with great ceremony—kissing and bowing—the Oba threw it into a basket on his left side without reading it. He ignored the missionaries for three months before finally granting them an audience. “*njsso lhe fazia sua carta, que beijado ha a pôdoa sobre nossas cabeças cõ muyto acatamento lhe deemos, nã reço beo como diuera e ha laçou e hüa coquina ou caxeta que tinha ao lado esquerdo, dõde a no abrio senã day ha tres meses, pera o que nos chamaram;*” (Brásio 1953, 2: 80)

The missionaries were confined under guard in a house filled with idols and fetishes and were not permitted to leave. *Pos nos per ospedes e casas getios co muytos idolos e feitçeiros e guardas sobre nós, dode todos pas per çima de nós, de noite e de dia..*” (Brásio 1953, 2: 80)

Their belongings were stolen and they were treated harshly by the Oba’s men, often receiving insufficient food. On several occasions, they were forced to sell what little they had to survive and avoid starvation. “*ha nossa vida hé vender tudo quanto trouxemos pera saluarmos ha vida da fame*” (Brásio 1953, 2: 80).

That year, the region was suffering from hunger caused by drought, and the missionaries received no charitable support. They also noted that the French had taken all of their provisions

the previous year, which were meant to arrive via commercial ships. “*e ajnda esse nos roubara os frãçeses todo ho ordenado do ano passado, que nos nauios do trato*”(Brásio 1953, 2: 80).

The missionaries requested the Oba’s permission to return to the king with a letter, but he refused, insisting that they could not leave without an ambassador from his court to carry his message—effectively treating them as his captives. “*ele nola negou e disse que nã aviamos de hir de quá sem ebaixador de v. a. cõ carta sua, e quer dizer que estamos per seus cativo*”(Brásio 1953, 2: 80).

The missionaries noted that the Oba had been instructed in the mystery of the cross and was said to have converted to Christianity alongside his brothers through the efforts of a priest who had visited earlier. However, the Oba had returned to idolatry and remained deeply committed to diabolical practices, showing no intention of abandoning them. The missionaries observed that he took pleasure in the misfortunes of Christians, which explained the harsh treatment they endured—so severe that they considered it a miracle that they survived.

The missionaries requested by the wounds of Christ that the Portuguese crown send an armada through the French that come to the river which could rescue them or by way of the island, “*pollo que pede os ditos padres a v. a., pelas chagas de Christo, que lhes socorra e se mãdar armada chegar a este Rio per os frãçezes que a ele ve, que dee é Regimento ao capitão dela que daqui nos tire,*” they pleaded and hoped it could be done faster since they were afraid of the fetish and idolatries of the Oba, because it appeared like if the Oba’s fetish requested him to sacrifice the missionaries they feared he could do so.

The narratives of hardship described above illustrate how Benin distinguished between different types of Portuguese visitors. Duarte Pires, a diplomatic envoy, enjoyed freedom in the palace and dined with the Oba’s son, while the Franciscan priests were confined, deprived of food, and subjected to harsh treatment. This contrast was not simply a matter of timing but reflected a deeper reality: Benin consistently resisted the imposition of Christianity. Political and commercial envoys were accommodated, whereas missionaries—whose presence threatened the kingdom’s spiritual and political order—faced suspicion and restriction.

The Oba and his subjects actively defended their beliefs, refusing to allow foreign influence to alter their spiritual traditions or to participate passively in the propagation of Christianity. Religion thus emerged as a significant factor in the growing tensions with Portugal, shaping both the treatment of visitors and the broader trajectory of diplomatic relations.

Early missionary efforts met with a few successes; nevertheless, the Oba consistently reverted to traditional religious practices, including sacrificial rituals. This persistent refusal to embrace Christianity contributed to Portuguese frustration with Benin and became a factor in the decline of trade between the two polities. As Metzsig (2016, 41) observes, this dynamic led the Portuguese monarch to lose interest in Benin as an African ally. The episode illustrates how relations between Portugal and Benin evolved but soon deteriorated, setting the stage for Benin's subsequent interactions with other European powers.

Therefore, a central factor in the deterioration of relations between Portugal and the Benin Kingdom was religion. Portugal had limited understanding of Benin's spiritual beliefs and cultural sensitivities, particularly the profound significance of the Oba's divine status and the political implications of religious conversion.

This lack of awareness was compounded by the Papal bull restricting the provision of firearms to Christian allies, which created unmet expectations and frustration for the Benin Oba and Portuguese crown. Consequently, the Portuguese remained dissatisfied with the Oba's partial engagement with Christianity, fostering mistrust and contributing to the souring of interstate relations.

This episode underscores the importance of studying the history, language, religious beliefs, and cultural norms of diplomatic partners. In this view, effective international relations require recognition of cultural diversity and religious difference, rather than attempts to impose one's own beliefs as the basis for engagement.

### 4.3. The West Africa's Climate and Disease Environment

Christopher Columbus described the African climate as a very harsh one, with a sun that was fierce and burning (Columbus 1493/1870, 133). Hegel (1848) similarly characterised it as hostile to Europeans, even describing it as “poisonous” (Hegel 1848, 114). Godinho (1981) notes that during the reign of Dom João III, the Portuguese were compelled to abandon their trading factory at Ughoton due to the unhealthy climate, although trade in the region continued (Godinho 1981, 15).

While the climate and diseases were not a direct cause of the decline in Edo–Portuguese relations, they significantly discouraged sustained European engagement. The of Ughoton was notorious for its high mortality rate; for instance, the early explorer João de Aveiro died there, illustrating the risks faced by Europeans attempting to trade in the region (Ryder 1977). This inhospitable environment was further evidenced by the high death rates reported among Portuguese personnel during the missions of 1504–1506 (Aremu and Ediagbonya 2018).

Pacheco Pereira observed that the rivers in the region were “very unhealthy because of the fever which is grievous to the white men, especially in the winter of this country” (Esmeraldo 140 as cited in Ryder 1977, 32; Aremu & Ediagbonya 2018).

From the late fifteenth century onwards, European sailors and traders frequently referred to the West African coast as “the white man’s grave.” The low-lying lagoons, mangrove swamps, and humid climate of the Bight of Benin created ideal breeding conditions for *Anopheles* mosquitoes, the vectors of malaria, as well as for water-borne diseases such as dysentery. Europeans arriving in the region, lacking prior exposure, had no immunological protection against these illnesses. During the early modern period, European crews operating on the Guinea coast faced some of the deadliest mortality rates globally.

Aremu (2018, 79) records that during the English voyage of 1553, “the crew members, including the captain of the ship and ninety-eight others, died from this sickness,” prompting Queen Mary to prohibit further voyages.

One specific disease which affected Europeans in Africa was Malaria (*Plasmodium falciparum*): The most lethal strain of malaria, *Plasmodium falciparum*, was endemic in the lagoons and low-lying regions of Benin. Its prevalence, combined with the humid, swampy environment, created exceptionally high risks for Europeans who lacked prior exposure or immunological resistance. Koschorke, Ludwig, and Ziegenbalg (2007, 49) note that malaria was responsible for numerous deaths among European missionaries in Africa, highlighting the deadly impact of tropical diseases on early European efforts to engage politically, commercially, and religiously in the region.

Climate and disease had an indirect impact on Edo–Portuguese relations, but they were not the primary causes of decline. Even setting aside other factors—such as the rise of competing European maritime powers and the failure to convert Benin to Christianity—environmental and health challenges alone would not have been sufficient to drive the Portuguese away or to deteriorate relations. This interpretation is supported by comparisons with other African polities, such as Angola and the Kingdom of Kongo. Despite sharing similar climates and exposure to tropical diseases, the Portuguese maintained active engagement with these regions, demonstrating that factors beyond environmental conditions, particularly political, commercial, and religious dynamics, were decisive in shaping their relations with Benin.

Experiences in other African polities suggest that Europeans could adapt to such conditions. Research on Angola, for instance, highlights extensive cross-cultural exchanges in medicine. Kananoja (2021) demonstrates that indigenous remedies were widely used by both local populations and Europeans, and that the circulation of healing techniques and materials facilitated practical adaptation across the early modern Black Atlantic (Kananoja 2021).

Kananoja (2021) highlights *angariaria*, a medicinal plant (fruit) from Angola, which was imported to the Kingdom of Kongo around 1650. This plant, a key feature of Angolan medicine, also became known to Europeans, who observed its therapeutic uses (Kananoja 2021, 51). Kananoja further notes that *angariaria* gained official recognition under Governor Dom Miguel António de Melo in late 1798, who documented the positive experiences of people using the plant (Kananoja 2021, 51).

John Locke, physician and philosopher, recorded in his diary receiving from Mr Toynard a large piece of Angola wood, the powder of which was traditionally made into a paste by local inhabitants for full-body application and washing as a cleansing treatment. Ground with water on a stone, the paste was reported to alleviate headaches, heat-related discomfort, and sleep disturbances, despite its strong, heavy scent. Locke also noted that an infusion of the wood was particularly effective for therapeutic purposes (Dewhurst 1963, 151).

Kananoja (2021) notes that European recognition of *angariaria* as an effective African remedy reflects a broader pattern of cross-cultural medical interaction during the early modern period of European expansion. Local medicines were often considered the most appropriate for treating diseases endemic to the regions in which they were found (Kananoja 2021, 51).

In 1526 King Afonso I of Kongo sent a letter to Dom João III, requesting the assistance of Portuguese surgeons and physicians to address local diseases (Afonso I, 1526/2023, 203). This correspondence highlights the persistence of health challenges in Kongo, a region where Portuguese engagement continued unabated. By contrast, the relative decline of Edo–Portuguese relations cannot be explained solely by climate or disease. While environmental and health factors may have posed minor obstacles, they were not decisive in shaping the deterioration of diplomatic and commercial ties with Benin.

The Portuguese also adopted healing methods from African communities. In 1575, Father Garcia Simões documented the use of red dyewood, known as *takula* (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*), which local populations employed to treat fevers and headaches (Kananoja 2021, 53).

Kananoja (2021) further notes the use of kola nuts by Europeans, observing that “kolanuts were used as a stimulant by blacks as well as whites” (Gastão Sousa Dias 1934, as cited in Kananoja 2021, 53). This example aligns with the broader argument of this thesis, which emphasises African agency and reciprocity in cross-cultural encounters.

In sum, while this subheading examined climate and disease as potential factors in the decline of Edo–Portuguese relations, it has demonstrated that these factors alone were insufficient to explain the weakening of ties. Comparisons with Kongo and Angola—regions

with similar environmental and health challenges—show that European engagement persisted, aided in part by local medical knowledge and exchanges. Most importantly, this discussion highlights Africa’s active and subjective participation in early Atlantic medical history, rather than portraying the continent as a passive recipient of European influence.

### **The Shift in European Perceptions about Africa and the Decline of Edo-Portuguese Relations**

Bondarenko (1992) observes that the initial Western accounts of the Benin people were notably complimentary, even noting how difficult it was to be offended by the Edo people. This respectful portrayal was later entirely abandoned, replaced by hostile narratives that fixated on human sacrifices and barbaric rituals (Bondarenko 1992). This analysis leads directly to the question: Did the drastic reversal in European moral narratives about Africa reflect a genuine decline in African demographic and political order, or was this ideological shift primarily a rationalisation for the external pressures and growing demand of the transatlantic slave trade?

As discussed, the emergence of other European maritime powers and the subsequent erosion of Portugal’s monopoly in Africa gave rise to intensified competition. This subheading advances the hypothesis that this development accounts for the transformation in European perceptions. Bondarenko (1992) addresses the evolving perceptions of Europeans about Benin: from the early positive views during the Portuguese and early Dutch periods, when Edo people were described as “civilised, hospitable and honest” (Bondarenko 1992, 57). Ruy de Pina referred to the Benin envoy as “a man of eloquent speech and natural wisdom.” Similarly, Duarte Pires’s 1516 letter detailing the Oba's great hospitality, suggests that European perceptions remained broadly positive until at least the first quarter of the sixteenth century or c. 1516.

The early favourable remarks were soon replaced by a marked deterioration in written accounts: by 1539, missionary reports had already begun characterising the Oba as 'idolatrous.' This negative trajectory continued across Europe; the subsequent English sources of 1553, for instance, further amplified the theme by emphasising widespread illness, — although this topic

was already noted by Duarte Pacheco, now it seemed more alarming thereby signalling a concerted shift toward narratives of moral and physical deterioration.

Even as late as the 17th century, Dutch sources maintained a duality, simultaneously praising Great Benin's urban sophistication—noting its wide streets, lack of theft, ordered layout, and wealth by comparison to Amsterdam—while conspicuously foregrounding practices such as the killing of twins and human sacrifices during funerals. The shift toward unequivocally negative perceptions truly took hold during the English era, perfectly coinciding with the massive growth of the Atlantic slave trade. This period wasn't just a slight change in attitude; it was a fundamental redefinition of European goals. When acquiring captives became the main priority, it spurred the widespread adoption of racist ideas designed to paint Africans as inherently deficient and in desperate need of 'civilisation'.

To avoid repetition, the broader context of inter-European rivalry, as highlighted in the preceding subheadings, is invoked here. The Portuguese actively sought to marginalise rival European powers—specifically the English, French, and Dutch—who were all competing fiercely for commercial access to Benin and the wider African trade network. This study posits that Portugal's discovery of vast African resources—notably gold, pepper, and ivory—initially yielded enormous wealth, naturally attracting the envy and commercial ambition of other European nations. Following Portugal's failure to maintain a geopolitical monopoly, a new strategy emerged: portraying Africa as morally deficient and dangerous. This negative narrative served to strategically discourage rivals from entering the valuable trade network, a tactic swiftly adopted by other European competitors to collectively create and sustain Africa's detrimental image and deter further newcomers.

The Benin certainly engaged in rituals and sacrifices prior to contact with Portugal; yet, the conspicuous mention of these "evil deeds" in Portuguese missionary accounts only began around **1539**—a highly significant delay of over fifty years after the initial diplomatic and commercial contact. This period coincides with the rise of the French and their entry into West African trade, suggesting that the heightened emphasis on the Oba's rituals and sacrifices was not

coincidental. Instead, it served as a strategic narrative, portraying him as the "evil savage ruler" to undermine new commercial competition.

Although a tempting counter-argument suggests that early European visitors simply failed to witness the rituals and sacrifices, the evidence makes this hard to sustain. Duarte Pires's letter, for example, clearly details the unrestricted access and freedom he enjoyed walking throughout the Oba's palace, yet he makes absolutely no mention of the fetishes or idols that the missionaries would so conspicuously report by 1539. This significant chronological and thematic gap points less toward successful concealment and more toward a deliberate strategic shift in European narrative focus.

The argument here is not that these negative narratives were completely fabricated, but rather that while they contained elements of truth—such as the pre-existing unhealthy climate, which was certainly difficult but not invariably fatal to every visitor—they were strategically timed and weaponised. These true-but-exaggerated accounts were deployed precisely when needed for a geopolitical purpose, serving to amplify the dangers of trade and undermine commercial competition.

In narratives of Duarte Pacheco (1480s–1506) and Christopher Columbus (1493–1506). Duarte Pacheco in *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, wrote about the “deadly fevers” and illnesses that Europeans suffered along the West African coast and how they died shortly after arrival. Yet both missionaries and merchants still went to Benin for trade and evangelisation. Christopher Columbus noted how he found the heat so intense and the rays of the sun so fierce that he thought they were being burnt. Even when the sky was heavy with clouds he suffered the same oppression (Columbus 1493/1870, 133). As discussed in the subheading on health and climate, this was not a major factor in the decline of Edo-Portuguese relations, hence the comparison was made with Angola and Kongo.

While Europeans were undeniably susceptible to local diseases, their consistent refusal to abandon the region undermines the narrative that the climate was truly as universally deadly as described. Their sheer commercial persistence across centuries stands as compelling evidence that these reports were exaggerated. This stereotypical view, however, became deeply entrenched

and foregrounded in later European thought, exemplified by Hegel's description in the 19th century of a "climate poisonous to Europeans," "*ein Saum, dessen Atmosphäre für die Europäer giftig ist*" (Hegel 1848, 114). Similarly, Cornevin (1960) maintains that for the explorers, Africa remained "a poor and desolate land with a deadly climate," "*Que représente l'Afrique pour ces nobles seigneurs? Une terre pauvre, désolée, au climat meurtrier,*" (Cornevin 1960, 34). Hawkins (1847) provides perhaps the most creative example of this environmental demonisation, claiming that even the moonlight in these hot countries was so intense that one could feel the pain of being burnt at night (Hawkins 1847, 45). This assertion can be characterised as a **prejudiced exaggeration**. Ultimately, the truth here is nuanced: while the climate was certainly hot and rituals/sacrifices did occur, these factors were systematically amplified and weaponised in the European narrative to serve a calculated commercial and ideological purpose.

European merchants and missionaries were clearly aware of the climate's dangers from the earliest years of Edo-Portuguese contact, yet they consistently returned to Benin for centuries thereafter to trade and evangelise. For instance, despite the English confirming illness in 1553 and Queen Mary subsequently prohibiting voyages, the ban was later lifted, and English merchants promptly resumed contact (Aremu 2018, 79). This persistent engagement fundamentally contradicts the public rhetoric, leading to one conclusion: either the negative narratives were entirely untrue, or they were deliberately exaggerated—containing elements of truth but grossly amplified for strategic, non-commercial purposes.

Dapper (1686) maintained this striking duality in perception. While his observation still described Benin as beautiful, he immediately followed this praise by detailing ritual violence: "*Le Nouveau Roi institué à l'honneur de son prédécesseur des fêtes annuelles qu'on célébre par des sacrifices de plusieurs personnes trois, quatre ou cinq jeunes hommes.*" (Dapper 1686, 312). It is highly significant that Dapper explicitly noted that both innocents and criminals alike were killed during the death of an Oba, as this macabre focus on the burial rituals emerged despite several Obas having likely died and been interred between the Portuguese arrival in 1485 and 1668, yet earlier sources chose not to address these rites.

Dapper (1668) further reinforced the narrative of 'savagery' by conspicuously mentioning nudity, appearing to imply a lack of clothing and civilisation, especially among the women: "*Ces peuples sont sort grossiers quoiqu'assez courtois, de fort francs dans le commerce. Ils ont accoutumé de se couvrir le visage tant les hommes que les femmes: mais à Hoden les hommes portent une petite robe blanche et les femmes vont toutes nues, n'ayant qu'une treffe rouge autour de la tête, pour tenir leurs cheveux.*" (Dapper 1686, 220). This observation, however, is clearly exaggerated and runs counter to established historical evidence. The local populations were prolific cloth producers and, as demonstrated earlier in this study, actively participated in extensive trade networks for decorative beads, sustaining sophisticated fashion and material culture traditions long before the arrival of the Portuguese.

Advancing the narrative of 'savagery' to its most extreme legalistic form, the Italian explorer Cavazzi (1690) claimed that the consumption of human flesh was legally sanctioned: "*il mangiare dela carne humana fu permesso a questa ingorda seta, confortando la stessa Legislatrice i fuoi seguacia non prenderne schifo, ne horrore: laonde il principale motiuo della guerra fu sempre presso costro, di tenere schiauii piu robusti e diuorare la carne de pui delicati.*" (Cavazzi 1690, 154). By asserting that law supported cannibalism and that wars were waged specifically to secure both slaves and human meat, this account served to cement the impression of a profoundly savage people whose practices wholly justified external intervention and exploitation. While wars waged for the capture of enslaved persons were historically verifiable events, they ultimately formed a vicious circle: European demand for captives became the primary engine that itself drove and intensified these African conflicts.

Further advancing the narrative of inherent danger and horror, accounts extended the peril to the wildlife itself. Broecke (1648), for instance, claimed that animals were so poisonous that consuming them would lead to certain death: "*Men fept dat de orelen van dit Dier vergiftig fijn dat fo wie daer af eet/geheel dul sterben fal*" (Broecke 1648, 10). This served to create an impression of great and inescapable danger in terms of alimentation, strategically discouraging rival European presence by depicting the very act of survival in Africa as fraught with mortal peril.

Jobson's (1623/1968) description in the early 17th century represents the apex of this strategic horror, fabricating a monster known as Ho-re, or "the roaring devil." Jobson claimed Ho-re roared with the deepest bass male voice, instilling universal fear that demanded immediate appeasement: *"at the first notice of his voice, preparation for him of all manners of victuals... everyone imparting somewhat, all which are carried towards the voice and there under the tree set down and devoured within small time...they are devoured and not so much of bone is seen"* (Jobson 1623/1968, 147). By alleging that a monster was instantly feeding on people and that all vanished without a trace, the narrative was designed to create an unmistakable impression of fright, chaos, and inexplicable peril in the minds of European readers about Africa.

Although these negative narratives contained elements of truth, their dramatic rise did not reflect a sudden European discovery of African 'barbarism'. Instead, the absence of such themes during early, stable contact suggests they were later repurposed to serve European geopolitical ends. This rhetorical shift was essential for facilitating the Atlantic slave trade; by portraying Africans as 'savage', Europeans could systematically dismantle empathy, effectively rationalising the cruelty of enslavement and assuaging the collective guilt of such inhumane treatment.

While the slave trade undeniably destabilised African demographic and political structures, this radical narrative reversal was not a true reflection of widespread collapse. Rather, the portrayal of Africa as a 'degraded zone' functioned as a strategic instrument of statecraft. Reimagining once-respected African polities as dangerous and chaotic served a dual purpose: it provided the moral cover necessary for the expansion of the slave trade while simultaneously discouraging European rivals from seeking legitimate diplomatic or commercial ties in the region.

## **Chapter Summary**

The present chapter investigated the decline of Edo–Portuguese relations, emphasising religion as the central cause. The absence of deeper understanding of one another’s religious beliefs and cultural sensitivities created tensions and disappointments on both sides, gradually undermining the relationship. This analysis underscores a key lesson: sustainable cross-cultural relations require careful attention to the sensitivities, languages, and spiritual traditions of the societies involved. The chapter also demonstrated that factors such as climate and disease, though often assumed to be decisive in shaping early modern encounters, did not play a significant role in weakening ties between Benin and Portugal. It highlighted the exchange of medical knowledge between Europe and Africa, which reinforced the broader themes of reciprocity, negotiation, and mutual engagement established in earlier chapters. Finally it addressed the change in the perceptions of the Europeans about Benin as part of the competition among European maritime powers explaining that this change was strategically done with motive of dissuading other Europeans from joining the competitions well as to justify the immense moral and financial pressures associated with the transatlantic trade and Europe's own economic needs.

## **Conclusion**

This study has re-examined the historical encounters between the Kingdom of Benin and Portugal from an African-centered perspective, revealing cultural legacies of the Atlantic world that have long been overlooked. By focusing on Benin as an active agent in these interactions, rather than a passive recipient of European influence, the research highlights Africa’s role in shaping transatlantic cultural flows. From material culture and ritual practices to language, agriculture, and religious adaptations, Benin demonstrated both receptivity and innovation, creating hybrid forms that challenged simplistic, Eurocentric narratives of Atlantic exchanges.

In addressing how Edo–Portuguese relations contribute to a broader understanding of Africa’s role in the Atlantic world, this study underscores that African societies were central to the construction of modern cultural legacies. Benin’s diplomatic, commercial, and cultural engagements with Portugal reveal a pattern of reciprocal influence, demonstrating that Africa was not merely a backdrop for European expansion but a dynamic participant that actively

shaped the contours of Atlantic modernity. These findings encourage a re-evaluation of other African-European encounters, emphasising the continent's agency in global cultural networks.

Ultimately, the Benin–Portugal case illuminates the complexity of historical interactions in the Atlantic world and affirms the importance of African perspectives in reconstructing global histories. Recognising Africa's role in creating enduring cultural legacies challenges long-standing assumptions and offers a more nuanced understanding of the Atlantic world as a space of mutual influence, negotiation, and creativity. By centering African agency, this study contributes to a richer, more balanced historiography that acknowledges Africa as an indispensable architect of transatlantic cultural history.

**Summary of Findings:** Key arguments and findings from each chapter.

Chapter 1 established the historical foundations for understanding the 15th-century encounter between Benin and Portugal. Benin Kingdom is shown as a highly organised and sovereign state, with a strong military, complex culture, and active diplomacy. Portugal is presented as an emerging maritime power, expanding into the Atlantic through navigation, trade, and diplomacy. The chapter emphasised that this encounter was between two organised states with their own interests, laying the groundwork for subsequent political, commercial, and cultural exchanges. The chapter found that the western borders of the Benin Empire extended to as far as the territory of ancient Dahomey, corresponding to present-day Benin Republic. In the east the borders included the igbo lands; Biafra, and Itsekiri. In the north, Oyo, Igala, Jukun, Efik, Idoma among others. Hence the borders of the Great Benin Empire are redrawn using two hypotheses; Benin's military power conquest and the Edo-yoruboid culture in the region. The chapter addresses a gap in the historiography dating back to the 16th–17th centuries, when writers such as Dapper (1668) and Barbot (1732) noted that neither European travellers nor local Africans could precisely determine the full extent of the Kingdom of Benin and the surrounding black nations.

Chapter 2 argued that early diplomatic and trade relations between Benin and Portugal were strategic, **reciprocal**, and mutually controlled, rather than imposed by Europe. Diplomacy involved material exchanges, state-regulated trade at Ughoton, and negotiations around Christianity tied to military resources. The chapter found that the Portuguese monarch treated the

Oba with great respect and prestige, evidenced in the tone of correspondence —acknowledging the Oba as powerful and noble. This phenomenon strengthened the argument that the relationship was mutually controlled. Benin retained sovereignty over commerce and exports such as ivory, pepper, and enslaved persons, while Portugal accessed Atlantic markets and prestige goods. These interactions were deliberate and mutually beneficial, fostering continuity alongside selective transformation.

Chapter 3 examined the cultural exchanges between Benin and Portugal, focusing on the exchanges in; Artworks, language, agriculture, religion, technology, toponymy and identity. As the main body of the thesis studying the intercultural exchange of Edo-Portuguese relations, the chapter has most of the findings of the thesis. Under Edo-Portuguese **artwork** exchange, this chapter addressed the long-standing historiographical question of why Afro-Portuguese artworks display such strong resemblances. It applied the Portuguese patronage effect hypothesis to explain these similarities, using examples such as the Sapi-Portuguese and Benin-Portuguese oliphants in the analysis. This analysis helps fill a significant gap in the historiography.

Under **language** exchange, the chapter found that while the Portuguese brought and taught their language to the locals in Africa, they also learned the African languages becoming familiar and speaking to the locals. The chapter identified how the encounter led to the borrowing of words from one language to the other; from Portuguese to Edo, From Edo to Portuguese and Portuguese creoles in São Tomé and Príncipe. Furthermore the chapter identified the legacy of this phenomenon in the Nigerian Pidgin English, it noted Portuguese words in this language formation used in contemporary Nigerian society of the 21st century.

Under **agriculture** the chapter highlights reciprocal agricultural exchange, identifying crops taken from Benin to Portugal; pepper, palm oil etc. And crops brought from Atlantic Portugal to Benin; cassava, potatoes, pineapples etc. The long-standing historiographical gap in this area of the history has been that sources addressed pepper as one of most sought items by the Portuguese without further detailed investigation on how the Benin pepper could have changed or impacted Portuguese cuisine. This chapter filled this gap in the historiography of **Portuguese - Benin pepper trade** by the identifying the use of Benin pepper in local Portuguese cuisine like *alheira*, as well as royal cuisine,

Under **religion** the chapter highlights the religious exchange where objects of European religion were made with materials of African origin. Emphasising reciprocity, a gap often overlooked. The chapter found that Benin religious and artistic practices shaped European perceptions and practices surrounding material objects. This was illustrated through the analysis that Edo artwork indirectly influenced European practices: the Portuguese, in handling and preserving these objects like “ivory made coat of arms” — participated in a form of reverence previously unfamiliar in their own culture.

Under **technology** the chapter found that discovery of cannons in Benin ascribed to the 16th century support the long contested historiography of military technology exchange of Edo-Portuguese relations. It further highlighted economic political and technological benefits both polities got from the exchange. Hence the chapter reinforced this historiography and likewise the benefits of the encounter

Under **toponymy** the chapter found that the adoption of foreign city names highlights the region’s cultural exchanges, exemplified by *Bairro de Macambo* and mirrored in the Portuguese names of Lagos and Porto Novo, revealing the intertwined histories shaping urban identity.

Under **identity** the chapter found that natives of Edo make part of the Afro-Portuguese identity in Portugal, despite being small - underscores that cultural exchange was dynamic and bidirectional.

Chapter 4 addressed the causes of decline in Edo-Portuguese relations highlighting religion as the major factor. The lack of knowledge about religious beliefs and cultural sensitivities led both sides to disappointments. The lesson learned is that countries should study one another's sensitivities, culture, languages and religion for better relations. The chapter found that **climate and diseases were not a strong factor enough to slow down relations**. It also highlighted exchange in medical knowledge between Europe and Africa reinforcing the broader pattern of mutual engagement, **reciprocity** and negotiation observed in earlier chapters. The chapter also found that European perceptions were exaggerated as part of competing strategy of the Europeans to discourage their counterparts as well as justify their actions of the slave trade.

**Answer to the Research Questions:** The questions posed at the beginning of the study were

What does a re-examination of Benin–Portuguese contact from an African perspective reveal about overlooked cultural legacies of the Atlantic world?

A re-examination of Benin–Portuguese contact from an African perspective reveals that the relationship was far from one-sided, being instead characterised by negotiation, adaptation, and mutual influence. This perspective brings to light overlooked cultural legacies, including the introduction of Benin pepper into Portuguese cuisine, the incorporation of Portuguese words into Nigerian Pidgin English and Edo, as well as Benin words entering Portuguese. It also highlights the emergence of hybrid artistic forms and material culture that reflect the creative intersections of African and European influences across the Atlantic world.

How can the study of relations between Portugal and Benin contribute to a broader understanding of Africa's role in constructing the cultural legacy of the Atlantic in the modern era?

Studying the relations between Portugal and Benin highlights Africa's active participation in shaping the cultural, artistic, linguistic, agricultural, economic, and political dynamics of the early Atlantic world. It reveals how African societies were powerful and sovereign powers who selectively adopted, adapted, and transformed foreign influences—such as art, language, religion, and technology—into their own cultural frameworks.

### **Future Research**

Future scholarship could explore the multidirectional nature of Benin–Portuguese exchanges by examining lesser-studied domains such as culinary practices, music, and ritual sacrifice performance. Comparative studies of Edo loanwords in Portuguese and vice versa could shed light on the linguistic processes of cultural adaptation and memory across the Atlantic. Additionally, archival research in both African and European sources could uncover more material evidence of hybrid artworks, technological transfers, and diplomatic negotiations. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining history, linguistics, anthropology, and art history

could provide a more holistic understanding of Africa's enduring role in shaping the cultural legacy of the Atlantic world.

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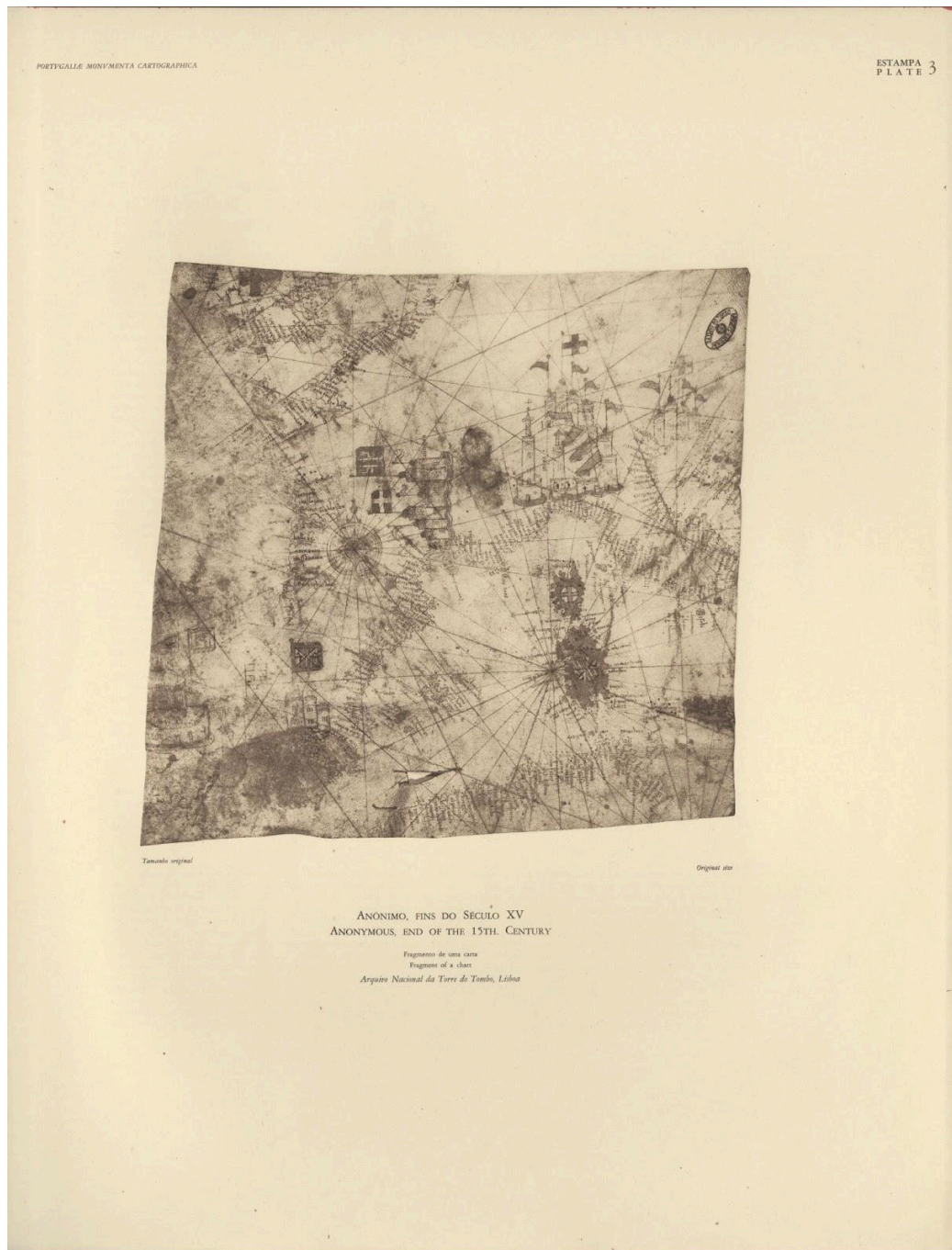
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APPENDIX I MAPS



**Figure I 1 – Fragment of a Chart, End of the 15th Century.**

Source: Cortesão & Teixeira da Mota, 1960.



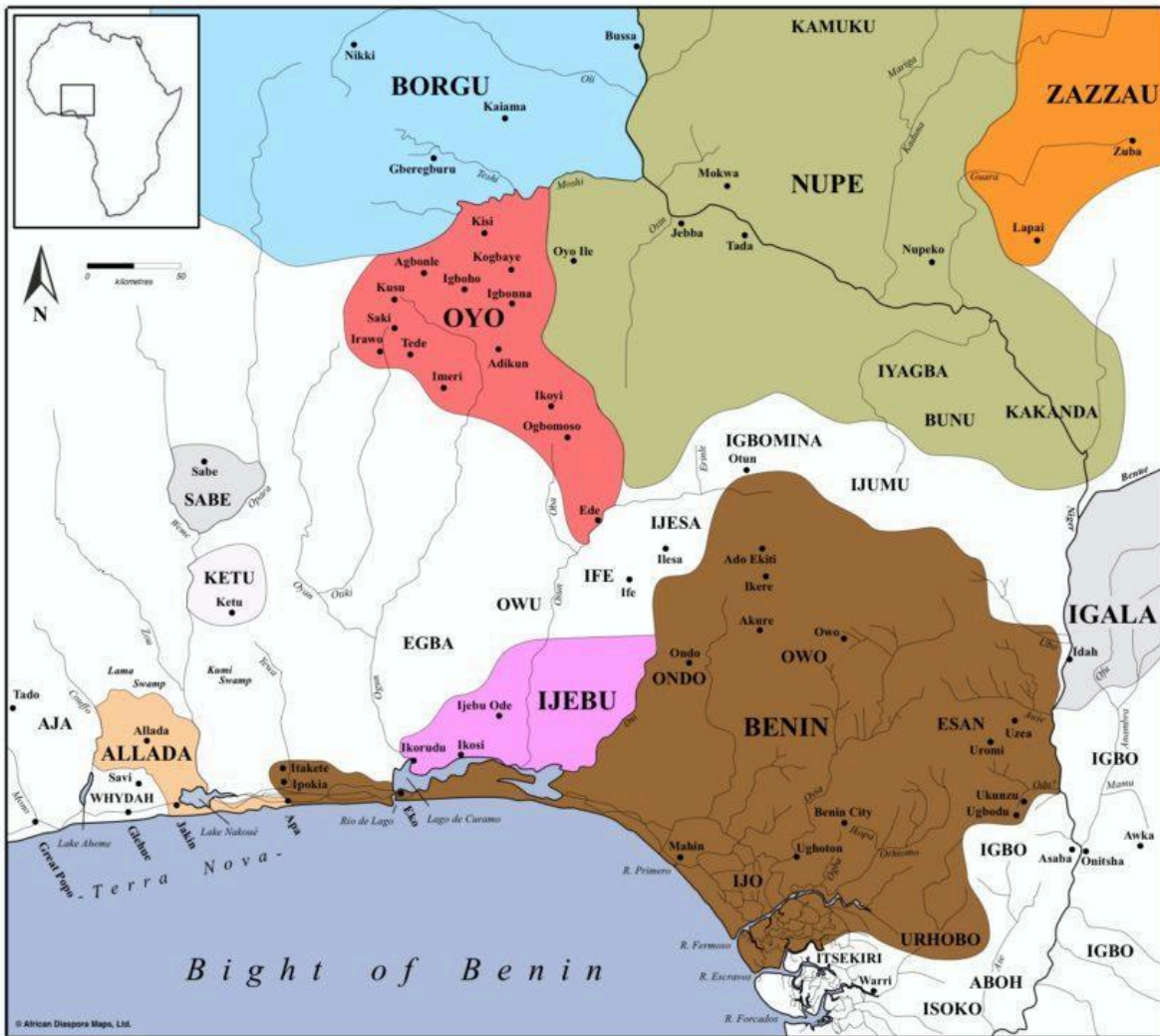


Figure I 3 – States of the Bight of Benin interior, c. 1580.

Source: Courtesy of Henry B. Lovejoy, African Diaspora Maps Ltd. (CC BY 4.0)



**Figure I 4 – Map of the Atlantic Ocean, 1613.**

Source: Vault, P. D. (1613) [Place of Publication Not Identified: Publisher Not Identified].  
Retrieved from the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668630/>



**Figure I 5 – Map of the Atlantic Coast of Africa (Gold Coast, Slave Coast, Ivory Coast), 1670.**

Source: Ogilby, J. (1670). Retrieved from Geographicus:  
<https://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/Guinea-ogilby-1670>



**Figure I 6 – An Approximate Map of the Great Benin Empire 15th-17th Century.**

Source: Created by Author using narratives of history and [mapchart.net](https://www.mapchart.net)



**Figure I 7 – Map of Benin City in Nigeria, 21st Century.**

Source: George Whitefield College, October 2019.

<https://www.gwc.ac.za/explore-launches-in-nigeria/>

A map of Benin City in the 21st century is included, even though it falls outside the temporal focus of this study. Its purpose is to help the reader understand how Benin, once a large and powerful kingdom in 16th-century West Africa, has today been reduced to a relatively small state in Nigeria.

APPENDIX II: Chronological List of the Obas and Queen Mothers (Iyobas) of the Benin Kingdom

**Chronology of the Obas of the Benin Kingdom**

Note: *Only reign dates are listed, as precise birth and death dates for many Obas remain uncertain. This chronology follows the most widely accepted sequence based on oral traditions and established historical sources.*

**Pre-Imperial Obas of Benin (c. 1180 – 1440)**

*(Period of consolidation and urban development preceding the imperial expansion under Ewuare I)*

No.	Name of Oba	Approximate Reign Dates
1	Eweka I	c. 1180 – 1246
2	Uwuakhuahen	1246 – 1250
3	Ehenmihen	1250 – 1260
4	Ewedo	1260 – 1274
5	Oguola	1274 – 1287
6	Edoni	1287 – 1292
7	Udagbedo	1292 – 1329
8	Ohen	1329 – 1366
9	Egbeka	1366 – 1397
10	Orobiru	1397 – 1434
11	Uwaifiokun	1434 – 1440

**Obas of the Benin Empire (1440 – 1897)**

*(Era of imperial expansion, consolidation, and European contact)*

No.	Name of Oba	Approximate Reign Dates
12	Ewuare I (the Great)	1440 – 1473
13	Ezoti	1473 – 1475
14	Olua	1475 – 1480
15	Ozolua	1480 – 1504

16	Esigie	1504 – 1547
17	Orhogbua	1547 – 1580
18	Ehengbuda	1580 – 1602
19	Ohuan	1602 – 1641
20	Ohenzae	1641 – 1661
21	Akenzae	1661 – 1669
22	Akengboi	1669 – 1675
23	Akenkpaye	1675 – 1684
24	Akengbedo	1684 – 1689
25	Ore-Oghene	1689 – 1701
26	Ewuakpe	1701 – 1712
27	Ozuere	1712 – 1713
28	Akenzua I	1713 – 1740
29	Eresoyen	1740 – 1750
30	Akengbuda	1750 – 1804
31	Obanosa	1804 – 1816
32	Ogbebo	1816 (brief reign)
33	Osemwende	1816 – 1848
34	Adolo	1848 – 1888
35	Ovonramwen Nogbaisi	1888 – 1897

### **Post-Imperial Obas of Benin (1914 – Present)**

*(Restoration of the monarchy under British colonial rule and continuation into the modern era)*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name of Oba</b>	<b>Approximate Reign Dates</b>
36	Eweka II	1914 – 1933
37	Akenzua II	1933 – 1978
38	Erediauwa I	1979 – 2016
39	Ewuare II	2016 – Present

## Chronology of the Queen Mothers (Iyobas) of the Benin Kingdom

*Note: Dates of reigns for many Iyobas are approximate or derived from oral history. The list reflects the most widely acknowledged sequence among Benin historians and traditions.*

No.	Name of Iyoba (Queen Mother)	Mother of / Associated Oba	Approximate Reign Dates	Notes / Significance
1	Idia	Oba Esigie	c. 1504–1550 CE	First Iyoba; honoured for her military and spiritual leadership during the Idah War.
2	Elaba	Oba Orhogbua	c. 1547–1580 CE	Continued the prominence of the Iyoba institution after Idia.
3	Umelu	Oba Ehengbuda	c. 1580–1602 CE	Associated with Benin’s consolidation after early imperial expansion.
4	(Name unrecorded)	Oba Ohuan	c. 1602–1656 CE	Acknowledged in royal lineage though name lost to oral memory.
5	Eson	Oba Ahenzae	c. 1656–1661 CE	Likely held ceremonial and spiritual duties during a brief reign.
6	Enahen	Oba Akengboi	c. 1669–1675 CE	Presided during a period of political adjustment and transition.
7	Edin	Oba Akenkpaye	c. 1675–1684 CE	Associated with a phase of dynastic continuity and palace reorganisation.
8	Ohogha I	Oba Akengbedo	c. 1684–1689 CE	The first of two Iyobas recorded with this name; possibly linked to early ritual traditions.
9	Imarhiaede	Oba Ore-Oghene	c. 1689–1701 CE	Served during a time of internal restructuring within the royal court.
10	Ewebonoza	Oba Ewuakpe	c. 1701–1712 CE	Her period coincides with Queen Iden’s legendary sacrifice, an event central to Benin oral history.
11	Ihasogie	Oba Akenzua I	c. 1713–1740 CE	Oversaw a period of royal revival and renewed prosperity.
12	Ede	Oba Eresoyen	c. 1740–1750 CE	Remembered for her maternal guidance during Eresoyen’s reign.
13	Ohogha II	Oba Akengbuda	c. 1750–1804 CE	Served the longest-reigning precolonial Oba; continuity of royal influence.
14	Ose	Oba Obanosa	c. 1804–1816 CE	Associated with a turbulent political period in Benin’s history.
15	(Name unrecorded)	Oba Ogbebo	c. 1816 CE	Brief reign; details of the Iyoba’s life remain unrecorded.

16	Omozogie	Oba Osemwende	c. 1816–1848 CE	Remembered for her counsel during Benin’s diplomatic revival.
17	Ugiomo	Oba Adolo	c. 1848–1888 CE	Her period marked the late imperial era and growing European contact.
18	Iheyá	Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi	c. 1888–1914 CE	The last precolonial Iyoba; her son resisted British invasion in 1897.
19	Eghaghe	Oba Eweka II	c. 1914–1933 CE	Played a key role during the restoration of the monarchy under colonial rule.
20	Ariowa	Oba Akenzua II	c. 1933–1978 CE	Oversaw a period of cultural revival and modernisation in the royal household.
21	Aghahowa	Oba Erediauwa I	c. 1979–2016 CE	Revered for her symbolic role during a period of national transformation.
22	Justina Ikuoyemwen	Oba Ewuare II	Posthumously honoured, 2016 – Present	The current Queen Mother, honoured after her death at her son’s coronation; symbol of continuity and respect for maternal legacy.

### APPENDIX III: Chronology of the Monarchs of Portugal

This table provides a chronological overview of Portuguese Kings and Queens from the foundation of the kingdom in 1139 to the abolition of the monarchy in 1910, highlighting dynastic affiliations and historical significance.

No.	Monarch (Portuguese)	Reign	Notes / Significance
1	Afonso I o Conquistador	1139 – 6 Dec 1185	Founder of the Kingdom of Portugal; established independence from León.
2	Sancho I o Povoador	6 Dec 1185 – 26 Mar 1211	Expanded settlements and strengthened internal administration.
3	Afonso II o Gordo	26 Mar 1211 – 25 Mar 1223	Consolidated royal authority and codified laws.
4	Sancho II o Pio	25 Mar 1223 – 4 Dec 1247	Faced internal unrest; papal intervention curtailed his rule.
5	Afonso III o Bolonhês	4 Jan 1248 – 16 Feb 1279	Completed conquest of the Algarve; centralised governance.
6	Dinis I o Lavrador	16 Feb 1279 – 7 Jan 1325	Promoted agriculture, education, and legal reforms; “Farmer King.”
7	Afonso IV o Bravo	7 Jan 1325 – 28 May 1357	Strengthened military and judicial structures.
8	Pedro I o Justo / o Cruel	28 May 1357 – 18 Jan 1367	Known for justice and punishment of criminals.
9	Fernando I o Formoso / o Inconstante	18 Jan 1367 – 22 Oct 1383	Last of the Afonsoine dynasty; succession crisis ensued.
—	Interregnum	1383–1385	Crisis of succession; contested claims resolved by João I.
10	João I o Bom-Rei	6 Apr 1385 – 14 Aug 1433	Founder of House of Aviz; initiated maritime expansion in Africa.
11	Duarte o Eloquentes / o Rei-Filósofo	14 Aug 1433 – 9 Sep 1438	Consolidated administration; supported African trade.
12	Afonso V o Africano	9 Sep 1438 – 11 Nov 1477 & 15 Nov 1477 – 28 Aug 1481	Military campaigns in North Africa; briefly abdicated for João II.
13	João II o Príncipe Perfeito	11 Nov 1477 – 15 Nov 1477 & 28 Aug 1481 – 25 Oct 1495	Strengthened royal control and maritime trade.

14	Manuel I o Afortunado	25 Oct 1495 – 13 Dec 1521	Oversaw global expansion; Portuguese contact with Benin.
15	João III o Piedoso	13 Dec 1521 – 11 Jun 1557	Consolidated colonies in Africa, India, and Brazil.
16	Sebastião I o Desejado	11 Jun 1557 – 4 Aug 1578	North African campaigns; disappeared at Alcácer Quibir.
17	Henrique I o Casto / o Cardeal-Rei	4 Aug 1578 – 31 Jan 1580	Clerical monarch during dynastic crisis.
18	António I, Prior do Crato	19 Jun 1580 – 25 Aug 1580	Contested claimant; briefly recognised in parts of Portugal.
19	Filipe I de Portugal (Filipe II de Espanha)	17 Apr 1581 – 13 Sep 1598	Iberian Union; Portuguese empire under Spanish crown.
20	Filipe II de Portugal (Filipe III de Espanha)	13 Sep 1598 – 31 Mar 1621	Continued Spanish administration of colonies.
21	Filipe III de Portugal (Filipe IV de Espanha)	31 Mar 1621 – 1 Dec 1640	Ended with Portuguese Restoration of Independence.
22	João IV o Restaurador	1 Dec 1640 – 6 Nov 1656	First of Braganza dynasty; restored Portuguese sovereignty.
23	Afonso VI o Vitorioso	6 Nov 1656 – 12 Sep 1683	Brother Pedro served as regent from 1668.
24	Pedro II o Pacificador	12 Sep 1683 – 9 Dec 1706	Stabilised monarchy; strengthened trade and economy.
25	João V o Magnânimo	9 Dec 1706 – 31 Jul 1750	Wealthy patron of arts; golden age of Baroque Portugal.
26	José I o Reformador	31 Jul 1750 – 24 Feb 1777	Oversaw reforms under Marquis of Pombal.
27	Maria I a Piedosa / a Louca	24 Feb 1777 – 20 Mar 1816	Co-reigned with Pedro III (King Consort) until 1786.
28	João VI o Clemente	20 Mar 1816 – 10 Mar 1826	Oversaw transfer of court to Brazil and return to Lisbon.
29	Pedro IV o Soldado / o Libertador	10 Mar 1826 – 2 May 1826	Also Pedro I of Brazil; brief reign in Portugal.
30	Maria II a Educadora	2 May 1826 – 23 Jun 1828 & 26 May 1834 – 15 Nov 1853	Reigned twice; Ferdinand II co-reigned as King Consort 1837–1853.
31	Miguel I o Absolutista / o Usurpador	26 Feb 1828 – 26 May 1834	Claimed throne during civil war.
32	Pedro V o Esperançoso	15 Nov 1853 – 11 Nov 1861	Modernised Portugal; infrastructure and public

			health improvements.
33	Luís I o Popular	11 Nov 1861 – 19 Oct 1889	Patron of arts; oversaw European imperial engagement.
34	Carlos I o Diplomata / o Mártir	19 Oct 1889 – 1 Feb 1908	Assassinated amid political instability.
35	Manuel II o Patriota / o Infeliz	1 Feb 1908 – 5 Oct 1910	Last King; monarchy abolished in 1910 revolution.

APPENDIX IV: Artefacts Arranged by Materials

BRONZE/BRASS ARTWORKS



**Figure IV 1 – Head of an Oba.**

**Source:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Head of an Oba
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	H. 10 3/4 x W. 8 3/8 x D. 8 5/8 in. (27.3 x 21.3 x 21.9 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	1550-1680
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1979.206.87
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979
<b>Description</b>	The artwork was created to honour a deceased Oba. Each new ruler commissioned such heads for placement on royal altars as part of the memorial tradition. Its naturalistic features, coral-bead regalia, and use of lost-wax casting display Benin's artistic mastery. The image is included in the catalogue because the thesis addresses this tradition, allowing readers to visualise the practice described.



**Figure IV 2 – Equestrian figure, lost-wax cast in brass.**

**Source:** *British Museum Collection Online*. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Accessed 25 August 2025.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Equestrian figure
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height: 48 centimetres Weight: 13.20 kilograms, Width: 15 centimetres, Depth: 31 centimetres
<b>Date:</b>	Mid c. 16th - mid 17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	British Museum
<b>Museum number</b>	Af1944,04.13
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Bt. Mrs H. Mutch, West Chase, Callington. Cornwall.'
<b>Description</b>	A male figure on horseback, wearing an elaborate feathered headdress with upright finial, cast using the traditional lost-wax technique. This brass sculpture exemplifies the sophistication of West African bronze artistry, reflecting status, ceremonial significance, and the skilled representation of elite figures in the 16th–17th century.



**Figure IV 3 – Seated Portuguese, 15–16th century.**

**Source:** Ex collection W.D. Webster; Lt. General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers. Webster 1895–1901, cat. 21, no. 156; Pitt-Rivers 1900, pl. 46, figs. 358–59; Dark 1982, 2/25; Exhibition: New York, Center for African Art, 1988, fig. 220

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Seated Portuguese Figure
<b>Material:</b>	Brass, iron
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h 4 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> in. (12.4 cm).
<b>Date:</b>	16th-17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford
<b>Inventory number:</b>	NA
Photographic credits:	Ezra (1992, 74)
<b>Description</b>	A carved figure representing a seated Portuguese man, typical of 15th–16th century West African depictions of Europeans. The figure reflects cross-cultural interaction, illustrating local artistic interpretation of European dress and posture during early trade and diplomatic encounters.



**Figure IV 4 – Brass Figure of a Portuguese holding a musket.**  
Source: Courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum British Museum, London

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier holding a musket
<b>Material:</b>	Bronze
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height: 37.50cm
<b>Date:</b>	1600/1699
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	British Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Af1928,0112.1
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Trustees of the British Museum
<b>Description</b>	A brass figure depicting a Portuguese soldier holding a musket, characteristic of 16th–17th century West African bronze artistry. The sculpture reflects local craftsmanship and the representation of European military presence during early Atlantic trade, illustrating both cultural encounter and technological influence.



**Figure IV 5 – Three Portuguese Men.**

**Source:** Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture), Sweden

[Carlotta - Objekt](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	<b>Three Portuguese men</b>
<b>Material:</b>	<b>Bronze</b>
<b>Description</b>	Bronze plaque of three Portuguese The City: Relief painting depicting three Europeans. Possible merchants with head of the delegation sitting in an armchair
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Dated Middle of 16 <sup>th</sup> century
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture) Sweden
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Item number 1907.44.0386
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna
<b>Description</b>	This brass sculpture group depicts three Portuguese men with distinctive European clothing, headgear, and facial hair, some holding weapons or trade objects, reflecting the Kingdom of Benin's engagement with European traders in the 15th and 16th centuries. Crafted using the lost-wax casting technique, it exemplifies Benin's technical and artistic mastery. The work is included in the catalogue as it illustrates the symbolic representation of Europeans in Benin art, supporting discussion of cultural and diplomatic exchange.



**Figure IV 6 – Portuguese Figure with Crossbow.**

Source: British Museum

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Portuguese figure with crossbow
<b>Material:</b>	Brass, iron;)
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h 20 1/2 in. (52.0 cm
<b>Date:</b>	16th-17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	British Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Af1898,0115.X
<b>Description</b>	A sculptural or carved representation of a Portuguese figure holding a crossbow. The piece reflects West African artistic interpretations of European military figures during the 16th–17th century, highlighting cultural encounters and the incorporation of foreign weaponry into local visual traditions.



**Figure IV 7 – Relief Plaque: Portuguese with Linstock and Five Manillas.**

Source: © KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien.

[Relief Plaque: Portuguese with Linstock and Five Manillas | Weltmuseum Wien](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Portuguese with Linstock and Five Manillas
<b>Material:</b>	Material: Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Dated: 16th/17th century Accession date: 1899
<b>Place of production:</b>	Culture: Edo. Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	Weltmuseum Wien
<b>Inventory number:</b>	inv. No 64799
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Collection: Wilhelm Albert Maschmann © <i>KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien.</i>
<b>Description</b>	<p>This brass relief plaque depicts a Portuguese figure holding a linstock, a device used to ignite firearms, alongside five manillas, brass ingots used as currency. The figure wears European-style garments, including a helmet, and is positioned within a decorative frame. Crafted using the lost-wax casting technique, the plaque reflects the Kingdom of Benin's engagement with European traders during the 16th and 17th centuries.</p> <p>The plaque is included in the catalogue as it illustrates the use of manillas as a medium of exchange, both before and during contact with the Portuguese, supporting discussion of Benin's economic and trade practices.</p>



**Figure II 8 – Relief Plaque: Upper Body of a Portuguese.**

Source: © KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien  
[Reliefplatte: Oberer Teil eines Portugiesen | Weltmuseum Wien](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Object Name: Relief Plaque: Upper Body of a Portuguese
<b>Material:</b>	Material: Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Accession date: 1899
<b>Place of production:</b>	Culture: Edo. Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	Weltmuseum Wien
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Inv. No. 64697
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Collection: William Downing Webster 1868-1913
<b>Description</b>	This brass relief plaque depicts the upper body of a Portuguese man, wearing a jekin with three buttons, featuring a long beard, and holding a sword. Crafted using the lost-wax casting technique, the plaque reflects the Kingdom of Benin's engagement with European traders in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is included in the catalogue as it illustrates the symbolic representation of Europeans in Benin art, supporting discussion of Benin's depiction of foreign figures and arms in court art.



**Figure IV 9 – Relief Plaque: Lower Body of a Portuguese.**

Source: © KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien

[Reliefplatte: Unterkörper eines Portugiesen | Weltmuseum Wien](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Object Name: Relief Plaque: Lower Body of a Portuguese
<b>Material:</b>	Material: Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Dated: 16th/17th century Accession date: 1899
<b>Place of production:</b>	Culture: Edo. Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	Weltmuseum Wien
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Inv. No. 64718
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Collection: William Downing Webster 1868-1913
<b>Description</b>	<p>This brass plaque fragment, the lower half of a separated Benin bronze, depicts a high-status Portuguese interlocutor. The figure's attire is a direct marker of 16th-century European material culture, characterised by a skirted jerkin (or doublet) that falls in structured 'bases' over knee-length breeches. The Edo artist meticulously utilised fine surface patterning to convey the texture of European cloth, contrasting with indigenous forms. The figure is completed by high-cut boots, which emphasise his foreign identity and constant state of travel. Cast in a static, frontal stance, the piece embodies the Oba's control over foreign trade and military access. This fragment (Inv. No. 64.718) is culturally significant as its upper half resides in the British Museum, highlighting the dispersal of the Benin Bronzes after 1897.</p>



**Figure IV 10 – Portuguese with Two Manillas.**

Source: © KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien

[Reliefplatte: Portugiese mit zwei Manillas | Weltmuseum Wien](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Relief Plaque: Portuguese with two Manillas
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Dated: 16th/17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Culture: Edo. Benin Kingdom Accession date: 1899
<b>Located:</b>	Weltmuseum Wien
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Inv. No. 64735
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Collection: Wilson © KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien.
<b>Description</b>	<p>This brass plaque (Inv. No. 64735, 16th/17th century) depicts a single, high-status Portuguese Interlocutor in characteristic European attire, identified by his distinctive facial features and dress. The central element of the composition is the explicit display of <b>two manillas</b> (brass currency bracelets), which were imported by the Portuguese and served as the financial backbone of the Benin court's brass-casting industry. The plaque thus functions as a <b>commemorative record</b> celebrating the Oba's successful diplomatic and <b>economic control</b> over foreign wealth. The piece's creation validates the Edo state's agency in directing the terms of trade, while its current location in Vienna highlights the subsequent dispersal of the royal arts following the 1897 British Punitive Expedition.</p>



**Figure IV 11 – Plaque with Portuguese Traders and Manillas.**

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

[Ìgùn Èrònwòn \(brass-casting guild\) artists - Plaque with Portuguese Traders and Manillas - Edo peoples - The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Plaque with Portuguese Traders and Manillas
<b>Artist</b>	Ìgùn Èrònwòṅ (brass-casting guild) artists
<b>Material:</b>	Brass, iron
<b>Dimensions:</b>	H. 18 × W. 7 3/4 × D. 1 in. (45.7 × 19.7 × 2.5 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	ca. 1540–70
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	Metropolitan Museum of Art
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991.17.13
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 EZRA Kate (1992)
<b>Description</b>	A brass plaque depicting Portuguese traders alongside manillas, created by the Edo brass-casting guild. The piece illustrates the Benin Kingdom's documentation of European trade and currency objects, reflecting cross-cultural encounters and the high level of technical skill and symbolic representation in 16th–17th century Benin art.



Figure IV 12 – Plaque: Portuguese with spear.

Source: *The British Museum* (16th-17th century)  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Plaque: Portuguese with spear
<b>Material:</b>	brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h 47 cm w 15.72kg w. 31 cm
<b>Date:</b>	16th-17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	The British Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Af1898,0115.12
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	British Museum Trustees
<b>Description</b>	<p>Relief plaque, lost-wax cast in brass. Wide plaque, rectangular in form with side flanges. Background surface decorated with river leaf patterns and stippling. Rosettes in relief in each corner. Two nail holes at top of plaque, two holes at bottom.</p> <p>Depicts standing European (Portuguese) figure in semi-sideways pose holding a gun across the body in right and left hands; crossguard sword in scabbard on left hip attached to belt. The figure wears a domed and brimmed helmet with a boss at top. Dressed in sleeveless buttoned doublet with neck ruff and decorative element on chest, with long-sleeved tunic below. Short pleated patterned 'skirt' and plain knee-length breeches.</p>



**Figure IV 13 – Bracelet: Portuguese Heads and Mudfish.**

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Portuguese Heads with Mudfish 2
<b>Material:</b>	brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h 20 1/2 in. (52.0 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	16th-17th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991.17.79
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991
<b>Description</b>	<p>The “Bracelet with Portuguese Heads and Mudfish” is a brass Benin court object combining Portuguese heads and mudfish motifs. It reflects Benin’s engagement with European trade and the symbolic fusion of foreign influence with local cosmology, as mudfish represented duality and royal power. The bracelet exemplifies lost-wax casting and high craftsmanship. Its inclusion in the catalogue helps illustrate Benin’s artistic dialogue with Portugal, complementing discussions of intercultural exchange in the thesis.</p>



**Figure IV 14 – Gilded cast brass armlet with raised design of Edo and European heads, leopards, and crocodiles.**

Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford  
[Collections online | Pitt Rivers Museum](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Gilded cast brass armlet with raised design of Edo and European heads, leopards and crocodiles.
<b>Material:</b>	Brass metal and Gold metal
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height max 130 mm
<b>Date:</b>	Date made 1680-1730 Date collected 1897 Date loaned 1991
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
<b>Inventory number:</b>	NA
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Field collector: Goerge Le Clerc Egerton
<b>Description</b>	The Gilded Cast Brass Armlet with Raised Designs of Edo and European Heads, Leopards, and Crocodiles, is a ceremonial Benin object combining local Edo and European faces with leopard and crocodile motifs, symbolising royal authority and possibly reflecting faunal knowledge exchanged through contact with Europeans. Crafted in gilded brass, it exemplifies Benin's mastery of lost-wax casting. The armlet is included in the catalogue because it illustrates Benin's intercultural dialogue and symbolic use of animals, supporting the thesis discussion of cultural and ecological exchange.



**Figure IV 15 – Cast brass armlet with raised design of European heads and mudfish.**

Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford  
[Collections online | Pitt Rivers Museum](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Cast brass armlet with raised design of European heads and mudfish
<b>Material:</b>	Material: Brass metal, process cast, low wax cast
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height max 148 mm, diameter max 92 mm
<b>Date:</b>	Date made 1680-1730
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Pitt Rivers Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	NA, Accession number: 1991.13.15
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Field collector: Goerge Le Clerc Egerton & 1897 Benin City Punitive Expedition PRM source Dumas-Egerton Trust
<b>Description</b>	The Cast Brass Armlet with Raised Designs of European Heads and Mudfish is a ceremonial object from the Benin Kingdom that combines European facial motifs with representations of mudfish, symbolising duality and royal power. Made in lost-wax cast brass, it reflects Benin's technical mastery and its interactions with European traders. The armlet is included in the catalogue because it illustrates Benin's artistic engagement with foreign figures, supporting the thesis discussion of intercultural exchange and court symbolism.



**Figure IV 16 – Pendant: Portuguese Horseman.**

Source: Sotheby Parke-Bernet, London, July 12, 1976, Lot 171; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, 1984, no. 94; Museum for African Art, New York, 1988, no. 191. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Portuguese Horseman
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h. 6 1/4 in. (15.9cm)
<b>Date:</b>	16th-18th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991.17.39
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Ezra (1992, p 173)
<b>Description</b>	A brass pendant depicting a Portuguese horseman, created in the Edo Court of Benin between the 16th and 18th centuries. The piece illustrates the Benin Kingdom's detailed representation of European figures and equestrian motifs, reflecting cross-cultural encounters and the high craftsmanship of Benin brass work.



**Figure IV 17 – Lidded Box: Portuguese Face.**

Source: Ezra, K. (1992, 240). *The Perls' collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Royal art of Benin*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Lidded Box: Portuguese Face
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	W. 2 1/4 × D. 1 7/8 × L. 4 1/2 in. (5.7 × 4.8 × 11.4 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	16th-19th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria Edo Court Benin
<b>Located:</b>	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991.17.145 ab
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 EZRA Kate (1992)
<b>Description</b>	That piece is an exceptional example of Bini-Portuguese artistry, most likely a Saltcellar or Lidded Box crafted in the Benin Kingdom (16th century) for the European export market. It is highly probable that it is housed in either the British Museum (London) or the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). The box's surface features detailed carvings of Portuguese figures, symbolising the early diplomatic contact and commercial wealth derived from the European trade in brass and ivory. It is featured in the catalogue for having a portuguese head on it, exemplifying how the bini had foreigners (portuguese) represented on their daily objects of domestic use.



**Figure IV 18 – The Prophecy Bird.**

Source: Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture), Sweden

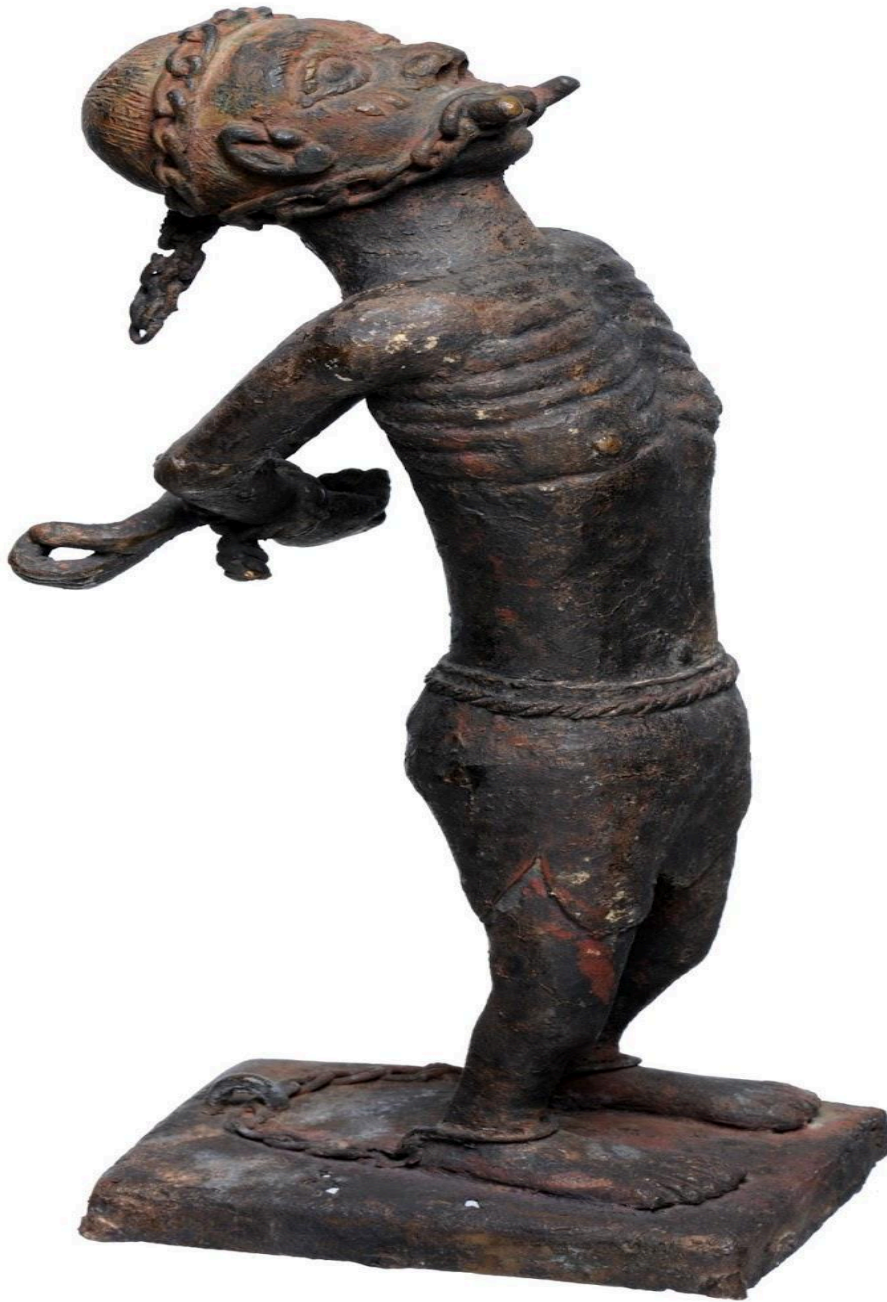
<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Sprout of bronze with bird on the bud
<b>Description</b>	Also a musical instrument, shaped like a bird's crowned tube, it is made to sound by striking its beak with a metal rod.
<b>Material:</b>	brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	Dated 17 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup> century
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture) Sweden
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1907.44.0376
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna
<b>Description</b>	The Sprout of Bronze with a Bird on the Bud is an elaborate piece of Benin royal regalia (17th/19th century), made of cast brass, and currently held by Sweden's National Museums of World Culture. This sculptural object is identified as the Bird of Prophecy ( <i>Ahianmwēn-oro</i> ), used during court festivals. The bird symbolically asserts the Oba's power to overcome fate and defy prophecies of disaster. It is included here because the symbolism of the Bird of Prophecy is frequently discussed in this study.



**Figure IV 19 – Crucifix.**

Source: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Crucifix
<b>Material:</b>	Solid cast brass (Christ), solid cast copper alloy (halo); hollow cast bronze (three end pieces), brass sheet (one end piece), solid cast copper alloy (Mary); forged copper and brass (nails); wood
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height: 18 in (45.7 cm); Width: 8½ in (21.6 cm); Depth: ¾ in (1.8 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	16th–17th century, with later additions
<b>Place of production:</b>	Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	The Metropolitan Museum Of Art
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1999.295.8.
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999
<b>Description</b>	A sculptural crucifix, reflecting European Christian iconography as interpreted or acquired by the Kingdom of Kongo. The piece illustrates the presence of European religious objects in West Africa and their influence on local artistic and ceremonial practices during the 16th–17th century.



**Figure IV 20 – Esclave Enchaîné.**

Source: Musée d'Ethnographie Ville de Neuchâtel

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Statue representing a slave
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	H. 29.9 cm W.12.8 cm D. 8.8 cm
<b>Date:</b>	Production date; unknown date
<b>Place of production:</b>	Western Africa Acquired in 1963
<b>Located:</b>	Musée d'Ethnographie Ville de Neuchâtel
<b>Inventory number:</b>	63.16.10
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Musée d'Ethnographie Ville de Neuchâtel
<b>Description</b>	<p>This brass statue depicts a bound enslaved figure, with hands tied behind the back, legs chained, and the mouth bound to prevent speech or outcry, conveying the physical and psychological trauma of captivity. Although not produced in the Kingdom of Benin, it relates to the wider visual and material culture of slavery in West Africa. While the Kingdom of Benin participated in aspects of the Atlantic slave trade, it did not depict enslaved people in its artworks. The statue is included in the catalogue because, following the thesis discussion on slavery, such imagery provides a vivid historical lens for understanding the realities of enslavement.</p>



**Figure IV 21– Brass Manilla, horseshoe-shaped open bracelet (manilla).**

Source: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Brass Manilla, West Africa, accessed August 2025.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Brass Manila horseshoe-shaped open bracelet (manilla).
<b>Material:</b>	Brass
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	c 16th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Held in the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
<b>Inventory number:</b>	HCR6515
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Ashmolean Museum
<b>Description</b>	The brass manilla, a horseshoe-shaped open bracelet, functioned as a form of currency throughout West Africa from the early modern era. Made of brass, it facilitated trade, social exchanges, and later became integral to Atlantic commerce between Africans and Europeans. Its inclusion in the catalogue supports the thesis discussion on manillas, providing readers with visual context that enhances clarity and understanding of their historical significance.

IVORY ARTWORKS



**Figure IV 22 – Queen Mother (Iyoba) Idia, Pendant Mask.**

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

[Ìgbèsànmwà \(ivory- and wood- carving guild\) artists - Pendant mask of Ìyóbà Idia - Edo - The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Queen Mother (Iyoba) Idia Pendant mask of Ìyóbà Idia
<b>Artist</b>	Ìgbèsànmwà (ivory- and wood- carving guild) artists
<b>Material:</b>	Bone/ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	H. 9 3/8 x W. 5 x D. 2 1/2 in. (23.8 x 12.7 x 6.4 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	16th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Nigeria, Edo, Court of Benin
<b>Located:</b>	Metropolitan Museum of Art
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1978.412.323
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972
<b>Description</b>	A pendant mask representing Queen Mother (Iyoba) Idia, crafted by the Edo Ìgbèsànmwà guild in ivory and wood. The mask exemplifies the Benin Kingdom's masterful ivory and wood carving techniques, highlighting the political and spiritual significance of the Iyoba in court rituals and ceremonial display during the 16th–17th century.



**Figure IV 23 – Carved Elephant Tusk.**

**Source:** Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture) Sweden

[Carlotta - Objekt](#)

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Carved Elephant tusk
<b>Material:</b>	Ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Description</b>	Carved Elephant tusk carved altar tusk, ivory Made of animal material
<b>Date:</b>	NA
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna (The National Museums of World Culture) Sweden
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Item number 1907.44.0375
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Världskulturmuseerna
<b>Description</b>	The carved elephant tusk is a large ivory sculpture (likely 16th-19th century) commissioned by the Oba of Benin and carved by the Igbesanmwan royal guild. It was traditionally placed atop a brass commemorative head on an ancestral altar, serving as a memorial to a deceased Oba. The surface is covered in relief figures, animals, and court scenes that chronicle the kingdom's history, rituals, and the monarchy's divine connection to the spiritual realm. These tusks, now part of the Swedish collection, are key documents of Benin's royal history and ritual power. Despite not having a Portuguese figure on it, it was included in this catalogue to allow the reader to compare with other elephant tusks used in the thesis which represented foreign inscriptions like Portuguese coat of arms.



**Figure IV 24 – Benin–Portuguese Oliphant**

Source: Bassani & Fagg (1988, 158). *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in ivory*. Center for African Art; Prestel-Verlag.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Benin-Portuguese oliphant
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	ca. 1525-1600
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum Cologne
<b>Inventory number:</b>	no.111
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Bassani & Fagg (1988)
<b>Description</b>	This oliphant, produced in the Kingdom of Benin, features the Portuguese coat of arms inscribed on its surface, demonstrating the integration of European motifs into local Benin craftsmanship during the 16th–17th centuries. It is discussed in Chapter 3 to compare with the Sapi–Portuguese oliphant, supporting the thesis argument regarding stylistic and thematic similarities among Afro-Portuguese artworks.



**Figure IV 25 – Sapi–Portuguese Oliphant with Portuguese Coat of Arms**

*Source: (Bassani & Fagg, 1988, 114) Africa and the Renaissance: Art in ivory. Center for African Art; Prestel-Verlag.*

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Sapi-Portuguese oliphant coat of arms
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimension</b>	63 cm
<b>Details:</b>	This horn could have come to Italy as result of marriage between daughter of Dom Manuel I and Charles II Duke of Savoy
<b>Date:</b>	ca.1490-1530
<b>Place of production:</b>	Sierra Leone
<b>Located:</b>	Royal Armory of Turin
<b>Inventory number:</b>	no 81
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	BASSANI Ezio (1988)
<b>Description</b>	This oliphant, decorated with a Sapi-Portuguese rendering of the Portuguese coat of arms, illustrates the cultural and artistic exchanges between the Sapi region and Portugal during the late 15th-16th centuries, showing how local craftsmanship incorporated European motifs. In this thesis, it is discussed in Chapter 3 to facilitate comparison with Benin oliphants and to support the argument regarding the causes of stylistic and thematic similarities among Afro-Portuguese artworks.



**Figure IV 26 – Saltcellar with Portuguese Figures.**

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Arts.

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Salt cellar with Portuguese Figures
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	h 7 1/8 in (18.1 cm)
<b>Date:</b>	15th-16th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Master of the Heraldic Ship (Court of Benin?), Nigeria; Edo; Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	The Metropolitan Museum of Arts.
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1972.63a, b
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Louis V. Bell and Rogers Fund, 1972
<b>Description</b>	A brass saltcellar depicting four Portuguese figures—two richly adorned men and their attendants—around the perimeter. The higher-status figures are depicted frontally, facing outward, while the attendants are in profile, more crudely rendered, and in motion. This piece reflects the Benin Kingdom's detailed representation of European figures and their integration into local artistic traditions during the 16th–17th century.



**Figure IV 27 – Carved Ivory Salt Cellar.**

Source: Photograph by Luísa Oliveira, 2012 (DGPC/ADF).

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Carved ivory salt cellar,
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	19.2 (Height) x 9.8 (diam) cm.
<b>Date:</b>	c.1520-1550
<b>Place of production:</b>	Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria,
<b>Located:</b>	National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon
<b>Inventory number:</b>	Inv. 750 Esc;
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Photo: Luísa Oliveira, 2012 (DGPC/ADF).
<b>Description</b>	A carved ivory salt cellar from the Kingdom of Benin, featuring detailed imagery characteristic of Benin court art. The piece reflects the Kingdom's high level of ivory craftsmanship, ceremonial use of objects, and incorporation of both local motifs and representations of European figures during the early 16th century.



**Figure IV 28 – Half-Section Saltcellar**

*Source: Photograph taken by the author at Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, Portugal, 12 August 2023*

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Saltcellar without base
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	1st quarter of the 16th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Benin Kingdom
<b>Located:</b>	Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga
<b>Inventory number:</b>	750 Esc
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Photo taken by author
<b>Description</b>	<p>Acquired in 1951 This salt jar from Benin (incomplete, with the lower part missing) belongs to a group of approximately fifteen similar vessels known worldwide today. Made entirely of ivory, the lid depicts a knight wearing a helmet and armour, riding a horse with a richly decorated bridle. The background is intricately ornamented, while the central section portrays additional knights and distinguished figures in period-typical costumes and accessories. Although the vessel follows European prototypes in form, clear signs of African craftsmanship are evident in the depiction of costumes and the ground of the composition, which reflect textile patterns still traditionally produced in present-day Nigeria. During the 15th and 16th centuries, countless ivory works arrived in Lisbon, initially from Sierra Leone and later from Benin. Unlike objects from Sierra Leone, which rarely feature Portuguese figures, Benin ivories frequently depict individuals with European facial features. These representations are carefully rendered, detailing distinct physiognomic traits such as long hair, varied beard styles, and pointed noses. Such objects attracted European collectors seeking rare and exotic artworks. Local artisans—including the Bulom of Sierra Leone, the Yoruba, and the Beni of Benin—produced spoons, forks, bowls, hunting horns (oliphants), pyxides, and salt vessels to order. The Benin salt jar is particularly significant as one of the earliest examples of commissioned works, revealing the cultural encounters facilitated by Portuguese contact during the Age of Exploration.</p>



**Figure IV 29 – Section of Luso-African Arts at Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga**

Source: Photograph taken by the author at Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, Portugal, 12 August 2023

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Portuguese saltcellar & elephants
<b>Material:</b>	ivory
<b>Dimensions:</b>	NA
<b>Date:</b>	16th century
<b>Place of production:</b>	Benin Kingdom,
<b>Located:</b>	Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga
<b>Inventory number:</b>	NA
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Photo taken by author
<b>Description</b>	This image shows a selection of Luso-African artworks, highlighting the cross-cultural exchanges between West Africa and Portugal. The photograph, taken by the author, ensures accurate documentation and demonstrates active engagement with museums during the research for this thesis, supporting the comparative analysis presented.



**Figure IV 30 – Long-handled ladle of carved ivory inlaid with brass.**

**Source:** Field collector Goerge Le Clerc Egerton, Pitt Rivers Museum

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Long-handled ladle of carved ivory inlaid with brass
<b>Material:</b>	Material: Brass metal, material Animal Ivory Tooth. Process: carved
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Length 800 mm
<b>Date:</b>	Date made: 1680-1730? Uncertain
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Pitt Rivers Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991/13/04
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Field collector Goerge Le Clerc Egerton
<b>Description</b>	The object is carved from ivory with intricate brass inlay, an artefact of high status from the Edo Kingdom (Benin). At the end of the handle is a cast brass figure of a Portuguese soldier with a musket. Its significance lies in the handle's terminal: a cast brass figure of a Portuguese soldier carrying a musket. This blending of African material and European imagery is a crucial 16th/17th-century record, symbolising the Oba's control over prestigious foreign trade and the acquisition of advanced military technology. The piece physically documents the early diplomatic parity between the two powers. It is included in this catalogue to demonstrate the wide variety of objects carved by Benin artists during the temporal period of this study.



**Figure IV 31 – Ivory armband inlaid with brass, carved with mudfish and European heads.**

**Source:** Field collector Goerge Le Clerc Egerton PRM source dUmas-Egerton Trust, Pitt Rivers Museum

<b>Name of the piece:</b>	Ivory armlet inlaid with brass and carved with mudfish and the heads of Europeans on display
<b>Material:</b>	Animal ivory tooth, brass metal
<b>Dimensions:</b>	Height max 126 mm diameter: max 90 mm
<b>Date:</b>	Made Before 1897
<b>Place of production:</b>	NA
<b>Located:</b>	Pitt Rivers Museum
<b>Inventory number:</b>	1991/13/26
<b>Photographic credits:</b>	Field collector Goerge Le Clerc Egerton PRM source dUmas-Egerton Trust
<b>Description</b>	<p>This cylindrical ivory armlet (likely 18th Century) is a profound example of Edo artistic interpretation of the early European encounter. The surface features a dense, repeating decorative field that combines both African and European iconography, carved in low relief. Key to its meaning is the juxtaposition of stylised European/Portuguese heads (often wearing distinctive caps) with mudfish motifs. The brass inlay not only enhances the object's beauty, but also underscores the economic link with Europe, as the Portuguese supplied the brass manillas used for metalworking. The mudfish represents the Oba's divine nature and association with Olokun (god of the sea), while the Portuguese heads signify the King's control over the wealth that arrived from the sea. The piece visually chronicles the early modern intercultural exchange.</p>



**Figure IV 32 – 500-Year-Old Stone Sculpture, Cloister of the Jerónimos Monastery**

Source: Photograph by Luís Pavão, IGESPAR DIDA AF

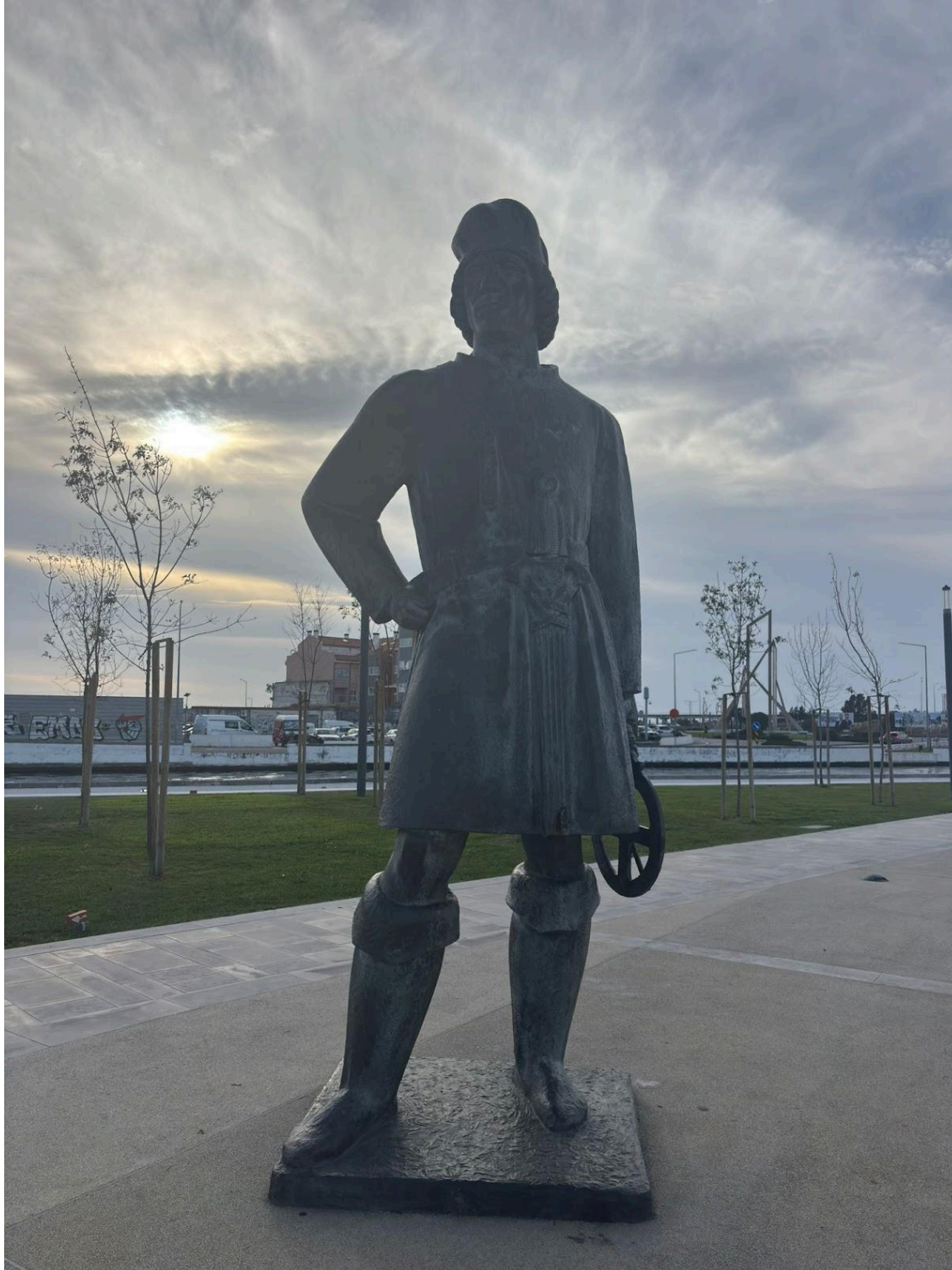
This stone sculpture, dating to approximately the early 16th century, depicts the profile of an African figure. Located in the Cloister of the Jerónimos Monastery, it provides insight into the presence and representation of Africans in Portuguese visual culture during the Age of Discovery. The image is included in the catalogue to support discussions of cross-cultural encounters, reciprocity and the visual circulation of African figures in European contexts.



Figure IV 33 – Benin in the 17th Century (1668) by Olfert Dapper

Source: <https://panafrocore.com/2024/03/06/the-kingdom-of-benin-a-historical-overview/>

The engraving *De Stadt Benin* in Olfert Dapper (1686) depicts Benin City in the 17th century. Dapper, a Dutch writer, based his work on reports from missionaries and explorers. The city is shown with fortified wooden walls and watchtowers. The royal palace is prominent, with large courtyards and galleries adorned with brass plaques. The Oba is depicted on horseback, with musicians in the background. Figures in the scene engage in trade, processions, and daily life. European observers are included, reflecting Benin's interactions with traders. The image illustrates the city's organisation, cultural vibrancy, and perceived grandeur. Its inclusion in the catalogue is essential, as it provides a rare visual reference for Benin during the period under study, helping to convey an informed impression of the kingdom's appearance in the 17th century. It could also be argued that this illustration represents Africans in art from a European perspective, as it was sketched by the Dutch engraver Jacob van Meurs, active in Amsterdam during the 17th century. Van Meurs was renowned for producing detailed maps and illustrations for various publications, including the works of Olfert Dapper. This supports the idea of **reciprocity** defended in this study where Benin (African) artists depicted the Europeans (Portuguese).



**Figure IV 34 – Statue of João Afonso de Aveiro**

Source: Photograph taken by Jowita Wysocka, at Jardim do Rossio, Aveiro, Portugal, 18 October 2025

It was very vital to include the image of the statue of João Afonso de Aveiro in the thesis catalogue for multiple scholarly and interpretive reasons. It provides a concrete visual reference to a pivotal figure in early Portuguese engagement with West Africa, allowing readers to contextualise textual discussions within a tangible material form.

The statue conveys nuanced details of attire, posture, and artistic style, offering insights into how Portuguese explorers were represented and commemorated during the early modern period. Its presence in the catalogue also illuminates broader dynamics of memory, power, and visual culture in colonial encounters, highlighting how European figures were memorialised in ways that reflected political and cultural agendas.

By integrating this image, the thesis facilitates a more immediate and embodied engagement with the historical narrative, bridging the gap between abstract discussion and material culture. Furthermore, it provides a point of comparison for examining Portuguese influence on West African societies, enabling a richer, more multidimensional understanding of cross-cultural interactions. Ultimately, the inclusion of the statue strengthens both the analytical depth and the visual clarity of the study, reinforcing the thesis' broader arguments about the entangled histories of Portugal and the Kingdom of Benin.



**Figure IV 35 – Description of João Afonso de Aveiro at Rossio Square (Praça do Rossio)**

*Source: Photograph by Jowita Wysocka*

## APPENDIX V Links of Digital Artefacts of some Museums

1. Pitt Rivers Museum  
[Photographic services | Pitt Rivers Museum \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)  
[Collections online | Pitt Rivers Museum \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)
2. World Museum of Culture  
[Carlotta - Free search \(smvk.se\)](#)
3. Weltmuseum Wien  
[Weltmuseum Wien | Weltmuseum Wien](#)
4. Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel  
<https://mus-e.ne.ch/app/eng1/f?p=135:8>  
[Module WEB \(ne.ch\)](#)

### **Digital Benin**

Digital Benin is a collective online museum with data of about 5, 285 objects from about 136 institutions in 20 countries. The platform focuses on objects looted from the Benin Kingdom. The reader can access this platform by clicking on the link here [Digital Benin](#).

In case the reader is reading a printed version of the thesis, one could find it on <https://digitalbenin.org>

Digital links to museum collections have been included in the appendix to provide readers with direct access to the institutions housing the artefacts discussed in this thesis. This approach not only allows for verification of descriptions and supports comparative analysis, but also reflects the author's direct engagement with these museums during the research process.

By providing these links, readers are offered a clearer and more immediate connection to the material culture under study, which can help address potential questions or uncertainties. The inclusion of authoritative online catalogues thus complements the textual and visual content of the main thesis, enhancing transparency, scholarly rigour, and overall engagement with the artefacts without disrupting the flow of the catalogue.

## APPENDIX VI Flora and Fauna Exchanged

### Plants Introduced to Benin by the Portuguese

<b>Plant</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Maize ( <i>Zea mays</i> )	From the Americas, it became a staple crop in West Africa.
Cassava ( <i>Manihot esculenta</i> )	From Brazil; thrived in African soils and became widely adopted.
Peanuts ( <i>Arachis hypogaea</i> )	Native to South America, spread by Portuguese traders.
Sweet potatoes ( <i>Ipomoea batatas</i> )	American origin; added to local diets.
Pineapple ( <i>Ananas comosus</i> )	Tropical fruit from South America, cultivated on the coast.
Sugarcane ( <i>Saccharum officinarum</i> )	Brought from Madeira/Brazil, tied to plantation systems.
Tobacco ( <i>Nicotiana tabacum</i> )	Grown for ritual, medicinal, and trade uses.
Papaya ( <i>Carica papaya</i> )	Exotic fruit introduced via Portuguese routes.
Citrus fruits (orange, lemon, lime)	Spread by Portuguese from Asia/Mediterranean into Africa.

## Plants Taken from Benin to Portugal

<b>Plant</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Oil palm products ( <i>Elaeis guineensis</i> )	Palm oil and kernels became valuable exports.
Kolanut ( <i>Cola nitida</i> / <i>Cola acuminata</i> )	Stimulant nut; important in West African culture, introduced to Europe.
African pepper <i>Capsicum spp</i> / ( <i>Aframomum melegueta</i> )	Widely used in European cuisine and medicine.
Shea products ( <i>Vitellaria paradoxa</i> )	Exported occasionally for oil and butter.
Yams ( <i>Dioscorea spp.</i> )	Some varieties were sent to Europe for study and novelty.

### **Animals Introduced to Benin by Portuguese**

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Horses (new breeds)	Supplemented trans-Saharan horses, used in warfare and prestige.
Cattle (European breeds)	Introduced alongside existing African cattle.
Pigs	European domesticated pigs spread through trade.
Chickens (new breeds)	Added to indigenous fowl varieties.
Goats and sheep (Mediterranean breeds)	Brought for food and breeding, mixed with local stock.

### **Animals Introduced to the Portuguese from Benin**

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
African grey parrot ( <i>Psittacus erithacus</i> )	Highly prized as pets and diplomatic gifts.
Leopards	Sent as royal gifts and kept as exotic marvels.
Monkeys (various species)	Exported as curiosities and pets.
Crocodiles	Transported occasionally as exotic animals.
Guinea fowl ( <i>Numida meleagris</i> )	Originally African, popularised further in Europe.

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Patrick Joseph

[DM]



[2026]