Gregor M. Metzig

Corals, Brass and Firearms. Material Commodities in Cultural Interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin around 1500

Abstract: This article argues that in early contacts between the Portuguese and the Edo of Benin (whose territory lies in today’s Southern Nigeria), objects played a key role in the establishment of intercultural diplomatic relations. From the 1480s onwards, when Portuguese navigators arrived in the Niger Delta, the exchange of gifts assisted both sides in overcoming cultural differences and gaining the other’s trust. These material exchanges included the establishment of long-term trading relationships. The Europeans were mainly interested in purchasing African slaves, and tried to gain the favour of the Oba (the chief monarch in Benin) with prestigious luxury objects such as high-quality textiles, corals and stud horses. Important to the Edo were Portuguese copper and brass imports, which were used for the artistic representation of Benin at the Oba’s court. As bearers of strength and wealth, the Portuguese were portrayed in these characteristic sculptures and reliefs. In the absence of written sources, these artefacts provide a unique Edo perspective at the moment of first contact between Europeans and Sub-Saharan Africans.

In the mid-fifteenth century Portuguese explorers, seeking new trading partners and routes in the hinterland of the Muslim-dominated Maghreb, advanced systematically along the Guinea Coast. The Papal bull “Romanus Pontifex” (1455) privileged the Portuguese crown as the only European power entitled to navigate, trade and missionize in Western African territories. And for a long time the Portuguese maintained the semblance of predominantly military campaigners in Africa, defending their Rome-granted monopoly position against the ambitions of their European rivals. In the face of painful losses of ships and crews, however, these initially belligerent campaigns eventually evolved into more peaceful ones, based on a mainly diplomatic and economic exchange-oriented strategy.¹ In 1482, the Portuguese established Fort São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) in present-day Ghana on the “Gold Coast”. Presumably, some of their ships had previously reached the area bordering the Edo-speaking Bini, whose realm the Portuguese called O Beny,

after its inhabitants. Hence the derivation of the name of the historical kingdom of Benin in the Niger Delta, which corresponds to today’s federal state of Edo in Southern Nigeria (Figure 1).²

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² In the context of historical studies on Portuguese expansion and diplomacy in West Africa, the Edo realm of Benin finds only sporadic attention: Ivana Elbl: Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy:
The arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century coincided with Benin’s rise as a leading regional power, culminating in the former tribal kingdom’s reach across the entire Niger delta region and its long coastal shoreline, which included Lagos. The taking of large numbers of prisoners during the numerous wars waged by the Oba (the chief secular and spiritual monarch in Benin) against his neighbours facilitated a slave trade with the Portuguese. Apart from “human” goods, the Europeans were interested in ivory, timber, textiles and in the so-called Benin pepper (pimenta do rabo) as well. After initial sporadic contacts, Portuguese navigator João Afonso de Aveiro († before 1504) founded in 1485/86 a trading post (feitoria) in the seaport of Ughoton (Gwato), located near the capital Benin City. Both sides immediately realized the importance of their respective counterpart and endeavoured to build close diplomatic and economic relations. This cultural contact led to both the original red collar, made of strings of coral beads (odigba), which covered the Oba’s entire neck, and the scarlet wool cloth (ododo), which to this day remains a symbol of the Oba’s royal and spiritual dignity (Figure 2).
These objects can serve as first hints in an analysis of Luso-African diplomacy and in particular of the role of material goods in the early period of European expansion, which shall be elaborated upon in this article. They underline the high prestige of European goods in Benin society. The imported materials and artefacts could function not only as a kind of bribe or currency but also as non-verbal communication tools or even as objects of cultic veneration. On the other hand, to sever intentionally such an exchange of material goods could cause serious intercultural complications or even significantly cool the relations between both sides.

Figure 2: Oba Erediauwa wearing his insignia of corals and red wool, Benin, photo by Joseph Nevadomsky, ca. 1985.
However, the role of the Portuguese in Benin is a still highly controversial issue, especially due to the lack of sources, so that one may draw only a few general conclusions about the dimension of this first intercultural encounter. Because there are no written sources from that region of African provenance, modern historiography is based mainly on oral traditions, which is evidently a problematic approach. In the case of Benin, local historian Jacob Uwadiae Egharevba combined diverse, long-standing historical traditions with several European sources to complete an extensive historical work that is strongly characterized by twentieth-century political interests.8 The accounts of Portuguese officials such as Duarte Pacheco Pereira (ca. 1469–1533) and João de Barros (1496–1570), who actually served in Africa for several years, together with the writings of court chronicler Rui de Pina (ca. 1440–1522), are indeed the oldest documents on the Edo realm in the Niger Delta. However, not one of them provides information about internal West African developments.9 This could be the reason why international research on Benin is predominantly done by art historians or ethnologists and, up to a certain point, in a mainly speculative way. Adopting the methodical approach of *material culture studies*, which was recently introduced into the field of historical research, enables us to seriously consider for this study the numerous images of Europeans in brass, ivory and timber as visual complements to the written sources. These artefacts demonstrate clearly that the early intercultural encounters were closely followed and carefully observed by Native Africans. Obviously, however, this does not necessarily mean that these reliefs always correspond to a realistic documentation of these contacts. Therefore, one has to bear in mind very carefully the producing context and the function of these artistic expressions within the ancient Edo world.10 In a certain way, these images express the degree but also the limits of European impact on Benin society.

9 Most of the useful material is today preserved at the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, in the collections “Corpó Cronológico”, “Gavetas” and “Núcleo Antigo”, but some of it has already been published. For an overview of the Portuguese sources and editions cf. Ivana Elbl: Archival evidence of the Portuguese Expansion in Africa, 1440–1521, in: *Primary Sources & Original works 2* (1993), 319–357.
10 On the methodical problems of the interpretation of Benin's courtly art as a historical source: Gore, Benin City, 185–190; Spahr, Benin, 144–173. “Material culture studies”, predominantly developed by Jules David Prown, assume a formal description of objects and a context analysis of their function and use, including questions about the producers and their distribution, cf. Jules D. Prown and Kenneth Haltman (eds.): *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*. East
Material Exchange of Commodities in Luso-Edo Diplomatic Relations

In contrast to older studies, which generally assume a technological superiority of the Portuguese at the beginning of their expansion into Africa, the example of the Guinea Coast emphasizes that their influence as political players on the ground was very restricted. In 1481, King John II (1455–1495) added the title of a “senhor da Guiné” (Lord of Guinea) to his royal intitulatio, but neither in Benin nor on the Gold Coast did the authority of his representatives reach much beyond the local trading post. At the diplomatic level, the Portuguese were at no time able to avoid the complex diplomatic procedure at the Oba’s court. As political actors and missionaries the Portuguese representatives could only advance their interests there to a minor extent, and even as traders they were obliged to meet their Edo business partners on an equal footing.

During their forays into the sub-Saharan territories, the Portuguese found a large number of unknown realms and rulers whose languages and customs they were not acquainted with and whose power they initially could hardly assess. In this intercultural context, gifts as tools of nonverbal communication no doubt figured even more prominently than in Europe. Certainly, the Portuguese had difficulties in deciding who should be honoured how and with which material “dues”. Not only the ruler of Benin and his negotiators but also a number of his

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11 Thornton, Portuguese Expansion, 122f.; Elbl, Portuguese Relations, 166–167 provides a critical overview on older studies. A good example of this colonial approach is the book title by John Vogt: Portuguese rule on the Gold Coast, 1469–1682. Athens 1979, even if the author himself clearly concedes that “the Portuguese never were able to extend their political influence far beyond the limits of São Jorge da Mina”: ibid., 86.

12 Harding, Königreich Benin, 83. In the Portuguese sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the geographical term “Guiné” encompassed still a wider area than afterwards, including the whole Guinea Coast from the Senegal river to the Ogooué river in present-day Gabon.

court dignitaries had great expectations. The complex multilevel ritual of gift-giving started immediately after the arrival of the Portuguese ships in Ughoton, continued in the greetings of the foreigners by the local officeholders of the port city and those of the capital, and climaxed in the audience at the royal palace. In fact, the Oba often fixed the trading volume in relation to the quantity and value of the presents he and his dignitaries had previously received from his guests.\footnote{14 Jungwirth, Benin, 258; Elbl, Portuguese Relations, 174, 179. Cf. the gift list of the Portuguese vessel São Miguel, 1522, in: Harding, Königreich Benin, appendix No. 57.}

On the other hand, based on the value of these gifts, the Europeans speculated on creating sufficient incentives for potential economic and political rewards. A few cargo lists of the ships leaving Lisbon for West Africa reveal how the Portuguese tried to satisfy the Oba’s need for representation, predominantly by corals and glass beads from the Mediterranean as well as by fine-woven textiles for ceremonial outfits.\footnote{15 Ryder, Benin, 40. Already Rui de Pina: \textit{Crónicas de D. Sancho I, D. Afonso II, D. Sancho II, D. Afonso III, D. Dinis, D. Afonso IV, D. Duarte, D. Afonso V, D. João II, ed. Manuel Lopes de Almeida. Porto 1977, chap. 24, 940–941 and Garcia de Resende: \textit{Crónica de D. João II e miscelânea, ed. Joaquim V. Serrão. Lisboa 1973, chap. 65, 97, mention, without giving any further details, that the Oba’s first delegation to King John II in Portugal returned to Benin on a considerable caravel, provided with magnificent clothes for the envoy and his wife as well as with an honorary gift for the Oba.}}

In Benin, corals belong to the monarch, who even today wears a red collar of coral strings up to his mouth (\textit{odigba}), a coral bead crown (\textit{ede}) and a royal jerkin completely made of this precious material. Sometimes the Oba bestows a few single coral beads upon meritorious officials, which traditionally however have to be given back after their death.\footnote{16 Daniel Inneh: \textit{Gilden im Dienst des Palastes}, in: Plankensteiner, Benin, 103–117, here 107. As an example of an Oba’s portrait in brass with his coral insignia cf. Barbara Plankensteiner: \textit{Gedenkkopf eines Königs}, in: ibid., No. 275, 492; Ezra, Royal Art, 11–21.}

The red colour of the Mediterranean coral introduced by the Portuguese fitted into the symbolic court language of the Edo realm, where this colour is traditionally associated with power, blood and the water god Olokun as the aquatic counterpart of the Oba.\footnote{17 Kathy Curnow: \textit{Zeremonialschwert – ada – mit Korallenscheide}, in: Plankensteiner, Benin, No. 153, 380–381. In the years 1512–13 the Portuguese imported 33,844 small corals and beads to Benin, cf. Ryder, Benin, 40, 49.}

In 1505 King Manuel I (1469–1526) sent a caparisoned horse with an ornamented saddlecloth made of silk, linen and coral beads as a present to the Oba. Horses were not completely unknown in sub-Saharan Benin, but due to the predations of the common tsetse fly, they were a rare and high-ranking status symbol.\footnote{18 John K. Thornton: \textit{Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500–1800}. London 1999, 76; Barbara W. Blackmun: \textit{Anhänger mit portugiesischem Reiter}, in: Plankensteiner, Benin, No. 138, 367. On the function of horses as diplomatic gifts in Europe: Magdalena Bayreuther: \textit{Pferde in der Diplomatie der frühen Neuzeit}, in: Häberlein and Jeggle, Materielle Grundlagen, 247–254.}
Additionally, the royal Portuguese representatives delivered 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 made in Cambay (Kambhat). A Portuguese cargo list dated 1522 confirms these kinds of customary gift-giving practices at the court of Benin and also listed twenty ounces of corals, four Indian caps and red satin silk. Indeed, the officials of the Oba received European and North African goods like linen and wool fabrics as well as a large amount of coloured hats and caps as presents. The extremely prestigious luxury commodities from India were exclusively reserved for the monarch himself.

The continuous exchange with the Europeans enhanced the preferences for exotic luxury goods among the courtiers of Benin. They particularly appreciated materials of long-lasting durability like corals, glass, and especially metals and metal products of all kinds. The largest import products of the Portuguese in West Africa were copper and its alloys, brass and bronze, which occasionally served as presents, but mainly served as a kind of currency. The Europeans imported these raw materials predominantly in the shape of bars or wearable armlets (manilhas), which could be melted down on site and processed further. For example, 13,000 of such metal rings were imported from 1505 to 1507 via the Portuguese trading post at Ughoton. How strongly the Portuguese were identified with these items can be seen in the numerous visual representations of them with manilhas in the courtly art of Benin. Together with the textiles, metal goods constituted more than three-quarters of the Portuguese cargos to Morocco and West Africa.

Similar to their role in introducing other luxury commodities into Africa, the Portuguese acted merely as trade intermediaries in this exchange. The tiny West Iberian kingdom did not have sufficient ore reserves of its own, but obtained its

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20 Cargo list of the Portuguese vessel São Miguel, 1522, in: Harding, Königreich Benin, appendix No. 57.
22 Eisenhofer, Benin, 108.
23 Vogt, Portuguese Cloth Trade, 625.
copper via the Portuguese factory in Antwerp from important deposits in Tyrol, Upper Hungary (Slovakia) and the Mansfeld territory (Central Germany). In Benin, the Portuguese were not the first copper importers, but via their new shipping routes from Europe they were able to deliver greater quantities of the metal than ever before. From that point on, regular imports enabled the local bronze casters a continuous production that transformed large quantities of ore into full-figured sculptures, busts and rectangular plaques — by using the lost wax process (cire perdue). The ornamented brass plaques were not allowed to be merchandised, serving rather exclusively as decorations for the Oba’s palace, the administrative and political centre of the realm and the most important ritual sanctuary that honoured the ancestors.

Under Oba Esigie (ca. 1504–1550), the extraordinarily high esteem in which this non-ferrous metal was held, not unlike the contemporary European fascination for gold and silver, is especially well documented in the local tradition. One of Esigie’s epithets means “the bright, white man of bronze”. Furthermore, tradition claims that he built nearly his whole residence from copper. In the tropical and humid climate of Benin, where even the elite’s houses decayed rapidly – despite intensive care – due to their clay and wood construction, resistant materials like copper and its alloys were of major importance. These metals resisted decay and insect damage and were, as import products, easy to control by the ruling elites and therefore exclusive. Thus, these materials functioned, in the words of ethnologist Stefan Eisenhofer, as “manifestations of timeless orders”. One should not underestimate the effect of these very skilfully casted and highly detailed brass plaques. Even the rough British colonial troops, who captured Benin City in a brutal assault in 1897, seem to have been so impressed by these artworks that they doubted their African origin. During this campaign, the

26 Harding, Königreich Benin, 117–118.
28 Jungwirth, Benin, 243.
29 Eisenhofer, Benin, 108.
Oba’s royal palace was completely destroyed and its reliefs were sold to several museums and private collectors around the world. As a result, its original arrangement and iconography has not even yet been sufficiently decoded. At least one of the approximately A4-shaped brass plaques shows the palace of Benin City as a centre of power. Moreover, it is described quite accurately in a Dutch book, published in 1668, based on reports of Dutch sailors describing Africa:

The King’s court is square and stands on the right side of the town when you enter the gate [which leads] from Gotton [Ughoton]. It is easily as big as the town of Haarlem and enclosed by a wall of its own, similar to the town wall. It is divided into many fine palaces, houses and rooms for courtiers, and it contains beautiful long square galleries about as big as the exchange at Amsterdam, some bigger than others, resting on wooden pillars, covered from top to bottom with cast copper, on which deeds of war and battle scenes are carved. These are kept very clean.\(^{30}\)

This wing of the palace with its columns jacketed with brass plaques is probably depicted on a relief, preserved in Berlin today (Figure 3).

It shows, arranged one below the other as a picture-in-picture, the characteristic representations of the Portuguese with long hair, helmets and hooked noses.\(^ {31}\) On the top of the building one can even identify the crooked serpent with its head hanging down, which is mentioned in a letter of another traveller to Benin, David van Nyendael (1667–1702), who was in the service of the Dutch West India Company.\(^ {32}\) He further described several carvings on the wooden stringers of the palace, but he had some problems distinguishing between “the merchants, soldiers, hunters and the likes” represented there.\(^ {33}\)

Even if all of these complex iconographic programs have by no means yet been decoded, the brass plaques and the wood and ivory carvings originally fixed in the Oba’s palace outline historical topics of the realm and its dynasty. In this context, astonishingly detailed historical illustrations are mingled with a variety of symbolic and religious-animistic motifs. The Edo used some of the courtly artefacts obviously as a form of ritual worship, an aspect which provoked the Portuguese writers Rui de Pina and Duarte Pacheco Pereira to condemn the common

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\(^{30}\) Olfert Dapper: Description of Benin, 1668, in: Harding, Königreich Benin, appendix No. 67; translated by Adam Jones.


\(^{33}\) Spahr, David van Nyendael, 92.
Figure 3: The Oba’s palace, brass, Benin, sixteenth/seventeenth century, Ethnologisches Museum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Inv.-Nr. III C 8377.
“heresies, idolatries and witchcrafts” in the local population. The precious material and the upmarket manufacturing emphasized the importance of the Oba, who represented his unique status with this exclusive interior and exterior residential decoration. To a certain extent, the palace as a part of his self-conception served as a diplomatic setting for receiving envoys of neighbouring African rulers while at the same time underlining the continuity and legitimacy of the ruling dynasty towards their own population.

The buildings of the residence included several sections and towers and were separated from the rest of the city by a high mud wall. In contrast to the rather well-documented architectonic structure, one can hardly make firm conclusions about how diplomatic audiences proceeded. Basically, even face-to-face contact with this theoretically unrestricted and sacred monarch signified an extraordinary honour in itself. In the belief of the Edo-people, after his enthronement the Oba was, due to his close connections to the gods and ancestors, considered otherworldly. This implied that he did not even feel the urge to eat or sleep and, therefore, the common people were not supposed to watch him partaking in these primary necessities. Thus in Benin the typical welcome and farewell dinner of European diplomacy could, if at all, only take place in the absence of the host. Even at the climax of Portuguese influence at the West African court, the merchant Duarte Pires mentioned as the greatest honour for his Portuguese compatriots the invitation to dine at one table with one of the Oba’s sons. But Pires’s following statement – that they were allowed to move within the palace completely unguarded – sounds dubious. Most of the Portuguese contacts at the court were with high-ranking dignitaries, especially the territorial lords (Uzama) and the hierarchically subdivided palace guilds of the Otus. Both of these groups organized and controlled relations with foreigners, received presents in the name of the Oba and supervised the exchange of commodities with the guests.

However, the Oba granted a personal audience to a number of chosen European delegations at his court. Duarte Pires, for example, stressed, certainly not without exaggeration, his personal proximity to the ruler, while at the same time Portuguese clerics were allowed to accompany the monarch on his campaigns.

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35 For the Oba as sacral ruler cf. Harding, Königreich Benin, 99–110.
36 Letter of Duarte Pires to King Manuel, s. l., 20 October 1516, in: Brásio, Monumenta 1, No. 103, 369–370.
37 Harding, Königreich Benin, 115–120; Inneh, Gilden.
38 Letter of Duarte Pires to King Manuel, s. l., 20 October 1516, in: Brásio, Monumenta 1, No. 103, 369–370.
Nevertheless, only a few accounts of English and Dutch merchant delegates who were received in Benin at a later time contain further information about the proceedings at an audience. According to these documents, the European visitors, attended by several royal dignitaries, passed a number of palace rooms and open galleries before reaching a fourth courtyard. There the Oba, surrounded by a circle of his close courtiers and wearing his collar and his coral bead crown, awaited them. The Dutch company representative David van Nyendael remembered vividly the canopy expanded over the head of the monarch and the royal ivory seat, whereas Richard Eden’s account emphasized particularly the respectful distance of all persons to the ruler. According to this Englishman, none of those present dared look directly at the Oba’s face without first having been asked to do so. Still, until the seventeenth century, the official audience language for European guests was Portuguese, which was translated, if necessary. In addition to these language skills, the quality of the offered gifts was a decisive condition for a successful intercultural encounter in Benin. If these did not satisfy the host’s expectations, the mood could turn again just as swiftly, as, in 1539, a missionary delegation of John III had to learn the hard way. The Franciscan friars, in compliance with their monastic vows, arrived there without “temporal advantages”, bringing only “spiritual advantages”. With their heads lowered, they handed over the diplomatic documents of the Portuguese king, but the Oba threw these papers scornfully into a chest and ignored them for the following three months. Without further audiences, the royal representatives were detained with little food and faced humiliations from their guards. Apparently, the West African ruler felt offended not only by the missing gifts, but also by the delegation’s lower rank and status. As a condition for their release he demanded a high-ranking envoy posted at his court, in order to deliver his diplomatic correspondence to the king in Lisbon personally.

39 Spahr, David van Nyendael, 92–94. Richard Eden’s account of the journey Thomas Windhams to the Guinea Coast, 1553, in: John W. Blake (ed.): Europeans in West Africa 1450–1560. Documents to illustrate the nature and scope of Portuguese enterprise in West Africa, the abortive attempt of Castilians to create an Empire there, and the early English Voyages to Barbary and Guinea. London 1942, No. 129, 318. A Portuguese letter from 1539 also mentions a throne on a three-stage platform, on which the Oba had a seat during their audience, cf. Letter of the Franciscan friars António and Francisco together with the lay brother Miguel Magro to King John III, Benin, 30 August 1539, in: Brásio, Monumenta 2, No. 29, 79–82, here 81.

40 Ibid., 79.

41 Ibid., 80: “[...] lhe [to the Oba] pedimos, que nos alargasse ha jda com re[s]posta da carta de v. a. e ele nola negou e disse que nã aviamos de hir de quá sem ebaixador de v. a. cô carta sua, [...]”
The voyage of the Franciscans makes clear that Portuguese diplomacy in Benin aimed, in addition to the establishment of commercial relations and the granting of trade concessions, also at the Christianization of the local elites. Therefore, Christian missionaries arrived there immediately after the first European merchants in the mid-1480s. Although none of them were able to understand any of the indigenous West African languages, they persuaded the Oba to delegate some of his confidants to return with them on the Portuguese ships to Lisbon. This kind of strategy had proved to be successful at the Gold Coast before. The head of Benin’s first delegation to Europe was, according to the chroniclers Rui de Pina and Garcia de Resende (1470–1536), a high-level official from Ughoton. This shows the Oba’s appreciation and interest in the foreign monarch in faraway Portugal. The guests were received solemnly at the Portuguese court and honoured with a number of presents. After a couple of years they returned to their home country, educated in the Christian faith and the Portuguese language. Henceforth they acted as mediators between Europeans and Africans in Benin. This way, the local rulers grew up with the Portuguese language, as the Englishman Richard Eden confirmed in his account from about 1553, stating that the Oba mastered “the Portugall tongue, which he had learned as a child.” Furthermore, Duarte Pires in his letter from 1516 reported that several European missionaries in Benin were eagerly teaching some of the local courtiers how to read. Apparently, these foreigners had so much influence that they were allowed to keep the correspondence to the Portuguese king in the Oba’s name. As an example, in 1515 an envoy of the African ruler, whom the Portuguese called Pero Barroso, arrived at the court in Lisbon with a few letters of his principal, but he, obviously unable to write, signed the receipt of his guest presents only with a simple cross. A significant expression of this period of strong European influence is a detail of an ivory carving, today preserved in

43 Pina, Crónicas, chap. 24, 940f.; Resende, Crónica, chap. 65, 97; cf. Hein, Communication, 2; Harding, Königreich Benin, 84.
44 Richard Eden’s account of the journey Thomas Windhams to the Guinea Coast, 1553, in: Blake, Europeans, No. 129, 318.
45 Letter of Duarte Pires to King Manuel, s. l., 20 October 1516, in: Brásio, Monumenta 1, No. 103, 369–370.
Berlin, which is traditionally interpreted as depicting the Edo prince Esigie together with one of his white tutors (Figures 4, 5). 47

The ambitious policy of Evangelization was initially inspired by the search for Prester John, a legendary Christian ruler of the East, whom the Portuguese hoped to win over as a strong ally in the hinterland of the Muslim territories. According to the historical work of João de Barros, these speculations were fuelled by local

47 Blackmun, Figuren, 160, 164 (including fig. 3); Barbara W. Blackmun: Elfenbeinzahn mit Reliefschnitzerei, in: Plankensteiner, Benin, No. 146, 375–376.
Edo narrations about a spiritual and secular monarch named Ogané, who reigned in the interior of the African continent. Traditionally, the Oba of Benin, after his enthronement, rendered homage to this superior ruler by sending him a number of precious presents. As a symbol of his new dignity he received a headdress and some cross charms in return, which, as a matter of course, attracted the attention of the Portuguese.  

Nevertheless, their search for the fabulous Prester John remained fruitless and, in contrast to Central African Congo, Portuguese efforts to introduce Christianity in Benin were of little success in the long run. Only a few

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sources point towards success with projects of Christianization, such as Duarte Pires’ letter, which pointed out that the Oba had ordered the conversion of one of his sons to the Christian faith and the building of a church. But this enthusiastic declaration by the Portuguese liegeman can easily be explained by the intention to inform his king about the considerable progress of the Benin mission. Even though the Nigerian historian Jacob U. Egharevba proposed a precise localization for this church building, there is neither written nor archaeological evidence for it. A conversion to an alien religion would basically have put into question the Oba’s sacral concept of rulership as well as his exceptional authority and the social cohesion of his people. Therefore, the result of the Europeans’ arrival in Benin was not the Christianization of the Edo-people, but the integration of the foreigners into the religious-cultural and pictorial worldview of the Africans.

The Portuguese through Edo Eyes

Concerning the material culture in the context of Luso-Edo relations, there is another useful and prestigious product of European manufacturing that stands out from luxury commodities and metal imports: namely, firearms. The Portuguese introduced these war instruments, striking mostly psychologically, into Benin at the end of the fifteenth century. At the beginning of the following century, a Papal ban on the sales of these military technologies to non-Christian peoples quickly brought this profit-promising commerce to a standstill. The local casters imitated the European manufacturing of helmets and armour plating, but the production and handling of cannonry required a considerable amount of material as well as specific chemical and mechanical knowledge. Indeed, some African reproductions of Portuguese cannons have been found in Benin, along with Portuguese originals. However, due to their primitive casting, these guns could hardly have been used in combat. Therefore, it is highly doubtful that at that time the Edo were able to produce and operate these newly introduced firearms by themselves.

50 Letter of Duarte Pires to King Manuel, s. l., 20 October 1516, in: Brásio, Monumenta 1, No. 103, 369–370.
52 Roese and Smith, Cannon.
54 Roese and Smith, Cannon, 90–97.
It is much more likely that they continued to import at least some elements, such as the fine mechanical lock or European gunpowder, and hired a number of skilled Portuguese mercenaries for their local wars. As a letter of King Manuel I shows, at least in 1514, in contrast to the newly Christianized ruler of Congo, the Oba had no properly functioning firearms at his disposal. The Portuguese king promised his potential African ally the demanded weapons on the condition that the Oba convert to Christianity, underlining at the same time his will to respect the Papal ban on firearms for non-Christians. This royal letter was preceded by an Edo delegation to Portugal, which connected the missionary question with the request for weapon deliveries. Effectively, in 1517 three padres, among them even one Benin native, set out from the Island of São Tomé to the West-African coast with the intention of converting the Oba to Christianity. Decades later, the Portuguese chronicler and African veteran João de Barros supposed that the reason for this alleged rapprochement was not the pious desire of the Edo ruler but his military emergency situation during the war with the neighbouring Igala people. Barros concluded his observation with the discernment that the Oba remained obviously a chief promoter of idolatry. Ultimately, considering the aforementioned failure of the mission, Manuel I rescinded on delivering firearms to his African ally. Instead, Portuguese mercenaries accompanied some of the Oba’s military campaigns, still attaching importance to being independent from his African warriors.

Tradition has it that the Portuguese in the Oba’s army carried out the decisive strike against the neighbouring Igala during the Idah War at the battle of the Oregbeni Hills, when they put the hostile Igala to flight with a well-targeted cannon shot. Such Portuguese artillerymen (bombardeiros) were often depicted on indigenous brass reliefs, most of the time with their characteristic linstock, used for firing a loaded cannon (Figure 6).

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55 Ibid., 100, 111 f.; Thornton, Warfare, 77, 81.
56 Letter of King Manuel to the Oba of Benin, Almeirim, 20 November 1514, in: Brásio, Monumenta 4, No. 24, 88–90.
57 Harding, Königreich Benin, 84; Ryder, Benin, 46–47.
58 Letter of João Fialho to the royal secretary António Carneiro, s. l., 24 August 1517, in: Brásio, Monumenta 1, No. 115, 412–413: “Jeañes crerigo, que era vimdo de Benjm, e çerto ele vay cõ tall preposyto de fazer elRey cristãao, [...]”
59 Barros, Ásia, chap. 3, 179.
60 Letter of King Manuel to the Oba of Benin, Almeirim, 20 November 1514, in: Brásio, Monumenta 4, No. 24, 88ff.; Elbl, Portuguese Relations, 183; Osadolor, Kriegführung, 77.
61 Osadolor, Kriegführung, 80.
Due to their military strength and their imported commodities, it is hardly surprising that these foreigners found their way into Benin’s traditional forms of artistic representations under Oba Esigie and his successors. Europeans appear on

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63 No precise chronology of the Benin artifacts has so far been made. The casted plaques, made in lost wax process, can be roughly dated only in the period between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, whereas an exact assignation of the pieces is still controversial: Harding, Königreich Benin, 201–214; Spahr, Benin, 62–107; Christian Goedecke and Sabine Henschel: Zur
such depictions as decorative elements and background figures as well as central subjects on regalia made of brass, ivory and wood. They catch the viewer’s eye as ritually honoured full-figured sculptures, but more often on masterfully cast reliefs, carvings, bracelets and even occasionally on the clothing of high-ranking dignitaries. The representations of the Europeans with their stereotypically narrow hooked noses, their long hair and their beards can easily be distinguished from the Edo, who were usually shown as being beardless and short-haired. The Portuguese appear mainly as traders or bearers of luxury and wealth, but also in the role of mighty allies hunting leopards. In Benin culture, the leopard was considered a symbol of the Oba, whose epithet can be translated as “human leopard” (Figure 7).

But the most characteristic representation of these foreigners is that of heavily armed and armoured military men. Apparently, due to their arrival from the ocean, bringing corals and cowries (buzeos da Índia), the Portuguese were initially perceived as messengers of the sea and fertility God Olokun. This also explains the number of aquatic motifs such as fish, snakes and crocodiles as well as the characteristic background pattern of quatrefoil river leaves. Similar to the Oba’s residence on land, the underwater palace of his divine counterpart Olokun was, according to the Edo imagination, also splendidly decorated with brass and bronze plaques. Obviously, on all of the preserved images the Portuguese represented strength and wealth, and to be more accurate, the strength and wealth of the Oba. Apparently, their weapons, stud horses and armour-plating fascinated the local bronze casters. As a good example one can mention two similarly heavily armed sculptures of a Portuguese espingardeiro (hand gunner), today preserved in Nigeria and in Dresden, who in addition to his precisely classifiable flintlock gun bears two more handguns, a sword and a linstock (Figure 8).

64 For examples of depictive clothing see: Wolf, Benin, No. 8–11.
65 Eisenhofer, Benin, 111; Ben-Amos, Benin, 37–41; Ezra, Royal Art, 155–158.
68 Wolf, Benin, No. 1–19; Silvia Dolz: Portugiese, in: Plankensteiner, Benin, No. 231, 232, 450–451 (the linstock is here erroneously confounded with a ramrod).
Figure 7: Leopard hunt with Portuguese men, brass, Benin, sixteenth / seventeenth century, Ethnologisches Museum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Inv.-Nr. III C 27485.
Figure 8: Portuguese hand gunner (espingardeiro), brass, Benin, sixteenth century, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Staatliche Ethnographische Sammlungen Sachsen, Kat. Nr. 16604.
Supposedly the character of all these artworks is not merely historical or documentary. These figures rather create a religious ritual connection to the sea God Olokun and functioned as a charm against visible and invisible spirits.\(^6\) The astounding attention to detail confirms the obvious prestige of these weapons and their bearers. Therefore, the flintlock rifles of the hand gunners can be distinguished from a snap-matchlock gun with its characteristic German rifle butt.

\(^{69}\) Dolz, Portugiese, No. 232, 452; Harding, Königreich Benin, 85.
on a Portuguese rider figure on the top of a Bini-Portuguese salt cellar in ivory (Figure 9).\textsuperscript{70}

**Conclusion**

The early relations between the Portuguese and the Edo realm of Benin at the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century are an example of a mainly peaceful intercultural encounter. Both partners gained from the trade exchange, from which political and military alliances also developed intermittently. Portuguese influence at the West African court around 1500 culminated under Oba Esigie, whose period of rule is still today referred to as the “Golden Age” of Benin. It might be tempting to call the *face-to-face* contacts between Edo and certain Portuguese on the ground an encounter on equal footing – concerns about “political correctness” might make such a label especially attractive. In reality, already towards the end of the reign of King Manuel, the Crown in Lisbon had lost interest in its West African ally after the unsuccessful campaign for Christianization and integration into a feudal hierarchy. This is proved not only by the extreme scarcity of historical records concerning Benin in the Portuguese archives, but also by the fact that at no time did the Crown, in contrast to Central African Congo, send high-ranking plenipotentiaries to Benin. Whereas the Oba dispatched several of his dignitaries to the Royal Court in Lisbon, the Portuguese king commissioned just a few royal emissaries or indeed merchants to conduct his negotiations in Benin City. After the discovery of the sea route to India in 1498, Portugal’s interest shifted to Morocco, the Indian Ocean and the Far East, where higher profits and more powerful partners nearly completely absorbed the limited resources of the small Iberian Kingdom.\textsuperscript{71}

At this time, the deepening of the diplomatic relations with Benin had already failed because of different expectations on both sides. On the one hand, the Portuguese hoped in vain to gain a Christian and reliable ally in West Africa; on the other hand, the Oba was disappointed by the limited commitment and the non-delivery of firearms by the Portuguese king. Therefore, the relationship between


King Manuel’s successor, John III (1502–1557), and the Oba, whose resistance to the Catholic mission became even stronger, cooled off significantly. This can also be seen on a material level by the aforementioned example of the royal delegation of Franciscan friars who arrived at the Oba’s palace in Benin City without any presents. They therefore were given a cool reception and afterwards were even intentionally humiliated by their guards. The decision of the Portuguese crown not to deliver firearms or prestigious gifts, handed over by high-ranking diplomats, and, in consequence, the Oba’s harsh reaction to this underline not only Lisbon’s decreasing interest in his former African ally but also the substantial mistrust between both courts. But ultimately both parties averted open conflict, not least because the triangular trade with slaves, metals and textiles between Benin, the Portuguese trading posts on the Gold Coast and the islands of São Tomé und Príncipe continued to flourish. However, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, Dutch, English and French merchants claimed an ever-increasing share of the Benin business. Despite a number of internal conflicts, the once so powerful Edo realm in the Niger Delta could maintain its independence against any attempt at European colonization. This lasted until as late as 1897, when it was violently incorporated into the British Empire.

The early encounter with the Portuguese left some remarkable vestiges in the collective cultural memory of the Edo. Objects which assisted both sides in overcoming cultural differences and gaining the trust of each other played a key role in this relationship. In this regard, it has to be considered that the Europeans could not satisfy the Oba and his dignitaries with simply manufactured commodities or everyday objects. Rather, they initially tried to gain his favour with selected and prestigious luxury goods. These included high-quality coloured textiles from Europe, Morocco and India as well as precious corals from the Mediterranean or stud horses, which were extremely rare in sub-Saharan Africa. Obviously, the material exchange of commodities was not limited to business objectives, but also contained the practice of gift-giving to establish stable intercultural relations. From the Edo’s perspective, corals as the Oba’s insignia of power assumed spiritual importance, as did the Portuguese copper and brass imports, which served as raw material for the characteristic sculptures and reliefs at the court. These unique objects were reserved exclusively for the Oba’s palace as architectural ornaments and room decorations. With this special diplomatic setting he distinguished his residence not only from the buildings of the neighbouring African rulers but also from the wooden and mud-walled houses of his own population.

The Oba expected a similar representative effect from the personal attendance of the Portuguese at his court. The Europeans served him as mercenaries with their prestigious firearms and horses, as guards and counsellors. As bearers of strength and wealth, they found their way into Benin’s different forms
of artistic representations on reliefs and sculptures with their luxury commodities as well as with their characteristic clothing and weapons. Further, as alleged messengers of the sea god Olokun, whose attributes appear always in the same context, a certain religious-magic virtue was ascribed to them. This way the Europeans were integrated into a culture of complex symbols and narrative compositions, where they functioned as everlasting signs of the Oba’s power. Compared to the first representations of the non-European peoples in European art, these figural objects illustrate that the authority of the ruler is not restricted to his own population. Apparently, the physical and symbolic presence of the Portuguese as the Oba’s powerful allies could impress his African negotiation partners, but at the same time the firm and everlasting materials of their representations underlined the continuity of the ruling dynasty towards his own people. This was how the foreign new arrivals who, at the beginning, with their unfamiliar appearance and their heavily armed ships and warriors, probably constituted a threat, could finally be integrated into the Edo’s worldview. From their perspective, according to Leonhard Harding, even the rapprochement to European lifestyle under the reign of Oba Esigie did not necessarily signify a betrayal of their own tradition but rather an attempt to multiply the ruler’s own magical power with that of the White men. The artistic realization of this intercultural partnership is a visual form of commemoration in exclusive and stable material. It may have affected the people at the court more deeply than an occasional ritual. These representations registered the cultural encounter and in an illiterate society served as the Edo’s visual memory of a kind to deliver their own history, together with religious-animistic narratives, to posterity. The artifacts provide, in the absence of written sources, a unique vision de l’autre from an Edo perspective, at practically the moment of first contact between Europeans and Benin.

72 Harding, Königreich Benin, 85.