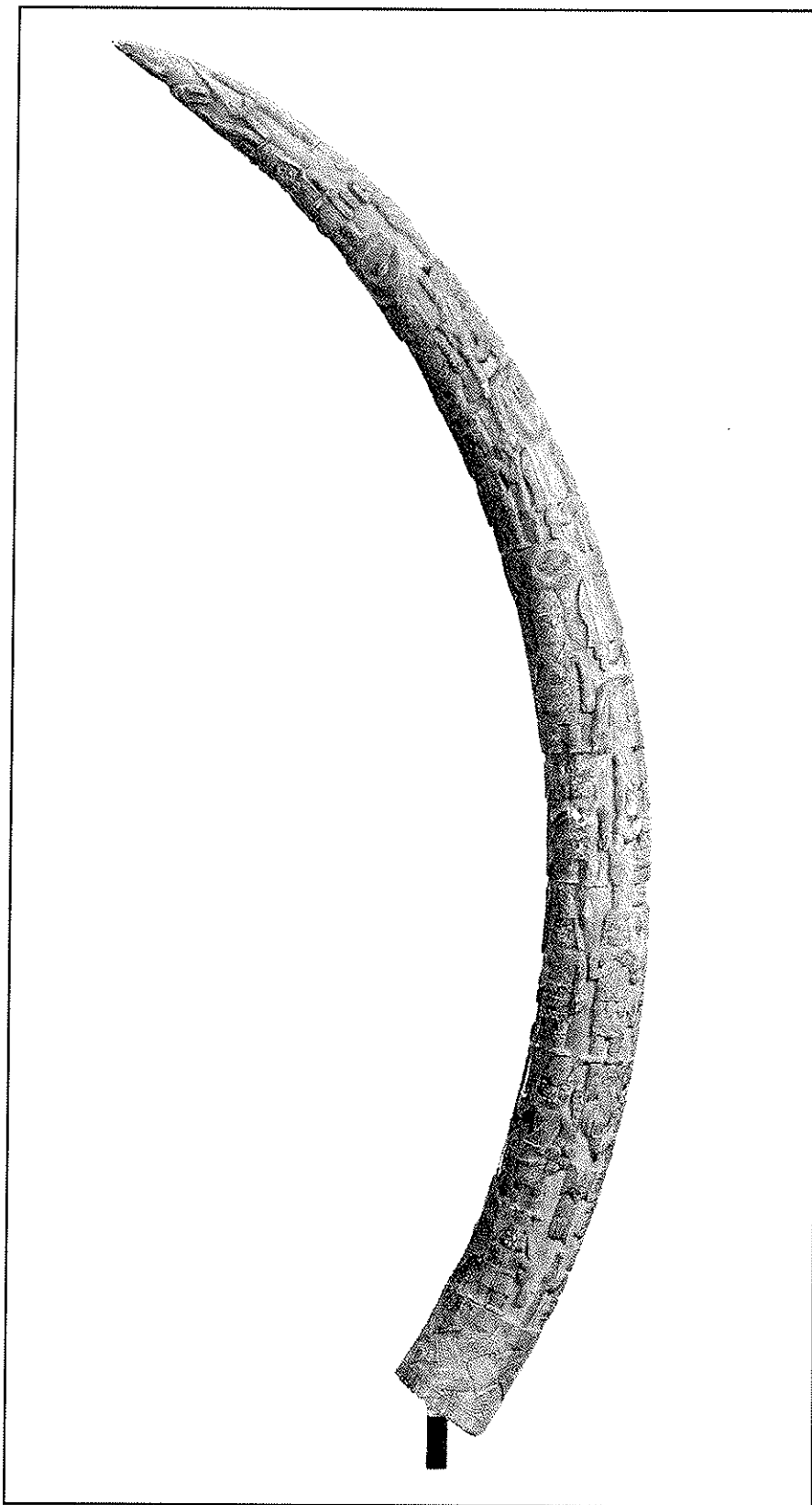


Chapter 3



Royal Altar Tusk
Mid-19th Century
Africa, Nigeria, Kingdom
of Benin; Edo People
Ivory
Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
Edwin Hokin, 1976.523

Royal Altar Tusk

Kingdom of Benin, Africa

Overview

The royal art of the Kingdom of Benin provides an artistic and historical record going back 500 years. The majority of the kingdom's people are known as Edo. In the Edo language, Oba means king. According to Edo oral tradition, the Oba descended from divine ancestors. Because he is semidivine, the Oba possesses spiritual powers that affect the entire kingdom. Through him spirits of the ancestors continue to protect the Edo people and to insure a prosperous future.

When an Oba dies, one of his sons inherits the throne. Among his first acts, the new Oba establishes a royal altar in honor of his father. He then commissions craftsmen to create works of art for the altar to glorify both his father and other great Obas of the past. The Art Institute's tusk was made for Oba Adolo who ruled in the 1860s, about the same time that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States.

As part of a royal altar, a carved elephant's tusk is mounted on a brass pedestal shaped like the crowned head of an Oba and then placed on a semicircular platform. The tusk provides a link between the living world of man and the spiritual world of the ancestors. An ivory tusk represents wealth and purity, and it also suggests the strength, endurance, power, longevity, and wisdom of elephants.

What's the Story?

Benin ivory tusks tell stories of the Kingdom of Benin, which is led by its ruler, the Oba (oh-bah). In the past, the Edo (eh-doh) people didn't use a written language, and thus employed pictures and the spoken word to tell their history. Their imagery and oral histories present time and human accomplishments as a rhythmic pattern of days, seasons, and years. Important symbols pass from generation to generation, their visual continuity emphasizing the endurance of the Kingdom of Benin.

Carved ivory altar tusks are made as pairs and are commissioned by a new Oba to honor his immediate predecessor, his deceased father. This tusk was commissioned by Oba Adolo (ah-doh-loh), who ruled around the same time that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States. Oba Adolo's half-sister Aghayubini (ag-hah-you-bin-ee), who was celebrated during her lifetime for her wisdom and diplomacy, chose Adolo from among his brothers to be Oba when their father Osemwende (oh-sem-wen-day) died. Thus, this tusk honors Oba Osemwende. Many of the tusk's images refer to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Benin, a prosperous period in the kingdom's history.



67

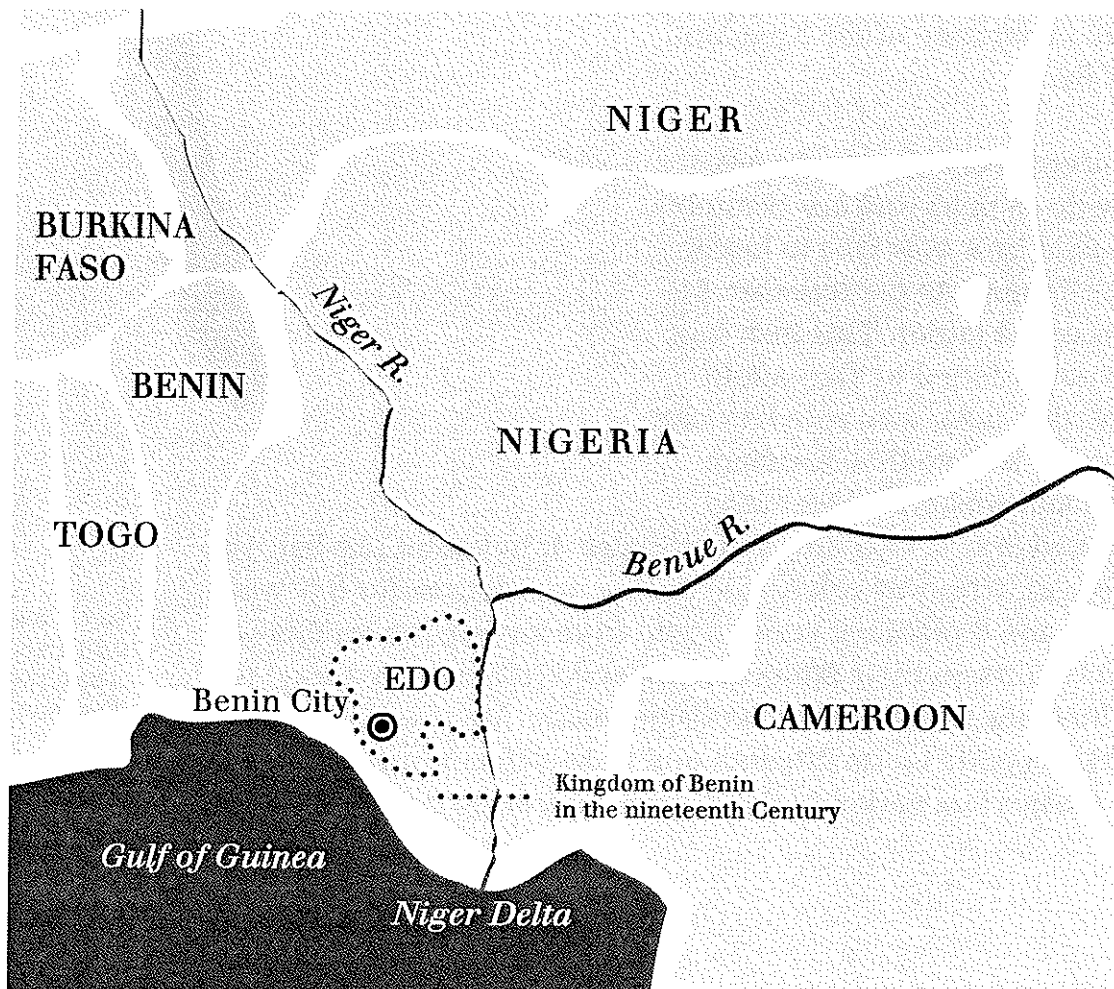
Royal Altar Tusk
Mid-19th Century
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Kingdom of Benin; Edo
People
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The Kingdom of Benin

The Kingdom of Benin is located in the tropical rain forest of southern Nigeria in West Africa. It sits on a sandy coastal plain west of the Niger River and north of the swamps and creeks of the Niger Delta. The majority of the kingdom's inhabitants are known as Edo, which is also the name of their language. In the past, some Igbo, Ijaw, Yoruba, and Itsekiri people also lived within Benin's borders. Outside of the capital, Benin City, are several hundred towns and villages with an average population of 400 to 500 people each. The Edo principally farm yams, timber, and rubber.

The Oba, the ruler of Benin, is the central figure in the kingdom. According to Benin oral history, the present royal dynasty was founded about 1300 A.D. by the son of a deified king. This

68



prince came to Benin from the city of Ife, the ancient cultural, religious, and artistic capital of the Yoruba people. The Oba is therefore considered divine. The Edo believe that he can personally control the forces that affect the well-being of the entire kingdom. He is the channel through which the powers of his ancestors vitalize and protect the Edo and ensure their survival. Carved ivory tusks are among the numerous objects that help the Oba maintain a close connection with his ancestors and that help him serve as an intermediary between the earthly and spiritual worlds.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which are highlighted on this tusk, were powerful years for the kingdom. Benin's boundaries were at their widest and the kingdom conducted trade with many people including European merchants, mainly Portuguese, Dutch, and English. While a few Benin objects appeared in early European collections in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was not until the late nineteenth century, when the British used military force to exile the Oba and colonize the kingdom, that many objects left Benin. Despite a decade of political turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new Oba of Benin was enthroned in 1914. His descendant, Oba Erediauwa (er-eh-dee-ah-wah), the thirty-eighth and current Oba of Benin, presides over a court, participates in traditional rituals, and commissions works of art from his guilds of artists.

69

What Images Are on the Tusk?

The images on the *Royal Altar Tusk* should be “read” from bottom to top. The figures on the tusk’s lower part are historical personages accompanied by symbols of power, while those on its upper part represent officials who typically help the Oba with sacred ceremonies.

Telling Stories From the Royal Altar Tusk

Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper (row 2)

Before Ewuare (eh-war-ay) became Oba, the young man lived deep in the forest to escape the people who had executed his father, Oba Ohen (oh-hen). He camped for a long time with his friends, and slept in secret places to hide from his enemies.

One night Ewuare fell asleep under a large tree. He awoke when he felt liquid drip on his face. A leopard in the tree above him was eating its prey in the night. Horrified, Ewuare then looked down and discovered that he was sleeping on a huge, coiled viper, a poisonous snake. Able to flee both the leopard and viper, Ewuare felt very fortunate and began to see his escape as a sign.

The Edo people believe that a viper is lucky, and it did, in fact, bring good luck to Ewuare. The Edo people also say that a leopard is like a king, so Ewuare believed that someday he would become the Oba. When he finally did become the Oba, he became so powerful that he is known to this day as “Oba Ewuare the Great,” and the viper and the leopard are among his symbols.

Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea (row 2)

Legend has it that the mid-fifteenth-century Oba, Ewuare (eh-war-ay) the Great, traveled to the coast of Benin in search of Olokun (oh-law-kun), god of the sea and a son of the High God. Olokun ruled the rivers and ocean, and he was very rich. When Ewuare arrived at the coast, he dove deep under the water. The first thing he saw was Olokun’s undersea palace glowing with mirrors, ivory, and polished brass. Then Ewuare saw Olokun, who wore a tall crown and wonderful clothes made of red coral beads. The two great rulers challenged each other to a contest of strength and quick wit. Ewuare was so clever that he won Olokun’s respect.

Ewuare took home many treasures. He took a tall helmet crown made entirely of red coral beads, and shirts and wrappers made of coral netting, just like those Olokun wore. He also took some magical brass containers called *iru* (ee-roo) that could talk. Ewuare built a new palace in the style of Olokun's palace of mirrors, ivory, and brass, and he dressed himself in Olokun's fancy clothes. Then Ewuare ruled the land just as powerfully as Olokun ruled the waters.

Oba Ewuare and his Coral Crown (rows 3, 4, 5)

When Oba Ewuare (eh-war-ay) returned from beneath the sea, he put on Olokun's tall helmet crown and coral clothes. He soon realized that Olokun's crown was very heavy. Oba Ewuare was not strong enough to wear the crown by himself, so he asked every man, woman, and child in the kingdom to help him carry his crown. He invented four daily greetings to remind them of this important job:

*“Ob-Owie (ohb ow-wee-ay)
— Help me carry it in the morning,
Be King of the Morning!”*

*“Ob-Avan (ohb ah-vahn)
— Help me carry it in the afternoon,
Be King of the Afternoon!”*

*“Ob-Ota (ohb oh-tah)
— Help me carry it in the evening,
Be King of the Evening!”*

*“Ob-Ason (ohb ah-sahn)
— Help me carry it in the night,
Be King of the Night!”*

And that is why no Oba can lead a nation without the help of his people.

Oba Ohen (row 5)

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), Ewuare's father, was paralyzed in his legs. Although unable to support his weight, the Oba's legs had strength of another kind. If his feet touched wet ground, nothing would grow there ever again. The supernatural power of Oba Ohen's legs was as dangerous as the electric shock of a mudfish, which can kill with a touch.

Oba Ohen selfishly tried to hide these supernatural powers from the Edo people. When the people sent a representative to learn the truth, Oba Ohen killed him. Because an Oba must be truthful with his subjects, the Edo people then executed Oba Ohen.

Since then, every Oba is believed to have inherited the awesome, supernatural power of Oba Ohen's legs, but an Oba must control this force with great care.

This narrative explains why any Oba can be pictured as the fish-legged Ohen and why his feet must not touch the earth when it is wet.

72

Ozolua the Conqueror and the Betrayal of Elaisolobi (row 6)

Oba Ozolua was a mighty warrior. In the late fifteenth century, he made the Kingdom of Benin grow and grow. For many years, Ozolua conquered one town, then another. To keep his army strong, he demanded more and more young men and more and more food and clothes from Benin City. Many of his people began to complain, and his soldiers also began to grumble. Even his best friend Elaisolobi (ee-lie-so-low-bee) begged him to stop fighting. They all said that the kingdom was big enough and that it was time to go home. But Ozolua would not listen. He always had to fight just one more town.

Although Elaisolobi was Oba Ozolua's best friend, he also loved the Kingdom of Benin. He decided that he must do something. Elaisolobi knew a secret about Oba Ozolua. Oba Ozolua never took off his iron armor, except when he took a bath. Elaisolobi told the enemy where to find Oba Ozolua bathing. The great conqueror was killed, the fighting stopped, and the kingdom was saved.

How Was the Tusk Originally Displayed?

The elephant tusk is one of a number of symbolic items that comprise a royal ancestral altar in the Kingdom of Benin. When an Oba dies, his son inherits the throne. The new Oba then must establish an altar commemorating his father, the previous Oba. Such altars are tributes as well to other earlier Obas, and the altars create a way to contact the spirits of these leaders, should their support or advice be needed. Palace ceremonies reinforcing the continuity of divine kingship also take place in front of these altars.

Mud is carefully used to form the semicircular altar platform, which then dries and becomes hard. Upon this platform are placed pairs of brass heads, each supporting a carved ivory tusk. These heads represent the helper of a person's guardian spirit, which resides within his head during the day but at night lives in the world of the dead. Placed between the brass heads supporting the elephant tusks is a cast brass sculpture depicting the Oba with attendants, as well as other freestanding brass figures and pyramidal brass bells. At the back of the altar, leaning against the wall, are staffs with built-in rattles, used to call the ancestral spirits.

Several rituals are conducted in front of the royal altars, the most important of which is the *Ugie Erha Oba* (oog-ee air-hah oh-bah). *Ugie Erha Oba* honors the Oba's paternal ancestors and symbolizes the Oba's supremacy in the hierarchy of the court. On the first day of this ceremony, the Oba conducts rites in the palace compound, which honor all past Obas. On the second day, individual chiefs, according to their rank, present the Oba with gifts of kola nuts and palm wine. On the third day, the Oba dresses in an elaborate costume of coral beads and appears in public. He makes sacrifices at the altar of his father to commemorate his father's deeds and to appease dangerous forces. The chiefs demonstrate their reverence and allegiance to the Oba by dancing around him, with ceremonial swords raised, to the music of horn and drums. The Oba then performs a similar dance before his father's altar. The ceremony concludes with a mock battle, in which chiefs reenact an early sixteenth-century challenge to the Oba's power by a former council of chiefs.

How Are Tusks Made?

The artists commissioned to carve this tusk were experienced ivory carvers. Because of the preciousness of ivory, the complexity of the designs, and the important role of a tusk on an ancestor altar, carvers have to be members of a hereditary guild that inherits techniques, symbols, and patterns from previous generations. Oba Ewuare, the mid-fifteenth-century Oba who is featured several times on this tusk, is credited with developing many of the visual symbols of divine kingship that have endured. Ivory carvers are also frequently wood carvers, and they may use the same adzes and knives for cutting and rough-textured leaves or other abrasive materials for sanding and smoothing.

Why Is Elephant Ivory Used?

Ivory, like cast brass, is a material used by the Edo to affirm the power of the Oba. Especially in the eighteenth century, ivory was highly valued because of its costliness, rarity, popularity as an item of trade, color, durability, and animal origin. Specifically, ivory connotes the strength, endurance, power, longevity, and wisdom of elephants. Hence, the use of ivory is critical to the tusk's role as an enduring symbol of the Kingdom of Benin.

The white color of ivory is one of its most significant attributes: like chalk, ivory's whiteness symbolizes the purity associated with Olokun, god of the sea, who is seen as a source of extraordinary wealth and fertility. Altar tusks are washed and bleached with citrus juice to remove the remains of sacrifices poured over them and to keep them as white as possible.

Before the twentieth century, one tusk from every elephant slain in the Kingdom of Benin had to be given to the Oba, and the other had to be offered to him for sale. The Edo also obtained raw, uncarved tusks from the Yoruba kingdoms to the north and west, where elephants were plentiful.

• Original research on the *Royal Altar Tusk* by Barbara Blackman, Ph.D.

Glossary

Adze: An axe-like tool used for carving wood, which features an arched blade placed at a right angle to the handle.

Altar: A structure or platform upon which sacred religious objects are gathered. In the Kingdom of Benin, a royal altar is a semicircular platform upon which ivory tusks, rattles, and bells are displayed and safeguarded in between religious ceremonies.

Edo: The people of the Kingdom of Benin.

Guild: A society of artisans who train and work together, and who establish professional standards.

Mudfish: A fish that lives on land and in water. A mudfish can symbolize both prosperity and danger, since some varieties of mudfish can be eaten, while others give off dangerous electric shocks. When shaped like a mudfish, an Oba's legs represent the paralyzed legs of Oba Ohen, which were thought to have supernatural powers.

Oba: The semi-divine ruler of the Kingdom of Benin, considered a descendant of the gods.

Olokun: The god of the sea and son of the High God according to Edo beliefs.

Sacrifices: Animals and other objects offered on ceremonial occasions to honor the gods, spirits, and ancestors, and to commemorate the Oba's father.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Royal Altar Tusk

Three stories found on the tusk represent Oba Ewuare the Great, an important Oba of the people of Benin.

Read these stories out loud and ask the following questions.

Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper, (p.70)

What was dripping on Oba Ewuare's face?

What did Oba Ewuare discover he had been sleeping on?

What two symbols represent Oba Ewuare?

Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea, (p.70)

Where does Olokun live?

What does his palace look like?

What were some of the treasures Oba Ewuare took home?

Oba Ewuare and his Coral Crown, (p.71)

Describe what Oba Ewuare wore on his head.

What did Oba Ewuare need from every man, woman, and child in the kingdom?

Can you chant one of the daily greetings Oba Ewuare invented?

76

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Benin carvers work the figures on the tusk in *relief*; each figure stands out from the background because the area around it has been carved away. Figures and symbols on the tusk tell the story of the Oba's family, the Kingdom of Benin, and the Edo people.

ART ACTIVITY: *Relief Sculpture*

Choose one figure, animal, or abstract symbol on the tusk and carve your own version in plaster.

- ❖ Cut the bottom of a milk carton.
- ❖ Mix and pour plaster into the carton. Discard the carton when the plaster is dry.
- ❖ Draw an image on the plaster with a pencil.
- ❖ Carve into the plaster using a spoon.

NOTE: First carve away an even 1/4" layer of the background surrounding the figure. Then carve details into the raised figure such as lines or patterns.

WRITING ACTIVITY: *Leaders*

Write a story highlighting an important achievement of a family member, community figure, or national hero.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: *Genealogy*

Create a timeline of the history of your family as the task is a way of recording the passage of time.

- ❖ Research three or four generations of your family. Find out names, birth and death dates, places lived, etc.
- ❖ Bring in at least one photograph from each generation researched.
- ❖ Write down a story about each person or place featured in the photograph.
- ❖ Create a timeline of the family from the facts, stories and pictures.
- ❖ Display the timelines.

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Royal Altar Tusk, Kingdom of Benin, Africa

28 The Pouncing Leopard

Every Oba is praised as *Ekpe-n'Owa* (ehk-pay-n'oh-wa), "Leopard of the World," and as *Ekpelobo* (ehk-pay-low-boh), "Pouncing Leopard who never misses his prey." Because leopards are so powerful, images of leopard faces sometimes appear near the Oba's head or at his waist.

Row 9

25 Emuru

An *Emuru* (ee-moo-roo) is a ceremonial official in charge of one of the magical brass containers called *iru* (ee-roo) that Oba Ewuare brought back from the undersea palace of Olokun, god of the sea.

26 Magical Brass Iru

According to folklore, these shining brass vessels speak, and thus, keep dangerous forces away during the ceremonies honoring an Oba's father.

Row 8

20 Royal Woman

A royal woman honors the contributions women make to the human and spiritual worlds through their insights and labor.

21 Crocodiles

Crocodiles are the policemen of Olokun, god of the sea, as they can overturn the canoes of those who try to disrupt trade. Crocodiles patrol the seaports and rivers leading to the capital city of the Kingdom of Benin.

24 Ooton

Members of the *Ooton* (oh-ton) society carry two long wands to drive away spirits that might be disruptive when an animal or human travels to the spiritual world.

20 Uwenriontan Wand

Both the executioner priest and a member of the *Ooton* society carry the *uwenriontan* (oo-wen-ree-on-lahn), a thin, straight wand used to keep dangerous forces away and to signal that an important ceremony is underway.

..... Row 9

24 Portuguese Trader

Oba Ewuare, Oba Ozotua, and Oba Esigie all traded with the Portuguese.

27 Portuguese Soldier

Oba Ozotua fought many wars, often with the help of Portuguese soldiers.

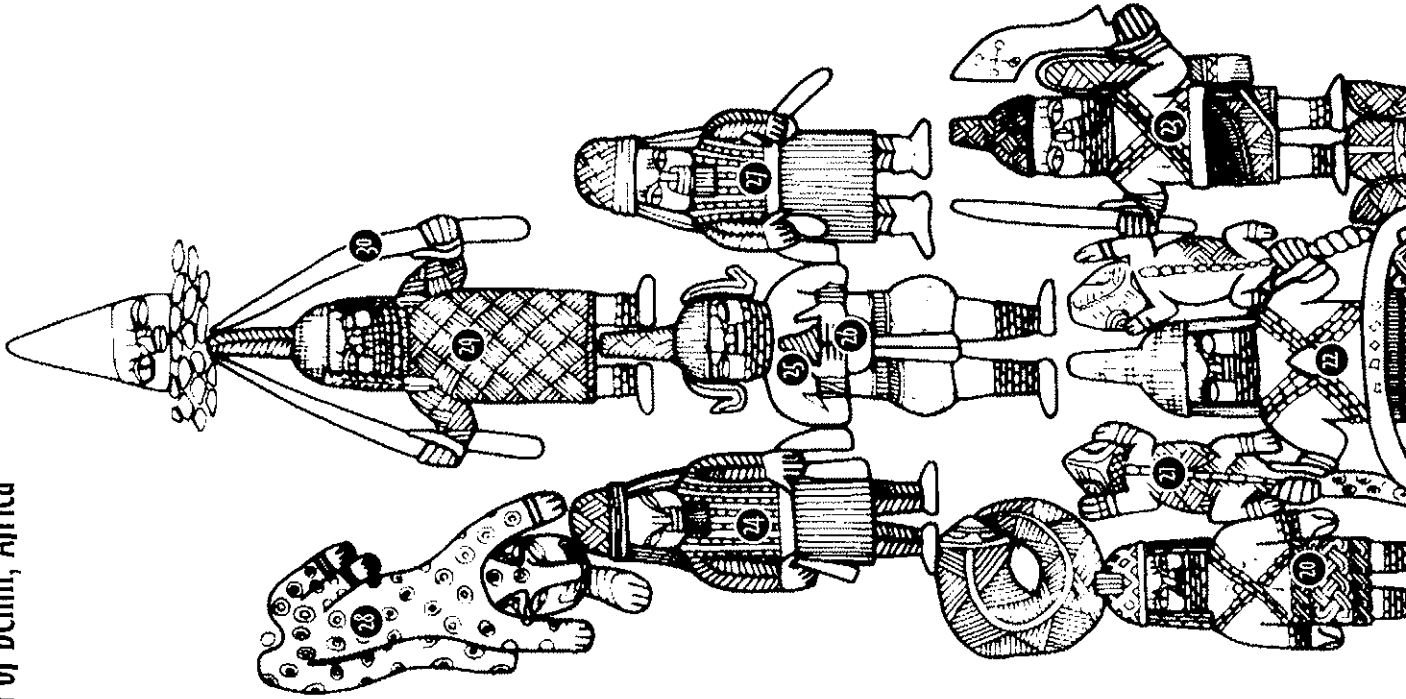
..... Row 8

22 Oba Ewuare with Oba Ohen's Legs

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), the father of Ewuare, was an Oba whose legs became paralyzed when they were filled with supernatural power. Ohen abused his royal authority and was therefore killed by the Edo people. Every Oba inherits Ohen's supernatural power. Ohen's mudfish legs warn the Edo people that the Oba has great power, and remind the Oba that he must not abuse that power.

23 Executioner Priest

Criminals were executed by a priest with a sword during ceremonies honoring the Oba's ancestors. The tall helmet of this executioner priest indicates that he has inherited his office.



Oba Ozolua 18

Oba Ozolua (ah-zah-loo-ah) the Conqueror was one of Ewuare's sons. Ozolua fought many wars. Here he wears a suit of armor under coral beads.

Elaisolobi 19

Elaisolobi (ee-lee-so-low-bee) was the best friend and closest advisor of Oba Ozolua. They fought many battles together until the Edo people began to complain about the constant fighting. To save the kingdom from splitting apart, Elaisolobi betrayed Ozolua to his enemies.

..... Row 6

Oba Ewuare with Oba Ohen's Legs 25

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), the father of Ewuare, was an Oba whose legs became paralyzed when they were filled with supernatural power. Ohen abused his royal authority and was therefore killed by the Edo people. Every Oba inherits Ohen's supernatural power. Ohen's mudfish legs warn the Edo people that the Oba has great power, and remind the Oba that he must not abuse that power.

A Magic Belt 26

This magic belt ends in two pylthons, servants of the Oba on land and of Olokun under water. Each python seizes a frog. Like the python and the mudfish, a frog can live either on land or in water.

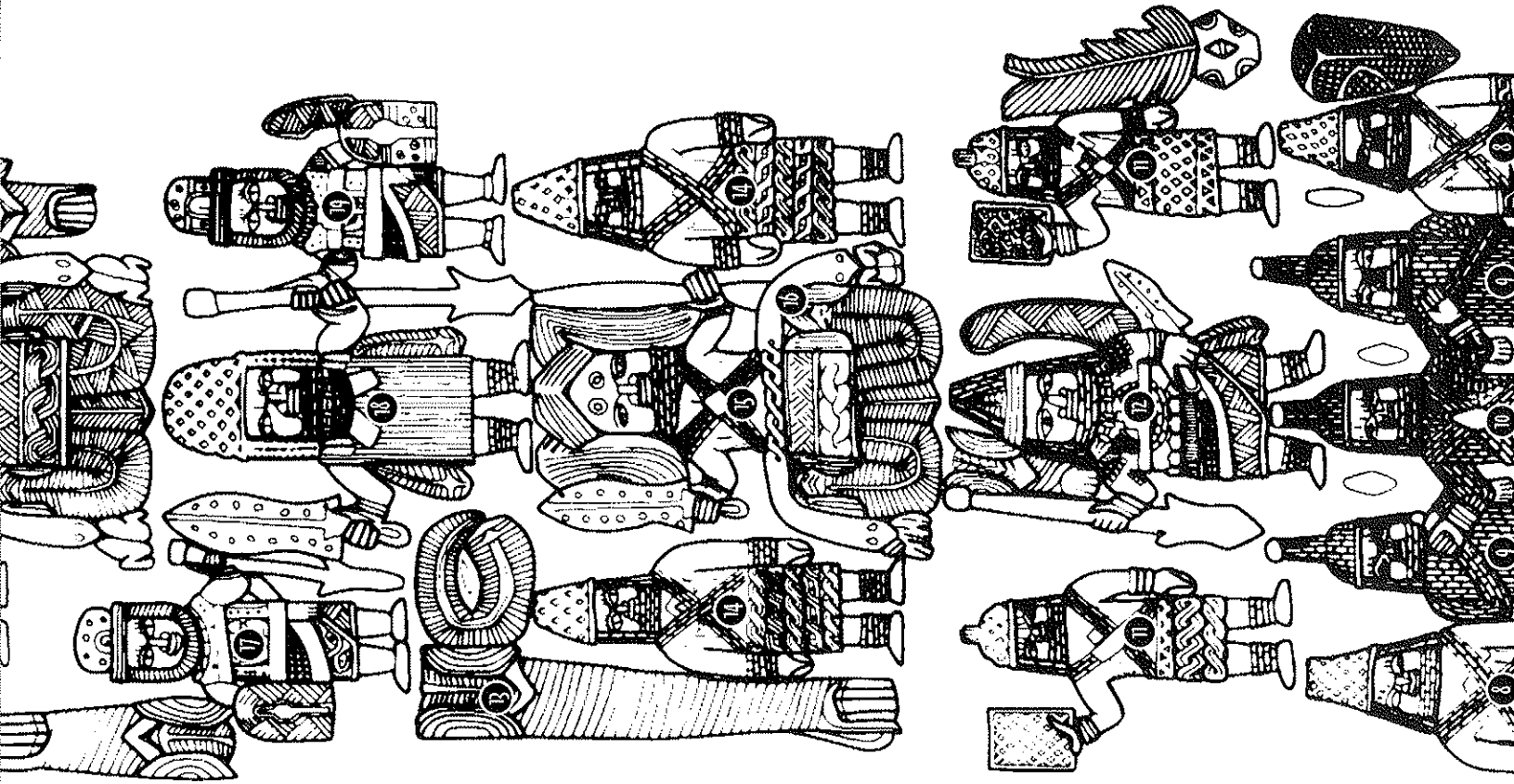
..... Row 5

Oba Ewuare 27

According to folklore, Oba Ewuare the Great ruled the Edo people from about 1450 to 1481. Ewuare went to the seacoast and brought back to his palace shining brass containers and red coral beads acquired from Portuguese traders. Edo stories say that Ewuare got these from Olokun, god of the sea.

..... Row 4

Ancestral Oba 30



17 Warrior

This Edo warrior carries a shield and a spear.

Row 6

23 The Oba's Trunk-Hand

An elephant's head with the trunk ending in a human fist is a symbol of the Oba's ancestors. This fist with the power of the elephant represents the great strength of the Kingdom of Benin.

24 Queen Mother

All Edo Queen Mothers strive to be like Oba Esigie's mother Idia, who was the first Edo woman honored with the title of *fy'Oba* (ee-oh-ba), Queen Mother. Idia won this honor because she used magical skills, diplomacy, and military strategy to help her son rule the kingdom.

Row 5

29 Ekpate

The *Ekpate* (ek-pah-tay) are female spiritual guardians who accompany the Oba during public appearances. When *Ekpate* sense hostile forces, they deflect danger with mirrors hidden inside the rectangular cases that they hold.

Row 4

3 Queen Mother

All Edo Queen Mothers strive to be like Oba Esigie's mother Idia, who was the first Edo woman honored with the title of *fy'Oba* (ee-oh-ba), Queen Mother. Idia won this honor because she used

3 Queen Mother

All Edo Queen Mothers strive to be like Oba Esigie's mother Idia, who was the first Edo woman honored with the title of *Iy'Oba* (ee-oh-ba), Queen Mother. Idia won this honor because she used magical skills, diplomacy, and military strategy to help her son rule the kingdom.

4 Enobore

Two officials called *enobore* (en-oh-bore-ay) always stand on each side of the Oba to support him as he walks. The E'do say that problems such as corruption and poverty will follow if the people do not support the Oba's leadership.

Row 3

4 Priest of Ogun

Ogun is the god of iron, brass, weapons, machinery, and war. Ogun's tongs for forging metal are on the left.

5 Oba Ewuare

According to folklore, Oba Ewuare (eh-war-ay) the Great ruled the Edo people from about 1450 to 1481. Ewuare went to the seacoast and brought back to his palace shining brass containers and red coral beads acquired from Portuguese traders.

Edo stories say that Ewuare got these from Olokun, god of the sea.

Row 2

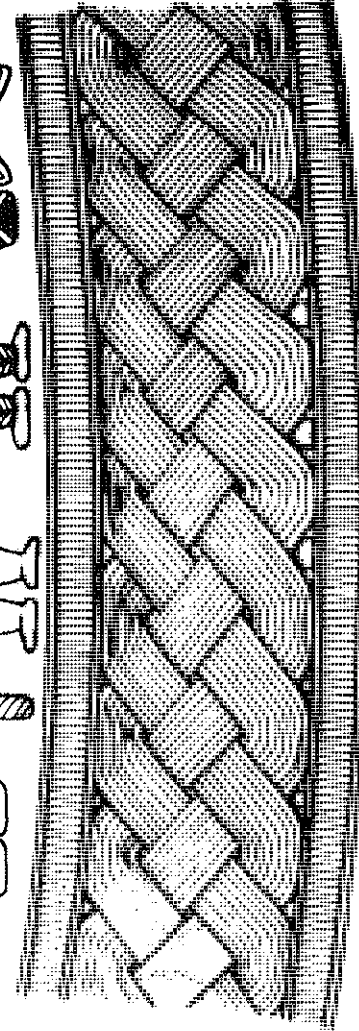
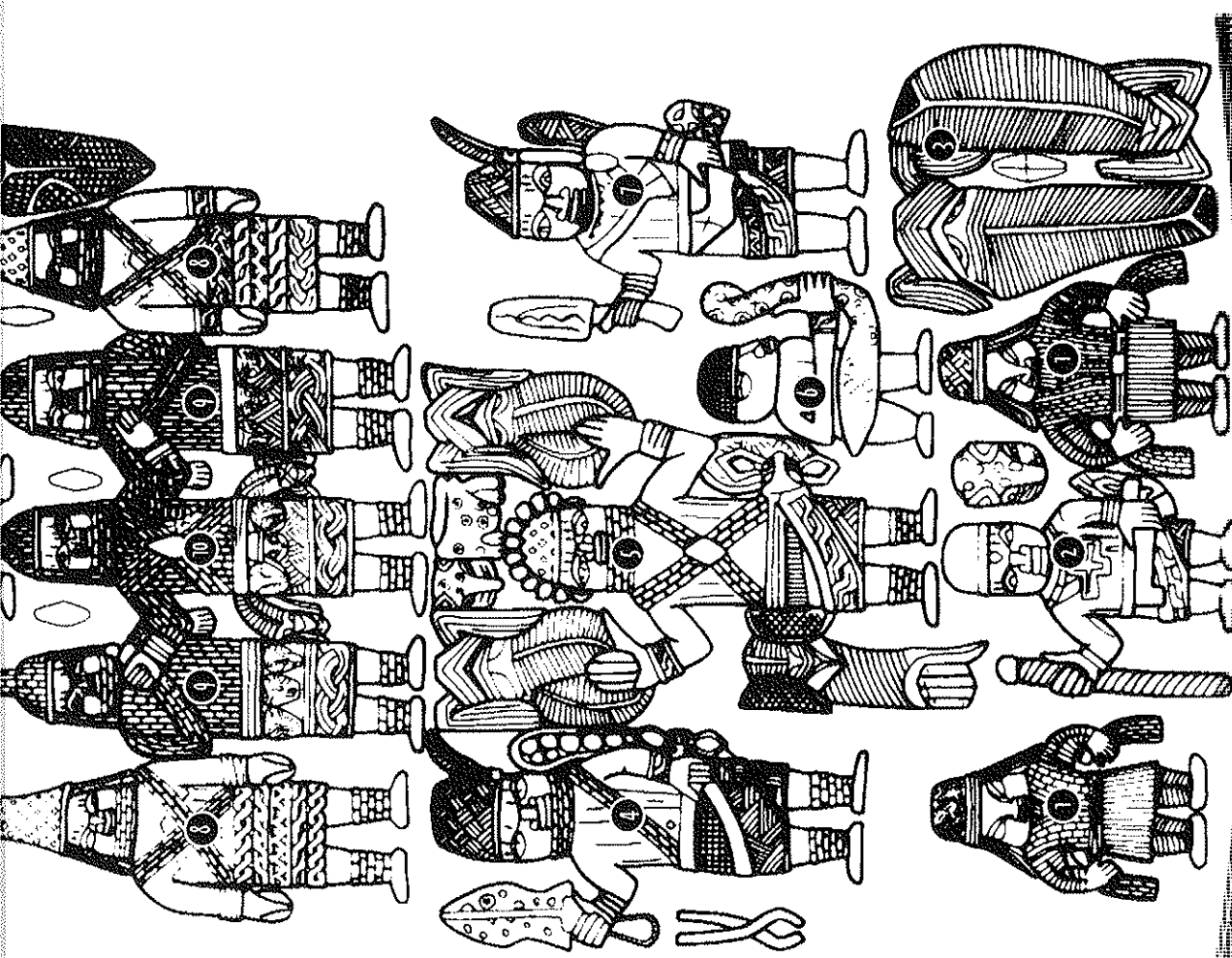
1 Portuguese Trader

These two long-haired, bearded figures are Portuguese traders. Their hands are holding cloth or beads.

2 Official Appointed by Oba Esigie

This palace official served Oba Esigie (eh-see-gee-ay).

Row 1



Ancestral Oba

This Oba wears a tall helmet crown with strands of rare coral, part of the lavish costume Oba Ewuare won from the sea god Olokun. On the Oba's chest is the huge, red agate bead of kingship that gives him authority over the Edo people. Around the Oba's waist are ivory or brass amulets to protect him and at his sides are images of mudfish.

Row 3

Man with Viper

The Edo say that Oba Ewuare had the "good luck of the viper" because he made his kingdom very wealthy. The viper, a poisonous snake, also represents danger. Here it overcomes the small man to the right of Oba Ewuare, suggesting that like the viper the Oba will strike quickly to punish enemies of the kingdom.

Priest of the Royal Ancestors

Priests keep good relations with the gods and ancestors to ensure a strong and prosperous kingdom.

Row 2

Mudfish

The Edo (eh-dob) people believe that mudfish serve the Oba, ruler of the land, as well as Olokun (oh-law-kun), god of the sea. Some mudfish are good to eat, while others give off dangerous electric shocks. Thus an image of a mudfish can suggest both the Oba's wealth and his dangerous powers.

Row 1