

History

What was life like in Benin?

Please read the following information about Benin:

Benin was a kingdom in West Africa, in what is now Nigeria. It lasted from the 11th Century until 1897, when it was conquered by the British Empire.

Benin was a large and varied kingdom. Some people lived in villages and small towns, but most people lived and worked in Benin City.

The most important person in the kingdom was the king, known as the Oba. Hundreds of men and women lived at the royal court and devoted their lives to looking after the Oba and his family. Some people at court had extraordinary jobs, working as acrobats, sorcerers, or leopard hunters.

Most people in the countryside worked as farmers, but there were also potters and blacksmiths. They made simple pots, weapons and tools for the villagers.

Watch this clip below to learn more about the kingdom of Benin.

The people of Benin traded with merchants from Europe and with other African kingdoms. Instead of using money, they exchanged goods.

What are potters? What are blacksmiths?

Goods traded in the Kingdom of Benin:

Brass manilla bracelets

Brass bracelets, like this, were very highly prized by the people of Benin, because they could melt them down to produce molten brass.

Skilled metalworkers in the royal court used molten brass to make beautiful plaques and statues.

Did you know?

People believed that brass had the power to drive away evil.



Cowrie shells

European traders collected cowrie shells and used them as trading goods with Benin.

The shells had no value for the Europeans, but African rulers used them as a kind of money. The rulers displayed the shells to show their wealth and power.

Did you know?

Some wealthy rulers had whole rooms made out of cowrie shells!



Guns from Europe

Before the Europeans arrived, people in Africa had never seen a gun.

At first, the Portuguese traders would not trade in guns because the people of Benin were not Christians. However, by the 1600s, they were exchanging guns for African goods.



Ivory from Benin

Ivory from elephants' tusks was a very valuable trading item.

Traders from Europe carried the tusks home on their ships. Then the ivory was used to make a range of objects, including jewellery, walking sticks, chess sets and piano keys.

Did you know?

Ivory was seen as a symbol of purity and strength.



Peppercorns from Benin

Spices like peppercorns were highly valued by people in Europe.

Without any fridges to keep their food fresh, pepper and other spices made their food taste better!



Slaves from Benin

Soldiers from Benin made raids on other kingdoms and captured prisoners to sell to the Europeans.

At first, all the slaves were women, but by the 1650s men were sold as well.

Did you know?

Some people from Benin were sold into slavery too.



Is anything from the trading section above similar to today?

What was life like for the Obas?

The people of Benin believed that their Oba was a god. He lived apart from the ordinary people inside the royal court in Benin City.

Most of the time, the Oba was kept very busy with his duties as king. He held meetings with his officials, and he led religious ceremonies. But he also had some free time to spend with his family. Obas had many wives, and all their wives and children lived in special apartments inside the palace.

The Oba owned all the land in his kingdom. He gave orders to his chiefs on how his kingdom should be run, and he decided when his armies should go to war. Sometimes he rode into battle at the head of his troops.

Everyone had to show great respect to the Oba. People approached him on their knees, and nobody could look at him without his permission. Most people in Benin believed that the Oba didn't need to eat or sleep!



This brass plaque shows an Oba with his attendants. Two bodyguards hold up their shields to protect him from harm. The two smaller figures hold symbols of his power.

Who else was important in the kingdom?

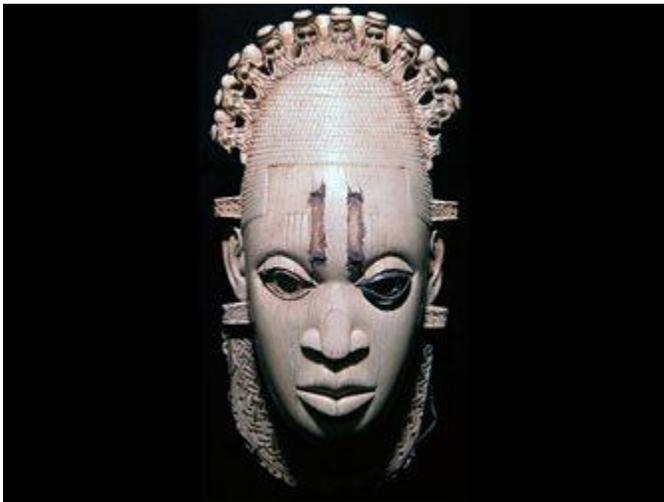
The Oba relied on many chiefs and officials to help him run his kingdom.

Palace chiefs ran the royal court, organised the craft workers and made agreements with European merchants. They came from wealthy families, and their jobs were passed down from father to son.

Town chiefs were chosen because of their leadership skills. They governed the ordinary people of the kingdom, but still took orders from the Oba.

Another important figure was the mother of the Oba. The first great Queen Mother or 'Iyoba' was Queen Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie. She helped her son to defeat his enemies and gain control of the River Niger. As a reward, Esigie gave her a palace of her own.

People believed that the Queen Mother had magical powers. She was not allowed to see her son after becoming Oba, in case she used her magic to control him!



This ivory pendant of a Queen Mother probably shows Queen Idia. Around the top of the mask are the carved heads of Portuguese merchants. These are symbols of the kingdom's power and wealth through trade.

What was life like for ordinary people?

Many people in Benin lived in villages in the rainforest. They cleared away the trees to grow vegetables, and they built their houses from mud, wood and palm leaves.

Benin was famous for its craft workers, for example, ivory-carvers. These workers formed groups called guilds. All the members of a guild lived and worked together.

There were more than 40 guilds in Benin City, and each guild had to perform a special duty for the Oba. Not all the guilds were for craft workers. Doctors, drummers, acrobats and dancers had their own guilds too.

Men from all over the kingdom served the Oba as soldiers. Warriors went into battle armed with swords, spears and crossbows. By the 1600s, soldiers had guns as well. Some boys trained as hunters. They started their training very young, and the most daring of all became elephant hunters.



Acrobats, like the ones shown on this plaque, caught birds for the Oba to sacrifice to the gods. Once a year, they performed a special ceremony where they swung from ropes and pretended to be birds.

What kind of gods did people worship?

The people of Benin worshipped many gods. They told stories about their gods and held ceremonies in their honour. Some of these ceremonies are still performed today by the Edo people.

People believed that the Obas of Benin were the direct descendants of Osanobua, the creator god. The Obas were all worshipped as gods.

According to Edo legends, the great god **Osanobua** created the world. Olokun, his eldest son, became the god of the waters. Obiemven, his daughter, was put in charge of farming and childbirth. Ogiuwu, his youngest son, became the king of death.

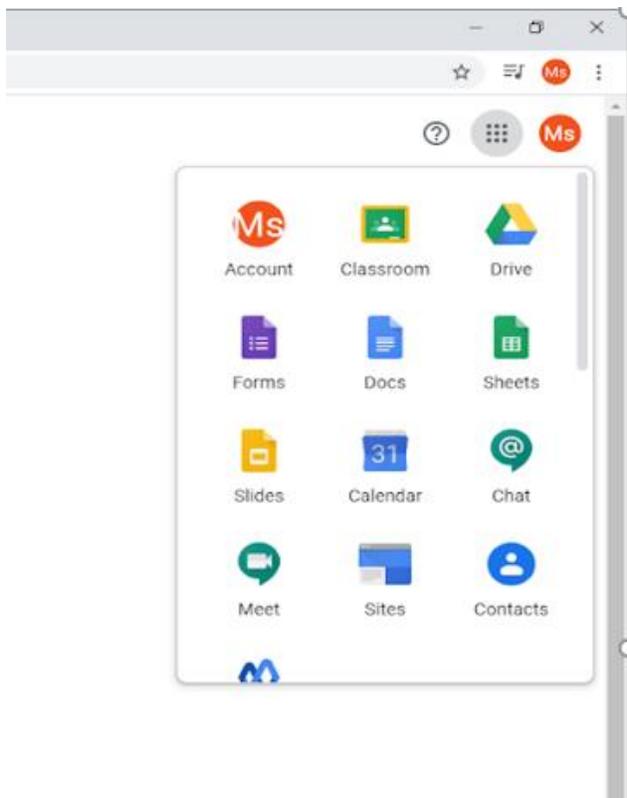
What is your opinion of the Obas? Explain clearly giving reasons.

Do any of the artefacts look similar to anything we have today?

Next step:

Based on what you have learnt about the kingdom of Benin, create your own quiz for your friends or someone at home.

Challenge: Use google forms to create your quiz. (Go to the 9 dots, find forms)



Google forms will allow you to create a quiz. You may need to explore google forms and see how it works.

If you are not sure, or do not feel comfortable using google forms, you can just create a quiz in the box below:

