

Resource 4

Background: Visiting Benin in the 17th Century.

The first Europeans to arrive in Benin from the late 15th century as part of what we call the 'Voyages of Encounter' or 'Voyages of Discovery'. Traders came from Portugal, Holland and Britain. Some wanted to buy and sell things. They sold brass to Benin from the late 15th century which was used to make the bronzes. Many praiseworthy things were written about Benin at this time by travellers who went there. A Dutchman called Olfert Dapper produced the picture used for the starter activity and also described what it was like from the stories he was told by travellers who went there.

Sheet A: Visiting Benin in the 17th Century

The King's Palace and Town

The King's palace is on the right side of the town, as you leave by the Gate of Gootton. It is a collection of buildings which occupy as much space as the town of Harlem, and which is enclosed with walls. There are numerous apartments for the princes, ministers and fine galleries, most of which are as big as those on the Exchange in Amsterdam. The town is composed of thirty main streets, very straight and 120 feet wide...The houses are close to one another, arranged in good order, they have verandas and balustrades, and are covered with leaves of palm trees and bananas-for they are only one story high. ...These people are in no way inferior to the Dutch as regards cleanliness; they wash and scrub their houses so well they are polished and shining like a looking glass

Dapper, O.(1686)Description I’Afrique. Amsterdam. Cited in: Hodgkin (1960)
Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology. London: OUP,p.123-24

Sheet B: Visiting Benin in the 17th century

A place to buy and sell things

No one has the right to buy anything from Europeans except the Faidors (King’s minsters) and the merchants whom the King has appointed...The goods which the Dutch bring are: cloth of gold and silver; red and scarlet cloth; drinking vessel with red stripes round the mouth; all kinds of fine cotton; linen; candied oranges, lemons and other green fruit; red velvet; brass bracelets ; lavender; violet embroidery silk; coarse flannel; fine coral; Harlem fabrics; red glass earrings, mirrors; iron bars; crystal beads; Indian cowries which serve as local currency.

The goods which the Dutch take in exchange are: -striped cotton garments which are retailed on the Gold Coast, and blue cloths which are sold on the rivers of Gabon and Angola; jasper stones; female slaves, for they refuse to sell men; leopard skins; pepper; and Acori which is a kind of blue coral. Every four days a market is held at Gotton, where edible

provisions and clothes are bought ...There are several large plains between Benin and Gotton, which serve as a market and meeting place for the peasants of the neighbourhood, to furnish them with what they need. When some dispute arises between them, it is the nobility of the country that judge it.

Dapper, O.(1686) Description I'Afrique. Amsterdam. Cited in: Hodgkin (1960) *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*. London: OUP,p128

Background: Visiting Benin in Tudor 1485-1603 AD Stuart times (1603 -88 AD)

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