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African perceptions of Europeans in the early period of Portuguese expeditions to West Africa

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The aim to this article is to analyse the judgments and opinions of Africans about Europeans during the early Portuguese expeditions to West Africa in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. While opinions of Europeans about Africans are for that period certified by numerous and varied sources, the opinions of Africans are difficult to examine. Cultures of the West African coast in the fifteen and early sixteen century were illiterate. Local oral traditions do not go back – within the scope of this field of interest – to such distant centuries. There are two types of sources: Firstly, African statements written down in European texts, which require a particularly critical approach; secondly, some Africans expressed their opinions about Europeans in works of Art. These include the statues of Europeans from the area of present-day Sierra Leone (the Sapi people), and from the state of Benin (the Edo people). In this article the author examines: 1) the circumstances in which the Africans expressed their opinions (ad hoc meetings, political negotiations, trade, court ceremonies); 2) the authors (individuals or social and ethnic groups), which were attributed the judgments; 3) the content of speeches; and 4) the motives which guided the Africans. Then author compares individual cases, analyses the common characteristics and the distinct features of judgments and opinions known to us, and discusses the possibility of identification of general traits of Africans' opinions about Europeans.

Keywords: West Africa, Africans, Europeans, fifteenth century, cultural contact, opinions.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the judgments and opinions of West African peoples concerning Europeans at the time of the early Portuguese expeditions to West Africa in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is inspired by David Northrup's approach to the question of Africans' attitudes towards Europe.[1] Whereas Northrup's synthesis concerns the long period from 1450 to 1850, it may be useful to divide these 400 years into sub-periods for more detailed study. My choice concerns

the beginnings of contact between Africans and Europeans. While a wide variety of European sources attest to European opinions about Africans during this early period,[2] the opinions held by Africans are more difficult to recover. West African cultures in the fifteenth century did not use written mediums. Memory and oral transmission (complemented by the sound of drums, music and by gestures) were predominant in both interpersonal contacts and in the commemoration of events from the past. In the region that this article is concerned with, however, present-day local oral traditions do not reach as far back as the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as shown by M. Feinberg's studies on this subject on the example of the Gold Coast.[3] Historians are thus forced to rely on two types of sources—European written sources and African art. Within the rich literature written about the early Portuguese expeditions to West Africa, there are few works looking at the opinions of Africans themselves. Apart from the previously mentioned work of D. Northrup, Paul Hair also looked into this question, using the example of the founding of the São Jorge da Mina castle.[4] He analysed the pronouncements, opinions and arguments of the local chief Caramansa during the negotiation with the Portuguese expedition under Azambuja. Kathy Curnow examined African art from Sierra Leone and Benin.[5] Writing from the viewpoint of Africans she introduced the term "other" to describe the Portuguese. I draw upon her approach and the concept of the Portuguese as "others."

This paper aims to gather all sources relevant to the subject and to compare the results of the examination of both—written and artistic sources, from both Africans and Europeans Europeans texts relating to pronouncements made by Africans are accounts written by eyewitnesses to various events—merchants, sailors and explorers—who travelled to Africa and came into contact with Africans. Those eyewitnesses include the Venetian merchant Alvise da Ca da Mosto, the Portuguese knight Diogo Gomes, and the Bruges merchant Eustache Delafosse.[6] In addition, pronouncements made by Africans are to be found in the chronicles of Gomes Eanes Zurara and Rui de Pina, as well as in the works of Valentim Fernandes, Duarte Pacheco Pereira and João de Barros, all three of whom drew on the first two.[7]

There is, however, a problem with using the term 'Africans' in connection with the period in question. Vincent Mudimbe posits that the notion of an 'African' is anachronistic in relation to the fifteenth an sixteenth centuries and 'depends on a Western epistemological order.'[8] This would thus be a case of using our own contemporary term in order to describe a situation in the past. This may be so in relation to the whole continent, in connection with the long period of African-European contacts, and with the gradual formation of African identity. But if one were to examine Portuguese texts from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, one would find in them terms used to refer to the black inhabitants of West Africa collectively. Gomes Eanes de Zurara used primarily the term 'Etiópios' which derived from antiquity, and the term 'Guinéus,' as the chronicler wrote, in relation to the black inhabitants of Guinea, which he understood as the area of the West African coast south of the Senegal estuary.[9] The knight Diogo Gomes stressed the Africans'

heterogeneity and wrote that 'the quantity of local peoples is so great as to be unbelievable' (tanta est multitudo gentium quod impossibile est credendum).[10] But Ca da Mosto used the collective term 'Negri' writing about the lands of the Blacks in Lower Ethiopia ('terra di Negri de la basse Etyopia').[11] In the early sixteenth century, Valentim Fernandes used the term 'Guyneos', while Duarte Pacheco wrote of 'estas Ethiopias de Guinée.'[12] Thus my use of the term 'Africans' (or West Africans) takes into account the knowledge of those authors, who saw in the black inhabitants of the Guinean coast of West Africa a multiplicity of various groups, making up the collective which the Portuguese encountered. This is, however, a viewpoint of Europeans who arrived to West Africa at the time—an outsider's viewpoint.

Another problem which arises is the question of how the inhabitants of the West African coast viewed themselves. It seems obvious that they had no knowledge of the European notion of 'Africa.' We can, however, consider if, in addition to the linguistic and ethnic ties which individual groups shared, and the political ties of the chiefdom or Early State type created by individual groups, there was not among them a sense of wider ties encompassing all the inhabitants of the region? The sources provide no answer to this question, only certain indirect hints. We have extensive and well researched testimonials of the existence of trading associations of an inter-regional character encompassing West Africa, information about merchants' itineraries, languages used for communicating on a supra-ethnic level, and also information about migrations, about information being shared between various groups of inhabitants in West Africa.[13]

This included mutual familiarity between more or less distant neighbours. But one can have doubts about the existence of a sense of identity extending beyond the linguistic and ethnic groups settled on a given area or organised into chiefdoms or Early States. Whether the experience of meeting the European arrivals and the dissemination through various regions of news of such meetings contribute to a distinct sense of identity among the inhabitants of different parts of the coast we cannot know. Thus the term 'African' is here used as a collective term to describe the peoples of the West African coast who entered into contact with European arrivals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We will strive, however, to define particular Africans groups (be they linguistic, ethnic or political) concerned with specific examples in the sources.

The texts throughout this paper are concerned with different parts of the West African coast and different groups of Africans. The Portuguese chronicler Zurara wrote about Azenegs (Berber fishermen from the Sahara coast of West Africa) as well as about Wolofs, a people who lived between the Senegal estuary and Cabo Verde, and the Serers who inhabited south of Cape Verde and around the estuary of the Salum River. In addition to the Wolofs and Serers the Portuguese knight Diogo Gomes and the Venetian merchant Alvise da Ca da Mosto also wrote about the peoples of Mande, from Gambia and Casamansa regions. The Venetian added some information about the peoples of Sierra Leone. Meanwhile the Portuguese chronicler Rui de Pina and the historian João de Barros related information about

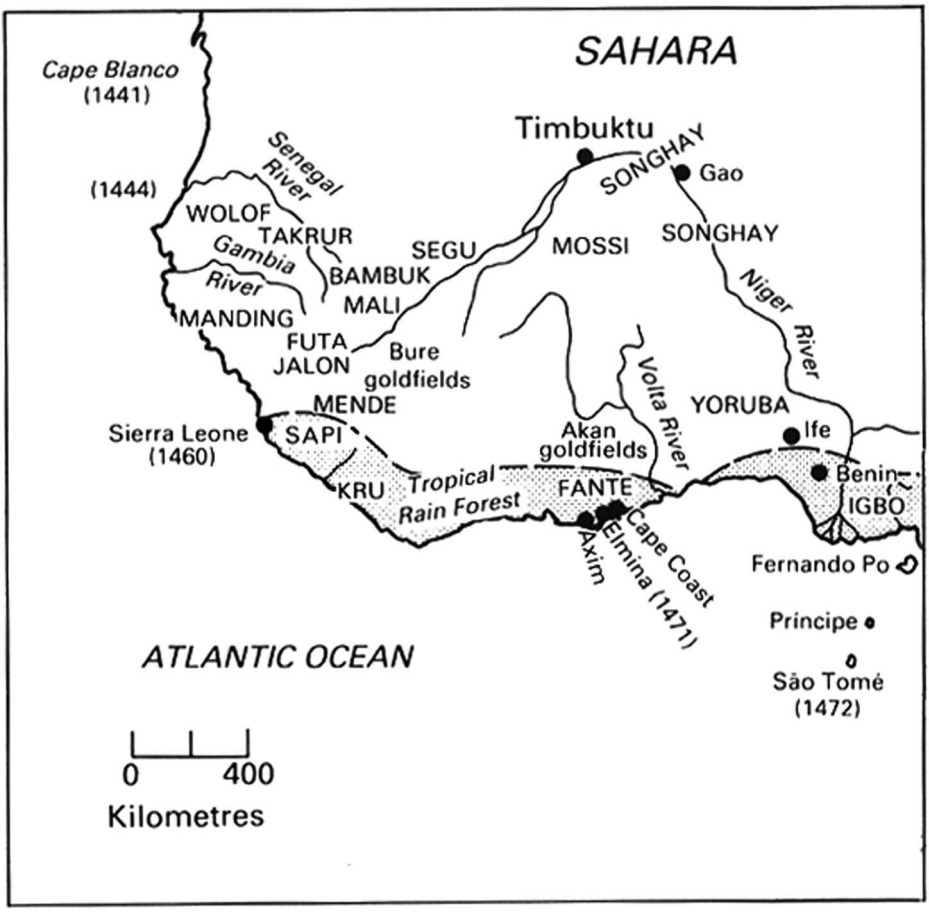

Figure 1. Map - West Africa and the Atlantic Ocean (15th c.)

aforementioned negotiations between Caramansa and Azambuja, as well as about the first contacts between the Portuguese and the state of Benin. The works of Pina and Barros, similar to those of Duarte Pacheco Pereira and Valentim Fernandes, are summaries of information about the Portuguese expeditions to West Africa in the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries.

On the other hand the African art which I will analyse and compare with written sources comes from two regions. In Sierra Leone the sculptors belonged to the Sapi (Temne) people. They created sculptures using ivory with the intention of selling them to the Portuguese. In Benin, a State created by the Edo (Bini) people, the sculptures were made by craftsmen, specialised and organised into a form of guild, which was supervised by the *oba* (ruler) and his officials. These sculptures were produced for the needs of the *oba*'s court and were use to legitimize his power.

On the basis of these sources we can analyse opinions expressed by specific African ethnic groups, who lived in determined parts of the West African coast. Secondly, we

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can ascribe these opinions to people occupying various social positions. And finally we can discuss the possibility of generalizing on the basis of these opinions and recognize (or not) their collective sum as the opinion of Africans.

The pronouncements made by Africans contained in all of these sources are based on what the Europeans were told by translators, on how those translations were understood, and on how and why they were recorded for a European audience. Naturally, accounts by eyewitnesses and participants in talks are a more reliable rendition of the African pronouncements. Europeans noted down what the translators told them but, in addition, they were able to observe the mimicry and gestures of their African interlocutors.[14] They could thus better understand what was said to them, and with what intent. In contrast, the works of chroniclers are indirect accounts on several levels: the records of African pronouncements they contain are based on what the translators said; what the Portuguese explorers understood; and what they told the chroniclers.

We can make use of another type of source besides European records of African opinions. Some Africans expressed their impressions and opinions about the European arrivals in the form of art. In two regions of the West African coast—in Sierra Leone and in the state of Benin, which existed within the territory of contemporary Nigeria—sculptures representing the Portuguese were made from the late fifteenth century on.[15] The direct nature of their authors' artistic expression makes these sources especially valuable. Any critique of those sources by historians must take into account the distinct language (or 'code') of the artwork, the political, social and economic circumstances in which the work emerged, and the different situations of the two regions where the sculptures originated.[16]

The first encounters between the two sides—taking place in the 1430s and 40s—were startling, sporadic and fleeting in nature, and were marked by aggression on the part of the Portuguese. Astonishment, fear and a desire to avoid contacts predominated among those Africans who had experienced these encounters.[17] At the same time, the Africans attempted to understand, and sought an explanation for who the arrivals were, and the purpose of their unfamiliar objects and tools. Both Africans and Europeans had no doubt that they were dealing with other human beings, as opposed to spirits, spectres or beasts. The chronicler Zurara expressed this view on several occasions.[18] Moreover, the intent to convert—one of the important motives shaping the policies of the Infante Dom Henrique—arose from the conviction that the Africans were human beings, notwithstanding the many cultural differences. This attitude amongst Europeans can be explained by the fact that they had known about sub-Saharan Africans for a long time. Black people and Berbers had been a familiar sight throughout the Mediterranean basin since antiquity.[19] In contrast, personal contacts with the Portuguese and other Europeans were an entirely new experience for the black communities inhabiting the coast of West Africa south of the Senegal River estuary. The Wolof, the Western Mande, and perhaps the Serer, may have sporadically encountered Arab or Berber merchants or *marabouts*—"white" people, that is. Ca da Mosto confirms the presence of Arab and Berber marabouts at the

court of Budomel, the ruler of the Wolof state.[20] Peoples who lived on sections of the coast further south had not known such contacts. However, people from all the above groups had no doubt that the Portuguese with whom they came into contact were human beings, not spirits or other unexplained phenomena.

Characteristic in this regard is a fragment of Zurara's chronicle, in which the author describes the reaction of black Africans at the sight of the caravel of Dinis Dias, who had sailed along the West African coast between the mouth of the Senegal River and Cape Verde in 1444. The appearance of the caravel attracted the attention of the inhabitants. Africans supposed it was a great fish or a bird, and they set out in their boats to meet it.[21] The Portuguese were hidden below deck in prudence, but their curiosity proved too great and they began to peek from behind the bulwark. It was then that the Africans realised they were dealing with human beings. This frightened them considerably more than the sight of the caravel itself had, so they fled. Dinis Dias failed to catch up with them but, somewhat later, he captured the crew of another boat. Zurara's account of how the Africans reacted and felt evidently comes from those prisoners, who were taken to Portugal. Zurara again mentions the fact that the Africans mistook the caravels for large fish or birds in another part of his chronicle.[22] The Venetian merchant Ca da Mosto was also told this by African slaves living in Portugal who, in addition to fish and birds, also imagined caravels as phantoms.[23] The Portuguese themselves were not seen as phantoms, although their assaults and pillaging did arouse fear.

In the middle of the 1440s, the Portuguese attempted to establish peaceful contacts and engage in trade but the Africans, mindful of the earlier Portuguese attacks, rejected the initial trade proposals. This was the case in 1445, when captain Gomes Pires, in the Cape Verde area, sent ashore gifts of cake, mirrors and sheets of paper depicting a cross. The 'Guineans' ('black Africans' in Zurara's terminology) hacked and tore those objects with their spears, thus violently and symbolically rejecting all contacts. A battle ensued and nothing came of the hasty efforts made by the Portuguese.[24] The Guineans in question were of the Wolof group, which did come to an understanding with the Portuguese in the following years, and Ca da Mosto noted in 1455 that Budomel, the local Wolof ruler, was trustworthy and paid well for goods he was offered.[25] However, peoples in other areas of the coast continued to refuse contacts. The Serer, who inhabited the areas to the south of Cape Verde, around the estuary of the Salum, and who were the neighbors of the Wolof, were especially persistent in rejecting the Portuguese advances. In 1446, Nuno Tristão and most of his caravel's crew perished in battle with them.[26] A year later, in 1447, the Danish knight Valarte, who was in the service of Infante Dom Henrique, managed to initiate talks and trade with one of the local Serer chiefs, ('um cavaleiro que ali estava quase como governador daquela terra') Guitenyia, but other chiefs, including a priest, drew the knight and his crew into a trap and killed them.[27] Eight years later, in 1455, Ca da Mosto's offer of contacts was also refused. He recorded, however, a very interesting pronouncement by the Serer, as conveyed by translators, from talks which took place once the boats of the Serer had approached the caravel, without any contact on land.

Ca da Mosto wrote that the Serer 'had had news of our coming and of our trade with the negroes of Senega [sic] who, if they sought our friendship, could not but be bad men, for they firmly believed that we Christians ate human flesh, and that we only bought negroes to eat them: that for their part they did not want our friendship on any terms, but sought to slaughter us all.'[28]

Ca da Mosto's account is the earliest such extensive and credible record of Wolofs' and Serers' perceptions of Europeans from the period preceding the establishment of contacts. This description indicates that news about the Europeans was spreading in Africa and was conveyed from one people to others. Some knowledge about the Europeans, even if it was a hostile perception, often preceded the first contacts with the arrivals. Such dissemination of information is confirmed in the description of Diogo Gomes who wrote about the Azenegues: 'quia gentes illi jam fuerant auisati.'[29] Secondly, the statement of the Serer contains a justification for their refusal to establish contacts. The Africans tried to recognise the motives of the Portuguese and understand them. They feared not only assault, but by cannibalism on the part of the Europeans. In such a situation, the Serer considered that even trade was dangerous.

During the initial period of assaults and pillaging, and later during battles caused by the rejection of Portuguese trade proposals, the Africans paid close attention to the weapons of the Europeans. In addition to the caravels, their attention was drawn by the guns and the crossbows of their opponents. According to Ca da Mosto, in a battle on the banks of the Gambia River in 1455, the thunder of the guns aroused fright amongst the African combatants, but this fear was assuaged when the stone shot was seen to fall into the water near the African boats without doing them much harm. The crossbows, whose projectiles brought death and whose range was considerable, made a much greater impression.[30] Ca da Mosto claimed that, upon being shown the lethal nature of the crossbows and bombard shots, the Wolof—with whom peaceful trade had already been established—'were astonished, saying that it was an invention of the devil.'[31]

African sculptures which were made 4 or 5 decades later and which depict the Portuguese confirm the African perceptions reported in the written sources. A large number of the sculptures from both areas (Sierra Leone and Benin) show Portuguese knights. The crossbow was an important item in their armament and appeared in these sculpted works.[32] The sculptures from Benin show, in addition, linstocks used to fire the canons and muskets.[33] During this period of conflict, therefore, the Portuguese were seen by the Africans as dangerous invaders equipped with astounding and threatening weapons, to which they ascribed diabolical powers and magical properties. In extreme interpretations of the behaviour of the Portuguese they were even seen as cannibals, because only in this manner could the Africans explain the purchase of slaves in large number. Such views did not sap the Africans' fighting spirit, however. To the contrary, they took defensive steps, sometimes even attacking the new arrivals and attempting to chase them off.

When the Portuguese tried to change the situation and to establish peaceful relations, the Africans' distrust proved to be an important obstacle, as was the fear of

Figure 2. Portuguese musketeer. On the base are represented two flint-lock pistols, a crossbow and two figures holding guns. Benin bronze, 16th century. Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. XIV, fig.85.

retribution amongst those who had previously killed Europeans. Diogo Gomes, who had dispelled the fears of future (most certainly Serer) trading partners by means of gifts, wrote about this. Talks and gifts made it possible to initiate regular trade contacts in this case as well.[34]

Discussions between Africans and the Portuguese, and with other Europeans in Portuguese service, subsequently became more peaceful and enduring, and made it possible for the two sides to present justifications for their actions. The available sources contain several descriptions of such talks: Valarte with Guitenyia in 1446–7; Ca da Mosto with Budomel in 1455 and with Mande chiefs on the banks of the Gambia River in 1456; Diogo Gomes with the same chiefs in about 1456 and 1459; the Bruges merchant Eustache Delafosse with the inhabitants of Aldeia das Duas

Figure 3. Portuguese knight with a linstock (match pike in Pitt Rivers" terminology) used to ignite the canons. Benin bronze plaque, 16th century. Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. XXXII, fig. 247.

Partes on the Mina Coast in 1480; and, lastly, the political negotiations between Diogo de Azambuja (an envoy of king João II) with Caramansa, the chieftain of the same village, in 1482.[35] These represent just a small proportion of such meetings; there were many more, and they differed widely in terms of importance and the course they took. Only accounts concerning the meetings that were particularly important for the Portuguese were written and have survived to our day. This fact increases the credibility of the descriptions, despite their sketchy nature, and in these records we can find reflections of African perceptions of Europeans.

The Portuguese had several goals in their meetings and talks with the Africans, which met with a very varied response depending, in turn, on the goals adopted by the Africans.

The most common theme, one that animated the majority of talks, was a commercial one. This goal was present on both sides and was based on knowledge of what the potential trading partner had to offer. Coming to an understanding was relatively easy. The list of goods that were attractive to the Europeans was rapidly established. It included gold, ivory, slaves, malagueta pepper and, additionally, natural scents and perfumes, exotic animals, and other singular objects. On the other hand, drawing up a list of European goods of interest to the Africans presented several obstacles. Many European objects aroused a sense of amazement and curiosity among the Africans, who ascribed magic powers to the makers and users of such objects. When Ca da Mosto hosted Budomel's envoys on his caravel, they were amazed and greatly delighted by bagpipes. The envoys stated 'that it was a divine instrument, made by God with his own hands.' Observing the outfitting of the caravel 'they said we must be great wizards, almost the equal of the devil.' Upon seeing candles and learning how to make them, 'they showed much wonderment, exclaiming that we Christians had knowledge of everything.'[36] The problem came down to which objects the European rulers agreed to sell and which would be useful for Africans. These were two serious barriers. For example, weapons undoubtedly drew the Africans' interest, but Portugal's rulers prohibited their export to Africa.[37] This prohibition—which applied not only to firearms and crossbows, but also included swords and daggers—was violated only sporadically in the early period of Afro-European contacts.[38] Some objects which had aroused astonishment, such as musical instruments and candles, were not traded for lack of commercial interest. The Africans' choice therefore fell on horses for their rulers and dignitaries, cloth, metal articles made mainly of copper and brass, and ornaments. In defining the goods they wanted to purchase, the Africans were in a way conducting a sort of appraisal of the European offer from the standpoint of their own needs and possibilities.

The Europeans channelled discussions with Africans to a number of other issues. For example, they strove to obtain information about the African interior.[39] Discussions on this topic do not generally reveal African opinions about Europeans. Such opinions did surface, however, in discussions about religion. According to the orders of their monarch, the Portuguese were to explore the possibility of converting the newly encountered peoples.[40] This aim, which was unusually important from the point of view of the Infante Dom Henrique, was difficult to carry out for the knights and merchants. During the period of conflicts, only prisoners taken to Europe were baptised. After more peaceful contacts were achieved, the Europeans raised this issue as a complementary subject to the main, commercial motive of discussions. The reactions of Africans varied. While admiring the arrivals' abilities and their many tools, the Africans ascribed the operation of the unknown objects they were seeing to magic powers and to the intervention of the European god. But proposals to convert them were usually passed over in silence by the Africans, who did not explore this topic during talks. This is what happened when Valarte presented to Guitenyia the translation of the letter Infante Dom Henrique had written to the (by him unknown) local ruler, devoted in large measure to the matter of conversion.[41] Guintenyia stated

that his paramount chief was away on war operations and that there was no contact with him. He proposed trade instead. There were also other leaders in the village besides Guintenyia, including a priest, who were more hostile towards European influence. They brought about the killing of Valarte and of his companions. Similarly, Caramansa also passed over in silence the question of conversion raised in a speech given by Diogo de Azambuja. On the other hand, he negotiated vigorously in the matter of the construction of a castle and tried to resist Portuguese intentions.[42]

The account of Alvise da Ca da Mosto from his talks with Budomel contains the earliest and very extensive description of discussions on matters of faith between him and the African ruler. Moreover, according to Ca da Mosto, it was Budomel who initiated those discussions. The African ruler listened to the European merchant's explanations with interest. 'Our faith appeared to him to be good: for it could be no other than God that had bestowed so many good and rich gifts and so much skill and knowledge upon us [but that He had not given us good laws]. He, on the contrary, had given them good laws, and he considered it reasonable that they would be better able to gain salvation than we Christians, for God was a just lord, who had granted us in this world many benefits of various kinds, but to the negroes, in comparison with us, almost nothing. Since he had not given them paradise here, he would give it to them hereafter.'[43] Budomel's nephew, Bisboror, also eagerly conducted discussions on religious matters with the Europeans.

The above fragment of Ca da Mosto's account is exceptional and, for the early period of Portuguese expeditions, unique. Only in the 1480s and 90s, e.g., about 30–40 years later, were discussions held about conversion to Christianity with Bemoy, the ruler of the Wolof, with the chief of the Soyo province in Congo, and later with the ruler of Congo himself.[44] Ca da Mosto's account is full of details, and the discussion took place without any pressure. The Venetian merchant tried to understand Budomel, and the latter, similarly, tried to grasp the principles of Christian faith and to form an opinion about them. The aim of the Wolof ruler was most certainly to explain the origin of the Europeans' unusual abilities and to ascertain whether adopting Christianity would be beneficial for him. While, during battles and conflict, the abilities of the Europeans were ascribed to magic, with an emphasis on evil and dangerous forces, during peace talks these powers were treated differently. They were no longer evil, but puzzling, mysterious and creative; attempts were made to understand and, perhaps, to harness them. It should be added that Ca da Mosto also ascribed magic powers to his African partners.[45] It cannot be ruled out that Budomel was also guided by other considerations besides practical ones. His answers would seem to indicate that the religion of the Europeans had not provided them.

The interest shown by rulers of the Benin state in the religion of the Portuguese was based on other aims. Firstly, they were thinking of using the image of the Portuguese and of relations with them to help shore up the splendour of their own power and of their dynasty. This is borne out in written, if scant, texts, and in Benin art.[46] Sculptures of the Portuguese and, above all, Portuguese knights, were placed on altars dedicated to rulers and their ancestors, along with sculptures of court

dignitaries, servants, warriors, and battle scenes.[47] Representations of the Portuguese were used to proclaim the glory of the *obas* of Benin. The *oba* and court of Benin apparently saw in the Europeans one more group of foreign peoples subordinated to Benin. Secondly, conducting negotiations about welcoming the Portuguese religious mission—as took place in 1514—also served a practical purpose for Benin's rulers. They wished to acquire firearms. The failure of those efforts led to the cessation of negotiations in religious matters.[48]

Another topic of talks and opinions formulated by the Africans was the appearance and behaviour of the Europeans. Budomel and his dignitaries did not make any pronouncements on Ca da Mosto's appearance, or Ca da Mosto did not record them doing so, but Budomel's simple subjects expressed surprise when the Venetian merchant visited the local market. People—men and women—surrounded him and were amazed at his skin's white colour, which they attempted to wipe off with their fingers. They thought Ca da Mosto's skin had been painted. Ca da Mosto's clothes and the cloth it had been made of, also aroused curiosity: 'My clothes were after the Spanish fashion, a doublet of black damask, with a short cloak of grey wool over it. They examined the woollen cloth, which was new to them, and the doublet with much amazement.'[49] Presumably, the detailed interest of the Wolof in various types of cloth had to do with their familiarity with cotton, cotton weaving and making garments using cotton cloth.[50] Given these abilities, the Wolof knew how to appraise types of cloth unknown to them, and presumably wondered about their dissimilarity, its usefulness to them and, perhaps, its commercial value.

The situation was different on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. No cotton was grown in this area. Traditional attire, made of vegetal fibres, was usually limited to loincloths. Diogo de Azambuja's talks with Caramansa in 1482 took place only 11 years following the appearance of the Portuguese on this part of the coast.[51] By 1482, some of the dignitaries in Caramansa's entourage were wearing costumes made of European cloth, but their servants still wore loincloths.[52] As can be seen, European cloth met with rapidly growing demand but its cost made it accessible only to the local elite.

The Europeans' good clothes (and their habit of covering the body) were thus viewed positively by the Africans. Caramansa stated that de Azambuja's attire and the ornaments that he wore must attest to the fact that he was a close relation of the Portuguese king. Caramansa then spoke a sentence which was telling in terms of the Africans' perception of Europeans. He said that he had already seen other Europeans who came to his village, but that The citation mark for the 'they had been few, dirty and base' was left as double and should be changed into a single mark as all others.(according to the account of Rui de Pina), or 'men poorly dressed and in tatters' (according to João de Barros). In addition, they were content with any goods the Africans would give them.[53] Caramansa's observation clearly indicates that the Africans ceased to treat Europeans as a socially homogenous group relatively quickly. They learned how to seek interlocutors and interesting trade partners among those Europeans who held power and riches. This corresponded to the attitude of the Europeans, who also learned to find partners among African rulers, chiefs and merchants.

The Africans' appraisal of the Europeans' behaviour was not only based on the latter's appearance, attire or greediness. They also observed and commented upon their attitudes toward women. We have few pronouncements on this subject, but they are telling. Only men took part in the early Portuguese expeditions to Africa. There were no women on the caravels, at least in principle. There is one official exception, however: the assignment of some women to the expedition of Diogo de Azambuja, which involved several hundred people. Three of them and sixty men were then retained at the castle of Mina.[54]

The Africans not only noticed this European weakness, but tried to make use of it. During the earliest period of the Portuguese expeditions, African women would woo the invaders, and attempt to draw them into a trap. The Europeans were careful, however.[55] When trade began, the custom arose of preceding trade with an exchange of gifts. Budomel gave Ca da Mosto a young and very beautiful slave girl whom the Venetian merchant sent to the caravel and subsequently never mentioned.[56] He and other authors did not discuss intimate matters in their accounts, but the existence of such issues is indicated by a conversation between him and Budomel, in which the ruler of the Kayor 'demanded of me importunately, having been given to understand that Christians knew how to do many things, whether by chance I could give him the means by which he could satisfy many women.'[57] Budomel was no doubt inquiring because he had observed the behaviour of the Europeans when they came ashore—and may have needed the advice, having several dozen wives and even more servants. Eustache Delafosse also wrote an intricate account concerning women. He wished to sell two basins, but was tempted and lured into a house by two women who, he claimed, cast a spell on him. In the end, the encounter left him with no basins and no payment—something he regretted immensely.[58]

African sculptures from the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century contain much information about the Africans' perception of differences between different groups of Europeans. As we have seen, these works originated from the region of Sierra Leone and Benin. Kathy Curnow has provided an interesting analysis of the image of the 'other' in these sculptures.[59] Curnow noted the African perceptive observation of the Portuguese and their ability of representing social differences among the Portuguese. She used the examples of a dignitary, knight and priest (I will add to this with a merchant, a servant and a poor sailor.) Curnow also demonstrates the difference in how the Africans entered in contact with the Portuguese in both regions. In Sierra Leone the local segmentary society enabled closer contact than in Benin, where there existed a centralised state, and its rulers decided about the extent of contacts, limiting them to economic, political and military spheres. I accept and draw upon Curnow findings.

I will first concentrate on the purposes of the sculptures common to both regions. Both depict Portuguese dignitaries and knights. The first were shown in elegant embroidered robes, with ornate chains and with pearl necklaces; the knights with swords, often accompanied by servants and, at times, with a horse, a sign of particular prestige. The figures of the dignitaries have long, curly hair, and most of them sport beards.[60]

Figure 4. Portuguese dignitary accompanied by attendants. Middle section of ivory saltcellar, 16th century, Benin or Sierra Leone sculpture. von Luschan, *Die Altertumer von Benin*, pl. 119, bottom, on the left.

The identification and presentation in art of all these traits and attributes was possible thanks to a careful observation of the new arrivals by the Africans. We can compare those depictions with the description of Diogo de Azambuja's appearance, which is known from several written sources, and this raises the credibility, as historical sources, of these works of art. Ordinary knights were presented with less pomp, above all with their military attributes, such as armour, helmets, swords, daggers, crossbows and, in the case of sculptures from Benin, muskets.[61] In the sculptures of both regions, the figures of Europeans with attributes of power, riches and military might outnumber other depictions. The message contained in these sculptures confirms the conclusions drawn from written sources: the Africans were especially concerned with the weapons, military prowess, and the power of Europeans.

Portuguese merchants form an important group depicted on sculptures made in Benin.[62] Such merchants, their servants, as well as ordinary sailors trading with

Figure 5. Portuguese riding knight with a linstock. Benin bronze plaque, 16th–17th century. Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. XXII, fig. 129.

Africans, were depicted in less elaborate attire, often without weapons, but surrounded with one of the main goods brought from Europe to the Gulf of Guinea—brass bracelets called *manilhas*.

They were ornaments, but also a source of brass and a gauge of value, a form of currency. The placement of *manilhas* next to the figures of merchants or in their hands needs no commentary. One thing that may cause surprise is that in some Benin sculptures the merchants at times hold in their hands a linstock used to fire the canon rounds. It means that although Africans from Benin recognised the merchants' commercial function, they also associated them with European weapons and military power. Another sculpture, in the form of a relief plaque designed to be hung on pillars surrounding the courtyard of the *oba*'s palace, represents a Portuguese man (probably a merchant) and a boy, both in everyday clothes without ornamentation. The artefacts from Benin also include sculptures depicting the daily life of the Portuguese in Africa. One splendid sculpture of a musketeer stands on a base whose side is adorned with a scene of a Portuguese drinking party.[63] The threatening power of the musketeer is here confronted with a depiction of the Europeans' daily life, and perhaps even their vices and weaknesses.

In contrast, only in the art of Sierra Leone do we find a depiction of a Christian priest and missionary.[64]

Figure 6. Portuguese merchant with the manilha in his hand. Benin bronze plaque, 16th century. Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. XXXII, fig. 247.

Its absence in the art of Benin confirms our knowledge about the failure of missionary efforts in this area. The missionary from Sierra Leone is shown in austere robes, modest hairstyle and in a gesture of prayer. More importantly, there are telling

Figure 7. Portuguese servant with manilha. Detail of an ivory saltcellar. Benin or Sierra Leone sculpture, 16th century. von Luschan, *Die Altertumer von Benin*, pl. 119, top, on the right.

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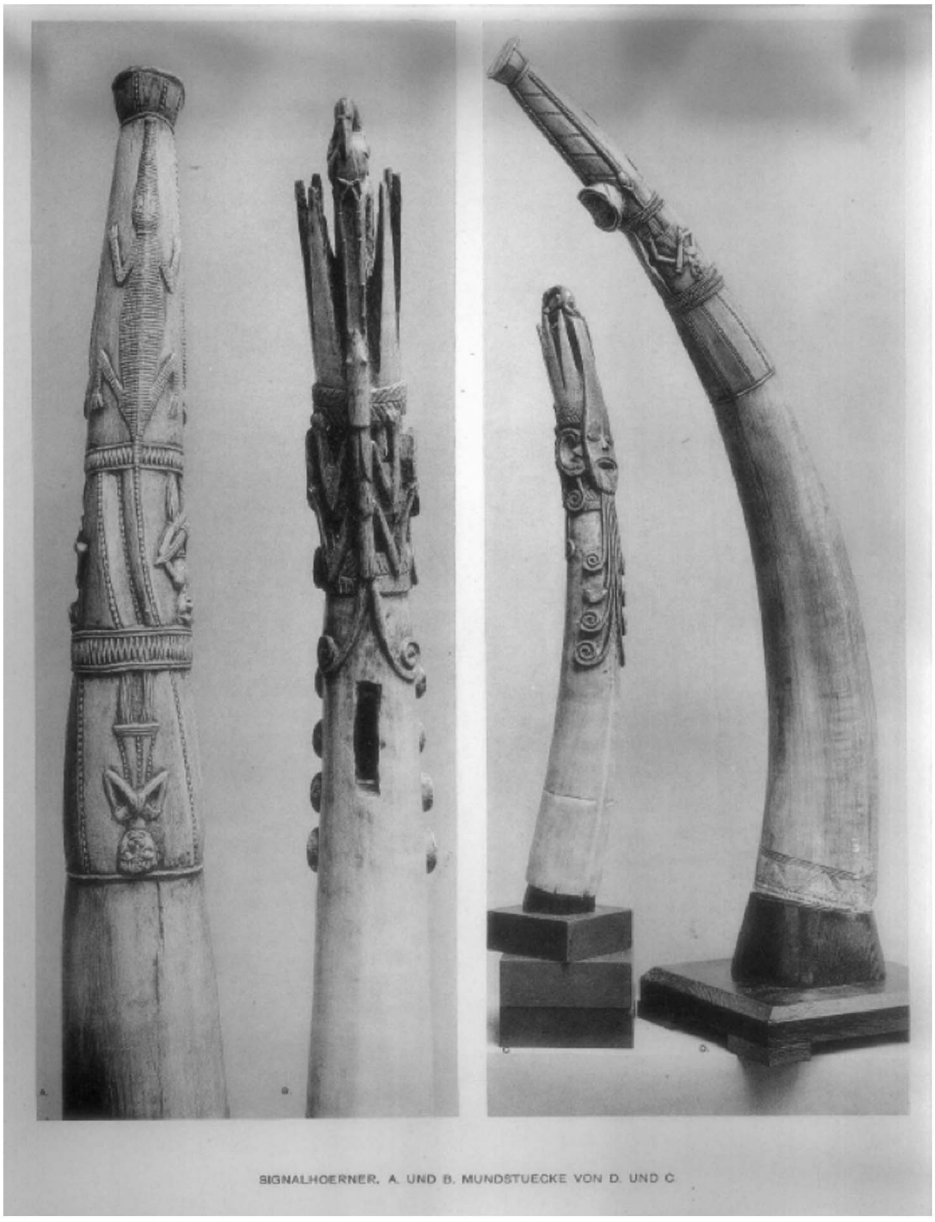

Figure 8. Praying priest. Detail of an ivory horn. Sierra Leone, late 15th/early 16th century. von Luschan, *Die Altertumer von Benin*, pl. 116, on the left.

differences between the sculptures of Sierra Leone and those of Benin with regard to the placement of the Portuguese within local society. In the case of Sierra Leone, they are often depicted in the company of Africans, with servants, and at times in the company of women.[65] This reflects real situations, especially the distinction between

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Figure 9. Figure of Benin warrior accompanied by attendants. Two heads of Portuguese knights in the background. Benin bronze plaque, 16th–17th century. Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. I, fig. 4.

the role of *lançados* in segmentary and centralised societies. So-called *lançados*—Portuguese who had come to Africa and who then rejected the suzerainty of their former king—did settle in Sierra Leone and joined the life of the local community, often taking local women as wives.[66] These *lançados* (called also *tango-maos*) and their descendants were usually bilingual, and played the role of intermediaries in African-Portuguese contacts. This was reflected in the sculptures of Sierra Leone, which were made above all to be sold, and were also created through the mediation of the *lançados.*[67] They could play such a role because the political organization of the communities inhabiting Sierra Leone was not centralised. Neither the early forms of the state nor that of chiefdoms emerged there. Instead, there was a segmentary organization of independent villages.[68] The inclusion, even immersion, of individual *lançados* into this type of social structure was therefore more possible than in Benin. On the other hand, the interest shown by local peoples in trade contacts with the Portuguese created opportunities to mediate for the *lançados*. By buying European

products, Africans offered in exchange a costly item that was especially prized by the Europeans—ivory. This was not limited to tusks, but included sculptures in ivory with carved scenes, often made to special order for the Portuguese.

The situation in the state of Benin was completely different. The predominant number of sculptures in bronze and in the form of sculpted elephant tusks, were made for the needs of the court of the Benin rulers. Local associations of sculptors were supervised and controlled by these rulers.[69] As we have seen, depictions of the Portuguese created for the needs of the court were placed on altars of the rulers as evidence of their superiority over the arrivals, the subordination of the Portuguese within *oba*'s own kingdom to the aims of his policy. It was not in the interest of the *oba* to depict the ties of the new arrivals with local society. For this reason, according to Curnow's analysis, the Portuguese in Benin sculptures were shown separately. These are figures of individual knights, musketeers, bas-reliefs of merchants or Portuguese hunting leopards.[70] These scenes do not show their African partners. One exception is the relief showing the *oba* surrounded by dignitaries and servants with, in the background, a small bas-relief head of a Portuguese knight.[71]

Of course, such a composition reflected the hierarchy of the figures and the idea of subordination of the arrivals to the *oba*. Similarly to Sierra Leone, individual traits of the Portuguese figures were not shown. Facial features were depicted in a schematic manner. For this reason, according to the terminology proposed by Curnow these are the depictions of the 'other' shown by means of a symbolic treatment of attributes. The latter defined the presented person's ethnic and social affiliation, and not that person's individual traits.

The source material which we have is modest and sketchy. This makes it difficult to pass from separate and incidental descriptions of various behaviours and pronouncements to conclusions of a general nature. On the other hand, one valuable trait of the source material is its variety. Both types of sources—written accounts and art works—emerged entirely independently from one another. The similarity of the information in these distinct sources increases their significance as historical evidence. This concerns in particular the level of credibility of Europeans written sources, which related the Africans' opinions in a indirect way, were dependent on the level of understanding of the Africans' pronouncements, and were also influenced by the European' interest. Where these accounts are in agreement with the massages conveyed by African sculptures, I find that the credibility of these texts is convincing.

From the 1430s to the beginning of the sixteenth century, contacts between Europeans and the inhabitants of the Coast of West Africa underwent many changes affecting the type of contacts, their frequency and intensity. Alongside these changes, the attitudes, opinions and pronouncements of different persons and groups of Africans about Europeans also changed. These were initially spontaneous pronouncements made *ad hoc* under the influence of unexpected events and heightened emotions. The source material, however dubious, shows opinions voiced by Africans of very different social standing.

After the assaults and battles with the Portuguese ceased, contacts became in large measure regulated. During meetings, longer discussions were held and the pronouncements of African became more abundant and adapted to the new phase in cultural contacts. They were based on a better understanding of their European trading partners. The aim of Africans became to expand and develop this acquaintance.

During the first phase of contacts Africans interpreted contact within their pre-existing understanding of the natural world (caravels as birds or fish for example), but some explanations for unexpected events were sought in magic powers ascribed to the Europeans. In the second stage Africans adapted their opinions and attempts were made to find rational explanations. During this period of peaceful discussions, the social make-up of Africans recorded as describing Europeans changed. The persons conducting trade and political negotiations were above all African rulers, chiefs of chiefdoms and villages and, in addition, merchants. Sources of this period contain few pronouncements made by persons of low social standing. This does not mean that such people did not have their own opinion about the arrivals, but for the Portuguese, who were interested in negotiations and trade, and for the authors of accounts and chronicles, it was the opinion of African elites which mattered. The creators of the sculptures should also be seen as an exceptional, if not elite, group in their societies.

The opinion of Africans about Europeans between the 1430s and the beginning of the sixteenth century had not yet become stereotyped, although it was often represented on a general level. African societies were flexible and creative in their interpretations of encounters with Europeans. This was due to the changes that were taking place during this period in forms of cultural contact and the evolution of opinions about Europeans that this entailed. Stereotypes only emerged gradually during the course of the sixteenth century.

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1 Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe.*
2 Horta, "A Representação"
3 Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans*; Hair, *The Founding*, 45.

4 Hair, *The Founding*
5 Curnow, "Alien or Accepted."
6 Ca da Mosto, *Le Navigazioni*; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages"; Gomes, *De la première découverte*; Delafosse, *Voyage*; Russell, "Veni,vidi,vici."
7 Zurara, *Crónica*; Pina,*Crónica*; Pina "Fragments about Mina construction"; Pacheco, *Esmeraldo*; Fernandes, *Description (1506–1507)*; Fernandes, *Description (1506–1510);* Barros, *Ásia*.
8 Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, XIV; Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*.
9 Zurara, *Crónica*, 34, 146, 244, 336.
10 Gomes, *De la première découverte*, 27.
11 Ca da Mosto, *Le Navigazioni*, 5.
12 Fernandes, *Description (1506–1510),* 76, 80; Pacheco, *Esmeraldo*, 18.
13 Małowist, *Wielkie państwa*; Curtin, *Economic Change*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*.
14 Russell, "Some Socio-Linguistic Problems"; Tymowski, "How did European Explorers Communicate."
15 Fagg, *Afro-Portuguese Ivories*; Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Rennaissance*; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*; Mark, "Towards a Reassessment."
16 Vansina, *Art History in Africa*.
17 Tymowski, "La peur et le courage."
18 Zurara, *Crónica,* 145, 176, 193, 336, 364.
19 Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*; Bieżuńska-Małowist and Małowist, *Niewolnictwo*, 46, 55–7, 320–4.
20 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 56–7.
21 Zurara, *Crónica,* 176.
22 Zurara, *Crónica,* 176, 364.
23 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 29.
24 Zurara, *Crónica,* 365.
25 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 49.
26 Zurara, *Crónica,* 485–7.
27 Zurara, *Crónica,* 542–3. Tymowski, "Why did Valarte Die?."
28 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 85; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 60.
29 Gomes, *De la première découverte,* 19.
30 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 83.
31 Ibid.; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 60.
32 Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, no. 233; Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Rennaissance,* fig. 125.
33 Il. 2, 3 and 5 in this paper; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, nos 10, 11, 233, 234, 236.
34 Gomes, *De la première découverte*, 31,33.
35 Hair, *The Founding*, 16–31; Tymowski, "Europeans and Africans."
36 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 70–2; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 51.
37 *Ordonaçoens*, vol.4, 63; *Ordonações Manuelinas*, vol.5, 81, quotation after Saunders, *A social history,* 12, 184; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 45.
38 Gomes, *De la première découverte,* 53, 55; Blake, *Europeans in West Africa*, 203; Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers,* 132–3, 141, 152; Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 48; Mark and Horta, *The Forgotten Diaspora,* 103–58.
39 Zurara, *Crónica,* 447; Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 30–4; Gomes, *De la première découverte,* 37–41.
40 Zurara, *Crónica,* 64–5, 549–50; Brásio, *A acção missionária*; Russell, "Prince Henry the Navigator," 16–25.
41 Zurara, *Crónica,* 534–6.
42 Hair, *The Founding,* 16–31.
43 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 57; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 41.
44 Mota, "D. João Bemoim"; "Textes portugais sur les Wolofs," 822–46; Pina "Fragments about Mina construction," 61–6, 112–16; Barros, *Ásia,* 113; Russell, "White Kings on Black Kings"; Newitt, *The Portuguese in West Africa*, 100–8.
45 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 62–3.
46 Barros, *Ásia,* 90; Dapper, *Description of Benin*, 11, 30; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*.
47 Ben-Amos Girshick, "The Symbolism of Ancestral Altars."
48 Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 41–53.
49 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 68; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 49.
50 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni,* 45; Monteil, "Le coton chez les Noirs," 585–684.

51 Hair, *The Founding*, 2, 47–8.
52 Pina "Fragments about Mina construction," 11; Barros *Ásia*, 79; Hair, *The Founding*, 83–4, 89; Pacheco, *Esmeraldo*.
53 Pina "Fragments about Mina construction," 12; Barros, *Ásia*, 82; Hair, *The Founding,* 26, 86.
54 Pina "Fragments about Mina construction," 14; Hair, *The Founding,* 91–2.
55 Zurara, *Crónica*, 196–7.
56 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni*, 50.
57 Ca da Mosto, *Navigazioni*, 53; Ca da Mosto, "The Voyages," 38.
58 Delafosse, *Voyage*, 30.
59 Curnow, "Alien or Accepted," 38–44.
60 Il. 4 in this paper; Fagg, *Afro-Portuguese Ivories,* fig. 7,16; Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Rennaissance,* fig. 209, 211, 240–243; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, no 38.
61 See nn 29, 30 and il. 2,3,5 int this paper.
62 Il. 6 and 7 in this paper; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, nos 10, 11, 29, 30, 31; Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Rennaissance,* fig. 216.
63 Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, no 231.
64 Il. 8 in this paper; Curnow, "Alien or Accepted," fig. 4.
65 Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Rennaissance,* fig. 28, 42, 156, 186; Curnow, "Alien or Accepted," 41.
66 Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, 31, 32, 388, 391; Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 83–7, 202–4; Brooks, "Historical Perspectives"; Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*, 188–196; Newitt, "Mixed Race Groups," 35–52.
67 Curnow, "Alien or Accepted," 39.
68 Horton, "Stateless Societies"; Tymowski, *The Origins and Structures,* 117–32.
69 Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 79,81–2; Inneh, "The Guilds Working for the Palace," 103–17.
70 See nn 29, 30, 57, 59.
71 Il. 9 in this paper; Ekpo and Willet, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria*, 139; Plankensteiner, *Benin Kings and Rituals*, no 62.