From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories

By Barbara W. Blackmun

In museums and private collections throughout Europe and America there are impressive holdings of antique bronzes and ivories from the Kingdom of Benin, in Nigeria (see map). The largest of these objects are elephant’s tusks three to seven feet long and elaborately carved with rows of figures, animals, and other motifs in high relief (Fig. 1). The tusks were created as furnishings for altars of various types in Benin City, and they were carved by the Igbesanwoman, the royal ivory carvers’ guild in the palace of the Oba, or hereditary king. From the eighteenth century onwards European visitors to the Oba’s palace have commented on the profusion of these ivories in shrines that the kings maintained in honor of their royal predecessors.¹ In the palace each tusk was supported by a bronze pedestal in the form of a crowned head, the tusk rising from the center like an extension of the crown (Fig. 2). Similar carved tusks have been noted on domestic shrines of high-ranking eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chiefs.²

Works of this quality and contextual importance are obviously of interest to the art historian. Had the ivories been produced by a European society, investigation of the meaning of their complicated motifs would be aided by reading the literature of the period in which they were carved. An understanding of the cultural matrix of Benin art cannot be achieved in the same way because the politically centralized and exceedingly complex Benin society is nonliterate. Since Benin arts replace rather than supplement written documents, they are primary vehicles for intellectual as well as aesthetic expression. The tusk motifs relate to a vast collection of stories, historical accounts, aphorisms, and song-texts that have been preserved orally for many generations. In addition to this oral literature, there are drum rhythms, costume details, dances, and ritualized positions of the hands and body that allude to specific ideas, personages, and events from the past. Highly regarded ritual specialists within the Oba’s palace, throughout the capital city, and in outlying communities interpret these visual and auditory symbols on multiple levels. Simple explanations are provided for the general public, with more profound associations accessible through initiation into specialized hierarchies that constitute the educational structure of Benin society. Traditionally, economic and political advantages have been conferred on those who have successfully mastered the deeper knowledge of the elite.

Much of the iconography is rooted in the kingdom’s 800-year span of traditional history. In the African view of history, the skillful use of expressive means to transmit cherished values takes precedence over linear, factual recording of past events. Moreover, nonliterate societies adjust their historical traditions more rapidly than societies restrained to some extent by written records. As circumstances change, the reshaping of the past proceeds with few impediments other than the need for consensus among the specialists themselves. It is evident on the Benin tusks that the interpretation of some motifs, as well as the motifs themselves, has undergone a gradual conversion. One such motif is the figure of a European trader in sixteenth-century dress (Fig. 3). This foreign figure appears with slight variations in pose or costume on almost every carved altar tusk. When present-day ivory carvers and other ritual specialists were asked in 1981–82 to interpret the image, their explanations varied with the context of the
the mid 1700s to the twentieth century. To accomplish this it is necessary to begin with the motif's early sources in the first European contacts with Benin.

European documents on Benin date from the late fifteenth century, when the Portuguese first contacted the reigning Oba, exchanging ambassadors and sending him missionaries and military assistance. For the next four hundred years merchants from Portugal, Holland, France, and England brought wealth to the kingdom in return for trade that included at various periods pepper, slaves, cloth, ivory, and palm oil. The early period of interaction with Europeans is prominent in Benin's oral history, and the exploits of the great sixteenth-century Obas, especially Owoalu the Conqueror and his Christian-educated son, Esigie, are among the best-known traditions in Benin. Between 1520 and 1550 the Europeans and their activities were recorded by the Igbesanmwan on finely carved ivory saltcellars (Fig. 4), which were exported to Portugal. Europeans were also depicted on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sculptured bronze plaques (Fig. 5) made by the bronze casters' Igunoronmwan guild to sheathe pillars in the Oba's palace. This art was supplemented by music, mime, dance, poetry, and the details of court regalia to keep memories alive of the sixteenth-century warrior kings and their Portuguese allies. It is difficult to determine the extent to which Portuguese depictions were based on direct observations of the foreigners; details of costumes and poses may have been derived from prints or other source material supplied by Portuguese traders.

During the 1600s Benin's leaders concentrated on the regulation of inter-African trade in the coastal waterways to the west, and it was not until the eighteenth century that the kingdom re-emerged as a strong trading partner with Europe. The Oba extended his control over a considerable portion of the Niger River ivory market, and thousands of elephants' tusks were stored and used at the Benin court. The temporal framework I have constructed for these ivories (based on the number of tusk sets, their condition and style, oral traditions, European descriptions, and iconographical correlations with motifs from other types of Benin art) postulates that the earliest of the large carved figurative altar tusks were prepared for the king's shrines in the palace during this period. By the end of the nineteenth century Benin's continued influence along the Niger and in coastal trade came into direct conflict with expanding British interests. In 1897 the autonomy of the kingdom came to an end with a British punitive expedition that attacked Benin City and stripped its palace and other buildings of their sculpture. More than a thousand art works in brass and ivory were shipped to Britain, where they were sold to museums and private collectors. They immediately excited the imagination of British and European scholars, and impressive studies of the cultural and historical background of Benin art appeared during the next two decades. Nevertheless, it is only recently that the iconography and chronology of the Benin altar tusks have been investigated thoroughly, and my work is still in progress.

At the court of Erediauwa, the present Oba of Benin, the hereditary Igbesanmwan traces its foundation to a

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Fig. 2 Twentieth-century ancestral altars in the Oba's palace, Benin City, Nigeria.

motifs surrounding the figure. Sometimes they were certain that it represented a Portuguese trader. In other contexts a very similar figure was identified as a popular sixteenth-century warrior king. Most surprisingly, when these specialists interpreted the twentieth-century version of the figure they made no reference whatever to a foreign identity. They explained the modern motif, carved about 1921, as an African priest wearing a garment covered with packets of spiritually protective substances.

The shift in identification seemed odd, and led me to investigate how it had occurred. Before beginning my work with interpretation, I sorted the tusks by computer into homogeneous groups on the basis of their size and condition and the choice, placement, and style of their carved motifs. A sequence was also formulated on the premise that motif clusters most similar to those carved in the twentieth century would be recent and that motifs of increasing age would exhibit progressively greater distinctions from these.

In the interpretation of the foreign figures by the specialists, a pattern emerged that was roughly consistent, developing in a way that will be explored in this essay. The methodology employed here is unorthodox for art history, and it goes beyond the use of documentary sources and stylistic analysis to consider the function of ambiguity in facilitating the gradual evolution of a particular image. I have attempted to trace the ivory-carving motif of the foreign figure for two hundred years, from

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Fig. 3 The foreign-trader motif, as it appears on the eighteenth-century Benin altar tusks. Drawing by the author.

Fig. 4 Benin-Portuguese ivory saltcellar, sixteenth century, H. 30 cm. British Museum.
European travelers first began to remark upon a profusion of large carved tusk on altars in the Oba’s palace. The motifs on the tusks that appear to be the oldest include many foreign figures in sixteenth-century pleated jerkins, with patterned hose, boots, and high-crowned hats (Fig. 6). Although this costume resembles that of sixteenth-century foreign visitors to Benin, for historical, stylistic, and iconographic reasons the probable date for these tusks is the middle of the eighteenth century. Why then would the craftsmen present foreign figures wearing clothing from a period two centuries earlier? The answers to that question lie in the carving practices of the Igbesanmwan, and in the kingdom’s cultural history.

In present-day Benin, royal ivory carvers working on an altar tusk use motifs inherited from their predecessors. If they wish to add others, these will be based primarily on old, revered artworks in the palace collections, although they may include new motifs of their own invention if they are inspired by dreams. Motifs, therefore, are seldom based on observations of contemporary life. If the carving practices of the past were similar to those of today, then the copying of two-hundred-year-old motifs by eighteenth-century artists would be expected.

The iconography of these early tusks commemorates the sixteenth-century warrior kings, particularly the popular Oba Esigie (c. 1515–50). A favored hero in Benin folklore, Esigie is associated with many tusk motifs, each referring to stories that are often repeated. The foreign traders and soldiers pictured on these ivories allude not only to the Portuguese presence in Esigie’s court but also to his Christian education from resident missionaries and to the European clothing he received from the Portuguese king. In carving foreign figures the eighteenth-century Igbesanmwan artists did not record their own perceptions of the contemporary Dutch, French, and English traders who were visiting Benin at that time; they based their motifs rather on antique sculptures of Portuguese foreigners. It is not unusual in Benin for a new Oba to strengthen his claim to the throne through identifying himself with an illustrious predecessor, and the carvers linked the eighteenth-century Oba who commissioned the tusks with Esigie. The patron for these eighteenth-century tusks was probably Oba Eresowany (c. 1735–50), who is remembered in Benin for his lavish use of court artists who worked in brass and in ivory, and for the use of symbols that alluded to Esigie’s reign.

The art of interpreting the motifs on altar tusk has always been exclusive. The Oba’s palace is the political and administrative center of Benin government. Government affairs are divided between three great oto or palace associations, founded by the fifteenth-century Oba Ewuare the Great. Motif interpretation is practiced primarily today by the members of Iwebo, the senior association, which cares for royal artworks and regalia and preserves certain traditions for the Oba. Although most of the activities of these associations take place in the capital city, every freeborn man in the kingdom traditionally belongs to one of them, and some elders of Iwebo also reside in the provinces. Ritual specialists with the authority to interpret visual symbols are therefore found throughout Benin society. Ranking members of the royal craftsmen’s guilds, including the Igbesanmwan, are initiated into Iwebo, since these guilds are directly under the Oba’s patronage and control. The palace is also the economic, social, and religious center of Benin life, and the final arbiters of motif interpretation are the artists themselves and the senior chiefs of Iwebo, who meet daily in the palace. Constant face-to-face communication between the Oba and the leaders of various hierarchies of initiated chiefs facilitates a more or less continual consensus uniting disparate versions of tradition. Much effort and attention is given to transmitting oral history accurately, so that values embedded within the historical traditions are preserved.

Like interpersonal relationships in Benin, which incorporate densely intertwined and crisscrossing networks of

Fig. 5 Benin brass plaque, sixteenth or seventeenth century, H. 32 cm. British Museum.
political and social factions, graded associations, hierarchies, and lineages, the interpretations that Iwebo elders link with each carved motif on the tusks are multidimensional. This complexity can be suggested by the "reading" of a single row of tusk motifs.

In the schematic drawing of the bottom row of a typical eighteenth-century tusk commissioned about the time of Eresonyen (Fig. 7) there are two nearly identical motifs of the foreign trader. The trader in sixteenth-century Portuguese clothing is regularly portrayed on these ivories holding ambiguous objects, which are interpreted variously as copper manillas, strings of coral beads, or lengths of manufactured cloth. These objects allude to the riches amassed in Benin by sixteenth-century Obas through commerce with the Europeans. According to David Omorogie of the Igbesanmwan, the two images of the foreign trader can also be interpreted as double representations of Oba Esigie himself, stressing his sponsorship of this foreign trade, his European clothing, and his skill in reading and writing Portuguese. The large barrel-shaped bead near the center of the row is a reference to wealth and status. The wearing of particular beads confers legitimate authority in Benin, and the use of locally manufactured and imported stone and glass beads is of great antiquity in Nigeria. This image is a second allusion to Esigie, commemorating his campaign to obtain a ritually essential bead from his elder brother—a bead that symbolized and confirmed the kingship.

Although this tusk was commissioned by an eighteenth-century Oba to commemorate his own father, its iconography honors a sixteenth-century predecessor. This may be explained by certain events in the seventeenth century, prior to Eresonyen’s reign. Although the kingdom had continued to expand after the 1500s, throughout the 1600s Benin’s direct trade in ivory with Europe declined. This period was characterized by an interregnum in which the kingship rotated among branches of the royal family dominated by a coalition of powerful chiefs. At the end of the seventeenth century there was a long and bitter civil war as an ambitious and energetic Oba, who is identified today as Eresonyen’s grandfather, Ewuake, struggled to wrest power from the king-making chiefs. Oba Ewuake (c. 1690–1713) endeavored to reestablish the right of hereditary royal descent from father to son that the sixteenth-century Obas had enjoyed. He also became strong enough to exert some control over the Niger Delta and its river ports. In 1715 an agreement was signed granting the Dutch exclusive rights to Benin ivory in exchange for the Dutch promise not to buy ivory from any other kingdom in the Niger Delta. The Oba who made this agreement was probably Ewuake’s son Akenuzua I (c. 1713–35).26

Both Akenuzua I and his son Eresonyen maintained strong ties with Dutch traders. The mutually advantageous ivory monopoly created a long period of great prosperity, which Eresonyen (and probably Akenuzua I before him) sought to compare to Esigie’s illustrious reign. The iconography on the bronzes that honor these two rulers suggests that they based their reclamation right to hereditary rule on either literal or symbolic descent from Benin’s sixteenth-century dynasty of warrior kings. The foreign-figure motif carved on the bottom row of the altar tusks from this period suggests emulation of Esigie.

One of the foreign figures on the illustrated tusk (see Fig. 7) is accompanied by a crocodile head, the emblem of Benin’s royal guild of traders, who served as intermediaries between the Benia and the Europeans.27 The crocodile (agbaka) is conceptualized as the escort of Olokun, the god of wealth, beauty, fertility, and the sea. In Benin belief European ships of Esigie’s era laden with luxury goods sailed over Olokun’s waters, which separate erinrinwin, the world of spirits, from agbon, the world of mortals. Crocodiles, as guardians of Olokun’s undersea realm, escorted the foreign ships from the coast through the delta rivers to Ughoton, the port of Benin. The Portuguese themselves were considered liminal beings, moving freely across the boundaries between agbon and erinrinwin to bring coral and other luxuries to the Oba. Stereotypical Portuguese heads with round hats, shoulder-length hair and short beards are ubiquitous in Benin art: they radiate from the headress of Idia, the mother of Esigie, on a sixteenth-century ivory pendant,28 they hang as apotropaic waist ornaments on the Oba’s regalia in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century brass plaques,29 they appear in the corners of these plaques,30 and they are woven into the designs on ceremonial textiles.31 In Benin belief, one who displays the head of a person or animal becomes the recipient of its spiritual energies. The foreign-trader motif in Portuguese clothing thus has supernatural as well as historical associations.

Another religious and political component to the trader motif on these early tusks may be inferred from the placement of the two foreign figures carved on the bottom row on either side of a cross-wearing figure that appears often in ivory and in bronze.32 The identity of this figure, who holds a round-headed staff with a spirally decorated shaft and an L-shaped metalworker’s hammer, has been a subject of controversy among Benin scholars, and the discussion presented here is partly based on the motif’s interpretation by Oba Akenuzua II (1933–78).33 Traditionally, two types of court functionaries wear the cross: the Ohensa priests, who worship the High God Osanobua, identified in Benin with the Christian God introduced to Esigie and other Benin converts by Portuguese missionaries;34 and the Ewu, a group of officials established by Esigie to conduct daily palace ceremonies—in which the cross is stressed—honoring the accepted origin of his dynasty in the divine kings of ancient Ile Ife, who descended from the Yoruba hero-deity Oduduwa.35

This link to the prestigious dynasty of Oduduwa may be reflected in European documents that associate the cross with homage to an overlord in Nigeria. A sixteenth-century Portuguese account, written about the time of Esigie’s reign, described a “powerful monarch” who confirmed each new Oba of Benin. To signify his approval of the coronation, this monarch sent the Oba a staff, headpiece of shining brass, and “a cross, likewise of brass, to be worn around the neck, a holy and religious emblem.”36 Today the cross-wearing Ewu still serve the shrine of Esigie in the palace, one of about eighteen palace shrines that each Benin chief honors at his installa-
terranan coral beads and a number of spiritually charged red-bronze vessels, called *iru*, from Olokun’s undersea palace. According to R. E. Bradbury, the *Emuru* “carry bronze vessels which contain certain protective substances. They are very old [and] are also associated with the *Ebo n’ Edo* shrine.”44 When Oba Ewuare found these bronze vessels in Olokun’s court, he heard voices within them respond with ritual affirmations during invocations. Seizing the vessels he brought them to his own palace, where the spirits within them presided over this state altar.45 After Ewuare’s death, the next Oba broke the bronze vessels in an effort to find the source of the voices, whereupon the spirits departed. New bronze vessels were cast, and priests were instructed to use ventriloquism to simulate the voices during ceremonies.46

Documentary evidence for the antiquity of belief in mystical vessels that speak can be found in a Dutch seventeenth-century description of Benin religious practices.47 Since the *Emuru* officials serve at the *Ebo n’ Edo* shrine to the gods Uwen and Ora, who accompanied the Yoruba prince Oramiyan when he founded Esigie’s dynasty,48 their appearance on the tusk is an additional reference to origins of the Oba’s dynastic authority as well as to the spiritual resources at his command.

The row of motifs is completed on the far right and left by images of *ekpelobo*, the pouncing leopard, one of many symbols of the Oba, who is praised as *Ekpe n’ Owa*, Leopard of the House, in contrast to *Ekpe n’ Oba*, the Leopard of the Forest.49 As with all Benin motifs, the leopard symbol is multifaceted, richly entwined with associations derived from herbalism, divination, folklore, word play, song texts, rhythms, dance, mime, and ritual.

The motif of the foreign trader then emphasizes the history, wealth, military might, dynastic authority, and access to power of the Obas of Benin, with particular references to Esigie.

My studies indicate that there is one other set of royal eighteenth-century tusks, and that two sets were carved early in the nineteenth century. On these ivories the foreign-trader motif remains constant. Its references apparently did not change very much on the tusks commissioned by Eresonyen’s immediate heirs.

The Trader Motif on the Early-Nineteenth-Century Tusks

Benin traditions hold that many of the palace treasures were destroyed by fire in a civil war between two royal claimants to the throne, Osemwende and his older brother Ogbebo,50 and a palace conflagration about 1816 is confirmed by European accounts.51 A number of factors make it difficult to assign a date to the tusks that are next in the stylistic and iconographic sequence. They may have been commissioned before or after this upheaval, and it is not known how many eighteenth-century tusks perished in the fire. Nevertheless, the eleven tusks in this set display stylistic distinctions and new motifs that could result from a break in palace traditions. Because of this and because of other iconographic characteristics, I have placed them after 1816.

Although these nineteenth-century tusks, too, make numerous allusions to Esigie and depict figures wearing European clothing of the sixteenth century (Fig. 8), they differ in significant ways from those of the eighteenth century. The motif of the foreign trader is still represented with manillas, cloth, or strings of beads, but the variety of armed and active Portuguese that appeared on the earlier carvings has been condensed into a single stereotyped musketeer with a profile face (Fig. 9).

Between the cross-wearing *Ewuwa* and the profile musketeer there is a small ambiguous motif often interpreted as a kola nut, a symbol of the civilizing amenities of Benin’s urban culture. Joseph Nevadomsky has suggested that the kola, an uncooked wild fruit essential to every Benin ceremonial occasion, mediates between the world of the untamed forest and the cultivated world of the court.52 The kola is therefore as seminal as the foreigner who crosses the boundaries between two worlds in his ships. To the right and left of the row, the Oba as the leopard, *ekpelobo*, pounces on a “bush animal,” representing an enemy, a potential danger to the kingdom, or anyone ignorant of proper civilized behavior.53 In this context both motifs emphasize the contrast between those with the right to rule and those who are destined for subjugation. If these tusks were commissioned soon after Osemwende’s victory over a coalition of chiefs backing Ogbede in the civil war, the musketeer may refer to the *Iwoki*, armed Portuguese who helped Esigie subdue a similar coalition early in his reign.54 The profile musketeer and the *ekpelobo* with the bush animal are both introduced for the first time on this set of ivories.

On the other hand, the stylized elephant’s head with the trunk ending in a human fist brandishing a long leaf is an established motif that appears in every group of tusks. It is common in the earliest eighteenth-century examples and continues throughout the nine-
teenth and twentieth centuries. It is an emblem of strength, and my research suggests that in this form it refers to Akenzua I and his immediate heirs. In traditional Benin a man of accomplishment will worship his own head in the ceremony of Igbe and will maintain a ikengobo shrine honoring his own right hand in the Ihekun ceremony. The head is believed to be the residence of thought and character; the hand is the source of high rank, which is based primarily on the possession of property. The trunk-hand motif is an emblem that appears sporadically on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century bronzes and then is revived in the eighteenth century to honor Akenzua I (c. 1713-35), the richest of Benin’s kings. Akenzua I was also the first ruler to sacrifice an elephant to his own hand. In Benin, the traditional method of sacrifice is to cut off the head of the offering. The trunk-hand motif combines the head of the most powerful of the animals with a hand that grasps with enormous strength, signifying thereby the acquisition of great wealth for the kingdom. Of ancient origin, the trunk-hand motif is also a reference to the early warrior kings and, thus, despite new motifs and stylistic changes, the iconography of these early-nineteenth-century tusks still glorifies Esigie and his era.

The Foreign Trader on the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Tusks

By the middle of the 1800s when the sixth group of extant tusks was commissioned, Benin’s economic position had deteriorated. During Gomina’s reign (1816–c. 1851), the British had become increasingly militant towards Benin’s long-established commerce in slaves, which contributed heavily to the European profit margin, even in the ivory trade. By 1825, with British naval squadrons patrolling the coastal waters and seizing French and Portuguese slave ships, these nations found it increasingly difficult to continue commercial ties of any kind with Benin. When cloth and palm oil finally replaced slaves as a cargo, production of the oil was controlled by the Isekiiki Kingdom, one of the small Niger delta states. As Benin’s relations with the Europeans in the coastal ports became strained and the Oba’s dominance over neighboring kingdoms weakened, he countered erosion of his economic hegemony by emphasizing the danger of challenging his supernatural authority. Benin became notorious for the power of its “fetish,” and the Oba’s curse was believed to have killed a disrespectful Itsikiri king and all of his successors.

On earlier tusks the foreign trader motif could appear in a number of different positions on the tusk surface; but in the mid-nineteenth century its location is limited to the bottom row (Fig. 10). On these tusks ritualistic references predominate, and other kings are commemorated more often than is Esigie. Moreover, the foreign-trader motif has become decidedly ambiguous. First, the objects in the figure’s hands are no longer clearly defined, having become extensions of a sash attached to his waist. As usual, this motif appears on either side of the cross-wearing Ewua official. Next to the trader on the left, replacing the crocodile-head emblem of the eighteenth-century tusks (reminiscent of Benin’s traders’ guild), is the horned head of a sacrificial animal, a motif based on eighteenth-century brass altarpieces that would have been palace antiques in the 1850s. Since the sacrificial head suggests ceremonial activity rather than foreign commerce, the ambiguity of Benin motifs may have facilitated a shift in the identity of the trader image on these tusks. Carvers in present-day Benin interpreted this image as a priest or a trader, depending on the context. The foreign-trader motif has acquired a more complex meaning.

In my discussion of eighteenth-century ivories, I suggested that the central cross-wearing figure on the bottom row could represent either an Ewua palace official or Ohensa, priest of the High God Osanobua. On these mid-nineteenth-century tusks, however, it is the trader motif that seems to have absorbed the identity of the Ohensa. This priest presides at shrines that in Benin tradition are on the sites of the Christian churches founded by sixteenth-century Portuguese missionaries. Ohensa is considered the spiritual descendent of the first converts, and in present-day carving Ohensa, like Esigie, can be portrayed in sixteenth-century European clothing. Since tradition claims that Esigie was baptized, the motif also celebrates Esigie himself as an Ohensa, priest of Osanobua. The power of his Christian knowledge is stressed, rather than his other foreign associations. Nevertheless, crocodiles appear with this figure on some of the mid-nineteenth-century tusks, indicating that the ambiguous trader-Ohensa motif is still associated to some extent with sea-going foreign commerce.

After the middle of the nineteenth century the British seized control of the coastal trade. Ignoring Benin, they dealt almost exclusively with Benin’s former tributary states. British power in the area slowly increased, so that in 1885, the Berlin Conference recognized a British protectorate over the Niger River regions, which were formerly Benin’s sphere of influence. The following year the British claimed sovereignty over the Yoruba states to the north and west of Benin City. By the end of the 1880s the Oba was responding to the steady decline of his political influence with a “terrible elaboration of supernatural powers.” In earlier centuries, European visitors to Benin had occasionally mentioned human sacrifices offered on major ceremonial occasions. In nineteenth-century accounts, however, there are horrified descriptions of decomposing corpses hung in trees and strewn along the paths, and of sacrifices offered daily to sweeten the land.
Fig. 10 Schematic drawing, generated by computer number, of the bottom row of motifs on tusks probably commissioned in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Tusks Commissioned by Oba Ovonramwen
The late-nineteenth-century altar tusks of Oba Ovonramwen (1888–97) can be identified with certainty through the similarity of their motif choice to early-twentieth-century examples. Ovonramwen commissioned many beautifully carved tusks, some of which were admired by English officials who journeyed to Benin City to meet the newly crowned Oba. Among the motifs on Ovonramwen’s tusks is a frontal figure in sixteenth-century European clothing, with his arms crossed over his chest (Fig. 11). A similar figure with arms crossed in a nonchalant pose (Fig. 12) appeared on the earliest eighteenth-century tusks and then dropped out of use. Ovonramwen’s carvers evidently copied the motif from these or similar earlier works, but they made curious changes. On these later tusks the figure has slanted eyes and a circular spot in the center of the forehead. He stands in the bottom-row position to the left of the central cross-wearing Ewua official (Fig. 13). On the other side of the Ewua is the earlier foreign-trader type, but distinguished here by slanted eyes and a circular spot on the forehead. This particular trader image is consistently identified by carvers in present-day Benin as a priest, probably the Ohensa, whereas the figure with the crossed arms is identified as an Ovia priest. At the time that Ovonramwen’s tusks were carved, the village-based Ovia masquerade was regaining strength as a vehicle to honor patrilineal ancestors. Although it had been banned from the capital by Oba Eresonyen when he replaced it with Odudua rituals honoring the sacred foundations of the royal dynasty, the priests of this popular ancestral cult, which is very strong today, claim that the Ovia ceremonies were originally brought from their village of origin to the palace in the sixteenth century by Oba Esigie. Among the ceremonial objects used in Ovia performances is a carved wooden Ukhurhe rattle staff, which is placed on the altar when sacrifices are made. This staff, too, is carved with a human figure, masked here, whose arms are crossed over his chest in a ceremonial position (Fig. 14). Since secrecy is important in Ovia, ritual specialists could not discuss the staff or the arm position. But the circular spot on the forehead of the crossed-armed figure on late-nineteenth century tusks (see Fig. 13) is interpreted in present-day Benin as a spot of blood or of white kaolin applied during religious observances to enhance spiritual powers. Slanted eyes on carved figures have been explained by Ugbo Inneh of the Igbesanmwan as a convention denoting lowered eyelids.

Thus, on Ovonramwen’s late-nineteenth-century tusks the two figures in sixteenth-century clothing on the bottom row are no longer perceived as foreign (see Fig. 13). They are both interpreted now as priests, so that the row incorporates three major sources of the Oba’s ostensibly overwhelming supernatural power. On the left, the Ovia cult is represented by Esigie’s Ovia priest (or Esigie himself as the priest of Ovia), with his arms crossed over his chest. In the center, Esigie’s cross-wearing Ewua official represents the sacred Yoruba origins of the Oba’s dynasty and also the Ebo n’Edo gods Uwen and Ora, whose high priests Osa and Osuan instigated human sacrifices whenever there was a need to strengthen the land. On the right, Esigie’s Ohensa priest alludes to Benin’s post-Christian shrines of the High God Osanobua. The trader identity of the foreign-figure motif has been subordinated to a display of spiritually sanctioned power over life and death, derived from multiple supernatural sources.

The Early-Twentieth-Century Tusks
Seventeen years after the British punitive expedition of 1897 sacked Benin City, destroyed the palace, and exiled Ovonramwen, the British colonial government inaugurated a policy of indirect rule by placing Ovonramwen’s son on the throne as Oba Eweka II. Eweka (1914–33) rebuilt the palace, and about 1921 commissioned a small group of altar tusks to honor his father. His son, Akenzua II, later commissioned similar tusks from the same carvers for additional ancestral palace altars. On these twentieth-century carvings the transition from foreign trader to Benin priest is completely effected.

The modern version of the foreign-trader motif (Fig. 15) still stands next to the cross-wearing Ewua official on the bottom row of the tusk. On these twentieth-century tusks, however, the figure wears trousers rather than skirt and hose and is never identified as foreign by...
figure is identified as the Ohensa priest. Above him the Ovia priest, also in troused sixteenth-century "medicinal" clothing, crosses his arms over his chest.76

The official at the extreme left of the bottom row is identified by the carvers as Osuan, High Priest of Uwen. Depicted in his former role as director of human sacrifice for the spiritual sustenance of the kingdom, he is accompanied by images of magic and secrecy, his ritual implements hidden in a box at his side.77 Still another palace priest directs a sacrifice in the row above.78 While attendants hold the severed head and decapitated body, small wriggling and looped serpents suggest mysterious forces unleashed by the sudden departure of the victim's spirit, and Akenzua I's dynastic emblem of the elephant's trunk ending in a grasping human hand proclaims that the Oba's power over life and death is supreme.

The ambiguity of Benin iconography has facilitated a transformation of meaning as the foreign-trader motif has been adapted to changing events and experiences over a two-hundred-year period. In the early twentieth century, as the Benin court struggled to re-establish royal prestige after the humiliation of foreign conquest, figures of foreign allies had no further relevance to cultural pride. In their place, the Igbesanmwan carved human sacrifices that awakened memories of nineteenth-century religious practices when Benin City was widely feared. On the earliest eighteenth-century tusks the carvers cele-

Benin ritual specialists. His peculiar garment (Fig. 16) displays textured surfaces that were first carved by sixteenth-century craftsmen to depict patterned or quilted foreign fabrics. In present-day carvings these textures are used to represent the special "medicinal" clothing worn by herbalists and diviners, covered with packets and charms containing protective substances.74 Since herbalists and diviners wear wrapped clothing more often than trousers and shirts,75 and the modern Ohensa wears a white robe based on Catholic ecclesiastical garb, this representation is symbolic rather than literal. Nevertheless, the
brated the conquests of a Europeanized Oba who encouraged Portuguese visitors and exploited the benefits of foreign trade. In the reduced circumstances of the early twentieth century these references gave way to the theme of power restored by supernatural means.

Throughout the centuries, ritual specialists at the Benin court have pragmatically adjusted their versions of the past while proclaiming the ideal of eternally fixed tradition. Like the official histories of literate nations, the oral historical accounts of such centralized urban socie-

ties as Benin telescope and shift. Similar processes can be observed in the use of iconography. That the interpretation of carved motifs and the motifs themselves have changed gradually in the course of two hundred years demonstrates that the iconography of an object is subject to creative mutation. In this way the symbols used by the Igbesanmwan have accumulated paradoxical, multifaceted layers of meaning that enhance their effectiveness as transmitters of Benin’s cultural values.

Fig. 16 The Ohensa priest motif on the bottom row and the Ovia priest motif on the second row of a tusk commissioned between 1921 and 1934 by Oba Eweka II or Oba Akenzua II, height of upper figure approximately 13 cm. Formerly in the Oba’s palace in Benin; present location unknown.

Notes


3. The research discussed here was in preparation for my doctoral dissertation, “The Iconography of Carved Altar Tusks from Benin, Nigeria,” presented to the Department of Art History at U.C.L.A. in 1984. The project would not have been possible without the generosity of His Highness Oba Erediauwa of Benin and of the craftsmen of his court, particularly Chief Ohanbanmu Ineh and Mr. David Omorogie of the Igbesanmwan and the late Chief Ihama of Iguneromwun. I have been assisted by many other ritual specialists, only a few of whom can be mentioned here: Chief Ihama of Ihogbe, Chief Obamwonyi of Ogbeleka, Chief Ohaghisie Aiyebobepen (The Esama of Iwebo), and Chief Osuan (High Priest of Uwen). Their aid in clarifying Benin customs is very much appreciated. I am also grateful for the Fulbright Dissertation Research Grant that supported my work in Benin in 1981–82. A 1980 Dickson History of Art Travel Grant from U.C.L.A. enabled me to photograph and chart the ivories in Europe, and I want to thank Philip Dark for his guidance in locating each tusk in present collections. The research owes a great deal to my assistant Gregory Airehnenbua, and to Michael Roland, a computer specialist. I owe particular gratitude to Paula Ben-Amos for valuable advice and assistance in the field, and to Arnold Rubin for unfailing inspiration and professional counsel. My husband, Rupert Blackmun, has also been a valued participant in this study.

4. Since 1979 I have been photographing and cataloguing the motifs on these carved ancestral ivories. The study has involved numbering each motif, charting the surface of each tusk to determine motif placement, recording the style characteristics, and noting the dimensions and condition of the ivory. The tusks were then sorted by computer into twelve sets, each reflecting a different workshop. Based upon iconographical studies in Benin City, it appears that seven or eight of these tusk sets were once on royal patrilineal ancestral altars, and their chronology is being prepared for publication.


10 The sources of the designs on Benin-Portuguese ivories are discussed by Curnow (cited n.8), Vol. I, pp. 250–58; and by Donna K. Abbass, “European Hats Appearing in Benin Art” (M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, 1972).


13 Ryder (cited n.6), pp. 272–94.


15 Charles H. Read and O. M. Dalton, *Antiquities from the City of Benin*, London, 1899; Roth (cited n.14); Luschan (cited n. 9).

16 According to Chief Ohanbanmu Inneh and Mr. Egbe Obawye of the Igesanmwan (personal communication, April 1982), their guild was established by seven craftsmen who were brought from the spirit world, erinnin, by the first ruler of the Ojigbo, who preceded the Yoruba dynasty of the sixteenth-century kings. The greater antiquity of the Igesanmwan over other craft guilds is acknowledged at the court.


19 Ohanbanmu Inneh (cited n. 16) and David Omorogie of the Igesanmwan, personal communication, October 1981.

20 These motifs include the ahiammenowo bird of prophecy, the equestrian figure in European costume, the Maltese cross, the cross-wearing Portuguese missionary, the prince holding the hand of the Portuguese missionary, the cross-wearing Ohensia priest of the High God, the L-shaped ironworkers’ hammer, the cross-wearing Ewua official who holds this hammer, the priest of the Ovia cult, armed Portuguese soldiers, and the foreign-trader motif. Also see: Barbara W. Blackman, “Remembering the Warrior Kings,” and inidem, “Reading a Royal Altar Tusk,” *The Art of Power: The Power of Art*, ed. Paula Ben-Amos and Arnold Rubin, Los Angeles, 1983, pp. 49–50, and 59–70.

21 Ryder (cited n. 6), pp. 40–50.


23 These are Iwebo, Ibiwe, and Iwegue, whose functions are explained by Bradley (cited n. 7), pp. 60–67.


26 Ryder (cited n. 6), p. 140.


28 Ibid., p. 80, fig. 86.

29 Read and Dalton (cited n. 15), Pl. XVI.

30 Ibid.

31 Ben-Amos (cited n. 27), fig. 9.

32 The cross-wearing official appears on rectangular brass plaques in Luschan (cited n. 9), fig. 155, Pls. 22, 84, and 85, and on D-shaped brass plaques in Luschan, figs. 428 and 429. Freestanding brass figures of the cross-wearing official are illustrated in Luschan, figs. 433 and 434, and large freestanding ivory figures are illustrated in Luschan, fig. 803c, and in Philip J. C. Dark, *Introduction to the Art of Benin*, Oxford, 1973, Pl. 6, fig. 9.


34 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 264.


36 de Barros (cited n. 5), p. 126.


38 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 176–77; Ben-Amos, “Royal Art” (cited n. 22), p. 75.

39 Ben-Amos (cited n. 22), 1984, pp. 76–78.

40 Chief Orhue, member of the Enitla of Osa and Osuan, personal communication, May 1982.

41 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 96.


44 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 96.

45 Ibid., BS 96, and BS 113.

46 Ibid., BS 113, and BS 220a.


48 Osuan (cited n. 42), personal communication, December 1981. Some of the many traditions about Uwen and Ora and their twin priests Osa and Osuan are discussed in Blackmun (cited n. 3), pp. 265–71.

50 Jacob Egharevba, A Short History of Benin, Ibadan, 1968 (reprinted from 1934), p. 43; Bradbury (cited n. 7), pp. 21, 25.


53 Ben-Amos (cited n. 49), p. 244.

54 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 84.

55 Bradbury (cited n. 7), p. 272.

56 Ben-Amos, “Royal Art” (cited n. 22), p. 70.

57 Ryder (cited n. 6), pp. 232–47.

58 These altarpieces are discussed in Vogel (cited n. 22); and Ben-Amos, “Who is the Man in the Bowler Hat”; and idem, “Royal Art” (both cited n. 22).

59 Omorogie (cited n. 19), pc. November 1981; Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 264.

60 Ryder (cited n. 6), p. 257.

61 Ibid., pp. 249–50.


63 Puch (cited n. 62).

64 See: Luschan (cited n. 9), p. 467; and P. Meinilöf Kästers, “Die Figurlichen Darstellungen auf den Beninbahnen des Linden-Museums, Stuttgart,” Jahresbericht des Württembergischen Vereins für Handelsgeographie Stuttgart, 50 (1932), p. 118. Both authors considered and rejected the idea that the slant-eyed foreign figures on the tuskss represent Asians.


67 Chief Ihama of Ihogbe, personal communication, December 1981.

68 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 98.4, 98.6.

69 Bradbury (cited n. 7), p. 192.


71 Omorogie (cited n. 19), personal communication, May 12, 1982.

72 Bradbury (cited n. 33), BS 110.

73 Akpata (cited n. 18).

74 Omorogie (cited n. 19), personal communication, March 20, 1982.

75 See: Joseph Nevadomsky, “Kingship Succession Rituals in Benin 3: The Coronation of the Oba,” African Arts (May 1984), p. 49, Fig. 2.

76 Omorogie (cited n. 19), personal communication, May 12, 1982.

77 Osemwiegie (cited n. 24), personal communication, May, 1982.

78 Omoisigho Osaigede, of the Palace Omada carvers, personal communication, April 14, 1982.
