



Art of Africa

Learning Objective:

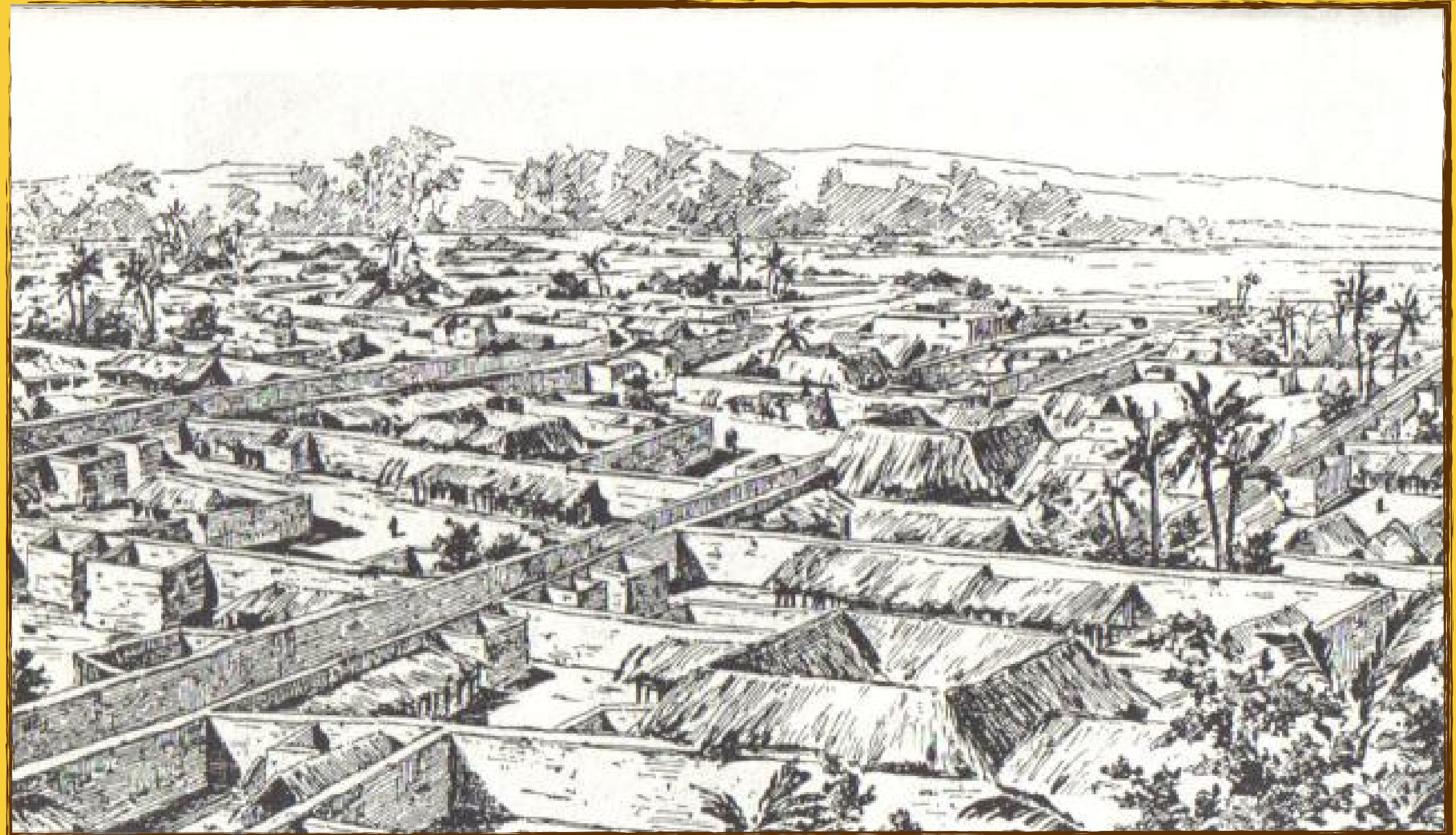
To create a piece of clay artwork inspired by the artwork of Benin.

**What do you already know
about the history of the
kingdom of Benin?**

**When did the kingdom
start and end?**

Where was it?

What was society like?



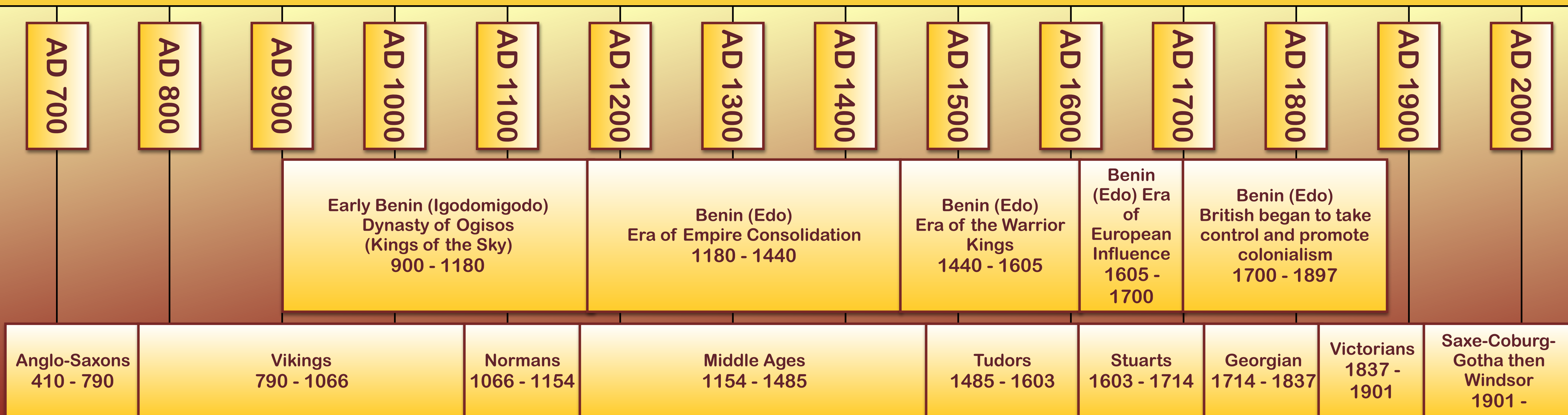
The kingdom of Benin

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Back

Next

The Benin empire existed from 900 AD to 1897 AD in what is now modern-day Nigeria in west Africa. The kingdom thrived off rich trade routes with other African countries as well as with Europeans who travelled to Africa on ships.



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Back

Next

The kingdom was run by a succession of Obas, which means 'king' in the Yoruba language.



The Oba was seen as semi-divine and was very powerful. Many Obas displayed their status by wearing intricate or precious materials as clothes or jewellery. They also kept specific special animals to show how powerful they were.



This plaque was made in the Benin kingdom.

Think, pair, share...

What was it made for?

What is it showing?

How was it made?

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Back

Next



This plaque is made from brass (which could only be created from precious imported copper) to glorify the Oba's status and achievements. It would be used to decorate the royal palace.

The Oba stands in the centre, more decorated and larger than the others on the plaque. He stands between two warriors armed with shields and spears to show his power.

You can also see other palace workers, priests and musicians behind him.

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Back

Next



Take a look at some other bronze plaques from Benin.

What do
you notice about
the people in the
plaques?

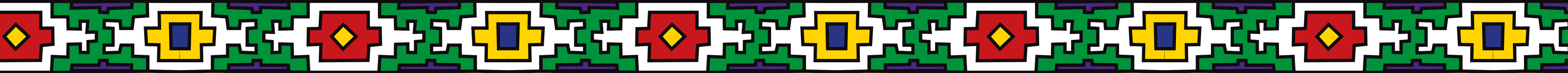
Do you think
the layout is
important?

What other
important features
can you see?

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Back

Next



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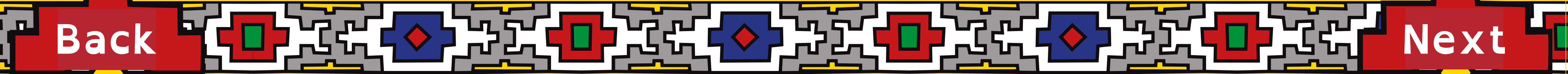


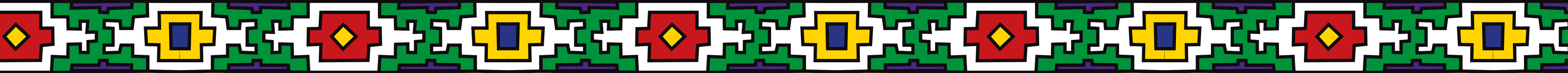
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Back

Next



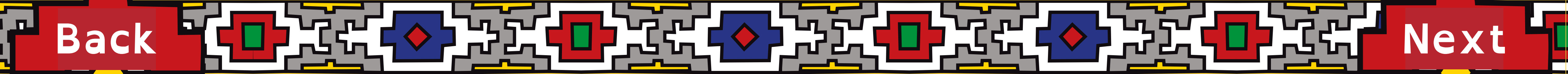


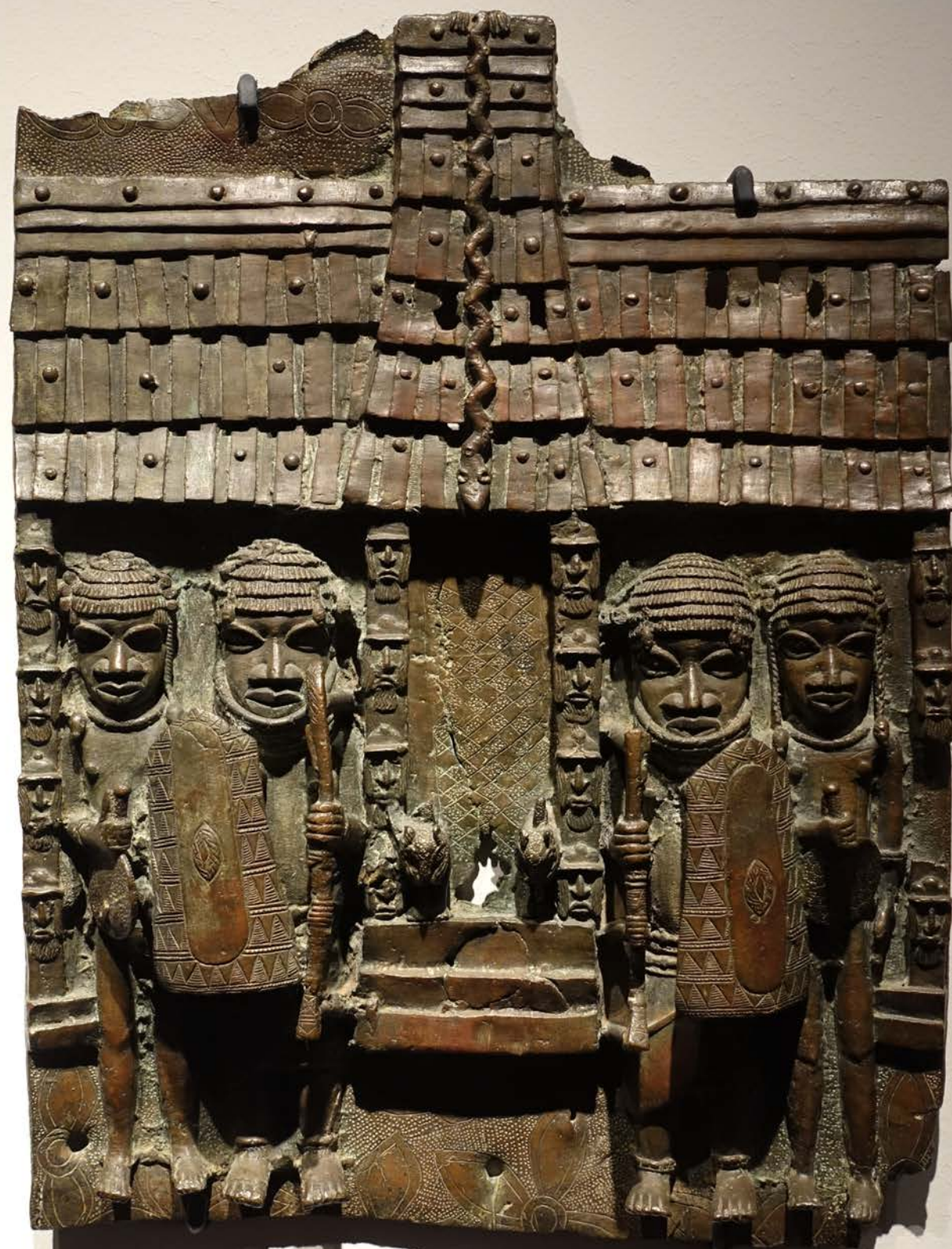
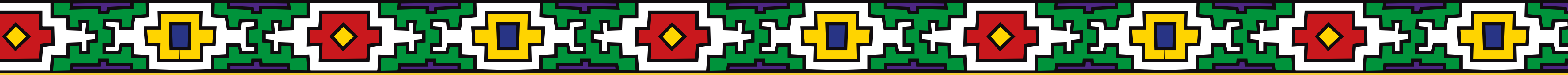
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Back

Next





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Back

Next

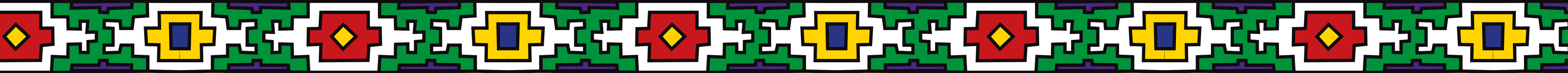
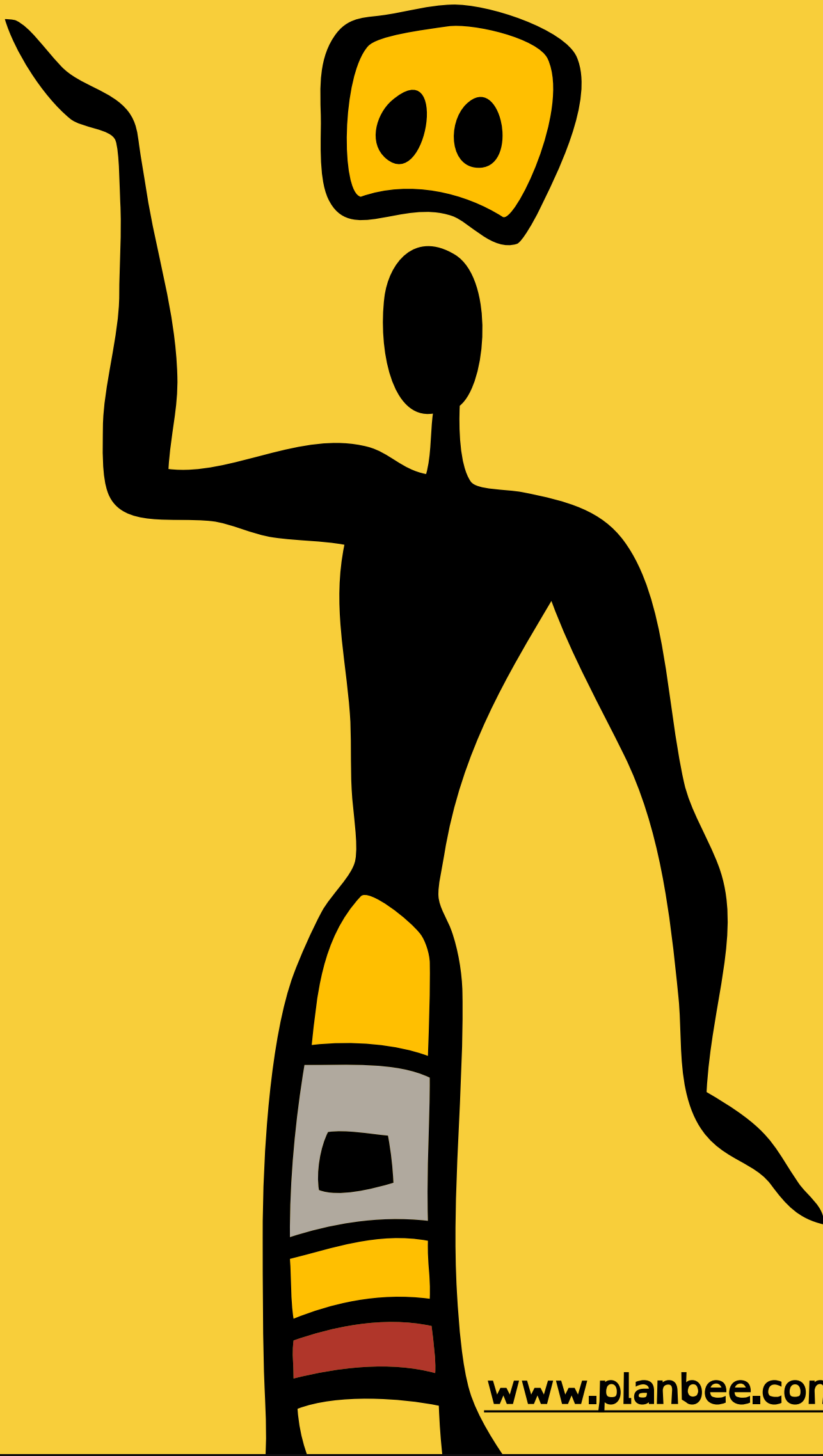


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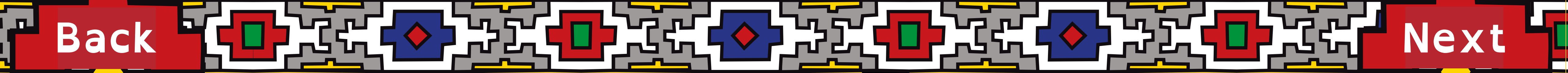


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Back

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The Oba is generally in the centre of the plaque carrying a weapon and is made to be bigger than the other people.

Why do you think that is?



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Back

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Did you spot the Europeans in this plaque? The craftsman of Benin would sometimes choose to show different events in their history.



These are probably Portuguese traders that arrived in Benin. They are shown with straight hair, helmets and guns.



Back

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Many pieces of Benin art also include animals. The Obas in these pieces both have mudfish belts and one is holding captured leopards.

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Back

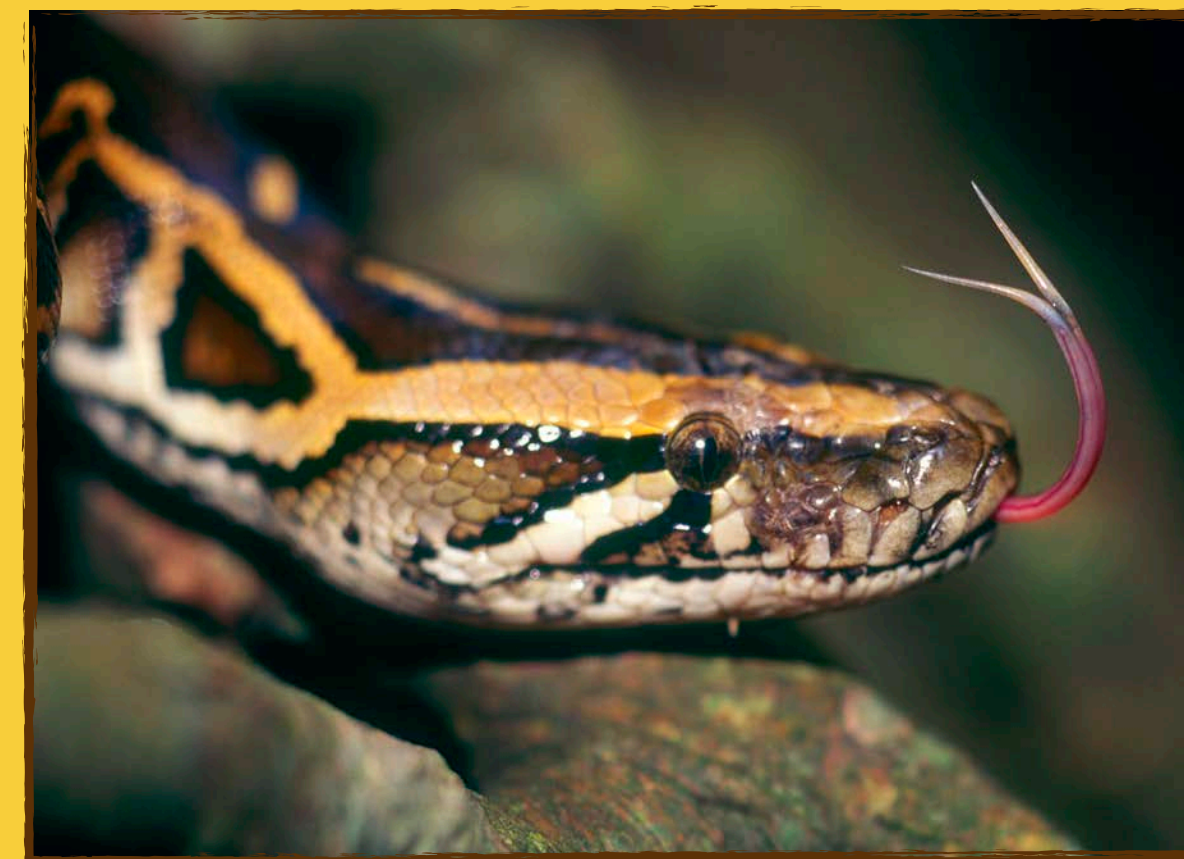
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These animals in particular are used to represent the Oba in different Benin artwork.

Why do you think these animals were chosen?



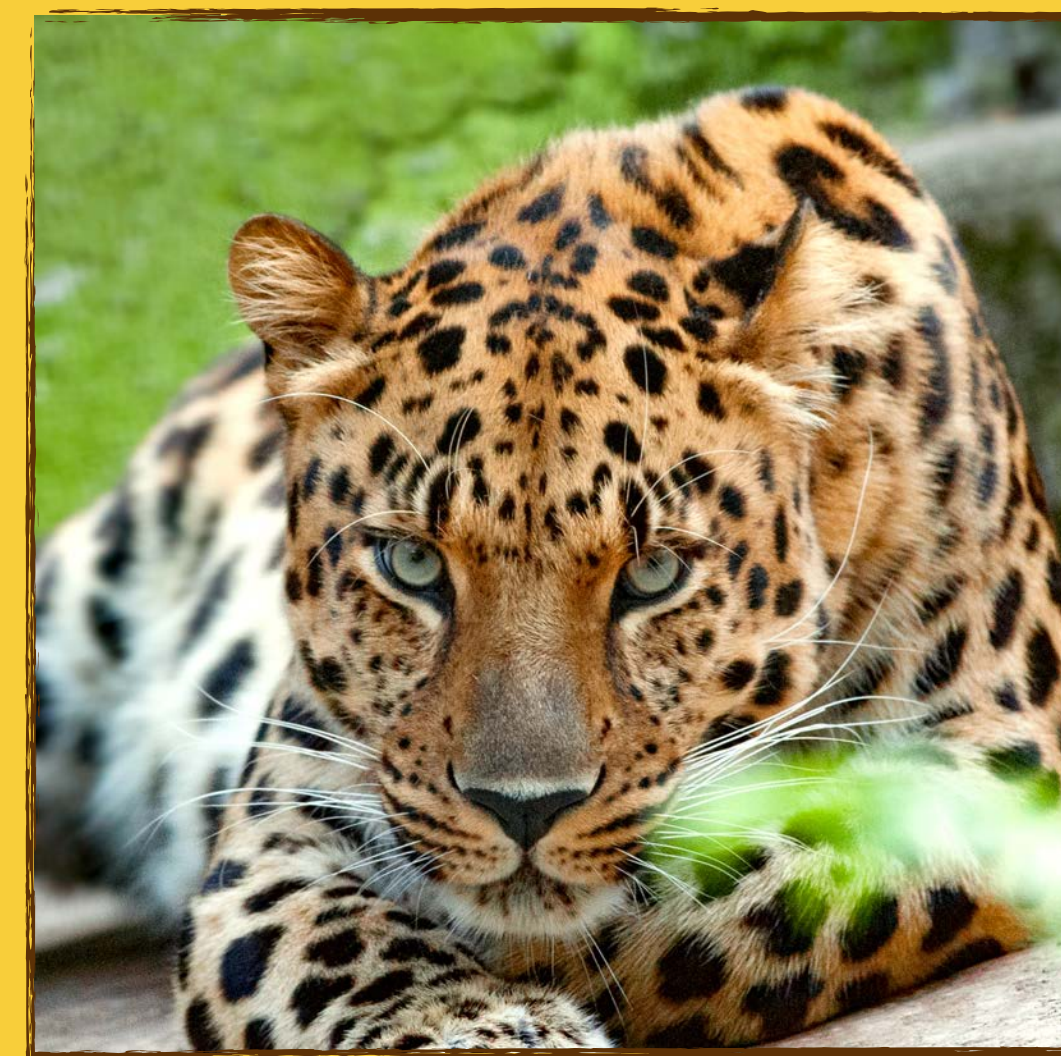
mudfish



python

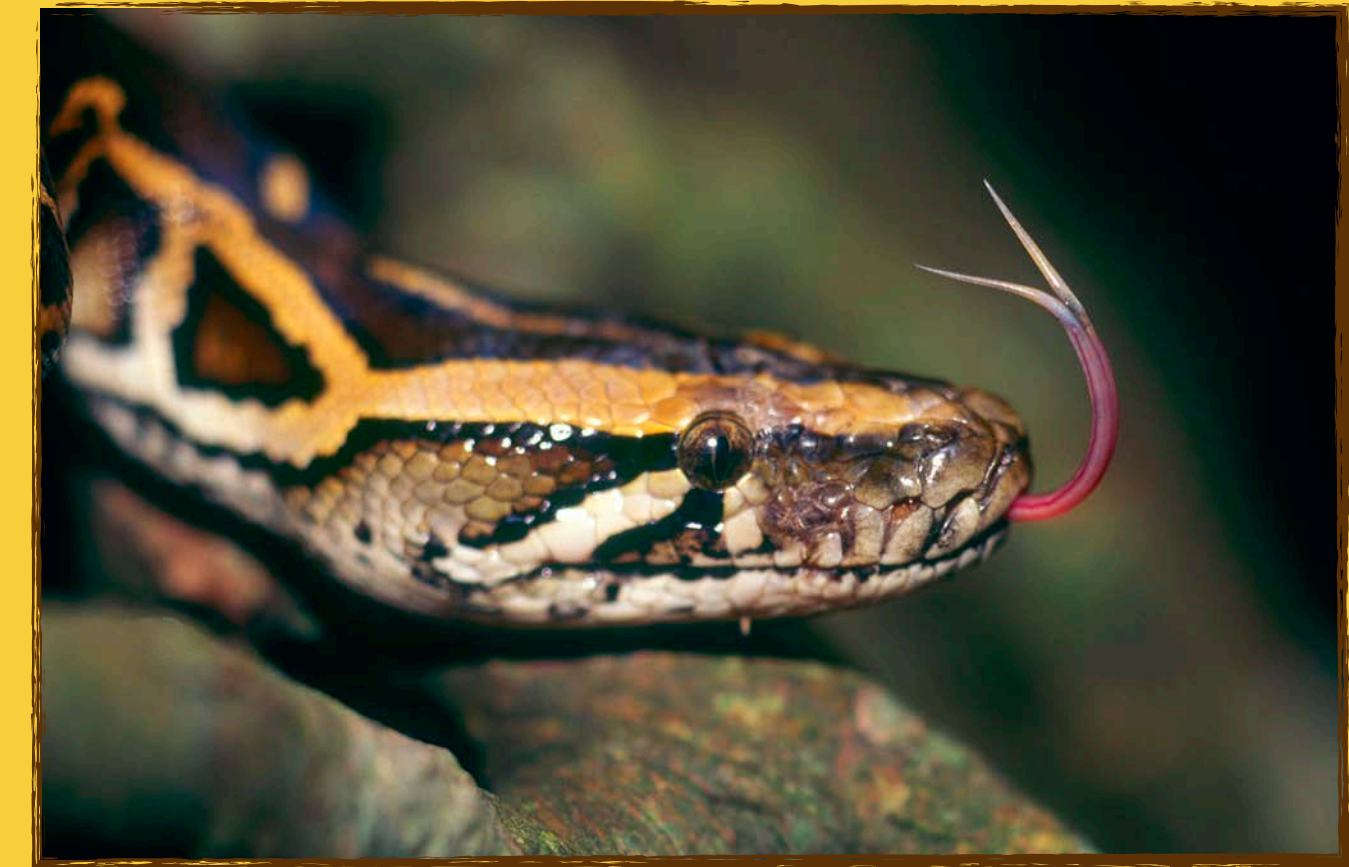


crocodile



leopard

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Mudfish can survive on land and in water. This represents the Oba's position between mortal man and the gods. They also represent the versatility that the Oba needs to lead.

Pythons symbolise the power of nature and are the punishers of wrong-doing, as the Oba needs to be in his role as leader.

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Back

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Crocodiles are the policemen of the water. They are ferocious and have the power to take human life, as does the Oba as he can decide to sentence his subjects to death.

Leopards are seen as the kings of nature and symbols of royal power. An Oba's ability to capture and dominate the king of nature shows the Oba's own power.

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Back

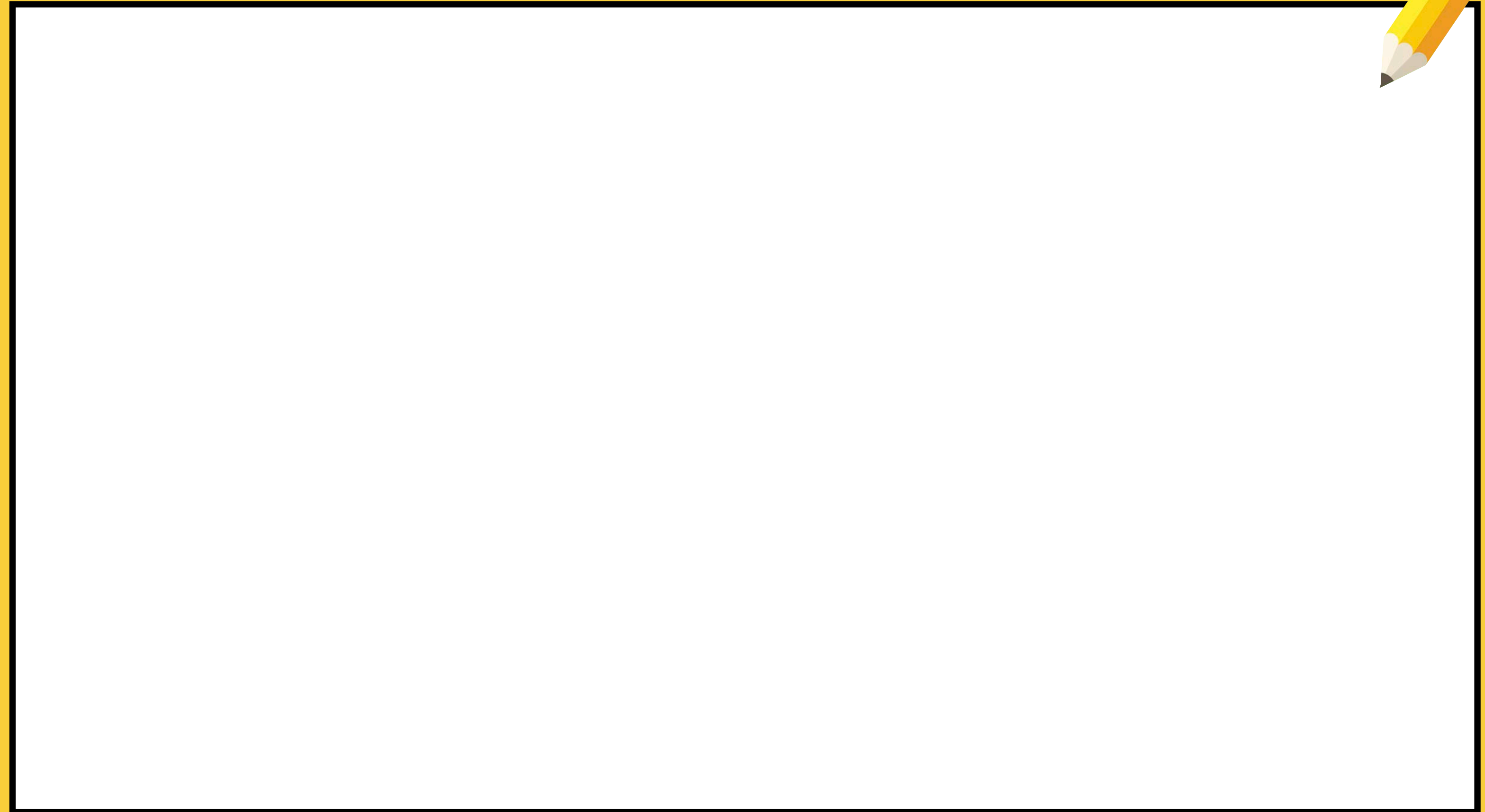
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Today you will be using clay to recreate some of the artwork of Benin.



Do you know of any techniques, tips or tricks for using clay already?



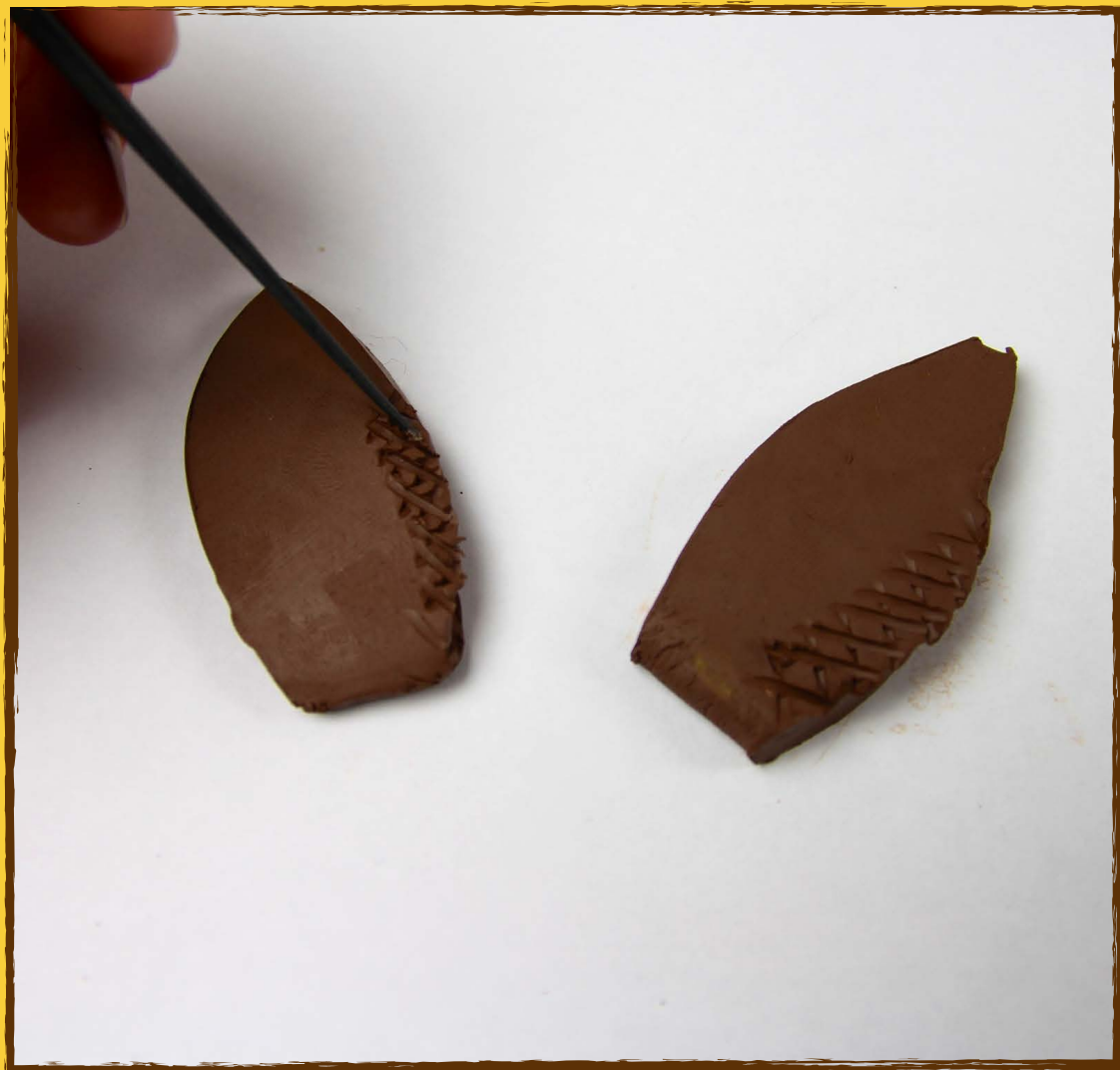
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Back

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When joining pieces of clay together it is important to remember the four Ss of clay work:

Score



Slip



Smoosh



Smooth



This will prevent the pieces from falling off as the clay dries.

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Back

Next

Score

You need to use a tool to score or scratch lines into the surface of the clay. This needs to be done on each part which will be stuck together. Try making little hashtag marks for the best result.

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Back

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Slip

Slip is used like glue to stick the two pieces together. Slip is made by mixing a small amount of clay with some water to create a paste. Apply slip to the scored areas of your clay.

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Back

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Smoosh

**Smoosh (or press)
your pieces
together, as if you
were gluing two
objects together.
Don't press too hard
or you'll alter the
shape of your clay
pieces.**

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Back

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Smooth

Smooth the join between the two pieces using a flat tool or your fingers. It helps to have a very small amount of water on your fingers to help smooth the clay.



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Plenary



What do these artefacts tell you about the kingdom of Benin?

What do you definitely know about Benin and Obas?

What could you speculate?

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