

Lesson 2: Art, Innovation, and Global Connections

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe the key features, achievements, and global impact of the Kingdom of Benin and Great Zimbabwe.
- Explain how trade, art, architecture, and diplomacy shaped these societies.
- Reflect on how Africa's global connections challenge stereotypes and shape identity today.

Key Vocabulary

- Legacy
- Diplomacy
- Architecture
- Trade networks
- Innovation
- Empire

Starter – What Makes a Civilisation “Advanced”? (10 mins)

Teacher Script:

“In our last lesson, we explored how African empires like Kush and Mali showed power and wisdom. But Africa's history isn't just about kings and gold, it's also about creativity, design, diplomacy, and connection.”

Activity:

- On the board, write: “What makes a civilisation advanced?”
- Students brainstorm answers (e.g. government, art, architecture, trade, technology, education).
- Introduce today's focus: “We'll explore two civilisations that prove Africa led the way in many of these areas; the Kingdom of Benin and Great Zimbabwe.”

Teacher Input – The Kingdom of Benin: Art and Power (15 mins)

Key Storytelling Points:

- **Time Period:** c. 1200 – 1897 CE
- **Location:** Modern southern Nigeria.
- **Government:** Ruled by the *Oba* (king) and an organised council. Highly structured political system.
- **Benin City:** Famous for its **urban planning**, wide streets, palaces, temples, and **giant defensive walls** stretching for thousands of kilometres.

- **Art and Culture:**
 - Created the world-renowned **Benin Bronzes**, intricate brass, bronze, and ivory sculptures depicting kings, warriors, animals, and historical events.
 - Used art to record history and express power and belief.
- **Trade and Diplomacy:**
 - Benin traded ivory, pepper, and artworks with **Portugal and other European nations** from the 1400s onward.
 - Maintained diplomatic relationships as equals, European visitors described Benin City as more advanced than many European capitals.
- **Colonial Impact:**
 - In 1897, the British invaded, exiled the Oba, and looted thousands of artworks, many now in museums.

Discussion Questions:

- “What do the Benin Bronzes tell us about the kingdom’s creativity and skill?”
- “How does Benin challenge stereotypes about Africa before colonialism?”

Key Message: Benin shows us that Africa was a centre of art, culture, and diplomacy producing work that still amazes the world today.

Teacher Input – Great Zimbabwe: Stone and Trade (15 mins)

Key Storytelling Points:

- **Time Period:** c. 1100 – 1500 CE
- **Location:** Modern Zimbabwe.
- **Architecture:**
 - Built entirely from **stone without mortar**, evidence of advanced engineering.
 - The **Great Enclosure**, massive stone walls up to 11m high, still stands today.
- **Trade and Global Links:**
 - Controlled **gold trade routes** connecting Africa’s interior to the Swahili coast.
 - Traded with **Arabia, Persia, India, and China**, archaeologists found foreign goods like porcelain, glass, and coins.
- **Society:**
 - Ruled by a powerful king (*Mambo*) who controlled trade and spiritual life.
 - Complex society with farmers, metalworkers, traders, and religious leaders.
- **Legacy:**
 - Early European explorers refused to believe Africans built it but archaeology has proven otherwise.
 - Modern Zimbabwe takes its name from this powerful city (*dzimba dza mabwe* – “houses of stone”).

Discussion Questions:

- “What do Great Zimbabwe’s buildings tell us about their skills and technology?”
- “Why is it important that we now know Africans built this city?”

Key Message: Great Zimbabwe was not isolated, it was globally connected, technologically advanced, and central to global trade networks centuries before colonisation.

Group Activity – Art, Architecture, and Influence (15 mins)

Instructions:

- Split the class into small groups.
- Half receive a short **Benin** fact sheet; half receive a **Great Zimbabwe** fact sheet.
- Each group discusses and answers:
 1. What achievements made this civilisation advanced?
 2. How did it connect with the wider world?
 3. What values or qualities does its legacy show?
- Each group presents a short summary to the class (1–2 mins each).

Extension/Challenge: Ask groups to compare Benin and Great Zimbabwe, which achievements are most impressive and why?

Reflection & Plenary – *Africa in the World* (5–10 mins)

Whole-Class Discussion:

- “What surprised you most about Benin or Great Zimbabwe?”
- “How do these stories challenge what people often think about Africa’s past?”
- “What lessons can we take from their creativity and innovation?”

Written Reflection (Exit Ticket):

“One achievement from Benin or Great Zimbabwe that I’ll remember is...”

“It matters today because...”

Assessment Opportunities

- Participation in group discussions.
- Quality of group presentations.
- Reflection responses showing understanding of key achievements and global connections.

Teacher Notes & Tips

- Use images of Benin Bronzes, Benin City’s walls, and Great Zimbabwe ruins to spark curiosity and discussion.

- Emphasise that **global trade and cultural exchange** were happening centuries before European colonisation.
- Encourage critical thinking: “Why might these stories have been left out of mainstream history books?”

Key Takeaway

The Kingdom of Benin and Great Zimbabwe prove that Africa’s history is a story of **creativity, connection, and innovation**. These societies produced world-class art, architecture, and trade networks that shaped global history, and they continue to inspire pride today.