Explore the presentation of ethnic identity in one work pre-1850.

The 16th century Benin brass plaques clearly demonstrate ideas of belonging to a social group with a common national or cultural tradition. The plaque showing attendants at the (probable) doors to the Oba’s palace apartments illustrate values of loyalty and rites of ceremonial duty as well as kinship of clothing, props and scarification. The work is cast in brass by the lost wax process, known to be strictly controlled by guilds and only produced by males. The material then, with its regal expectations, shows the Oba as the highest power in the Benin Empire, as both a spiritual and political leader. This is reinforced by accounts of the functions of these plaques as decoration for the Oba’s palace. Further information about the palace and importance of the Oba to the identity of Benin is given here in the details of setting: the python shown on the roof is a sacred/royal animal, as are the leopards at the foot of the central pillar, and the natural foliage on the walls alludes to the farming and trading traditions of the Edo people.

The four figures here are arranged symmetrically and hieratically showing a clearly structured society: the larger two clothed figures carry similar (but not identical) decorated shields while the smaller two are naked and carry fans suggesting a lower servant status. The heavily outlined facial features, cylindrical coral beads on the necklaces and headdresses of all four attendants show their belonging to Benin with the use of coral, a reference to the legendary raid by Oba Ewuare on the realm of Olokun (the white-faced sea god), showing pride and strength. The long plaits and slender figures of the two outside figures suggest youth in comparison to the warriors, perhaps again highlighting the concept of tradition passing from one generation to the next in Benin society.