



The Kingdom of Dahomey

When the celebrated British explorer Sir Richard Burton visited the kingdom of Dahomey in the 1860s, he encountered a militaristic traditional society ruled by an all-powerful monarch and bound together by elaborate ritual. The pageantry of the Dahomean court "is to be compared with that of Europe," he wrote. The "intense personal veneration" of the king "reminds me of . . . Mohammed the apostle and his followers. . . . To this exceeding care only can be attributed the protracted reigns of a dynasty whose . . . members have sat upon the throne 252 years, thus rivalling the seven Roman monarchs whose rule extended over nearly the same period."¹

According to legend, the Dahomey kings were descended from the union of a mythical leopard, depicted

here, and a princess from the kingdom of Tado.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.



A royal storyteller; in a society with no written language, these heralds passed down the kingdom's history from generation to generation.

Photograph by T. Spini and G. Antongini, 1972.

The history of the Dahomey kingdom is indeed a long and venerable one. The ancestors of the Fon, a West African people related to the Yoruba, migrated southward from the Niger River in about the thirteenth century, settling in the southern regions of what are today Benin and Togo. Bloody quarrels for succession divided the royal leaders, and by the early 1600s, the rival camps had separated into what would become the three warring kingdoms of Allada, Porto-Novo, and Dahomey.

Like many African societies, the Fon culture was essentially oral, and the stories that recount the origins of the Dahomey kingdom are complex and often contradictory. Before the arrival of the first European visitors to the kingdom in the early eighteenth century, very little was actually recorded in written form. For centuries, chroniclers chosen by the king were entrusted with perpetuating the culture by reciting stories in public, but their narratives were largely limited to royal history—singing the praises of monarchs past and present. Because the heralds could be punished by death if they strayed from the offi-

Time Line

ca. 1200 Migrations of Fon ancestors. Kingdoms of Tado and Allada founded.

1470s First Europeans land in West Africa; slave trade soon begins.

1492 Columbus lands in the New World.

cial version, their accounts varied little over time. Many of these stories are represented in the bas-reliefs on the walls of Abomey's palaces.

King Houegbadja, the third traditional Dahomean monarch, is often considered the dynasty's true founder. In the seventeenth century, he established the kingdom's capital on the rolling plain of the Abomey plateau, where he built the first royal palace and developed the administrative bureaucracy and the religious and political culture that would come to characterize the kingdom. Here, too, he initiated the kingdom's expansionist tradition, conquering the neighboring Gédévi people and various other local chiefdoms. He established control over kin groups and burial customs, implemented a system of laws—to be obeyed under penalty of death—and imposed a head tax, which he used to purchase firearms, supplementing traditional weapons such as the spear and the hatchet.

During Houegbadja's reign, the Fon people first began to call their kingdom Dahomey. According to one version of the legend, Houegbadja's son Akaba visited the house of a Gédévi chief named Dan, who



Bas-relief commemorating the kingdom's first encounter with Europeans in the early eighteenth century during the reign of King Agaja, who then adopted a European ship as one of his symbols.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

ca. 1645–1685 Houegbadja establishes seat of Dahomey kingdom in Abomey, where he builds the first royal palace.

1685–1708 Akaba rules Dahomey; invents new saber to behead his enemies; promotes such crafts as gem-cutting, embroidery, and fabric dying.

1501 African slaves introduced to the Spanish Indies.

ca. 1600 Gangnihessou and Dako settle north of Abomey.

ca. 1620 Dako ascends the throne.



opposed Houegbadja's rule. Akaba requested a plot of land on which to build a palace, a request that Dan would have been obliged to grant. After Dan reluctantly complied, Akaba asked for more, soliciting new and larger lots, until at last Dan angrily cried out, "Soon you will be building on my belly!" The next night, Akaba used this breach in etiquette as a reason to attack and kill Dan. Upon succeeding to the throne, he built his palace on Dan's grave. In Fon, *homè* means "belly." Thus, the name of the kingdom—*Dan homè*—literally means "on the belly of Dan."

It was also Houegbadja who introduced the Annual Customs ceremonies, which would soon become the kingdom's most important ritual observance. Developed and elaborated by following monarchs, the Customs were a period of festivities involving the entire population (as well as any visiting dignitaries), which both expressed and reinforced the ruler's relationship with his people. The palace courtyards and the town's public squares were ornamented with colorful banners, flags, and pavilions. Voudou ceremonies were performed, military parades displayed the king's might, and ritual dances glorified the monarch as the supreme ruler on earth.

Voudou initiate in the costume of Zangbeto, guardian of the night. During the annual Customs ceremonies, priests and diviners were consulted to help decide policy for the coming year.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.



A somewhat fanciful depiction of the annual Customs festivities being witnessed by European visitors. This drawing originally appeared in one of the first published descriptions

of the kingdom, Archibald Dalziel's 1793 book, The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa.

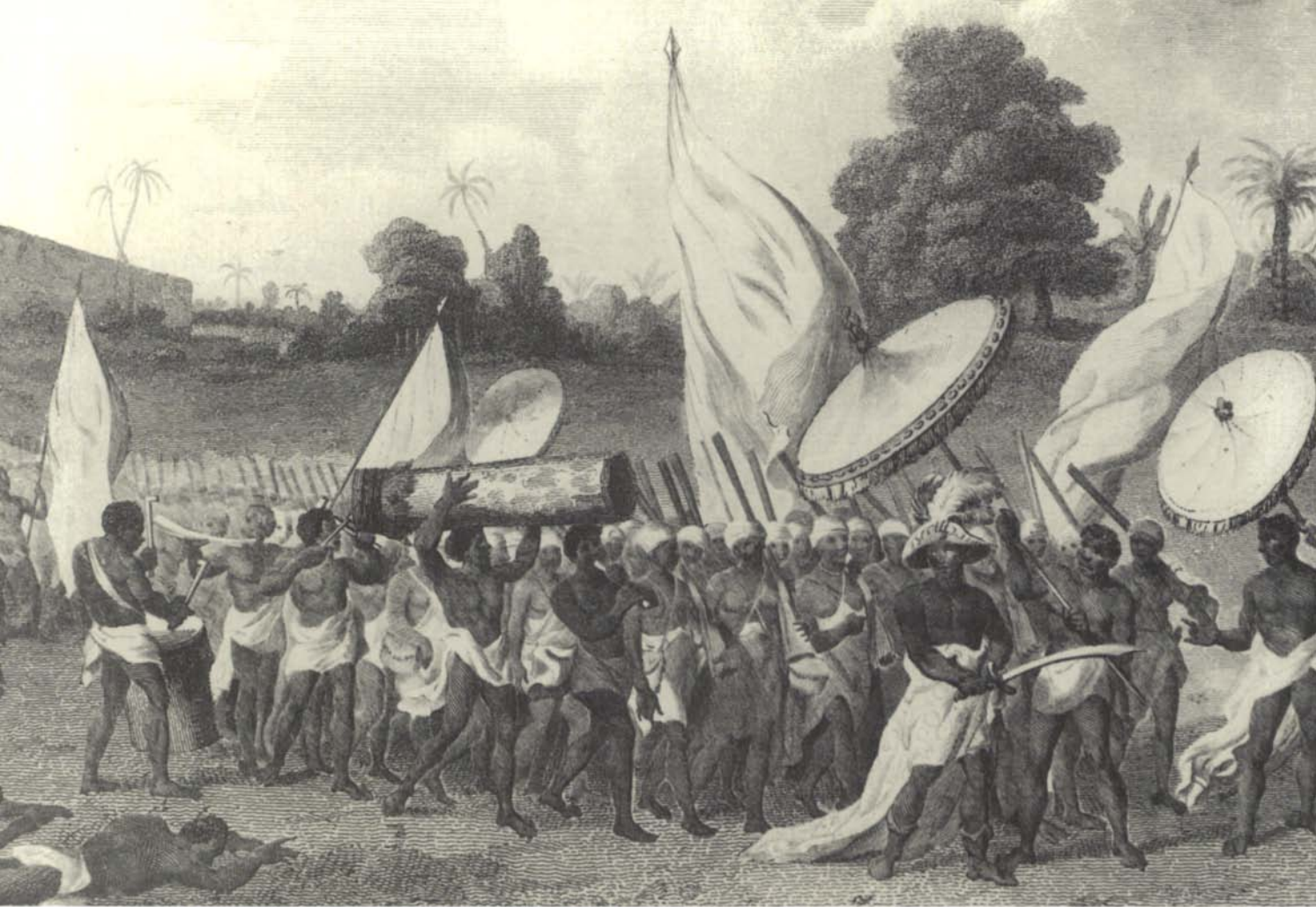
Second edition, 1967, published by Frank Cass & Company, Essex, England. © Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

1708–1732 Agaja rules Dahomey during the greatest period of expansion in the kingdom's history. He is the first king to have contact with Europeans.

1724–1727 Dahomey conquers neighboring states of Allada and Ouidah and begins to dominate region's slave trade.

1732–1774 Tegbessou rules Dahomey; Ouidah becomes a flourishing port and the kingdom's second-largest city.

1738 Oyo empire invades Dahomey, establishes a tribute system.



A romanticized late-eighteenth-century depiction of the Dahomey army heading into battle, reflecting the growing fame in Europe of the kingdom's female warriors.

From Dalzel, History of Dahomy, 1793; second edition, 1967, published by Frank Cass & Company, Essex, England. © Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

According to traditional Fon belief, the visible world was but part of a vaster reality that included the unseen world of the spirits and ancestors. During the Customs ceremonies, criminals and prisoners of war were sacrificed as “messengers” bearing questions to the “deadland” of royal ancestors. Answers from the ancestors were received through divination, including the spirit possession of voodoo priests, thereby consecrating the current regime by reinvoking its ties to the past. The practice troubled the European visitors who witnessed it. “The celebration of the *Customs* usually continues about a month, during

1774–1789 Kpengla rules Dahomey, strengthens army, and conquers coastal cities in modern-day Nigeria and Togo.

1789–1797 Agonglo rules Dahomey, opens the kingdom to Christian and Muslim missionaries.

1797–1818 Adandozan rules Dahomey; he is overthrown in a palace coup.

1818–1858 Guezo rules Dahomey, liberates kingdom from Oyo domination, promotes palm-oil processing as an economic alternative to the slave trade.

ca. 1830 Several European countries outlaw the slave trade.

which there is some exhibition every fourth, or market, day,” noted the English adventurer Archibald Dalzel in 1793. “The whole would afford a very amusing spectacle, if it were not for the human sacrifices which are annually made for the purpose of *watering*, according to the country expression, the graves of the deceased royal family.”²

From legendary origins, then, grew a highly organized and fiercely expansionist kingdom in which each ruler waged war to honor a traditional obligation to make Dahomey ever greater. In the 1720s, aided by a corps of fierce female warriors, Akaba’s brother, King Agaja, overcame larger armies to subjugate several neighboring rival kingdoms—including the strategically critical port town of Ouidah, which by then served as a major center of the West African slave trade. The Dahomey women warriors were called Amazons by the Europeans, after the legendary female warriors of Greek mythology; they would become a dynastic tradition.

Dahomey’s conquests permitted direct commerce with the traders, especially the Portuguese and French, who were exporting an estimated six thousand slaves a year from West Africa to plantations in the New World. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Dahomey’s prowess as a warrior nation allowed it to monopolize the Ouidah slave trade. Armed with weapons obtained in exchange for slaves, the Fon were able to defend themselves against ongoing threats from the larger Oyo empire, a powerful Yoruba kingdom to the east, in what is today Nigeria.

Nonetheless, the Oyo succeeded in exacting annual tribute payments from generations of Dahomey’s kings. It was not until 1818, at the beginning of the reign of Guezo, one of Dahomey’s most famous monarchs, that the Fon were finally able to

liberate themselves from their Oyo overlords. In the decades that followed, Guezo continued to strengthen and expand the kingdom, allying himself with a Portuguese adventurer who had helped him come to power and who, in return, was granted a virtual monopoly over the Ouidah arms and slave trade.³ Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Dahomey was one of the richest and most powerful kingdoms in Africa. Its army at this time was estimated to number some twelve thousand soldiers and four thousand Amazons. The Amazons constituted one of the army’s elite corps, serving as the king’s palace guards and forming a special phalanx that accompanied the monarch into battle.

The Dahomean monarchy, however, would prove no match for the upheavals that were to come. The development of the slave trade had attracted Europeans intent



Dahomean women warriors, or Amazons. The horns, probably made of tin, were an insignia of rank: these are officers. Horns were also icons of power, associated with such animals as the antelope and buffalo;

“furious antelope” and “wild buffalo” cadres were among the fiercest Amazon battalions.

Photograph by a French military doctor who accompanied the colonial army, ca. 1894. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, 94.R.56.

on exploiting West Africa’s economic potential. In the 1800s, as international abolitionist voices called for a worldwide end to slavery, slave traders searched for alternative sources of income. Throughout the region, European interest shifted to palm oil, which was extracted from the nuts of the area’s abundant palm trees and was highly prized for lubricating machinery and as a key ingredient in margarine, candles, and soap. King Guezo established a palm-oil industry and attempted to

1858–1889 Glélé rules Dahomey, rebuffs European intervention in Dahomey’s affairs.

1889–1894 Behanzin rules Dahomey.

1839 British seize Portuguese slave ships; the slave trade curtailed.

1851 Dahomean troops under Guezo attack the Egba capital of Abeokuta but are soundly defeated; Amazon cadres incur heavy losses.

1864 Seeking revenge for his father’s defeat, Glélé attacks Abeokuta; another defeat leaves Dahomean army severely weakened.

1892–1894 French invade and conquer Dahomey; Behanzin orders his troops to burn the royal palaces at Abomey.

increase Dahomey's agricultural output, though he continued to deal in slaves as well. Ironically, antislavery efforts drove up the price of the human "merchandise," making slave trading even more profitable than before.

Like his father, Guezo, Dahomey's next king, Glélé, resisted European pressure to eliminate both the slave trade and the practice of ritual human sacrifice. Sir Richard Burton's visit in the 1860s was a mission from the British government to negotiate such matters with the Dahomean ruler. While impressed by the king's regal demeanor, Burton was disappointed to find that the monarch would not readily accede to British demands. "The personal courtesies of the king," he wrote, "compared badly with his stubborn resolve to ignore, even in the smallest matters, the wishes of Her Majesty's Government." (Glélé's assessment of Burton, according to Burton himself, was that the Englishman "was a good man, but too angry.")⁴

Burton conceded that "to abolish human sacrifice here is to abolish Dahome. The practice originates from filial piety, it is sanctioned by long use and custom, and it is strenuously upheld by a powerful and interested priesthood. . . . Gelele, I am persuaded, could not abolish human sacrifice if he would; and he would not if he could."⁵ Regarding the slave trade, Glélé responded to Burton that it was a practice established by the Europeans themselves, and he would continue to sell what the Europeans wanted.



Map published in *Le Petit Journal*, a French illustrated magazine, in September 1892, on the eve of the French conquest. The legend notes that the red

lines trace the routes of European explorers and shipping lines; the small tricolor flags show the position of French troops. The neighboring territories are labeled

simply "German colony" and "English colony"—suggesting the strategic importance of Dahomey to the French colonial empire.

1894 Behanzin surrenders; Dahomey becomes a French protectorate; Agoli-Agbo I installed on the throne by the French; first restoration of royal palaces at Abomey begins.

1900 Deposition and exile of Agoli-Agbo I.

1911 The French colonial official E. G. Waterlot creates casts of palace bas-reliefs.

1914 World War I begins; Africans from several French colonies serve with distinction in the French army.

1914–1916 Resistance movements against the French colonizers organized.

1918 World War I ends; Germany loses its African colonies.

Le Petit Journal

TOUS LES VENDREDIS
Le Supplément illustré
5 Centimes

SUPPLÉMENT ILLUSTRÉ
Huit pages : CINQ centimes

TOUS LES JOURS
Le Petit Journal
5 Centimes

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ATTAQUE DE DAHOMÉENS
repoussée par une canonnière française

Cover of *Le Petit Journal*, August 20, 1892. In the late nineteenth century, illustrated magazines were very popular in France. *Le Petit Journal*, a conservative daily that often sought to glorify the French colonial effort, reported regularly on the Dahomey campaign. The magazine's caption claims that the "attack of the Dahomeans" is being "repulsed by a French gunboat"; in reality, the French retreated, alarming many colonial officials, who were astonished that their army had lost a skirmish to an African force composed largely of women.



In Dahomean society, battles were commemorated by bas-reliefs. In this one from Glélé's ajalala, a Dahomean warrior is shooting a Yoruba enemy.

Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

By the late nineteenth century, the colonial powers—primarily Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany—were vying for superiority in Africa, which in many respects had become an arena for the dispute of European imperial rivalries. The powerful Dahomean army, meanwhile, had been weakened by several defeats in battles with the neighboring Egba kingdom. Largely for strategic purposes, the French sided with another of Dahomey's longtime enemies, the kingdom of Porto-Novo. Glélé's successor, Behanzin, also clashed with France over such issues as slavery and the right to wage war against Dahomey's traditional enemies. The French found a pretext for conquest in a disagreement over the terms

ca. 1930 Original thatch roofs of palace buildings replaced with corrugated metal.

1945 Historic Museum of Abomey opens to the public.

1960 The Republic of Dahomey wins independence.

1960–1972 Independence followed by period of political instability; numerous coups and attempted coups.

1972 Regime of revolutionary-military government begins.



AU DAHOMEY
Entrée du drapeau français à Abomey

A glorified depiction of French troops carrying the flag into Abomey. Behanzin had set fire to the royal palaces shortly before their arrival. Le Petit Journal, ca. December 1892.

of the French occupation of the port town of Cotonou. In 1890, Behanzin launched a preemptive assault on the French at Cotonou, but he took heavy losses and retreated toward Abomey. A brief truce ensued. Hunkered down in his royal compound, the last independent monarch to rule Dahomey continued to resist French challenges to the kingdom's independence.

Then, in August 1892, a French colonial army gathered in Porto-Novo marched on Abomey. A series of fierce battles followed, with Dahomean forces retreating toward their capital. In November, King Behanzin tried one last time to rally his soldiers, but to no avail. The French demanded that he lay down his arms; he refused. Finally, heavily outgunned, the king attempted to destroy what he could not save. Behanzin ordered his troops to retreat; then, rather than see the beloved palaces and their sacred tombs fall into French hands, he had the torch put to the homes of his ancestors. Behanzin and his army disappeared into the bush, where they continued to fight a guerrilla war for another year. The king eventually surrendered to the French on January 25, 1894.

Before departing into French-imposed exile, Behanzin presented a farewell address to his soldiers. With his palaces destroyed, his court and storytellers dispersed, his army defeated, and his people facing the uncertainties of a colonized future, the monarch wondered whether the powerful Dahomey kingdom might not fade from the world's memory. "When my warriors rose by the thousand to defend Dahomey

1975 Name of Dahomey is changed to the People's Republic of Benin.

1982 Abomey's palaces are designated a World Heritage cultural site by Unesco.

1985 Abomey's palaces are placed on the list of endangered sites by Unesco.



Bas-relief from Guezo's ajalala showing a warrior planting a flag on conquered territory.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

and its King, I proudly recognized the same valor shown by the warriors of Agaja, Tegbessou, Guezo, and Glélé,” he said. “Despite our bravery and the justice of our cause, our troops were decimated. . . . Already my weeping voice awakens no echo. Where are the ardent Amazons? Where, their indomitable chiefs? . . . Where, my comrades in arms? . . . Who will sing of their great sacrifice? . . . Departed companions . . . here is the offering of memory—a little oil, a little flour, and blood of the bull. . . . Here the pact is renewed before the great departure. Farewell, soldiers, farewell.”⁶ Behanzin would die in exile some twelve years later.

Dahomey was proclaimed a French protectorate, and by the end of 1897, the French controlled the entire territory of the present-day Republic of Benin, which they called the colony of Dahomey. They installed Behanzin’s half-brother, Agoli-Agbo I, on the throne, only to depose and exile him and appoint a powerful French governor. In 1904 the colony of Dahomey was integrated into the federation of French West Africa.

The French instituted an “indigent system,” based on the concept that Africans were not mature enough to take care of their own affairs. Africans were considered subjects rather than citizens; they had to pay



"Once he had descended [from the Abomey plateau] to the surrounding plain, [Behanzin] stopped to look behind him. The entire plateau was in flames and the sky above like a calabash of blood. . . . After having watched his palace go up in flames, [Behanzin] remained motionless with his head between his hands. Respecting his grief, the high priests went into prayer, and the bokono made divinations to know what the future now held in store for them. Finally he got up. Then with his faithful followers of Amazons, bokono, warriors, high priests, women, and children he set off for the forest. There in its womb he lived for almost two years, unbeknownst to the French who hounded him like a beast, protected by his gris-gris and the magic of his bokono."

Maryse Condé, *The Last of the African Kings*.
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Above: French postcard, ca. 1905, showing Behanzin in exile with his family and servants, shortly before his death. Opposite: Agoli-Agbo I, ca. 1894, soon after the French installed him on the throne. An Amazon bodyguard, wearing horns, can be seen behind one of the king's wives.

Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, ZPC 2 (above), 94.R.56 (opposite).



*Different grades
of palm oil at
Abomey market.*

*Photograph by
Leslie Rainer, 1994.*



Dahomey's traditional culture. The French considered African culture generally to be uncivilized; they attempted to force indigenous Africans to abandon their own roots, embrace the civilization of Christian Europe, and adopt the French language.

Despite such pressures, however, the Fon people managed to hold fast to their own cultural beliefs, partly by drawing on their long-standing, deeply ingrained oral traditions. At the same time, Dahomey became the "Latin Quarter of West Africa," known for its writers, professionals, and artists. And, ironically, leaders of an organized anticolonial protest movement emerged from the ranks of intellectuals trained in the French-instituted schools. Immediately following World War II, Dahomey's educated elite began carrying out protests against the colonial government. In 1958, the French finally granted a popular vote to decide statehood, and the following year, the Republic of Dahomey became an independent member of the French Community of states. Dahomey, however, continued to press for complete autonomy, and on August 1, 1960, after sixty-six years of French government, the independent Republic of Dahomey installed Hubert Maga as its first president.

The new state survived a period of turbulent political activity from 1960 to 1972, followed by a revolutionary military regime under General Mathieu Kérékou from 1972 to 1990. Although the new government was initially embraced by the population, discontent soon became widespread, and in 1990 the single-party government was dismantled. A period of democratic renewal followed; in the new Republic of Benin's first presidential election, Nicéphore Soglo was voted into office in 1991, and in 1996, Kérékou—by then an advocate of democratic rule—was elected president.⁷



*Modern bas-relief by
Cyprien Tokoudagba
and family depicting
the symbol of
Agoli-Agbo 1—
a foot about to trip
over a rock. The
accompanying motto,
"I stumbled but
I did not fall," aptly
expresses the Fon
people's endurance.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1997.*

taxes while undergoing severe restrictions on personal and political freedom. Although Dahomey had historically derived its strength from its fierce warrior kings, most of its people were farmers who tended fruit trees, raised livestock, and planted native crops like yams, millet, and cotton, as well as the maize, tobacco, and coffee imported from the New World by European traders. French governance, which aimed to enrich the French economy at the expense of the colony, overexploited the land's resources.

Behanzin's concerns regarding the fate of Fon culture proved well founded. The French instituted a system of social services, establishing health centers in the principal towns and implementing an educational system developed largely by Catholic missionaries, who had first established schools there in the 1860s. The colonial schools systematically tried to obscure



Throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, the Fon—largely through art and ritual—have preserved a connection to their cultural identity. Today’s king, a descendent of Agoli-Agbo I, is an elected representative of the royal families of Abomey who fulfills an essential ceremonial function. The Fon continue to revere their traditional leaders and to respect many age-old customs. The royal compound at Abomey serves as the heart of those observances and houses the museum where the Dahomey kingdom’s treasures are displayed. A century after Behanzin’s surrender to the French, the plea implicit in his farewell address—that the Dahomean dynasty not be forgotten—has found its echo.

NOTES

1. Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 149.
2. Archibald Dalziel, *The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa* (1793; reprint, London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967), pp. xxi–xxii.
3. This story is vividly—if sorrowfully—recounted in fictional form in Bruce Chatwin’s short historical novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), which was made into the film *Cobra Verde* by the German director Werner Herzog.
4. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele*, pp. 347, 348.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–36.
6. Jean Pliya, *Dahomey* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Classiques Africains, 1975), pp. 127–28.
7. The Republic of Benin should not be confused with the modern Nigerian city of Benin, or with the historical kingdom of Benin, situated in present-day Nigeria and also renowned for its art—particularly its bronzes.

Campaign rally for Nicéphore Soglo, the first elected president of the Republic of Benin, in the square in front of the museum. The parasol shading the current ceremonial king, Agoli-Agbo III, bears the emblems of the Dahomean monarchs who preceded him.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

1988 Fifty-six bas-reliefs detached from one of Glélé’s palace buildings (*ajalala*) and placed in storage.

1988–1997 Glélé’s *ajalala*, structurally damaged, is rebuilt.

1989–1990 Benin becomes a democracy; name changed to Republic of Benin.

1993–1997 Conservation of bas-reliefs at Abomey in a collaborative project of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Republic of Benin.

1997 “Past, Present, and Future of the Royal Palaces and Sites of Abomey,” a conference sponsored by the Getty Conservation Institute, the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the Republic of Benin, is held in Abomey.



GANGNIHESSOU



DAKODONOU

1620
1645



AGADSA 1708-1732



1732
TEGBESSOU 1774



GUEZD 1818-1858



GLELE 1858-1889



1645-
HOUEGBADJA 1685



AKABA 1685-1708



KPENGLA 1774-1789



AGONGLO 1789-1797



BEHANZIN 1889-1894



AGOLI-AGBO 1814-1900

Warrior Kings

Like the pharaohs of Egypt or the great kings of Persia, the monarchs of Dahomey formed the epicenter of all spheres of the kingdom's life—political, social, religious, and military. A Dahomean king was venerated as the *dokunnon* (master and possessor of all riches), the *sèmèdo* (master of the world), and the *aïnon* (eminent master of the earth). Upon assuming the throne, each monarch took on the obligation to leave behind more territory than he inherited. The Dahomean monarchy, therefore, waged an ongoing series of wars of conquest that, by the early nineteenth century, had made Dahomey one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa.

To help ensure the monarchy's long-term stability, the transition between one king and the next was aided by a unique system of rules governing succession. Under this principle, known as *vidaxo*, the aging monarch selected from among his sons the one best suited to rule, subject to approval by royal ministers and diviners. When a prince was enthroned, he would select a "name motto"—a slogan that expressed such attributes as strength, wisdom, and cunning—as well as a royal name, or "strong name." He would also adopt a number of emblems or symbols, which served to promote his strong name and motto, warn his enemies and rivals, commemorate his conquests, and, in general, publicize an aura of charismatic royal power. These symbols were depicted on bas-reliefs and on colorful banners and appliqués, which, during the great annual festivities known as the "Customs," decorated the palace courtyards.

Previous page: Textile appliqué with symbols of the twelve kings traditionally acknowledged to have ruled Dahomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.



1 **Gangnihessou** (reigned ca. 1600)

SYMBOLS

A male *gangnihessou* bird; a drum; a throwing or hunting stick

MOTTO

"I am the biggest bird and the loudest drum. You can't keep the bird from singing, you can't keep the drum from beating."

Gangnihessou's motto notwithstanding, his younger brother Dako usurped the throne.



2 **Dako** (reigned ca. 1620; younger brother of Gangnihessou)

SYMBOLS

An indigo jar; a tinderbox; a war club

MOTTO

"Dako kills Konou as easily as breaking an indigo jar."

This motto is a reference to an indigo planter whom Dako killed.



3 **Houegbadja** (reigned ca. 1645–85; son of Gangnihessou, nephew of Dako)

SYMBOLS

A fish; a fish trap; a war club hoe

MOTTO

"The fish who has escaped the net won't go back in it."

Houegbadja's accession to the throne was seen as a rehabilitation of his father. Houegbadja is considered the founder of the Dahomey dynasty; he established the capital in Abomey, where he built a new palace, initiated a system of laws, established a bureaucracy, presided over religious ceremonies, and created a powerful political culture. His motto expresses the king's wisdom in refusing to be caught in traps laid by his enemies.



4 **Akaba** (reigned 1685–1708; son of Houegbadja and Nan Adonon)

SYMBOLS

A warthog; a sword (the weapon Akaba used to behead his enemies)

MOTTO

"When the warthog looks up at the sky, it gets its throat slit."

SYMBOL

A chameleon

NAME MOTTO

“Slowly, patiently the chameleon reaches the top of the Kapok tree.”

The chameleon, which changes color to blend in with its environment, exemplifies the patience and practical skill Akaba demonstrated in calmly waiting until the advanced age of about sixty to ascend to the throne. The warthog emblem suggests the importance of paying close attention to affairs of the kingdom: distraction can bring disaster.



- 5 Agaja** (reigned 1708–32; son of Houegbadja and Nan Adonon)

SYMBOL

European caravel boat

NAME MOTTO

“No one can set fire to a large tree that has fallen whole with its branches (first it must be cut).”

Known as “the Great Warrior,” Agaja ruled over the period of largest expansion in Dahomey’s history. His annexation of the neighboring Xweda kingdom extended Dahomey’s borders to the sea and allowed Dahomey to deal directly with European traders. He formed an elite corps of women warriors—an innovation that became a long-standing dynastic tradition—and was the first king to have contact with Europeans—hence his symbol of a European boat. Agaja’s motto expresses the importance of strength and unity.



- 6 Tegbessou** (reigned 1732–74; son of Agaja and Nan Huanjile)

SYMBOL

A buffalo wearing a tunic

MOTTO

“Nothing can force the buffalo to take off his tunic.”

SYMBOLS

A blunderbuss (the first firearm that the Dahomey royal army used); a door decorated with three noseless heads

NAME MOTTO

“The many grasses and leaves that cover the ground do not keep the small tégbésu plant from growing.”

When still a prince, Tegbessou was sent to reside in the Oyo kingdom as part of the tribute Dahomey had to pay its rival state. He later returned to his homeland, where he was selected to be the next ruler. According to custom, the king-to-be had to wear his father’s tunic for one whole day. Hoping to make Tegbessou take off the tunic—and therefore abandon his quest for the throne—a rival placed stinging nettle leaves in it. However, Tegbessou kept the tunic on and became king. His name motto reminded his subjects that he had acceded to the throne despite the maneuvering of his rivals; the emblem of a door bearing heads without noses evoked his victory over a rebellious conquered people whose corpses he had mutilated.



7 Kpengla (reigned 1774–89; son of Tegnossou and Nan Cai)

SYMBOLS

An *akpan* bird; a gun

MOTTO

“The agitated akpan strikes out at the other birds.”

NAME MOTTO

“In the water, the stone does not feel or fear the cold.”

Kpengla strengthened the army and engaged in many battle campaigns—an activity evoked by the bird motto. He conquered coastal cities, consolidating the kingdom’s rule over the Xweda and further tightening Dahomey’s grip on the slave trade. The stone name motto suggests that the king no more fears his enemies than a stone fears cold water, while the gun emblem refers to the fact that flintlock firearms became standard issue in the Dahomean army during Kpengla’s reign.



8 Agonglo (reigned 1789–97; son of Kpengla and Nan Senumé)

SYMBOL

A pineapple plant

NAME MOTTO

“Lightning strikes the palm tree but never the pineapple plant, which is close to the earth.”

Agonglo is remembered as a great reformer. He rescinded taxes that had paralyzed the port of Ouidah; outlawed the wooden gag that had been used on condemned prisoners to keep them from calling down curses on the kingdom; and enhanced the voodoo cult by instituting a rite known as Zomadonou, which became the dynasty’s specific cult. Agonglo also opened his kingdom to Christian and Muslim missionaries and was the first Dahomean ruler to take a European woman as one of his wives. His symbol and name motto refer to the king’s success in surviving his enemies’ intrigues and attempt to justify his peaceful ways in the eyes of those who preferred a more military ruler.

Adandozan (reigned 1797–1818; eldest son of Agonglo)

SYMBOL

A large parasol

NAME MOTTO

“The king overshadows his enemies.”

Considered by some to have usurped the throne from his brother, Adandozan is a highly controversial figure. During his reign, he tried to initiate various unpopular changes, reducing the power of the priests and apparently extending slavery and ritual human sacrifice to include members of the Dahomey noble classes. He was overthrown in a palace coup and placed under arrest. Adandozan continued to be highly regarded; he outlived his

successor and, when he died in 1861, was buried, discreetly, with full royal honors. His name, however, has since disappeared from the oral tradition and was removed from the dynastic list. Adandozan's emblem, therefore, does not appear on the appliqué on pages 24–25.



9 Guezo (reigned 1818–58; son of Agonglo and Nan Agontimè)

SYMBOL

A jar pierced with holes, held aloft by two hands

MOTTO

“Our freedom can be compared to a jar with many holes, which cannot hold water. If each one of you, the sons of this nation, can put your finger in one hole, the jar will hold water.”

SYMBOL

A buffalo

MOTTO

“The powerful buffalo crosses the country and nothing can stop or confront it.”

NAME MOTTO

“The red feathers of the cardinal may look like fire, but it cannot set fire to the bush.”

Following the unprecedented coup that brought him to the throne, Guezo worked to unify his kingdom. Regarded as a skillful diplomat, he was able to reconcile the friends and foes of Adandozan; he also

strengthened the army and finally liberated Dahomey from the powerful neighboring Oyo kingdom. Guezo is celebrated as one of Dahomey's greatest rulers. The jar emblem and its accompanying motto reminded his subjects of the importance of national unity; the jar is now the national symbol of Benin.



10 Glélé (reigned 1858–89; son of Guezo and Nan Zognidi)

SYMBOL

A lion

MOTTO

“The lion cub strikes terror in his enemies as soon as his teeth have grown.”

SYMBOL

The ritual knife of Gu, god of war

MOTTO

“The knife of Gu punishes rebels.”

NAME MOTTO

“The man is stretched out at full length, and his enemies cannot lift him.”

At the end of Guezo's reign, supporters of Adandozan—a number of whom remained in Abomey—set fire to the palace treasuries to protest Glélé's ascent to the throne. From the beginning of his reign, therefore, Glélé faced internal as well as external opposition, which he sought to diffuse through these symbols and mottoes. Glélé would go on to consolidate Dahomey's supremacy in the region by leading more

than thirty war campaigns; in addition, he developed such cultural practices as music, dance, and ritual ceremonies. Glélé became renowned in Europe as one of the great African kings. He resisted European anti-slavery efforts but was eventually forced to abandon commercial slave trading; nevertheless, he continued to use slaves in his fields and as human sacrifices who “carried messages” to the ancestors. His name motto evokes the values of patience and hard work.



11 Behanzin (reigned 1889–94; son of Glélé and Nan Zevoton)

SYMBOL

An egg

NAME MOTTO

“The world holds the egg that the earth desires.”

SYMBOL

A shark

MOTTO

“I am the shark: I will not relinquish an inch of my kingdom.”

Dahomey’s last independent ruler is celebrated as a great resistance fighter who tried to save his kingdom from French colonizers. Behanzin was unable to live up to his motto, however, and finally burned the Abomey royal palaces rather than see them fall into French hands. His farewell address to his soldiers, before he went into French-imposed exile, is considered one of the most important speeches in the history of the Fon people; today, the address is taught to

Beninois schoolchildren. Behanzin died in exile in Algeria in 1906; in 1928 he was reburied in his homeland.



12 Agoli-Agbo I (reigned 1894–1900; son of Glélé and Nan Kannanyi)

SYMBOL

A foot tripping over a rock

NAME MOTTO

“Beware! The royal Dahomean dynasty has stumbled but has not fallen.”

SYMBOL

A broom

MOTTO

“The king is like a broom that sweeps up his enemies.”

SYMBOL

A bow

The French installed Agoli-Agbo I on the throne; his motto sought to promote a sense of dynastic continuity. The bow symbol signified a French-imposed return to less-dangerous traditional weapons—as opposed to the considerable stock of firearms that earlier kings had accumulated by trading slaves. One of Agoli-Agbo’s greatest priorities was the reconstruction of the Abomey royal palaces. Under French rule, however, the monarchy was stripped of its power, and Agoli-Agbo I was unable to govern successfully. When he refused to act as a French pawn, he was exiled, and the French formally abolished royalty in Dahomey.





The Abomey Royal Palaces

The royal palaces of Abomey were slowly fashioned over the course of two and a half centuries, beginning with King Houegbadja—who founded the city in 1645—and continuing with each successive ruler, who added his own buildings to those of his predecessors. The right to raise structures of more than one story belonged exclusively to royalty, and the palaces' red earthen walls rose above the surrounding low-slung dwellings of the king's subjects. The imposing height—up to ten meters—of even the earliest palaces embodied the dynasty's power and prestige; soon the palace complex came to symbolize for Dahomeans the concept of kingship itself.

Ceremony in front of Glélé's ajalala. The custom of prostrating before the king began during the reign of Houegbadja.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1997.



Since the kingdom's growth was due largely to a combination of trickery and armed conquest, its rulers remained keenly aware of their need for protection from those who would overthrow them. Not surprisingly, therefore, the first palaces were erected to defend the king and his court against their enemies. A succession of monarchs settled their cousins and other relatives in the zone around the palaces, in an attempt to provide an additional security buffer between the outside world and the inner sanctums.

In addition to affording protection, the palaces fulfilled a range of other functions: royal residence, center of political life, seat of government, and site of the kingdom's most important state functions. Here, for example, the king's subjects would come to solicit an audience with their ruler. Here the king would dispense justice. And here, too, the monarch would preside over the Annual Customs ceremonies.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Abomey palace compound had grown into a sprawling complex of earthen buildings housing several thousand people.

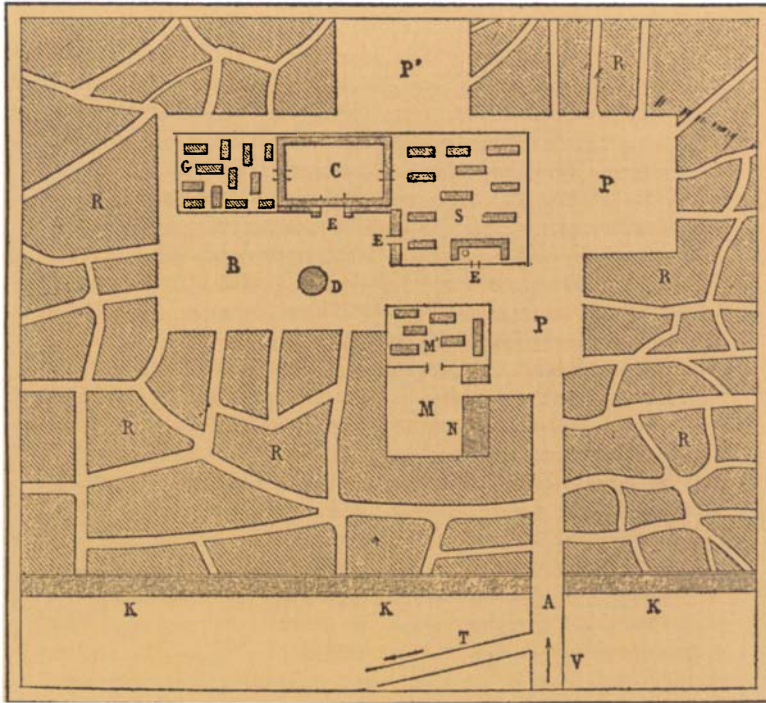


Artist's rendering of the exterior of King Glélé's palace as it appeared in 1856.

From Sir Richard Burton, A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome (1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Used by permission.

Detail of a wall of King Guezo's palace.

Photographer unknown, ca. 1900. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photo Study Collection.



Plan of Abomey, 1856.

- A. Bridge and town gate from Kana.
- B. Main square.
- C. Courtyard of king's palace with rooms for official reception.
- D. Sacrificial hut.
- E. Gates to king's palace.
- G. Huts of the Amazons.
- K. Ditch and wall around the town.
- P. Squares where markets were held.
- R. Maze of small streets between compound walls.
- S. Wives' huts.
- T. Road to prince's house.
- V. Road from Kana to Abomey.

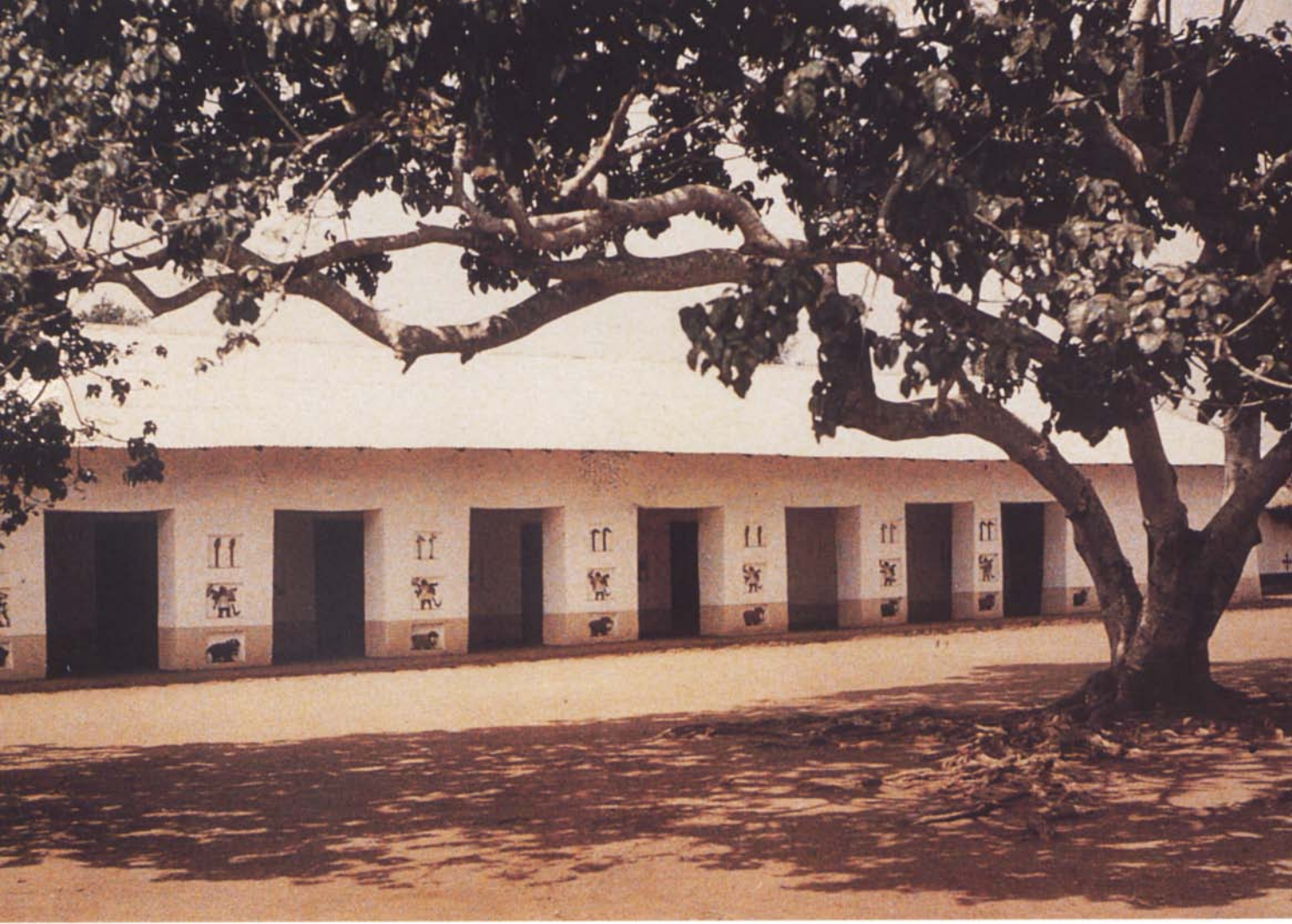
From Burton, *Mission to Gelele* (1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Used by permission.

This growth mirrored the kingdom's expansion; as each king fulfilled his pledge to leave behind more land than he inherited, the compound grew ever larger. Though a number of wives would sacrifice themselves to accompany the deceased king on his journey to the next world, others would often continue to live in the palace after his death, commemorating their late husband through ancestor-cult ceremonies.

One observer described the royal court of the mid-1800s as "a kingdom within a kingdom." Heavily fortified and zealously guarded by the monarch's elite guards—including the Amazon warriors—the compound was indeed a world unto itself—a world to which, along with the extended royal family, only nobles, courtesans, and appropriate servants enjoyed right of entry. Lives were governed by elaborate protocol. Only certain members of the royal retinue were permitted to address the king. Queens and princesses were not allowed to venture unguarded beyond the palace walls, and commoners could enter the complex only rarely, notably during the great annual celebrations, although even then most areas remained off-limits.

The diverse functions of the royal compound determined both the architecture and the arrangement of palace buildings. Each king's palace comprised a labyrinth of buildings grouped around several courtyards—typically, the *kpodoji* courtyard and its buildings, the *ajalalahennu* courtyard and its buildings, and the *hongu*.

The *kpodoji* courtyard, a gathering place where the king and his court listened to songs and watched sacred dances, was usually flanked by three buildings: the *logodo*, where the council met to discuss day-to-day matters; the *lègèdèxo*, which



housed the guards; and the *tasinonxo*, which were the living quarters for the princesses in charge of the ancestors' cult. Some kings constructed a fourth building, the *jononho*, where they received foreign visitors.

The ajalalahennu courtyard, with its monuments and altars for offerings, was reserved for formal receptions and for ancestor worship. Around it were arrayed the principal royal apartments. The largest, the multiportal "hall of many openings" (*ajalala*), consisted of a bedroom at each end—one for the king, the other for a woman in charge of watching over the courtyard—and a great reception hall in between. The back doors of the *ajalala* led to the royal dwelling, the *hongá*, to which the king admitted only his favorite

*The ajalala of
King Guezo.*

*Photograph by F. Gadmer,
1930. Courtesy Musée
Albert-Kahn—Département
des Hauts-de-Seine, France.*



*Ceremony in front
of the ajalala of
King Glélé.*

*Photographer/date
unknown.*

wives and children, his healers, his five principal ministers, and his designated heir.

A long open gallery lined the ajalala's main facade, creating a portico that spanned the length of the structure. Seated outdoors in the ajalalahennu courtyard, the king presided over enthronement ceremonies and rites held to honor the royal dead. These festivals became important occasions for displaying the kingdom's artistic wealth and reinforcing the popular perception of the monarch's power. During performances, the large open court was filled to capacity, while the ajalala provided a vibrant backdrop: brightly colored textile appliqués were draped everywhere, complementing the bas-reliefs adorning the facade. Both appliqués and bas-reliefs displayed royal emblems and imagery that illustrated the ritual dances and storytelling.

Throughout the complex, formal entries filtered passage between buildings and courtyards. The palaces also harbored secret entries, called *tonli*, which the king used when he embarked on a clandestine evening outing or needed an unobtrusive route to safety. Other doors linked the various internal sections of each palace. In addition, small doors sheltered by overhanging grass roofs connected the various kings' complexes, thereby symbolizing the link between the dynasty's rulers.

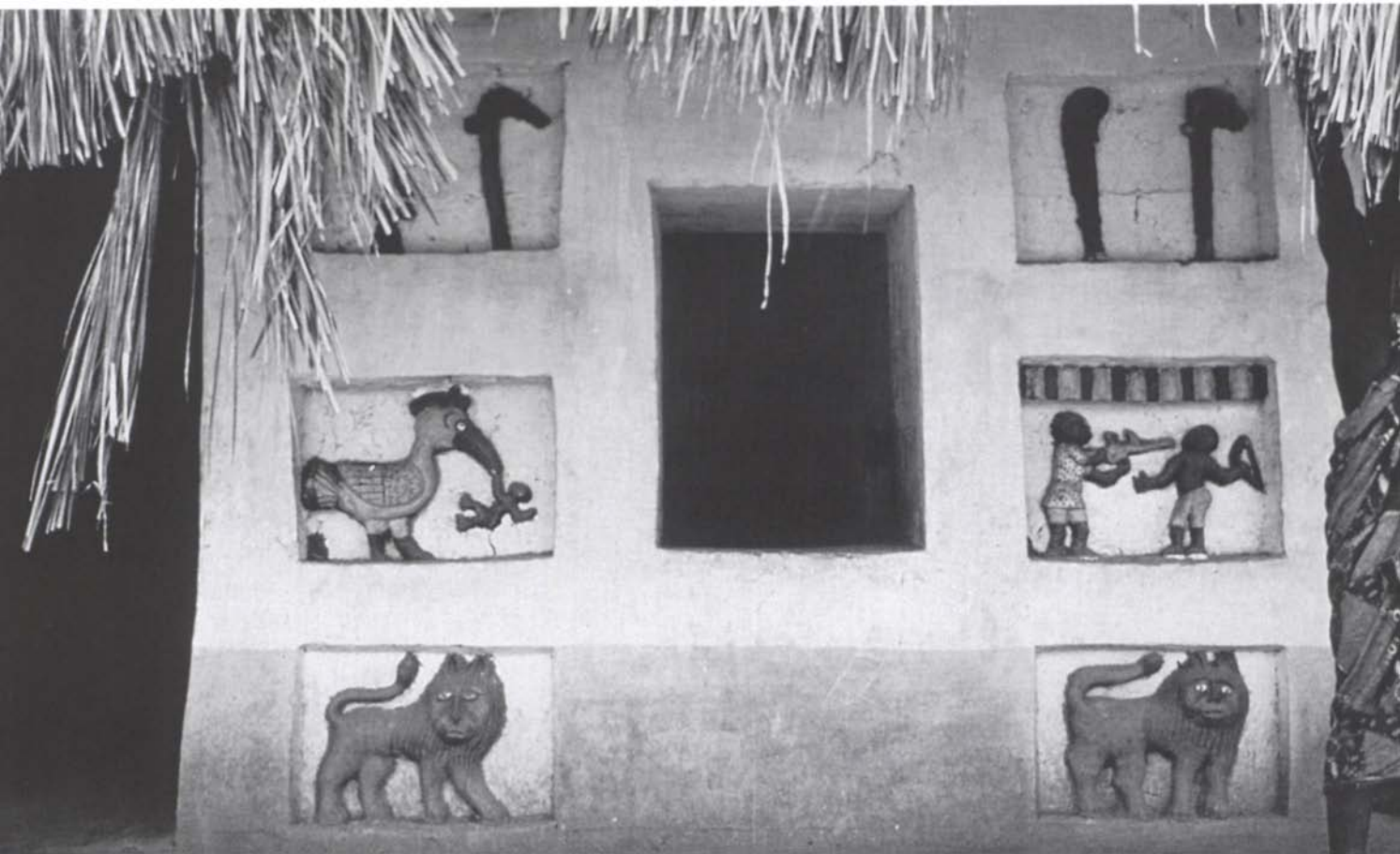
When Behanzin set fire to the royal compound rather than let it fall into the hands of French colonizers, the flames consumed at least the thatch roofs of many of the palaces. Left unprotected, the earthen buildings suffered heavy damage during the rainy seasons in following years; eventually, the buildings fell into decay. During both the French colonial period and the period

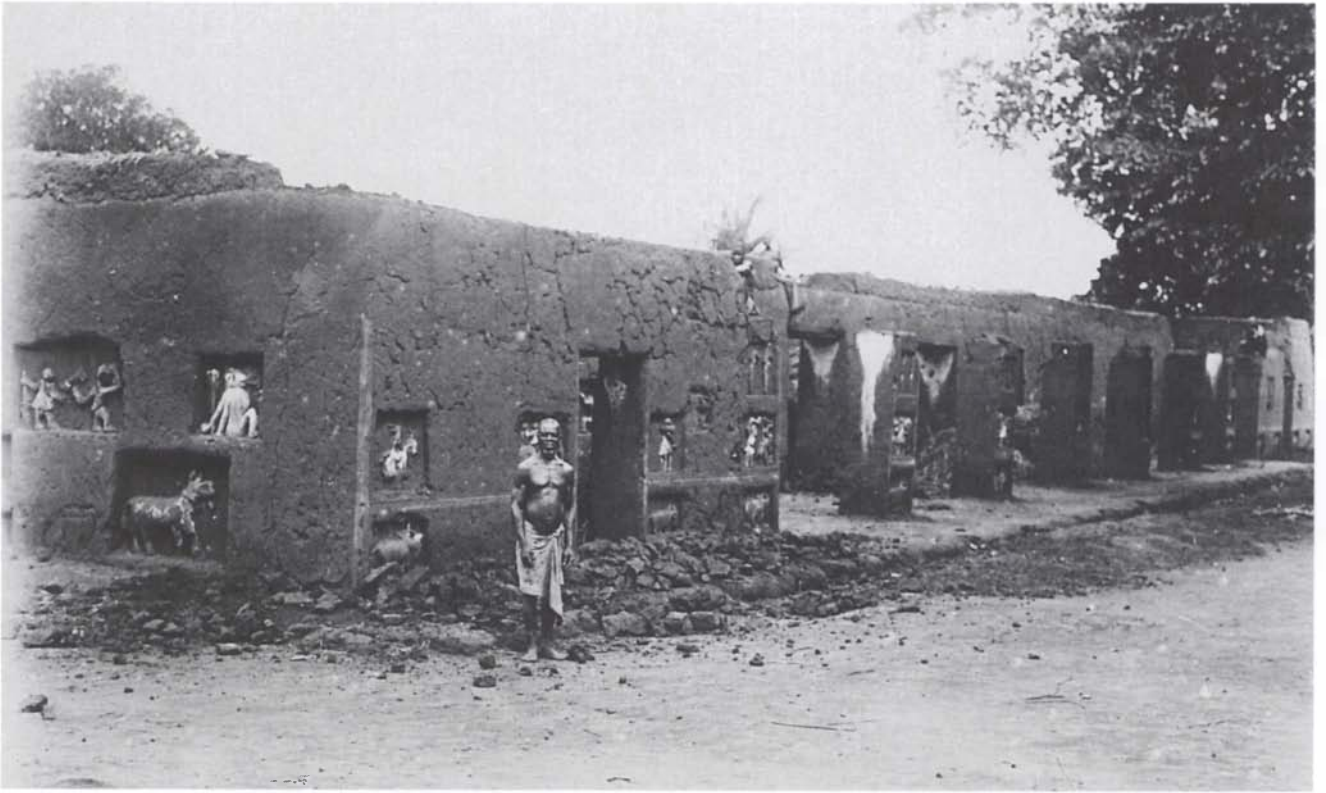
of Benin independence that followed, the buildings were alternately neglected, demolished, restored, modified, or rebuilt, depending on the prevailing political and economic conditions.

Of the 44 hectares (190 acres) originally forming the royal compound, only the palaces of Guezo and Glélé, which now house the Historic Museum of Abomey, have been maintained. Restoration of the buildings was first attempted by Behanzin's half-brother, Agoli-Agbo I, apparently soon after Dahomey fell to the French. After he was exiled in 1900, however, the compound again fell into ruin. Today, it is not clear how much of the palaces were destroyed in the fire set by Behanzin and reconstructed early on, and there are many questions regarding the dates of origin of the surviving bas-reliefs. Some or all may have been

Bas-reliefs adorning the ajalala of Glélé. The top pair depict weapons; a battle scene and two of the king's symbolic animals—the horn-bill and the lion—are also shown.

Photograph by Eva Meyerowitz, 1937. Neg. no. A1987-09-09, frame 34. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.





The ajalala of King Guezo, a few years after the palace fires, showing crumbled walls.

Photographer unknown, ca. 1900. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photo Study Collection.

reproduced after the French conquest. According to the Frenchman René Le Herissé, however, who visited the site at the beginning of the century, the ajalala of King Glélé was among the surviving buildings; its bas-reliefs are therefore thought to be among the oldest extant originals.

The first French effort to restore Glélé's palace seems to have been undertaken prior to 1911 by a colonial administrator, E. Chaudoin, who had first "visited" the palace in 1890 as Behanzin's prisoner. Photographs of the palaces taken in 1911 by E. G. Waterlot, a French official, clearly show steep-pitched, wide-eaved thatch roofs in the traditional style. A 1930 photograph by a French photographer indicates that the wooden posts holding up the thatch roofs had been removed, possibly during a later restoration carried out by



As the palace compound developed over the reigns of successive kings, the courtyards were linked by small doorways.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

In addition to the principal palaces, the royal families built palaces of lesser importance in outlying areas. The crown princes lived in these residences before succeeding to the throne.

Photograph by a French military doctor who followed the colonial army, ca. 1893. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, 94.R.56.



*Postcard showing
King Guezo's palace
with its wide-eaved
thatch roof.*

*Photograph from
E. G. Waterlot, 1926.*

the French colonial governor; even so, the thatch roofs remained.

During the 1930s, the thatch roofs were replaced with corrugated metal roofs with much shorter overhanging eaves. This change had dire consequences for the exterior walls and their sculpted decorations, which were no longer protected from direct exposure to the elements. The most severe problems occurred in the lower areas, particularly in the bas-reliefs located at the base of the walls. On the ajalala of Glélé, these included a row of lions—the emblem of the king.

In the early 1940s, the Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire restored the buildings of Guezo and Glélé. When the complex was opened to the public as the Musée Historique d'Abomey (Historic Museum of Abomey) in 1945, the restored



historical buildings housed the museum, which exhibited treasures from the kingdom. In 1960, following independence from France, the Republic of Dahomey received its first Unesco funds for work on the palace compound. Several other Unesco missions followed. Modifications, including the repainting of some bas-reliefs, were carried out during this period. In 1982, Benin ratified the World Heritage Convention, and the Royal Palaces of Abomey were included as a cultural site on the Unesco World Heritage List; three years later they were added to the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

By the late 1980s, several buildings within the museum precincts—for example, those of King Guezo—had already been completely renovated. Glélé's ajalala remained one of the only intact original

The entry buildings of the palaces of Glélé, left, and Guezo, far right, and Singbodji Square.

Photograph by F. Gadmer, 1930. Courtesy Musée Albert-Kahn—Département des Hauts-de-Seine, France.



*The ajalala of Glélé,
with the bas-reliefs
in their original posi-
tions before their
removal and subse-
quent conservation.*

*Photograph by
Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.*

structures with original bas-reliefs probably dating to the time of the Dahomean monarchy. For structural reasons, in 1988 the museum determined that Glélé's ajalala should be rebuilt—a decision in keeping with the historical practice of renovating palace buildings in the compound.

Recognizing the historical value of the bas-reliefs, the museum sought the advice of an architect working for the German embassy in Benin, who suggested detaching them from the facade before the building was reconstructed—a potentially risky undertaking. The bas-reliefs were cut from the walls and remounted as individual panels in heavy casings of earth strengthened with cement. These were supported by wooden frames and stored upright in the museum.

The ajalala of King Glélé was rebuilt out of stabilized earth—local earth mixed with a small amount of cement to ensure stability and longevity. Working closely from the originals, Beninois artists fashioned a new set of replica bas-reliefs, also of stabilized earth, and modern materials were used to paint them. The building was completed in 1996. Along with the restored palace of Guezo, it houses the Historic Museum of Abomey. Of the fifty-six bas-reliefs originally on Glélé's ajalala, fifty were saved. A selection of these is displayed in the museum's collection.

Guezo's palace courtyard and the rebuilt palace buildings.

*Photograph by
Francesca Piqué, 1995.*



