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Africa 63 (1), 1993

A YORUBA WOMAN REMEMBERS SERVITUDE IN A PALACE OF DAHOMEY, IN THE REIGNS OF KINGS GLELE AND BEHANZIN

Peter Morton-Williams

Several eye witnesses have left descriptions of the kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they will be familiar enough to readers of *Africa*. The published accounts, in general, are from the viewpoint of foreigners; where we have the insider's story, as Chief Agbidinoukoun's in Le Herissé (1911: chapter XID, Hazoumé (1937)) or that of the celebrated Gẹdẹgbe (b. *c.* 1809, d. 17 March 1936), principal diviner to successive kings of Dahomey, whose recollections are to be found in the monumental work of his admiring friend, Bernard Maupoil (1943; see especially chapter IV), those insiders are men. The all too brief reminiscence that follows will perhaps tantalise, not satisfy, but it does allow a glimpse of a Yoruba girl, captured it may be in the course of one of the two campaigns of the Dahomians against the Ketu Yoruba, 1882–83 or 1886, in the service of a royal wife in the capital, Abomey.

Towards the end of 1950 William R. Bascom began his second period of field research in Nigeria, accompanied by his wife, Berta. The visit attracted some attention, for he had brought with him the bronze heads collected in Ile-Ifẹ during the course of his first research in 1937, and he had ceremoniously returned them to the Ọni of Ifẹ in the Palace. He went on to begin research in the small Ketu-Yoruba town of Mẹkọ, near the frontier with Dahomey, then a part of Afrique Occidentale Française, now the Bénin Republic. At the time he was a member of faculty in anthropology at Northwestern University, under the chairmanship of M. J. Herskovits, the leading Africanist in the United States, and of course well known for his studies of Dahomey; so Bascom, while mainly concerned with Yoruba culture, was alert to Yoruba relations with Dahomey. His manner of conducting field research was in the Boas tradition, then strong in the United States. A working relationship would be developed with a regular informant, responding to a planned line of questions, and bringing in others with specialist roles and knowledge as appropriate. In Mẹkọ he was encamped in the crudely furnished government rest house on the edge of the escarpment, just outside and to the east of the town. By good fortune the caretaker of that rest house was a middle-aged man of good standing in the town, knowledgeable, interested in the enquiries and, despite his name, Tijani, able to enter temples and shrines freely and to handle masks. Tijani was thus both informant and interpreter, and also in rapport with other helpful people. After some hours of question and answer there might be a companionable walk to see places mentioned, or a more carefully arranged visit to a shrine or a ritual.

Bill and Berta Bascom were hospitable and generous. They invited me to visit them and at the same time entertained M. Paul Mercier, the French anthropologist, busy then with his research in southern Dahomey, and in

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charge of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) office in Porto Novo. Tijani had told them that his mother had been a captive of the king of Dahomey and had arranged that she would come to meet them and say what she could remember of that time long past. They kindly invited me to sit in with them. At the time—in my first spell of fieldwork—my anthropological perspective was bounded by a synchronic, structural functional horizon: I well remember, at University College London shortly before I left for Nigeria, Radcliffe-Brown arguing that social anthropology was an abstracting and generalising science, and we students were already sure that its subject matter—social structure, and not culture—was what anthropologists should be concerned with. I was well read in US cultural anthropology (no one taught by Daryll Forde in those, his eclectic, best years could fail to be) but it took meetings like this one in Mẹkọ to learn that I was parochial rather than ahead, and more time with the Egbado Yoruba to see that the coexistence of so many small kingdoms, as well as their structure, needed historical understanding. Although I knew too little about Dahomey to contribute to the proceedings that day, I wrote them in my notebook. Since neither Bascom nor Mercier has, I believe, published them, I offer what is a record of other people's work to readers of *Africa*.

The speakers. She, Tijani's mother (I do not know her own name, as Yoruba women were not ordinarily addressed by name but by teknonymy or occupation); T., Tijani; W. B., William Bascom; B. B., Berta Bascom; P. M., Paul Mercier. Tijani interpreting between English and Yoruba. (Present also was Tijani's father, who had been showing us some *egúngún* masks and costume.) Date: 9 January 1951, afternoon.

W. B. This whiteman [Mercier] has come here from Agbome.

She. To-ò! So!

W. B. She said she lived in Agbome twenty years before Glele died? [This is puzzling: Glele died in December 1889, and it would suggest that her memory reached back to 1869, but she was certainly not fifty years older than her son Tijani, and Yoruba in those days did not match their reckoning of time to that of Europeans. Perhaps she had been aged twenty when Glele died, making her about eighty one at the time of this meeting, just over sixty one years later. For dates in the wars and raids between Dahomey and the Yoruba see Morton-Williams, 1967: 82–84.]

She. Yes. Then Kondo became king. [Kondo took Béhanzin as his 'strong name'.]

W. B. How long had Kondo been king before she returned to Mẹkọ?

She. Ọdún mẹ́ta. Three years [equally well translated as 'In the third year'.]

W. B. A whiteman came with the king as a captive? [Staff captain Privé.]

She. Yes.

W. B. Where did they capture him?

She. Ijimẹrin. Ikondo wa. Ijimerin. Ikondo came.

P. M. That's the place where Béhanzin had his palace before he had his kingdom confirmed.

She. Aṣẹlegbe . . .

P. M. Aṣẹregbe he was captured. At Ijimẹ he was made a king and his

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grave is there. [Aṣedegbe was Tijani's pronunciation, Aṣẹrigbe Mercier's. Yoruba 'r' is Fon 'l'. I write what I heard. Atcherigbe on the international 1 : 1 m map.]

She. Aṣẹlegbe nĩbo l'ó ti mú u—where he was captured. If a man awakes in the morning to go on foot from Agbome to Aṣẹregbe, it will be one o'clock before he gets there. [She and Mercier are wrong: he gave himself up to Captain Privé at Achakpa/Akachakpa, some 15 km north of Abomey, having fled from Aṣẹrigbe when the French threatened to destroy it.]

P. M. Correct. It's 50 km. In which direction?

She. To the sun ... north-east.

P. M. Quite right!

W. B. Is this the place where he turned into snakes, animals, and so on?

She. Yes, that's the time. Snakes, bees, ants, hornets. Sometimes Béhanzin changed into animals—*ẹ́kun*, leopard. [Herskovits, 1938, i:24, recounts, 'When he saw the Dahomean cause was lost, he changed into a bird.']

P. M. When he was captured at Abomey, how long was it after the white man had reached Abomey?

She. The whiteman had stayed at Agbome before.

P. M. How many years?

She. L'ọdún méjì. For two years [but Yoruba, counting inclusively, would intend 'a year and some time'. This supposedly refers to General Dodds's entry into the fired town].

T. [intervening]. Just in the same year.

P. M. Was there much fighting?

She. No! No! Not much fighting.

P. M. Did they set fire to the town?

She. No.

P. M. Béhanzin set fire to the palace in 1892. Where was she, exactly?

W. B. He burnt the palace in 1892, was captured in 1894.

T. She was not sold as a slave, she was kept as a house servant in Agbome palace.

P. M. There were several—three—Agbome palaces.

She. Ile Agbome: Igbekan. Whegbe and Ijegbe were the others of three; and still a fourth, called Agbome.

P. M. Yes; the principal palace was not one of those three.

T. Yes. She was in the central palace.

P. M. The name of this central palace? It has a name.

She. Ahome. [Tijani adds, 'That's palace, *àfin*.'] I don't know [another name].

P. M. Does she know the name Simbọji?

She. Yes. That was the place where he killed people, at the grave of his father.

P. M. Simbọji was the name of the palace and of the grave in front. [Did different people identify, by the name Simbọji, the palace or the place of immolation? The references cited invite such speculation.]

She. Ọnly big men should call it that. Ihome the name common people can mention. That was the palace I lived in with the king and his wife, when the whiteman came. I ran away with the king when he left the town, ran to

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Aṣalọ. [*Tijani*. That is Aṣelegbe.] I was seven months there—*oṣù méje*—1893. [The king's sending ahead of him his dependants was recorded by Le Herissé, p. 347.]

P. M. Béhanzin was captured at the end of 1894.

W. B. When they captured Kondo at Aṣelegbe, did they bring him back to Agbome?

She. When they captured him the Europeans said they would take him to Agbome. He said, No, if taken there the slaves and people there would kill him. But they made a big cage of iron and took him to the European quarters. [General Dodds had made his headquarters at Goho, ten minutes' walk outside the eastern gate of Abomey.] They locked one of his children in the cage with him ... The king could stand up in the cage ... It didn't have wheels, they carried it.

Tijani's father. They gave it four wheels.

W. B. What were the wheels made of?

She. I did not notice that. They did not let us see it clearly. When it was brought to the town, Agbome, all the people were glad, cheering.

W. B. How long in Agbome?

She. The reason I left him and got to Agbome before the king was because the king ran to the bush. I got to Agbome not more than two months before the king.

P. M. Did she hear the noise of guns before she left Abomey?

She. The first time we were aware that the Europeans were coming to make war against the king was when the whitemen came to two towns, Ijẹhwẹ and Ikana.

P. M. Ah! Kana, a town 10 km from Abomey.

She. Ijẹwhẹ was about four miles from Agbome and Ikana about two miles from Agbome. I say Idọfa is from Imẹkọ as Ijẹhwẹ from Agbome. We heard the sound of guns from Ijẹwhẹ. They said the Europeans were coming to Ikana next.

P. M. There is no trace of Ijẹwhẹ now.

She. Ijẹhwẹ was the proper town for the King of Dahomi. His house was there, the clay of the walls mixed with the heads of those people he killed when every year he performed the ceremony for his father. They heard the guns of Ikana when they were on the road to Ijẹwhẹ and they fled. The king ordered his wives onwards. When the European saw women carrying guns shooting in war, he stopped his own people shooting any more.

P. M. At Ikana was the most bitter fight against the Amazons.

She. Then they ran, because they might shoot the king. I stayed nine months at Aṣerẹgbe before the king returned to Agbome.

W. B. Did they have any more kings for Dahomey after that?

She. We couldn't wait to see. The Europeans told us to go back to our towns. [The French, after taking Abomey, encouraged those who had been in captivity to return to their homes, but her release was later.]

P. M. Europeans went to Agbome about every year. Had she seen them before?

She. I went to Igerefe before this and saw Europeans in a shop selling cloth. I was a servant in the king's house and couldn't go outside to see anyone.

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P. M. Only the king's wives could go out, accompanied by guards and bells.

She. The guards were girls, not men. Each wife had three or four girls, servants.

*P. M.*Who were the girls?

She. I was one of those who went out with the king's wife.

B. B. When the king's wives went out, what did they do—play drums?

She. Ó ṣe sago; a máa k'ígbe [she calls out loudly,] '*Iṣẹ! Iṣẹ!*' One beat a hand gong; we shouted '*Iṣẹ! Iṣẹ!*' If one of the king's wives was going out, two female servants would go before and two behind. The two in front would shout, so no one should see them on the way, *A fẹ su sijaa mi dagbe!* A king's wife is coming!

The wives in the house were divided into five parts. When going out, they called all this before everyone. Then, to announce which group is coming, they used to call *mi dagbe* for the most senior. *A fẹ su sijaa osẹ–osẹ–osẹ!* for the next in rank. It was *ago–ago–ago!* for the next group. They were divided into two sets and the same call, *ago!* was used for both. Also for *osẹ!* two sets. There were many names for the wives, but servants should not give the names for the different kinds of wives. The names for each group were: *ihudohwe*, the greeting for them *osẹ; ihume* their greeting *dagbe*; *a fẹ sija mi yọnkẹn!* I've just remembered—for the fourth after: *ago!*

P. M. Does she remember *Pose*, the name of one of the two recorded categories of royal wives?

She. Yes; they are another, the most senior. Their greeting is *pose!* the same as *Idohwe*, the great wife of the king (*Ayańlá* in Yoruba).

P. M. Pose means leopard wife, *ahose* means royal wife.

She. Aya-ọba pátápátá! Senior wives of the king, absolutely. *Ahose* is the general term for all the king's wives, including *pose. Aya-ọba* (Yor.), they are–king's wives. Highest, *Pose*; *Hume* next; next *Hudohwe*; next—I forget; and the next—I forget. When Glele reigned, I was under a *hudohwe*.

P. M. What was her name? [Interpreted to her, *abísọ-rẹ̀ gan*? Her real birth-given name?]

She. No one should call their names; no one knew them except by the name the King gave them. There were eight in this group. Her name was Ayinu. She was the one who took poison when Glele died. [Dunglas, 1958: 20, was told that ninety wives in 'Singbodji' had gone to their deaths in a mutual and collective suicide.]

P. M. Did she become servant to a wife of Kondo?

She. No. When Glele died, the woman took poison, and I was chosen for another *hudohwe* of the same group for Kondo. At that time Kondo was not yet crowned.

W. B. Was he crowned before he was captured?

She. No. He was waiting to perform the final ceremony for his father before they were to crown him.

P. M. Right. And he never built his own palace. [It was left to Béhanzin's successor, Agoliagbo, proclaimed king by Brigadier General Dodds, representing the French government, on 15 January 1894, to perform these rites for Glele. They were going on when Toutée was received by Agoliagbo

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—hospitably, with a bottle of 'la veuve Cliquot ... vrai champagne, excellent, parfait de tous points'—on 2 January 1895 (Toutée, 1896: 70).]

W. B. When the king's wives went out, did they send a bell before or just call out?

P. M. There was a servant wearing a bell.

She. Not all the wives used bells [*agogo*, bell, or hand gong]. Some were not really wives [*aya-ọba*] but king's wives in name only, *ọbaya lásán*. They used bells instead of servants to praise them when going out. 'Wives of the Yard' we called them. Young girls carried the bells.

There were eight of each group of wives. Each of three groups of eight [of the highest-ranking wives] in a separate part of the king's compound, one part for each of the three. The other wives lived in another compound in the same area of the king, and the townswomen went to them to greet them, but no one could enter the houses of the Eight–Eight–Eight. If the mother of the wife I served wanted to greet her, she had to call one of us servants to the palace gate.

W. B. How many *aya lásán* were there?

She. Too many [to count]. Some of them were for cleaning the house and to take a calabash when the king made spit and take it out and throw it in the dustbin and bring another clean one.

P. M. Still done today.

She. Another brought his tobacco pipe. Others carried away his faeces (servants carried his wives'). Then other wives lived in the other house Ihwegbe, the first house; these were potters and the servants sold the pots. None of the servants traded in the market. [These wives in Ihwegbe would have been members of one or more of the companies of the amazons, who 'in peacetime ... saw to their own need by manufacturing pots or carving calabashes; both crafts were their ... monopoly' (Lombard, 1967: 87 f).]

The songs [praising, and warning the public to turn away at the approach of the wives]: *afe sisu ...* means in Yoruba, *Aya-Ọba si m̀bọ̀, ṣí apá kan*, The king's wife is coming—turn to one side! *Mi yọnkẹn* means, Clear the way. *Mi dagbe* means, Clear the bush!

P. M. Did she attend the annual ceremony of the king, *hwetannu*, Things of the end of the year [Yor. *ìparí ọdún*]?

She. We cannot go to see any ceremony of the kind.

P. M. But the king's wives attended.

She. That is a time they saluted the king's wives for going out, *ìparí ọdún*, went to Ajahi market in Agbome. There the king made a wall, a platform, about 12 ft high. [She reaches out to demonstrate.] They would have one man to climb it and the king himself would push him off it; he would be killed. When going to the market place a man would be tied in one thing, a yam carrier, as if an animal. They put a stick in his mouth, a T piece, and tied it, and tied his face with a white cloth, so they couldn't cry out.

P. M. Does she remember the name of the platform?

She. *Atọ.*

P. M. That's right. Did she go on the platform herself?

She. I went with the wives, sat with the wives on the top of the platform. Eight to ten, ten to twenty; carried up and pushed off. At the back, the heads were cut off, for putting on the palace. The heads were to be cut off

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before they hit the ground. Before these special wives came out, they had to step on the heads of humans killed that morning.

P. M. How many times did she go on this platform? Every year? Did she never see white men there?

She. Yes, yes, I saw them; but not soldiers, they were traders from Igenife, before the war.

P. M. The successor king had to come from the *Pose*, not born of another kind of wife. [He is contradicted by Lombard, 1967: 78, 83.]

W. B. What was the mother of Kondo?

She. I don't know.

P. M. Did she hear of Kondo poisoning his brother [the heir]? [See Maupoil, 1943: 138, text and n. 1, for a discussion of this rumour. The heir, Hãlãzo, died of smallpox sent by magic instigated by Kondo.]

She. Yes, they said so.

P. M. Did she know Glele's *babaláwo* [diviner by Ifa oracle], the one who said Kondo should not make war? [Maupoil, 1943: 164, n. 1: Gẹdẹgbe told Béhanzin, having consulted the oracle about the war with the whites, 'the butterfly ... once out of the cocoon, never returns to it before its death. This augured the defeat of Béhanzin and his death in exile.' Albéca heard a story, retold by Maupoil (p. 135, n. 2) that Gẹdẹgbe's oracle, satisfied with the immolation of a few 'useless old people' and some Yoruba children, revealed to Béhanzin after his defeat that the French would soon depart and the king re-enter Abomey.]

She. He had about four *babalawo*. I don't know their names.

P. M. The name Gẹdẹgbe?

She. It may be so. [She was shown the photograph of Gẹdẹgbe in Maupoil, plate 1.] I don't know his name.

P. M. He was a Yoruba.

She. Yes. Wives would only go out when the king was going somewhere.

W. B. How many wives were with him on the platform?

She. Nearly all of them, including some *aya lásán*, because there was one with the spit calabash and one with the tobacco pipe.

P. M. It was impossible for all the *aya lásán* to be there—too many for the platform, which I have seen.

She. On that day for sacrifice, the wives of the king dressed in very fine clothes, because it was a celebration; and the servants in fine clothes, too.

Not all wives went to war with the king; but my own mistress went. We stopped before we reached the battlefield.

P. M. Does she remember white men there in Abomey two days before Glele died? [Dr Bayol and his aides—see below.]

She. Yes.

So ended this part of a long and, for me, instructive day's work. It will be seen that the main purpose had been to match her recollections against the published accounts of the kingdom of Dahomey; for Mercier, particularly with Burton and Skertchly. Mercier had also an interest in her recollections of the main palace: he played an important part in the reconstruction of part of it as a museum and in documenting the exhibits (Mercier, 1952).

A field text as short as this must not be overburdened with commentary,

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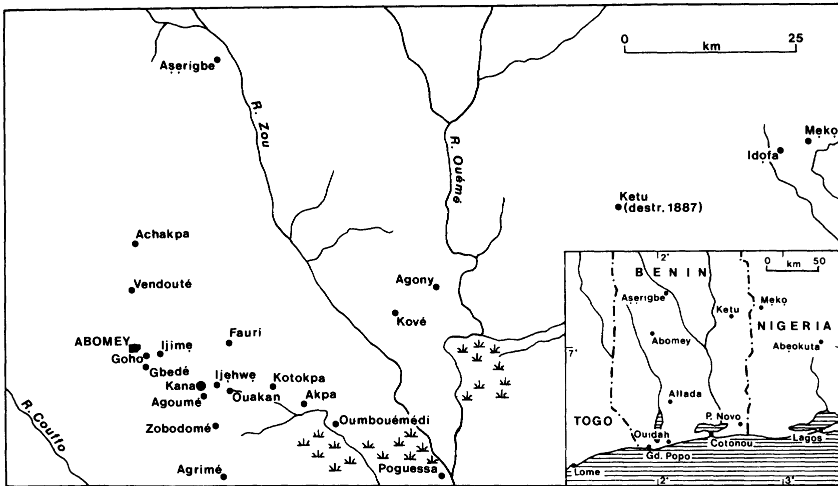

FIG. 1 *Dahomey c. 1890*

but anglophone readers may like to have extracts translated from pertinent (and some of them, rare) French writings; and a few glosses may be helpful, beginning with place names.

Initial 'i' or 'a' are weak and may be interchanged, lost by elision or simply dropped, hence Ikana/Kana, Imẹkọ/Mẹkọ, Ihome/Ahome. Some names were given in Fon (the language of Dahomey), some in Yoruba, or in both versions; thus Aṣẹrigbe/Aṣẹlegbe/Aṣẹdegbe/Aṣalọ; French, usually Atchéribé. In their Ketu dialect of Yoruba the 'l' may not only be replaced by ('one-flap') 'r' but sometimes, too, by 'd'—see, for instance, Dunglas, 1957, XX: 151.). Further complications arise from inconsistencies between renderings in the references listed and also in different maps; and some maps use the Paris, others the Greenwich, meridian. Thus the old capital is now conventionally written Abomey, though pronounced Agbome, and Abomé is sometimes seen; [I]mẹkọ may also be found as Meko and Mekkaw, Ketu as Kétou or Kètou. On the accompanying sketch map, places (except the now generally accepted Abomey) that were named in the dialogue above are written as spoken on that occasion: Ijẹhwẹ, rather than Diokoué (by Foà) or Djokoué (Brunet and Giethlen, and others); Ijimẹ rather than Gime (Foà) or Djimè (Akindélé and Aguessy) or Djimé (Cornevin). In Yoruba a dot below indicates an open vowel or, below 's', a 'sh' sound, and the signs ´ and ` mark high and low lexical tones; 'p' is a double plosive, 'kp'.

Igerefe/Igenife, where there were 'white men selling cloth' is Ouidah. In my notebook I had written 'Igbewhe', then scratched it out and written 'in Y. Igerefe–no dot under', which suggests that Igerefe is the Yoruba version of Fon Igbewhe. Foà has Ouidah 'called by the indigenes Gléhoué or Grégoué'. Dunglas (1957, XIX: 118 f.) in a useful summary of contemporary sources says that Gléwhé (*la ferme*) was in the seventeenth century 'a rural agglomeration' beside the sea and south of the capital, Sahé (three

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leagues inland), of the coastal kingdom Houéda. The name Gléhoué—'written Grigwe or Gregoy by the Europeans' (Akinjọgbin, 1967: 79)—disappeared from the maps, to be replaced by the name of the people (which the Portuguese wrote Ajuda, the French Juda, the British Whydaw and the Netherlanders Fida). Akinjọgbin uses both the names Whydah and Igelefe for the town. On Albéca's large-scale map (nearest in date to her visit) the French *factorerie* (a cluster of buildings is drawn) 'Gléhoué' is located on the beach across the lagoon from 'Whyddah' (*sic!*) and on p. 104 he lists two French and one German *factoreries* in Whydah. It is clear, then, that in using the two names Tijani's mother was referring to Ouidah as a whole rather than to the French trading post across the lagoon.

Kana or Cana. This town was seized by Dahomey in the earliest years of the kingdom and rebuilt to be a favourite resort of later kings. It was, so it seems, a town of dispersed clusters of buildings. Albéca (1889: 63), three years before the French campaign, estimated its population at 25,000 (and Abomey's at 60,000). Chaudoin (1891: 193, 230) regarded Agoumé and perhaps Ouakon as parts of Kana. The veterinary officer Frédéric Schelameur, with Dodds in Kana in November 1892, has left a description just before its ruin:

> The town of Kana occupies a large area; it is made up of a succession of hamlets separated from one another by fields of maize and connected by more or less wide and winding streets. The houses are alike to those of other villages ... some are very spacious and surrounded by a clay wall. Very beautiful trees grow at the crossroads and round most dwellings are fruit trees, ... oranges, pawpaws and mangoes. We see, in front and to the left, a vast surrounding wall forming a huge rectangle within which rise the dwellings of the king.

In wretched contrast Commandant Toutée who camped there overnight on 1–2 and 5–6 January 1895, wrote (pp. 65 f.):

> Cana is the sacred town of the kings of Dahomé ... As for Cana, there is not temple, nor traders, nor sacred town, nor town at all. Three or four clusters of huts, a crossing of roads, of which the greatest, straight and grassy, leads to Abomé ... The road from Cana to Abomé is the prettiest in Dahomé.

Le Herissé (p. 27) has an interesting passage on the various kinds of royal wives; the population of Simboji was reckoned to be about 8,000, almost wholly female. Glele had about 1,000 wives in that palace, some forty of them *kposi*, the leopard's wives, and the others *ahosi*, properly *aho-asi*, wives of the king. It may be that Le Herissé's forty *kposi* are Tijani's mother's sets of eight each of five ranks of titled wives. Later views are readily accessible: by Herskovits, by Lombard, and an admirable miniature by Paul Mercier himself (1954: 232). [A kindly but anonymous referee for *Africa* has mentioned a thesis concerning Dahomian royal wives, for Boston University, by Edna G. Bay, which I have not seen.] The many roles and duties assigned to women in Simboji in the second half of the nineteenth century went far beyond those usual among royal wives in West Africa, which include the tending of ancestral kings, and invite some discussion.

The great palace—perhaps we should think of all the palaces collectively—was the domain of 'the King of the City' (in Mercier's translation), but a realm of women, and policed by women who were not only the king's

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bodyguards but also the *corps d'élite* of the army. To the concentration of material power in the palace may be added occult or mystical powers generated by cults of the gods and the dead kings. Outside, in the realm of 'the King of the Fields', the roles of the great men did not directly interlink to form a corporate group that could be in structural opposition to the king, but were mediated through their female counterparts, through whom they related individually to the king. This intervention, by which the King of Dahomey combined in himself the persons of the two kings of the two constituent kingdoms of the whole, establishes the main organising principle manifest at every level: the containing of counterpositioned sets. Tijani's mother here was shown it at work within the ranked groups of royal wives.

The astonishing form of the 'dual monarchy' that so struck Burton and, later, Mercier took its inspiration from the metaphysical conviction that 'dual nature is the condition of completeness' (Mercier, 1954: 232). But that conception, expressed in attitudes towards twins, or notions about spirit doubles, for instance, is not specifically Dahomian; we recognise it throughout the region—Dogon and Yoruba spring to mind. When Gezo (followed by Glele) instituted the dual monarch he had intended, so Mercier was informed, restoring the primordial kingdom when Akaba and his twin sister Xãgbe (also written Ahangbè) jointly reigned. (Curiously, that story has its echo in one I was told in Ọyọ, that King Ṣango's twin sister Bayane had been made Aláàfin; but the Yoruba twist was never to be ruled again by a woman.) Gezo had hit on an unique solution (perhaps in part inspired by the double sets of courts of the matrilineal Akan, the king's and the queen mother's, for Dahomey had more features of its kingship in common with the Akan than with the Yoruba) to a widespread problem: how to secure command of his high officers of state, his generals and his chief of staff (the Migan), who were supposedly the kingmakers. Phrased in Weberian terms, it was how to recruit, manage and maintain the administrative staff of an enlarging system of patrimonial rule (and one, in Dahomey, moving quite fast towards sultanism). Other patrimonial kingdoms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and not too far away, such as Benin, Ọyọ, Habe Zazzau and even Asante, seem loose-knit in comparison with this creation of the later kings of Dahomey. Gezo's own usurpation shows up the insecurity of the earlier kings, whose problems have been well explored by Akinjọgbin (1967, chapters 3–6). Succession to such thrones is generally hazardous, and in Dahomey non-royal chiefs had to act swiftly at the news of the king's death to install his heir and to put a stop to the explosion of anarchy and mayhem in the kingdom outside the palace and of suicidal frenzy within. It is hard to see, had the French not invaded, how this huge, elaborate and costly patrimonial administration could have maintained itself into the twentieth century.

Béhanzin's tobacco pipe, with the need for an *ayalásán* to be ready with a spittoon, draws attention not only to his own addiction to tobacco (photographs or engravings of him with a pipe are to be seen in Brunet and Giethlen, 1900, Cornevin, 1962, Foà, 1895 and Ross, 1978) but also to the craving for treacly Brazilian tobacco as one of the motives that kept the slave trade going, as Verger has made clear (1964: 5–17; see also Dunglas,

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1957, XX: 41, n. 2). Reporting an attendant with calabash-spittoon for the female chief as well as for the king of Mamprusi, Susan Drucker-Brown (1975: 85) has suggested that it was because their bodies were dangerous that such care was taken with effluvia. C. K. Meek (1931: 128 f., 158, 251) on the Jukun king took a Frazerian view.

Béhanzin and the French campaigns, 1892 and 1893–94. The circumstances by no means creditable to the French residing on the coast (Cornevin, 1962: 360, writes of conflicting views aired by the military, sailors, administrators, traders and the missionaries: 'The mutual hostility of the various responsible Frenchmen over Dahomey resulted in letters of rare violence') that led to the sending of an expeditionary force commanded by colonel Alfred-Amédée Dodds (veteran of the conquest of Tonkin, Vietnam) against King Béhanzin are too well known to need to be told again in detail (see, among many other accounts, Brunet and Giethlen, 1900; Cornevin, 1962; Foà, 1895; Ross, 1978; Schelameur, 1898; Cornevin (with an excellent bibliography), Dunglas and Pawlowski name many more). The opinions of Robert Cornevin and David Ross differ interestingly about the character and role of Jean Bayol, whose report to Paris after his visit to Abomey in November and December 1889 helped turn opinion there towards war. Ross (1978: 147) asserts:

> In November 1889 the French sent the Lieutenant Governor of the Rivières du Sud, Dr. Jean Bayol, a fanatical, and often impetuous, advocate of French overseas expansion, to the Slave Coast to try to settle the problems of the area in a manner favourable to France. The Lieutenant Governor travelled to Abomey in November 1889 and in an interview with Prince Kondo, the Vi-Daho or Crown Prince, demanded that Dahomey should immediately fulfil her treaty obligations and hand over Cotonou. Kondo replied that Dahomey had never ceded Cotonou and had no intention whatever of doing so. Bayol, realising that further negotiations were pointless, on the 22nd February 1890 ordered that Cotonou should be occupied and that its Fon administrators should be placed under arrest ... Bayol's action meant that the dispute between France and Dahomey had erupted into war.

Cornevin (pp. 32, 319), on the other hand, portrays (with some irony) another Bayol—'It could have been difficult to find better than Dr Bayol for a peace-making mission'—and says of his mission:

> These objectives, as much as the astonishing list of presents that the 'Good Doctor' [he had been a naval surgeon] was to take on behalf of President Carnot, show well the distortions between Parisian eyeglasses, where they saw the 'Good Black King' receive with deep-felt gratitude the presents borne by 'the Good Doctor', and those of Dahomey, where the representatives of France, month after month, were ceaselessly rebuffed, and where to the Abomey government Bayol was a mediocre suppliant.

Two writers closer to the events may help us weigh these judgements. Chaudoin, who with his fellow prisoners was lodged in the Chacha's house in Abomey, says (1891: 217, 227) Bayol had stayed in the same house and, so he was told, had taken purges to make himself too ill to attend the Customs. Foà (1895: 51 f.) writes:

> At last, in November, M. le Lieutenant-gouverneur du Sénégal Bayol was sent to Abomey on a mission to obtain a decisive interview with King Glèlè, on the

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> subject of Cotonou ... it could not succeed ... The king forced M. Bayol to be present at the human sacrifices, where the Porto Novo people, taken prisoner during the last campaign, were designated the victims.

The release of those Porto Novan prisoners had been among the objectives set for Bayol.

> It was impossible to defy us more completely. M. Bayol bore it all with a smile on his lips, but he returned ill with disappointment and rage. He made a vigorous report on the result of his mission. In it he insisted that the government should defend our treaties by force, since persuasion was impossible.

Foà, who had lived from June 1886 to May 1890 on the coast (in Ouidah?) and whose book is dedicated 'au Général Dodds' may or may not have known that the part of the treaty that ceded Cotonou to the French had not been translated to Glele (as Dunglas believed) and may even have been a forgery. Bayol evidently did not know, and the more probable picture of him that emerges is that his experience in Abomey, rather than a pre-commitment to war, determined his advice to Paris. He could hardly have arrived in Abomey at a worse time. Glele was dying (yet, wrote Dunglas, 1958: 18, he did once receive Bayol, shortly after his arrival with those trumpery gifts) but his condition was being kept secret, while Kondo was acting the surrogate and, to ensure his succession, could not have conducted himself less assertively than Glele would have done. That Bayol was sickened, as well as seeing an affront to France, by the killing of the Porto Novans cannot be doubted. To read accounts of the last years of Dahomey, whether of the beheading of the prisoners, or of the amazons in defence of their king hurling themselves at French bayonets, is harrowing enough.

Béhanzin's side of the story is less often told but is to be found in a letter written for him by his son, Ouanilo, from Martinique to the President and published by La Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, and reprinted by Cornevin, (1962: 360). How astonished the Dahomians were that the French, unlike the Yoruba, should refuse to be paid to go away was still vivid in the memory of Chief Agbidinoukoun, Béhanzin's brother and court historian, when he recounted his view of the war to Le Herissé (1911: 347).

Some dates for the battles are pertinent. Colonel Dodds, who had refused to answer letters from Béhanzin proposing negotiation (Le Herissé, 1911: 345), led his expeditionary force out of Porto Novo on 11 September 1892. On the 20th occurred the first engagement with a Dahomey force at Dogba; then from the 27th to the 29th, the first crossing of the river Ouémé and a battle for Poguessa (Kphoghèssa, in Le Herissé, 1911; Kpokisa in Maupoil, 1943; Pokissa in Cornevin, 1962) and, here, the first encounter with amazons, of whom more than thirty died on 2 October (Schelameur, 1898: 104). On 12 October, battle at Oumbouémédi and, on the 13th, Dahomian camp at Akpa attacked, fighting continuing until the 20th, when 'a bayonet charge by the Hausa riflemen ejected them from the village of Akpa' (Cornevin, 1962: 354); then, on the 26th, the French entered Kotokpa after repeated counter-attacks by Dahomians, including amazons, met again by bayonets. On 2 November, after a fierce battle for Ouakan, Dodds camped under the walls of the palace. The next day the Dahomians counter-attacked and regained the palace. On the 4th Béhanzin led the remnants

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of the royal army, the elephant hunters, the amazons, prisoners taken out the evening before from the cells of Abomey, in a last great battle. His forces were dislodged by the bayonet from the palace of Djokoué and the expeditionary force encamped at the outskirts of Kana. This is probably that 'most bitter fight against the amazons' in the words of Mercier, above, and these the amazons raised by Béhanzin and described by Le Herissé (p. 67):

> Béhanzin created, with a kernel of women of the palace, the *Houisôdji*, whose name forms the first syllables of a hymn these warriors sang ... 'Our swords form a mountain, ... impassable ...'. It was these who most often measured themselves against our soldiers; their fury and their disdain for anger endowed all the amazons with the terrible renown that has reached us in France.

With the French in Kana, Béhanzin tried again to buy peace; but (according to Schelameur, 1898: 239 f.) a few hours earlier on the same day, 11th November, that his emissaries came to meet Dodds, Governor Ballot, with a group that included Albéca, had arrived, bearing the news that Dodds had been promoted *général de brigade* and delegating to him all powers to make terms for peace, conditional on French troops entering Abomey. From a different perspective, the old chief told Le Herissé (1911: 347 f.) that, after the dreadful carnage at Kana, they lost heart:

> It was on that day that our wives and our children were sent with emissaries behind Atchéribé and we hid our riches away from inhabited places, because Béhanzin already projected leaving Abomey for refuge across the Zou. But it was not the whites we mistrusted. All through this war, the French did no evil off the field of battle. Our Yoruba and Mahi slaves profited from our defeat to steal the money, coral and cloths we had hidden. The white troops stopped at Cana. Soon Béhanzin sent a messenger to Colonal Dodds with 10,000 francs, yams, two cannons and a finger in silver. This last object, intended for the King of France (President of the Republic) signified that henceforth we should like to be joined to France as the finger to the hand. We thought thus to obtain the retreat of the colonel's soldiers, because every time in our unhappy wars with the Yoruba we had given them money they had left the country. But, no! The chief of the whites declared that he would return to the coast only if we consented to hoist the French flag over the gates of Abomey and yield up our guns and our cannons. Béhanzin sent only a few guns. The colonel took them and refused the other gifts.
>
> It was then that Ballot arrived. He set harsher conditions than the colonel. 'I consent to suspend hostilities,' said he to Béhanzin, 'on condition that the colonel shall enter the palace of Abomey with 100 fusiliers. There we shall see you and treat with you.'
>
> These conditions seemed unacceptable to the chiefs. They counselled Béhanzin to fly towards Atchéribé and set fire to Abomey to stop the French from installing themselves there.
>
> The king fled next day, while the chiefs burnt the palace. Most of our historic relics vanished in the fire.

The flames spread through the town and Dodds entered the ruins of an empty capital. The last skirmish was at Fauri, on 27th December 1892.

From Aṣerigbẹ Béhanzin made approaches to President Carnot, who refused to meet his delegates. Dodds was recalled from leave in August 1893 and, after an extraordinary but vain pursuit of the king, expected to

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take him in Aṣerigbẹ; the town surrendered, 10 November 1893, but the bird had flown—or, as was said, the king had disappeared in some animal form. Dodds outmanoeuvred him by rounding up the princes, and proclaiming one of them, Goutchili, a son of Glele, who had held the military title *Gau* during the war with France, the new king of Dahomey. Goutchili, who took the name Agoliagbo, betrayed his brother's whereabouts to Dodds. Béhanzin's last oration to his remaining followers at Akatchapa/Achakpa is retold by Dunglas (1958: 108), who also says that the final negotiations were effected by the famous diviner Gẹdẹgbe, referred to above. Captain Privé hurried to Achakpa and escorted Béhanzin to General Dodds at Goho, on 26 January 1894. The story is that he was sent under an escort commanded by Privé to Cotonou. I can find no mention of that cage Tijani's mother describes and Mercier knew about. He was then, accompanied by five wives, his favourite son, Ouanilo, and a daughter, Kpo Tassa, sent via Marseilles to Martinique; and eventually allowed to come home to Africa, not to Abomey but to Blida in Algiers, where he soon died of pneumonia, on 10 December 1906. His remains (his ashes, according to Akindélé and Aguessy: 36) were brought home by his son Ouanilo (by now a barrister in Paris) in 1928, accorded military honours in Cotonou and then Abomey, and interred in the palace at Ijime (Gimé), where Melville and Frances Herskovits (Herskovits, I: 24) saw the grave tended by old ladies. Ouanilo died on the voyage back to France, called for, they said in Dahomey, by his father, Béhanzin.

All this may seem an elaborate article concerning so short a dialogue that took place so long ago. It is regrettable that we did not try to prompt recall of the feel of life day by day in the great palace of Kings Glele and Béhanzin: surely the largest-ever enclosed community of women. The 16th of November 1992 was the centenary of its end in flames.

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Abstract

A Yoruba woman in the Ketu-Yoruba town of Mẹkọ, in western Nigeria, gave an interview in January 1951 to the anthropologists William R. Bascom and Paul Mercier, in which she talked of her time in Dahomey as a servant in Simboji palace, some sixty years earlier. The conversation was written down by the author of this article and is offered to mark the centenary of the destruction of Abomey in 1992. She had served two mistresses, both of the same high rank. The first had committed suicide on the death of Glele, and the other she had served throughout the reign of Béhanzin, during the defence against the French campaign led by General Dodds and the time of refuge in the north of the kingdom until the king's surrender. She had seen the king shut in a cage before his exile, when she had returned home. She gave new information about the ranking of royal wives, how they were ordered in groups, and the cries announcing their approach when out of the palace. The article ends with notes identifying places mentioned, matching Fon and Yoruba names, and relating her story to published accounts of events.

Résumé

Une Yoruba de la ville de Meko en territoire Ketu-Yoruba, dans l'ouest du Nigéria

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a donné, en janvier 1951, une interview aux anthropologues William R. Bascom et Paul Mercier dans laquelle elle raconta sa vie de servante, au palais Simboji au Dahomey, quelque soixante ans arrière. Cette conversation est rapportée par l'auteur de l'article dans le cadre de la commémoration, en 1992, du centième d'anniversaire de la destruction d'Abomey. Cette servant eut deux maîtresses, l'une et l'autre du même rang, l'une se suicida à la mort de Glele; l'autre, elle la servit durant tout le règne de Béhanzin, au temps de la guerre contre les Français conduite par le Général Dodds et de l'exil dans le nord du royaume jusqu'à la reddition du roi. A son retour elle fut témoin de la mise en cage du roi avant son exil. Elle donna des informations encore inconnues sur le rang des épouses royales, comment on les rangeait en groupes, les cris qui annonçaient leur approche lorsqu'elles sortaient du palais. L'article se termine par des notes identifiant les lieux qu'elle mentionna, rassemblant des noms Fon et Yoruba et reliant son histoire aux récits déjà publiés de ces événements.

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