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ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AMAZONS OF DAHOMEY*

STANLEY B. ALPERN

I

Among the most intriguing unresolved historical questions concerning the women soldiers of Dahomey are the journalist's basic when, how and why (the who and where are givens). We know the amazons' terminal date precisely: the fourth of November 1892, when they fought their last battle against the French at the gates of Cana. But assertions in the literature as to when they got started range all the way from the reign of Wegbaja (*ca.* 1640-*ca.* 1680-85) to that of Glele (1858-89).

Neither Wegbaja nor Glele can seriously be considered as the originator of the amazons, though the former has a far better claim than the latter. The Wegbaja thesis rests on a tradition that he created the well-known corps of elephant huntresses, the *gbeto*, and on speculation that they became the first amazon unit.¹ The *gbeto* may even predate Wegbaja: Palau Marti cites a tradition that he organized pre-existing huntresses into a special corps.² Lombard offers the plausible explanation that since women provisioned the royal palace, it was only natural that some of them furnish game for the king's table.³ Dunglas seems to have been the first to write down the tradition tracing the *gbeto* to Wegbaja; he was inclined to accept it.⁴ P.K. Glélé says Wegbaja began employing women as personal guards.⁵ Cornevin states, without giving his source, that it was the *gbeto* themselves who doubled as the king's bodyguards.⁶ None of

* This paper grew out of research for a book titled *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (London, 1998) scheduled for co-publication in July 1998 by C. Hurst & Co. Ltd. of London and New York University Press.

¹ A. Le Hérisse, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey: mœurs, religion, histoire* (Paris, 1911), 67. Le Hérisse was the first author to identify the *gbeto* as the oldest amazon unit, but he wrongly credited their founding to Gezo. See also Marie-Madeleine Prévaudeau, *Abomey-la-mystique* (Paris, 1936), 93-94; Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (Seattle, 1966), 28; Thomas Constantine Maroukis, "Warfare and Society in the Kingdom of Dahomey: 1818-1894" (Ph.D., Boston University, 1974), 108.

² Montserrat Palau Marti, *Le roi-dieu au Bénin* (Paris, 1964), 141.

³ Jacques Lombard, "The Kingdom of Dahomey" in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Daryll Forde and P.M. Kaberry (London, 1967), 84.

⁴ Edouard Dunglas, "Contribution à l'histoire du Moyen-Dahomey (royaumes d'Abomey, de Kétou et de Ouidah)," *Etudes Dahoméennes* (hereafter *ED*), 19 (1957), 159.

⁵ Pogle K. Glélé, "Le royaume du Dan-Hô-Min: Tradition orale et histoire écrite" (Master's thesis, Centre des archives d'outre-mer [hereafter CAOM], Aix-en-Provence), 78.

⁶ Robert Cornevin, *La République populaire du Bénin des origines dahoméennes à nos*

this can be proved, and in any case no one has suggested that Wegbaja ever used women as real soldiers.⁷

Wegbaja's son and successor, Akaba (ca. 1680/85-1708), is also a candidate for paternity of the amazons. His claim is bound up with the story of Ahangbé, his putative twin sister.⁸ To Robin Law "it seems probable that the story is a late invention, perhaps devised as a sort of mythical charter for the Amazons," since "no eighteenth-century (or indeed, nineteenth-century) source refers to Ahangbe."⁹ Actually, one nineteenth-century source does refer to her: Victor-Louis Maire, who published in 1905 but gathered his information at Abomey in 1894. He recorded the names of 59 *male* "companies" of the Dahomean army created by kings from Wegbaja to Béhanzin (1889-94). He says that no. 8, "Zokhénou," was created under Akaba, and that it was also known as the "Company of Queen Angbé, daughter of Teckbessou."¹⁰ It was of course chronologically impossible for a unit founded by Akaba to be named for a daughter of King Tegbesu (1740-74). Mistaking Tegbesu for Wegbaja would have been a plausible error given the absence of Ahangbé from official oral records, and may even have been a product of deliberate misinformation.

The long silence on Ahangbé may well have been due not to her non-existence but to a dynastic policy of suppressing her memory. We know this was exactly the case with Adandozan (1797-1818), who was overthrown by his brother Gezo, then stricken from the official records. To this day appliqué wall hangings made in Abomey omit Adandozan from the sequence of royal heraldic devices, leaving a dynastic gap of 21 years.¹¹ Adandozan is a flesh-and-blood his-

jours (Paris, 1981), 105-06. This book updates Cornevin's *Histoire du Dahomey* of 1962.

⁷ A school of one, Paul Mimande, holds that Glele founded the amazons, thus betraying abysmal ignorance of a large body of testimony: Paul Mimande, *L'héritage de Béhanzin* (Paris, 1898), 23. Paul Mimande was the pseudonym of Viscount Armand de la Loyère, acting governor of Dahomey in 1895-96. See Hélène d'Almeida-Topor, *Les amazones: une armée de femmes dans l'Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1984), 167; Luc Garcia, *Le royaume du Dahomé face à la pénétration coloniale (1874-1894)*, (Paris, 1988), 245n31.

⁸ Also known as Ahanbé, Hāgbé, Hangbé, or Xāgbé, sometimes preceded by Tasi, Tassi, or Tassin.

⁹ Robin Law, "The 'Amazons' of Dahomey," *Paideuma*, 39 (1993), 250. See also Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750* (Oxford, 1991), 275n59. If by "late" he means the twentieth century, I doubt that anyone would bother to invent "a sort of mythical charter" for the amazons after they and the kingdom itself had gone out of existence. If late means nineteenth-century, one wonders why no European visitor reported the rationale.

¹⁰ Victor-Louis Maire, *Dahomey-Abomey: la dynastie dahoméenne. Les palais: leurs bas-reliefs* (Besançon, 1905), 43.

¹¹ I bought one at the Abomey palace in 1994.

torical figure not because of any Dahomean court chronicling but because he reigned at a time when Europeans were already in contact with Abomey, and lived on as a prisoner for another 43 years. He could not be physically erased by royal *damnatio memoriae*. Ahangbé could have been, however, since the period ascribed to her preceded direct European contact with the Fon rulers.¹²

Adandozan is preserved not only in European records but in non-official, formerly hushed-up Dahomean oral history, the same kind of history that resurrected Ahangbé once the French had abolished the Dahomean monarchy in 1900.¹³ The first author to write about Ahangbé was Auguste Le Hérissé in 1911.¹⁴ Le Hérissé got his information from Agbidinoukoun, a former court chronicler (and brother of Béhanzin) who could now speak freely. Agbidinoukoun said Akaba had a twin sister named Ahangbé, and since Dahomean custom required twins to be treated equally, she “shared the kingship” with her brother, “received all the honors due kings,” lived in her own palace, but “exercised no power.”¹⁵

Akaba and Ahangbé had a younger brother called Dosu, which, as Agbidinoukoun explained, was the name given by the Fon to the first son born after twins.¹⁶ When Dosu succeeded his brother, he took the royal name Agaja, but his original name would never be forgotten. Beginning with Blanchély in 1848, European visitors referred to Agaja as Dosu, though it seems that only Burton and his

¹² Nzinga of Matamba, an outstanding warrior queen in seventeenth-century Angola, suffered a similar fate. Joseph C. Miller found in 1969 that local traditional histories, “which accurately preserve the titles of other seventeenth-century . . . rulers,” were “damningly silent” about her. “Nzinga of Matamba in a New Perspective,” *JAH*, 16 (1975), 213, 213n20.

¹³ See Robin Law, “History and Legitimacy: Aspects of the Use of the Past in Precolonial Dahomey,” *HA*, 15 (1988), 434-35, for a discussion of secret clan and royal traditions and their divulgence after the fall of the Dahomean state. See also Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 8-9, 105, 272-73; Dunglas, “Contribution,” 80-81.

¹⁴ Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 6-7, 15. Most Anglophone authors leave the first accent mark off Le Hérissé’s name because that’s the way it appears on the cover and title page of his book. It was a typographical blooper. The name appears 47 other times in the book with both accent marks. Most Francophone authors instinctively correct the mistake. Auguste-Louis-René-Joseph Le Hérissé (1876-1953) served as a colonial official in Dahomey from 1901 to 1914, mainly as chief administrator of the Abomey *cercle*. He became so fluent in the Fon language, it was said, that blind men could not tell he was a white. He was able to interview Agbidinoukoun and other informants without the always risky mediation of an interpreter. His uncle, René-Félix Le Hérissé, a National Assembly deputy, visited Dahomey briefly in 1902 and wrote a book, *Voyage au Dahomey et à la Côte d’Ivoire* (Paris, 1903). After Auguste retired in 1924, he succeeded René as mayor of Antrain, their home town in Brittany. See *Dictionnaire bio-biographique du Dahomey* (Porto-Novo, 1969), 108-09; *Hommes et destins (dictionnaire biographique d’Outre-Mer)*, (10 vols.: Paris, 1975-95), 1:378.

¹⁵ Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 291.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 294-95.

imitator Skertchly appreciated the significance of the appellation.¹⁷ This suggests that Dahomeans were always aware that Akaba had a twin, and since no one has ever mentioned a male twin, they may also have been aware it was a female.

Besides oral and written history, there is material evidence. The Musée de l'Homme in Paris possesses a *récade*—a hatchet-like authority baton of the Fon—attributed to Akaba. The iron head features two bells of unequal size connected to a single handle.¹⁸ According to Le Hérissé, who presented the *récade* to the museum in 1931, the bells symbolize Akaba and Ahangbé, and the design recalls those of *asen*—Fon ceremonial iron sculptures—placed in front of altars honoring twins.¹⁹

Following Le Hérissé/Agbidinokoun's lead, many twentieth-century specialists on the kingdom of Dahomey have accepted Ahangbé's reality.²⁰ The presence of a group of persons in Abomey

¹⁷ Blanchély, "Au Dahomey: premier voyage de M. Blanchély aîné, gérant de la factorerie de M. Régis, de Marseille, à Whydah (1848)," 2d part, *Les Missions Catholiques*, 23/1171 (13 novembre 1891), 547; Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (2 vols.: London, 1851), 2:128, 131, 135; Auguste Bouët. "Le royaume de Dahomey," 3d part, *L'Illustration*, 10/492 (31 juillet 1852), 74; Jean-Claude Nardin, "La reprise des relations franco-dahoméennes au XIXe siècle: la mission d'Auguste Bouët à la cour d'Abomey (1851)," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 7 (1967), 113, 113n3; Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, ed., C.W. Newbury (New York, 1966), 99, 102n35 (in which he gives the meaning of Dosu), 312; Burton, "Notes on the Dahoman," in *Selected Papers on Anthropology, Travel and Exploration*, ed., N.M. Penzer (London, 1924), 112; J.A. Skertchly, *Dahomey as It Is* (London, 1874), 449-50, 518; L. Brunet and Louis Giethlen, *Dahomey et dépendances* (Paris, 1900), 59.

¹⁸ Musée de l'Homme inventory no. M.H.31.36.3.

¹⁹ Em. G. Waterlot, *Les bas-reliefs des bâtiments royaux d'Abomey (Dahomey)*, (Paris, 1926), plate XXIII; Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 363, 364, figure 1; Alexandre Adandé, *Les récades des rois du Dahomey* (Dakar, 1962), 68 and plate; Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé, *Le Danxome: du pouvoir aja à la nation fon* (Paris, 1974), 52.

²⁰ Paul Hazoumé, *Dogucimi* (Paris, 1938), 20; Anilo G. . . (probably Glele), "Histoire des rois du Dahomey," *Grands Lacs*, n.s. 88/90 (1 juillet 1946), 47, 48; Anatole Coissy, "Un règne de femme dans l'ancien royaume d'Abomey," *ED*, 2 (1949), 5-8; Paul Mercier, *Les ase du musée d'Abomey* (Dakar, 1952), 22, 44; Mercier, "The Fon of Dahomey" in Daryll Forde, ed., *African Worlds* (London, 1954), 232; Adolphe Akindélé and Cyrille Aguessy, *Le Dahomey* (Paris, 1955), 20; F. Sossouhounto, "Les anciens rois de la dynastie d'Abomey," *ED*, 13 (1955), 30; Dunglas, "Contribution," 87, 96-97, 99; C.W. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and Its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961), 14; Adandé, *Récades*, 68; Cornevin, *République populaire*, 95, 100-02, 134; Palau Marti, *Roi-dieu*, 119, 119n1, 157; W.J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey* (Oxford, 1966), 12; I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818* (Cambridge, 1967), 60-62; Th. Constant-Ernest d'Oliveira, *La visite du Musée d'Histoire d'Abomey* (Abomey, 1970), 23; Jean Pliya, *Histoire: Dahomey, Afrique Occidentale* (Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, 1970), 58, 59; CAOM, SOM-D 3538, Pogle K. Glélé, "Le royaume du Dan-Hô-Min: tradition orale et histoire écrite," (Master's thesis, 1971), 46-47; Glélé, *Danxome*, 52, 89, 91; Boniface I. Obichere, "Change and Innovation in the Administration of the Kingdom of Dahomey," *Journal of African Studies*, I (1974), 245; Obichere, "Women and Slavery in the Kingdom of Dahomey," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 45 (1978), 5-6;

claiming descent from her and maintaining traditions about her would seem to support them.²¹

Agbidinoukoun's barebones introduction of Ahangbé was considerably augmented in 1949 by Anatole Coissy (a/k/a Coyssi), a Dahomean school director, writing in *Etudes Dahoméennes*. He said that on Akaba's death (generally dated to 1708), Ahangbé was appointed regent because Akaba's designated successor, his son Agbo-Sassa, was still a minor. (This contradicted Agbidinoukoun, who said Akaba exceptionally chose his brother Dosu as his heir to avoid any conflict between his and Ahangbé's sons.²²) Ahangbé's regency lasted only three months. A court faction resenting her bacchanalian life-style assassinated her only son. She resigned the regency in melodramatic fashion, stripping before the throne council and publicly washing her private parts in a gesture of vast contempt. Dosu/Agaja then took over and later thwarted Agbo-Sassa's efforts to obtain the crown.²³ The story implies that Ahangbé became an official non-person because she opposed Agaja's irregular ascension to the throne.

More details were added in 1957 by Dunglas, drawing on other Fon traditions. He said Akaba died of smallpox during a war against the Ouéménou of the Ouémé River valley east of Abomey, and that Ahangbé posed as her brother until victory was won.²⁴ M.A. Glélé later claimed that her regency lasted three years, not three months.²⁵ And some of her descendants told Edna Bay in 1972 that as regent she waged two successful wars.²⁶

A few slender clues link amazon origins to Akaba and Ahangbé. Oral traditions of the Ouéménou speak of facing women soldiers in Akaba's time. The women are said to have worn raffia cloth, a plausible detail for the period before Dahomey reached the coast and be-

Edna G. Bay, "The Royal Women of Abomey" (Ph.D., Boston University, 1977), 125-26; Bay, "On the Trail of the Bush King: a Dahomean Lesson in the Use of Evidence, *HA*, 6 (1979), 7; Amélie Degbello, "Les amazones du Danxomè, 1645-1900" (Master's thesis, Université Nationale du Bénin, 1979), 33, 36-37, 39; Albert van Dantzig, *Les Hollandais sur la côte de Guinée à l'époque de l'essor de l'Ashanti et du Dahomey 1680-1740* (Paris, 1980), 222; Almeida-Topor, *Amazones*, 34, 36; Garcia, *Royaume*, 131; Suzanne Preston Blier, "The Path of the Leopard: Motherhood and Majesty in Early Danhomè," *JAH*, 36 (1995), 391, 414. Of all the above sources, only Akinjogbin challenges the dual kingship tradition, but he does not question Ahangbé's historical existence.

²¹ Bay, "Royal Women," 125n4, 126nn2, 3.

²² Le Hérisse, *Ancien royaume*, 295.

²³ Coissy, "Règne de femme," 5-8.

²⁴ Dunglas, "Contribution," 97. See also Cornevin, *République populaire*, 100.

²⁵ Glélé, *Danxome*, 89.

²⁶ Bay, "Royal Women," 126, 126n3.

gan importing European yard goods in quantity.²⁷ An amazon song tells of defeating Yahazé, king of the Ouéménou, with swords under Akaba's leadership.²⁸ Another seems to have the female warriors setting down roots in the shallows of the Ouémé River, just like native mangrove trees.²⁹ Maire's previously-cited reference to the male "Company of Queen Angbé" may be a clue not to amazons but to Ahangbé's possible combat role.

One shaky bit of testimony links the women soldiers to any or all monarchs from Wegbaja to Agaja. In 1850 Forbes witnessed sacrifices in Abomey at the grave of Adono, Wegbaja's wife and the mother of Akaba, Ahangbé, and Agaja. "Ah-doh-noh," he informs us in *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, "is one of the titles of royalty held by the amazons."³⁰ The problem with this statement is that in the journal on which his book is based he writes that Adono's "name is now a title in the royal Family."³¹ His printed version may be more accurate, but we can't be sure.

Amélie Degbelo, who collected amazon traditions in the 1970s for a master's thesis, found enough evidence to warrant crediting Akaba with creating the female corps and a martial Ahangbé with promoting it, but her brief is not convincing.³²

The case for Agaja founding the amazons is much stronger. It is composed of several strands: a hypothetical evolution from police-woman to soldieress, a somewhat less hypothetical evolution from palace guard to royal bodyguard, and the documented padding of Agaja's army with women dressed as soldiers to intimidate the enemy despite manpower losses.

One of the common elements of Africa's divine, or sacred, kingships was a ban on men touching royal wives, and sometimes even looking at them. By the 1690s the kings of Whydah had turned the ban to ingenious effect. Bosman tells us how:

[T]he King's Wives...are sometimes made use of by him as Executioners of the Sentences he pronounces against Offenders: Which is only done by sending three or four hundred of them to the Habitation of the Malefactor, to strip his House and lay it level with the Ground; for all Persons being forbidden on pain of Death to touch the King's

²⁷ Degbelo, "Amazones," 35. The Ouéménou are said to have been so impressed by Akaba's female militia that they started one of their own but it fizzled out.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁹ Anonymous, "Les panthères noires du roi Ghézo," *Calao*, no. 15 (juin 1977), 25, cited in Degbelo, "Amazones," 35-36, and Almeida-Topor, *Amazones*, 33-34.

³⁰ Forbes, *Dahomey*, 2:135.

³¹ PRO, FO 84/827, Fanshawe to Admiralty, 19 July 1850, enclosing Forbes's 139-page journal. The statement is on p. 71 (my pagination).

³² Degbelo, "Amazones," 36, 37, 39, 40. See also Garcia, *Royaume*, 131.

Wives, they are enabled to execute his Commands without the least interruption.³³

Law, who has repeatedly demonstrated institutional and ideological continuities from Whydah (and Allada) to Abomey, declines to see a parallel between the Whydah royal wives and the amazons because the former “were neither armed nor employed to fight.”³⁴ But that would seem to overlook later testimony from an anonymous Frenchman who spent some time in Whydah a dozen or so years after Bosman, and from Des Marchais, who last visited the port in 1725.

The anonymous observer said the Whydah king dispatched his wives whenever he wanted some house plundered. They went in a group, all carrying long poles or switches (“bambouges ou Rozeaux”) for hitting the residents if need be. Anyone who resisted would suffer the retribution of king and nobles, however high his rank.³⁵ The king also sent his wives, armed with big sticks (“grands bastons”), to break up any “little wars” between villages or provincial authorities and bring the antagonists to the palace for royal arbitration.³⁶

Des Marchais specified that the royal law enforcers were “third-class” wives, required to remain celibate (like the amazons) though they never shared the monarch’s bed. (The first-class wives were the youngest and most beautiful, the second were those who had already borne the king’s children or were too old or ill to serve his pleasure.) When sent to punish someone in the capital, each third-class wife carried a stick or pole (“gaule”), and the women proclaimed the king’s sentence to the culprit before devastating his home. Des Marchais also heard that the king sometimes intervened in armed disputes between *grandees*, and if one side did not accept his proposed solution he sent two or three thousand third-class wives to ravage their lands and oblige them to make peace.³⁷ It

³³ William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705), 366a-67.

³⁴ Robin Law, “Royal Monopoly and Private Enterprise in the Atlantic Trade: the Case of Dahomey,” *JAH*, 18 (1977), 556-61; idem., “Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey,” *JAH*, 27 (1986), 264-65; idem., “Ideologies of Royal Power: the Dissolution and Reconstruction of Political Authority on the ‘Slave Coast’, 1680-1750,” *Africa*, 57 (1987), 325-26, 331-32, 335-37; idem., *Slave Coast*, 70-115.

³⁵ CAOM, DFC, *Côtes d’Afrique*, no. 104, carton 75, “Relation du Royaume de Judas en Guinée, De son Gouvernement, des moeurs de ses habitans, de leur Religion, Et du Negoce qui sy fait,” 25 (my pagination).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁷ Des Marchais’ account can be found in two places: Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage du*

would appear, therefore, that these women were both armed and prepared to fight.

Since Agaja conquered Whydah in 1727 and later annexed it to the kingdom, if Dahomey borrowed the idea of royal wives as police—or perhaps more precisely as sheriff's deputies—he would likely deserve credit. But there is very little evidence of such borrowing. Argyle claims that sometimes amazons were used to punish lineage chiefs who had committed serious crimes. The chiefs would be killed, their compounds razed, and their families dispersed or enslaved. But the two sources cited by Argyle do not bear him out.³⁸ In 1879-80 Ellis saw a party of amazons armed with rifles and muskets who "had come down to Whydah to take some caboceer, who had incurred the king's displeasure, up to Abomey."³⁹ Conceivably this was a vestigial police function ultimately derived from Whydah, but that is sheer speculation.

There is no doubt, however, that women guarded the royal palace in Agaja's time, for he himself tells us so. In a fascinating 1726 letter to George I of England, brought to light by Law, Agaja speaks of palatial "dore-keepers and thare assistants, who are always a robusk sort of women slaves."⁴⁰ This does not of course mean that he originated the practice, but we have no earlier information about it. By the 1760s and 1770s, the doorkeepers had apparently multiplied, were well armed, and were being referred to as royal wives, not slaves.

Pruneau de Pommegorge, who commanded the French fort at Whydah in 1763-64, said the main gate of the king's palace at

chevalier Des Marchais en Guinée, isles voisines, et à Cayenne, fait en 1725, 1726 & 1727 (4 vols.: Paris, 1730), and in the mariner's original manuscript, "Journal du Voiage du Guinée et Cayenne Par Le Chevalier Des Marchais Capitaine Comandant La fregatte de la Compagnie des Indes, L'Expedition Pendant les Années 1724, 1725 et 1726," which survives as Fonds Français 24223 in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Curiously, our information about first- and second-class royal wives comes from Labat (2:79), not Des Marchais directly. Des Marchais had visited Whydah in 1704 and a journal from that period (Add. MSS 19560) is in the British Library. Paul Hair has advised me that it promises but fails to include material on Whydah, and he suggests that Labat may have had access to that missing portion. Alternatively, Labat may have had opportunities to consult Des Marchais after the latter's return to France. See Jean-Claude Nardin, "Que savons-nous du chevalier Des Marchais?" in Serge Daget, ed., *De la traite à l'esclavage* (2 vols.: Nantes, 1988), 1:344. Labat and the Paris MS. are in general accord on the police role of third-class wives. See Labat, *Voyage*, 2:96-98, 251, and Des Marchais, "Journal," f. 48^v f. 60^r.

³⁸ Argyle, *Fon*, 82, 82n3. The sources are Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 48-49, and Maximilien Quénum, *Au pays des Fons*, (Paris, 1938), 23.

³⁹ A.B. Ellis, *The Land of Fetish* (London, 1883), 54-56, 58.

⁴⁰ Robin Law, "Further Light on Bulfinch Lambe and the 'Emperor of Pawpaw': King Agaja of Dahomey's Letter to King George I of England, 1726," *HA*, 17 (1990), 217. The letter was transcribed by Lambe.

Abomey was always guarded by women.⁴¹ Dalzel, who directed the English fort at Whydah in 1767-70, said the royal palace at Cana was surrounded by a 20-foot-high quadrangular wall. In the middle of each side was a gate with a guardhouse occupied by armed women and eunuchs.⁴² Norris visited the Abomey palace in 1772. "In the guard house," he wrote, "were about forty women, armed with a musket and cutlass each; and twenty eunuchs, with bright iron rods in their hands."⁴³ French visitors in 1776-77 also saw gunwomen on duty at the Abomey palace.⁴⁴

It is not clear when women, in addition to guarding royal palaces, began guarding the king himself. Confusion arises from the fact that armed women seen standing by the monarch at public functions were not necessarily guarding him, as Agaja himself reveals. At military reviews, he says in his 1726 letter, while some of his wives fan him, whisk flies away, hold umbrellas over him, fill and light his pipe, or tote in cases of brandy, others hold his weapons, "as guns, pistols, and sabre, &c."⁴⁵ Thus, when Snelgrave had an audience with Agaja the following year and saw four women standing "behind the Chair of State, with Fusils on their Shoulders," they may not have been guards.⁴⁶ Likewise for two female musketeers a Dutch trader, Jacob Elet, spotted behind Agaja's throne in 1733.⁴⁷

The first unambiguous testimony to the existence of royal bodyguards comes from Pruneau de Pommegorge, i.e., well after Agaja's death in 1740. He said Agaja's successor, Tegbesu, was guarded within his palace at Abomey "only by his wives, who number two or three thousand."⁴⁸ Norris saw Tegbesu march in a procession "followed by a guard of twenty-four women armed each with a blunderbuss."⁴⁹ Referring to Agonglo (1789-97), the Portuguese

⁴¹ Antoine-Edmé Pruneau de Pommegorge (a/k/a Joseph Pruneau), *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam, 1789), 162.

⁴² Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy, an Inland Kingdom of Africa* (London, 1793), xiii.

⁴³ Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee, King of Dahomy, an Inland Country of Guiney* (London, 1789), 94.

⁴⁴ Pierre Labarthe, *Voyage à la côte de Guinée* (Paris, 1803), 120, 122; CAOM, DFC, *Côtes d'Afrique*, no. 111, "Réflexions sur Juda par les Srs De Chenevert et abbé Bullet," 1 juin 1776, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Law, "Further Light," 219.

⁴⁶ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London, 1734), 34.

⁴⁷ Albert van Dantzig, ed. and tr., *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast 1674-1742: a Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague* (Accra, 1978), 296.

⁴⁸ Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 162.

⁴⁹ Norris, *Memoirs*, 105-06.

priest Pires said a "household squadron" of more than 800 women accompanied the king everywhere.⁵⁰ In 1803 M'Leod heard at Whydah that Dahomey's ruler had "from three to four thousand wives, a proportion of whom, trained to arms, under female officers, constitute his body guards."⁵¹

Most likely it was the king's bodyguards who evolved into the amazon troops familiar to European visitors from the 1840s on. Nonetheless, many writers credit Agaja with instituting the female fighters.⁵² The reason is plainly Snelgrave's well-known description of the Dahomean reconquest of Whydah in 1729.

With Agaja distracted by a devastating invasion by the Yoruba of Oyo, the Whydah king and his army reoccupied their town. To make up for his losses, Agaja "ordered a great number of Women to be armed like Soldiers, and appointed Officers to each Company, with Colours, Drums and Umbrellas.... Then ordering the Army to march, the Women Soldiers were placed in the Rear, to prevent Discovery." Having heard of Agaja's manpower losses, the Whydah forces "were much surprized to see such Numbers of *Dahomè* Soldiers, as they supposed them all to be, marching against them." Some Whydah troops, along with Popo allies, resisted, but those directly under the Whydah king's command "cowardly fled," assuring a Dahomean victory.⁵³ There is no suggestion in Snelgrave's account that the women took part in the fighting, or that they were not disbanded after the event, yet it was inevitably interpreted by some (at the distance of a century or two) as the genesis of the women's army corps.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Vicente Ferreira Pires, *Viagem de Africa em o Reino de Dahomé* (São Paulo, 1957), 68.

⁵¹ John M'Leod, *A Voyage to Africa with Some Account of the Manners and Customs of the Dahomian People* (London, 1820), 38. M'Leod probably got his information from Lionel Abson, longtime head of the English fort at Whydah, who may have been alluding to any or all kings from Tegbesu to Adandozan.

⁵² Burton, *Mission*, 256; Winwood Reade, "The Kingdom of Dahomey" in H.W. Bates, ed., *Illustrated Travels: a Record of Discovery, Geography and Adventure*, II, part 24 (1870), 358; Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 450, 454; Armand Dubarry, *Voyage au Dahomey* (Paris, 1879), 156; Pierre-Eugène Chautard, *Le Dahomey* (Lyon, 1890), 6; Ellis, *Land of Fetish*, 56; Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1890), 183, 290; Alfred Barbou, *Histoire de la guerre au Dahomey* (Paris, 1893), 21; Léonce Grandin, *A l'assaut du pays des noirs: le Dahomey*, (2 vols.: Paris, 1895), 1:242; Georges Verdal, "Les amazones du Dahomey," *Education Physique*, n.s. 29 (janvier 1934), 55; Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, an Ancient West African Kingdom* (2 vols.: New York, 1938), 2:84; Eva L.R. Meyerowitz, "'Our Mothers': the Amazons of Dahomey," *Geographical Magazine*, 15 (1943), 446; Dunglas, "Contribution," 159-60; S. O. Biobaku, *The Egba and Their Neighbours, 1842-1872* (Oxford, 1957), 38; P. Mercier and J. Lombard, *Guide du Musée d'Abomey* (Porto-Novo, 1959), 20; Cornevin, *République populaire*, 105-06; Polanyi, *Dahomey*, 28; Glélè, "Royaume," 78.

⁵³ Snelgrave, *New Account*, 125-27.

⁵⁴ See note 52. Dunglas, "Contribution," 160, says that Agaja's use of women against

Even before the 1729 Whydah attack, women were reported in the Dahomean army. We are, again, indebted to Law for publishing an eyewitness account by a French trader named Ringard of the first Dahomean conquest of Whydah, in 1727.⁵⁵ Ringard said the invaders numbered “no more than 3 thousand persons of whom half were women & children.”⁵⁶ Law thinks the women were “probably... female camp followers” rather than troops, citing the apparent novelty of dressing up women as soldiers two years later.⁵⁷ He could, of course, be wrong. Still earlier than Ringard, there are hints in Agaja’s 1726 letter that women may already have fought for Dahomey. One passage foreshadows the mock attacks that would later become standard training routines for amazons (and male troops too). The brandy mentioned above was distributed, he says, after “my people have pretty well exercised themselves in activity of body, by running, leaping, and firing thare arms, *as if engaged*.”⁵⁸ He does not specify that they were all men, and in fact says elsewhere that “all” his subjects were bred to battle. In the same breath, he adds, “but the women stay home to plant and manure the earth.”⁵⁹ This might be taken to mean not that women did not make war (Law’s interpretation), but exactly what it says, that they could not do it in the planting season.⁶⁰ If it does mean women did not fight, one wonders why Agaja felt the need to make such a statement.

In the same letter Agaja claims that during Akaba’s reign, he was his brother’s chief general and destroyed Yahazé, king of the Ouéménou, and “his army of severall hundred thousands.”⁶¹ The figure surely is a gross exaggeration, but if Yahazé really did have a big army—and a tradition that he burned down the palace at Abomey implies he did—one can imagine that the Dahomeans could have resorted to women to make up a manpower disadvantage.⁶² This would tie in with the evidence linking Akaba and

Whydah “as regular troops” forming “the reserve and rear guard” was “a real success: this lesson was not lost on the Dahomeans.”

⁵⁵ Robin Law, “A Neglected Account of the Dahomian Conquest of Whydah (1727): the ‘Relation de la Guerre de Juda’ of the Sieur Ringard of Nantes,” *HA*, 15 (1988), 321-38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 335n17. As for the children, Law, *ibid.*, 335-36n18, cites references in Snelgrave (*New Account*, 78) and William Smith (*A New Voyage to Guinea* ([London, 1744], 192) to boy apprentice warriors.

⁵⁸ Law, “Further Light,” 219, with emphasis added.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 222n18; Law, “‘Amazons’,” 249.

⁶¹ Law, “Further Light,” 217.

⁶² A. de Salinis, *La Marine au Dahomey: campagne de “La Naiade” (1890-1892)*, (Paris, 1901), 98. The tradition was mentioned in a letter of 18 August 1890 from Béhanzin to Adm. Cavellier de Cuverville.

Ahangbé to the amazons. One can understand how a warrior king like Agaja might be reluctant to admit he had employed women soldiers in his youth, something he would think of again in 1729. But here I have given imagination free rein.

The king perhaps most often credited with founding the amazons is not Agaja, but Gezo (1818-58). Degbelo says that of her scores of informants, 99% named Gezo as founder of the institution.⁶³ Some writers give him full credit. They begin with T.B. Freeman, who says Gezo himself told him (presumably in 1843) that he had formed the amazon corps to strengthen the kingdom.⁶⁴ Others, usually citing Agaja, say women had already been used as troops but that Gezo reorganized, improved, enlarged, professionalized and/or institutionalized the female legion, making it the army's elite force, or at least putting it on a par with the best male units.⁶⁵ There seems, in fact, little doubt that in the course of the 1840s Gezo increased the number of warrioresses from hundreds to thousands, regularized and intensified their training, put them in uniform, and introduced other innovations.

After sifting the evidence, Law has decided that Gezo "can indeed be credited with the creation of the Amazons, in the sense of making them a contingent of the fighting army.... [His] critical innovation was to employ the Amazons as a fighting force in Dahomey's foreign wars."⁶⁶ Law concedes that a royal female bodyguard existed in the eighteenth century but rejects the idea that it

⁶³ Degbelo, "Amazones," 23.

⁶⁴ Typescript copy of untitled, unpublished book by T.B. Freeman, Methodist Missionary Society Archives, Biographical West Africa, Box 597, 168; CMS (Church Missionary Society), CA2/016/34, extracts by C. Chapman from J. Dawson's journal and from his letters to F. Fitzgerald, 17 November 1862, 21; Edouard Foà, *Le Dahomey* (Paris, 1895), 23, 255-56; Brunet and Giethlen, *Dahomey*, 63; Maire, *Dahomey*, 49; Le Hérisse, *Ancien royaume*, 67; Prévaudeau, *Abomey-la-mystique*, 93-94; Adrien Djivo, *Guézo: la rénovation du Dahomey* (Paris, 1977), 70-71.

⁶⁵ Reade, "Kingdom," 358; Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 454; Ellis, *Ewe-Speaking Peoples*, 183, 311; Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 2:85; Mercier/Lombard, *Guide*, 20; Cornevin, *République populaire*, 124-25; Argyle, *Fon*, 39, 87; David Ross, "Dahomey" in Michael Crowder, ed., *West African Resistance* (New York, 1971), 148-49; Glélé, *Danxome*, 133; Augustus A. Adeyinka, "King Gezo of Dahomey, 1818-1858: a Reassessment of a West African Monarch in the Nineteenth Century," *African Studies Review*, 17 (1974), 544; Bay, "Royal Women," 165-66. Although Duglas says women were first used as troops by Agaja (see note 54 above), he credits Gezo with organizing the first amazon "regiments," including one called the *Djèkpo* or *Djèdokpo*, meaning "Down on your knees!" When the warrioresses passed by, he explains, common folk had to kneel. "La première attaque des Dahoméens contre Abéokuta (3 mars 1851)," *ED*, 1 (1948), 15; "Contribution à l'histoire du Moyen-Dahomey," *ED* 20 (1957), 83-84. Cornevin, *République populaire*, 124, echoes him. Glélé, "Royaume," 78, who spells it *je-dò-pò*, traces the unit to Agaja's "rear guard" at Whydah in 1729.

⁶⁶ Law, "Amazons," 250.

“served as a fighting force outside the palace.”⁶⁷ He specifies “outside” to allow for reports that when Tegbesu, his successor Kpengla (1774-89) and Agonglo died, women fought *within* the palace.⁶⁸

II

In my view neither Agaja nor Gezo might have the best claim to paternity of the fighting females. A good case can be made that women soldiers went to war for Dahomey in the 1760s and 1770s during the reigns of Tegbesu and Kpengla. No single piece of evidence is conclusive, or even persuasive, but when nearly a dozen—some overlooked by Law—can be assembled for an historical proposition regarding precolonial, sub-Saharan Africa, it is as much, if not more, than one can reasonably hope for. I list them in chronological order.

Pruneau de Pommegorge said of Tegbesu’s two or three thousand wives: “elles sont comme enrégimentées,” meaning they were organized like troops. Their female chiefs, he added, bore the same names as the chiefs of male warriors. The Frenchman watched a parade of five or six units of “female troops... hardly more than sixteen to seventeen years old, except for a few who command them.” Each unit was composed of about 80 to 100 women, making a total of 400 to 600. Every woman carried a small musketoon and a small short sword. They marched four abreast, each unit with its own flags. Tegbesu gave presents to troops who had performed their drills well.⁶⁹

Historians are fairly sure that the one and only military clash between Dahomey and Asante occurred in 1764. It was won by the Dahomeans, who may have been supported by Oyo. An Asante tradition about fighting female soldiers has been linked to this battle.⁷⁰

In 1772 Norris saw a parade in Abomey involving, first, “a guard of ninety women, under arms, with drums beating,” then six “troops” of 70 women each, all led by “a distinguished favorite” (probably a commanding officer) walking under an umbrella, then seven more units of 50 women each, all preceded by two English flags—a grand total of 860 women.⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁸ Norris, *Memoirs*, 128-30; Dalzel, *History*, 204-05; Pires, *Viagem*, 79.

⁶⁹ Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 162, 181-82.

⁷⁰ PRO, T 70/31, William Mutter to Committee, 27 May 1764; Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (2d ed.: London, 1966), 237-39; R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (London, 1929), 221; Adu Boahen, “Asante-Dahomey Contacts in the 19th Century,” *Ghana Notes and Queries*, no. 7 (January 1965), 1-2, note 9; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 124, 124n2; J.K. Fynn, *Asante and Its Neighbours, 1700-1807* (London, 1971), 96-97; Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 1975), 320-33, notes 51-77; Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire, c. 1600-c.1836* (Oxford, 1977), 170-71; Law, “Dahomey and the North-West,” *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Africaines*, no. 8 (1994), 159-60.

⁷¹ Norris, *Memoirs*, 108-09.

In 1777 the head of the French fort at Whydah, Olivier de Montaguère, traveled north to pay his respects to Kpengla. In the palace at Cana he saw "a great number of armed women, forming a sort of square battalion.... [They] lined up 15 by 15, and... as they paraded, they fired a musket volley; soon they formed into two lines, and kept up a general fire which was very well executed."⁷²

Dalzel writes that among no less than 3,000 women "immured" in the various royal palaces, "Several hundreds...are trained to the use of arms, under a female general and subordinate officers, appointed by the King.... These warriors are regularly exercised, and go through their evolutions with as much expertness as the male soldiers. They have their large umbrellas, their flags, their drums, trumpets, flutes." Dalzel says the king sometimes took the field, "on very great emergencies, at the head of his women."⁷³

To illustrate his statement, Dalzel gives us the earliest visual representation of the amazons, an engraving captioned "Armed Women, with the King at their head, going to War."⁷⁴ It shows a long phalanx of female warriors issuing from the palace, all armed with muskets. They wear flowing knee-length cloths round their waists, and close-fitting caps. They are topless save for crossed shoulder straps that, judging from a couple of examples, appear to be holding up machete scabbards and pouches, probably for powder and shot. All are barefoot. Banners and umbrellas are held aloft, and musicians march alongside, one beating on a massive war drum. The king himself wears a fancy plumed European hat and brandishes a sword. Subjects prostrate themselves as the procession passes. The picture is romanticized but not implausible.

Relying on information from Lionel Abson, who headed the English fort at Whydah for more than three decades, Dalzel dates one such emergency to 1781. From the 1730s or 1740s to the 1820s, Dahomey was required to pay an annual tribute to Oyo. Dalzel says Oyo envoys happened to be in Dahomey in 1781 to collect the tribute when Kpengla's second-ranking minister, the *Meu*, died. The envoys saw a chance to increase the payment: they demanded 100 of the *Meu*'s women. Kpengla reluctantly handed over some to get rid of the Yoruba, but three months later the king of Oyo threatened an invasion if he did not receive the rest.

Unwilling to give up more Dahomean women, Kpengla sent troops to the neighboring country of Agouna to seize the requisite number of females. The local leader repulsed the Dahomean forces,

⁷² Labarthe, *Voyage*, 148-49. Labarthe quotes from a report by Montaguère without naming him.

⁷³ Dalzel, *History*, x-xi.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, plate II, opp. p. 54.

inflicting heavy losses. "This news being brought to the King of Dahomy at mid-day," Dalzel relates, "he immediately got up, girt on his cartouch-box [cartridge case], shouldered his firelock, and marched toward Agoonah, at the head of eight hundred armed women." The foe fled "this uncommon army" and was pursued. Kpengla stopped to rest, but soon after received some enemy heads, apparently severed by his female soldiers. He then returned home, perhaps with his amazons, because operations were now entrusted to the *Gau*, commander of male troops. The enemy was hunted down and defeated, and 1,800 captured. Presumably more than enough foreign women were now available for Oyo.⁷⁵

Dalzel and/or Abson clearly got their facts mixed up. Akinjogbin found documentary evidence that the Meu died very early in 1779, not 1781, and that the attacks on Agouna preceded his death. But he did not question the amazon role.⁷⁶ Law, on the other hand, contends that the 800 women did "no actual fighting," that their sortie "seems to have been a purely symbolic act, intended to inspire the king's generals to greater efforts."⁷⁷

Dalzel/Abson's use of the figure 800 may itself be a clue. Recall that Norris's women paraders totaled 860 and that Pires' household squadron who accompanied the king everywhere totaled more than 800.⁷⁸ It may be no coincidence that just before the big amazon buildup in the 1840s, Blaise Brue estimated the number of women soldiers at the royal customs in Abomey at 800.⁷⁹ The image of a little standing army of fixed size, perhaps a number with mystical connotation, emerges from these scattered references. The first four decades of the nineteenth century being an exceedingly lean period for printed and archival sources on Dahomey, it is possible the 800-woman force filled at least part of the gap between Pires and Brue.

Jérôme Félix de Monléon, who visited Whydah in 1844, recorded

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-77.

⁷⁶ Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 162, 162n3, 163, 163n1. The documents are PRO, T 70/1162, William's Fort, Whydah, Day Book, 2, 24, 27 January 1779. See also Law, *Oyo*, 167, 167n118.

⁷⁷ Law, "'Amazons,'" 249.

⁷⁸ Pires' exact phrase (*Viagem*, 68) is "mais de 800 mulheres: esquadrão de sua familia, que sempre o acompanha para qualquer parte." "Esquadrão" once designated a Portuguese infantry unit.

⁷⁹ Brue, "Voyage fait en 1843, dans le royaume de Dahomey, par M. Brue, agent du comptoir français établi à Whydah," *Revue Coloniale*, 7 (septembre 1845), 63. Some three years before Brue, British trader Thomas Hutton visited Abomey and gauged the strength of the king's female "body-guard" at an even 1,000. That, at least, was the recollection of his uncle, William Mackintosh Hutton, who regrettably lost Thomas' detailed written account of the trip, PP 1842 (551), xi.1, *Report from the House of Commons Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa, Minutes of Evidence*, W.M. Hutton, 22 July 1842, 673.

an old anecdote explaining why Dahomey never declared war. It seems that a director of the French fort at Whydah (which closed in 1797) had urged the king "to act like the sovereigns of civilized nations" and declare war before attacking a foe. The king deferred to this advice in his next war. Enemy resistance was so strong that it took a furious assault by amazons to turn the tide and win the day. Many combatants died and no prisoners were taken. The monarch had all the slain enemies beheaded and sent the heads to the fort director, complaining that he had lost that many potential slaves owing to the Frenchman's bad advice. He obliged the man to pay for the heads as if they were live slaves. And he reverted to his previous system of making war by stealth "as being less murderous and more lucrative."⁸⁰

If there is any truth to this story, the king involved is rather more likely to have been Tegbesu or Kpengla than Agonglo, whose accession to the throne coincided with the French Revolution, which put a damper on the French slave trade, though it stopped short of abolishing it. Moreover, Agonglo does not appear to have been a particularly aggressive leader.⁸¹

Forbes was told at Abomey in 1850 that Gezo's grandfather, meaning Kpengla, "first raised the amazon army, but not to its present extent."⁸² If Kpengla's amazons, unlike Gezo's, were *not* active-duty troops, Forbes most likely would have been told so since it would have reflected credit on his informant's lord.

In 1894 Maire copied a bas-relief in Kpengla's old palace showing two amazons boiling an enemy corpse in a kettle resting on a severed head.⁸³ This suggests they were real fighters, but of course the bas-relief could have been added long after Kpengla's time.

All in all, I would not be surprised if further archival research turned up additional evidence of fighting amazons during the reigns of Tegbesu and Kpengla.

III

If the when and how of amazon origins are highly problematic, the why seems fairly obvious. Burton had his usual emphatic opinion, in this case idiosyncratic. He thought the answer lay in the build of

⁸⁰ Monléon, "Le cap des Palmes, le Dahomey, Fernando-Pô et l'île du Prince, en 1844," *Revue Coloniale*, 6 (mai 1845), 66.

⁸¹ Forbes, *Dahomey*, 2:89; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 175-86; Law, "History and Legitimacy," 445.

⁸² Forbes, *Dahomey*, 2:88.

⁸³ Maire, *Dahomey*, plate XI, 30-31. The object of such boiling was surely to obtain bone trophies.

local women, whom he considered physically superior to the men. "I have no doubt," he said, that this "led in the...Dahoman race to the employment of women as fighters."⁸⁴ And again, "the somewhat exceptional organization" of the amazons originated in "the masculine *physique* of the women, enabling them to compete with men in enduring toil, hardships, and privations."⁸⁵ Burton also thought women in the Niger Delta were the physical equals of men but did not try to explain why they did *not* become warrioresses.⁸⁶ In truth, of course, West African women in general are a sturdy lot. Their unique experience in Dahomey can be explained by demography.

Burton's contemporary, Commodore Wilmot, who visited Abomey in 1862-63, noticed a heavy imbalance in the Dahomean population in favor of females. "As war is made one of the necessities of the State," he reasoned, "a constant drain upon the male population is required, and it naturally follows that the supply is never equal to the demand; hence the remarkable circumstance of nearly '5,000' women being found in the Dahomian army."⁸⁷

There was more to it than that. From the 1720s to the 1880s, Dahomey's chief rivals were the Yoruba. For half of that period, the Fon were tributary to the Yoruba empire of Oyo. For much of the rest of it, the Egba Yoruba of Abeokuta were their foremost adversaries. The Fon language is spoken today by less than two million people, Yoruba by about 20 million, and the ratio was probably similar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Oyo never embraced all Yoruba-speakers, its manpower advantage over Dahomey was overwhelming. And even the city of Abeokuta alone was too populous for the Fon to subdue. Their fierce women soldiers could not make up the difference.

Dahomean resentment against the Yoruba lingered beyond the French conquest. Agbidinoukoun told Le Hérisse that that conquest would have been easier to bear had the Fon previously defeated Abeokuta. "Nevertheless we have one consolation," he added. "[T]he inhabitants of Abeokuta too are under the domination of the whites [i.e., the new British colony of Nigeria]."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Burton, *Mission*, 112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 254. Burton repeated his view in a paper he read to British ethnologists in 1864: "The Present State of Dahome," *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, n.s. 3(1865), 405.

⁸⁶ Burton, *Mission*, 112n4, 254; *idem.*, "Present State," 405.

⁸⁷ A.P.E. Wilmot, "Despatches from Commodore Wilmot Respecting His Visit to the King of Dahomey in December 1862 and January 1863," *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies: Africa* 50 (Shannon, 1971), 438. Regarding the figure of 5,000 amazons, he appears to be quoting himself. The sexual imbalance must have been accentuated by the preference for males in the Atlantic slave trade.

⁸⁸ Le Hérisse, *Ancien royaume*, 325.