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THE PATH OF THE LEOPARD: MOTHERHOOD AND MAJESTY IN EARLY DANHOMÈ

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HISTORY was of critical importance in ancient Danhomè (Danhomè, Dahomey), the West African kingdom of the Fon which now forms part of the Republic of Bénin.¹ Today, although the kingdom's capital of Abomey (Agbomè) is a bustling metropolis with schools, stores, gas stations and a modern hospital, history remains a subject of key interest and concern. Every quarter, every street, every house and every tree has its historical significance. The palace continues to occupy a central part of the city, a vast enclosure of over 44 hectares which now serves in part as a museum. Many of Abomey's residences are occupied by descendants of the ministers, princes and priests whose lives had once been closely identified with the court.

Adding to this sense of the primacy of history, there is a tradition in Danhomè of memorializing key figures of the past through named place-holders, that is persons (usually relatives) who assume the names, identities, homes and histories of an individual from an earlier era, promoting through this means the memories of those of the past into the present. Today one can interview a number of these historic place-holders, from the founding Kings Ganyehesu and Dakodonu (whose reigns are generally given as *c.* 1625–45) to the early Queen Tassi Hangbe (*c.* 1705–8)² to each of the mothers of the Danhomè monarchs. Speaking in the first person, and often in dress viewed as appropriate for the period, these individuals frequently offer important insight into eras and events of the kingdom's past.

Even in the current period of television, radios and books, *huenuho* (*huenoxo*), the telling of history (*huenu*: time, past; *ho/xo*: speech),³ is serious

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1988 African Studies Association meeting in Chicago. Field research on Danhomè art and history was undertaken during the summer of 1984 and an 11-month period in 1985–6. Financial and other support during the course of researching and writing this essay was provided by a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship, a John S. Guggenheim Fellowship, a Social Science Research Council Fellowship and a period of residence at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. In addition to this support, I also owe a deep gratitude to the many individuals in the Republic of Bénin who made this research possible, both by helping me to acquire permissions and by providing vital information. Translations from French were made by the author. Translations from Fon were made by the author along with Constant and Giselle Legonou of Abomey. I also wish to thank Edna Bay, Robin Law and Patrick Manning for their various comments and criticism.

² The place-markers of other Danhomè monarchs, however, take the form of women known as *dadasi* (wife-king), who live in seclusion within the palace. Not only is it very difficult to talk to these women, but their positions are seen to be more ritual than historiographical in importance.

³ In this text I conform with the orthography of R. P. B. Segurolo, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* (Cotonou, 1963) with the following exceptions: tonal values are omitted, hard

business, for past and present reputations necessarily rest on the information which such histories impart. In the past, the court maintained considerable control over how and what history was guarded and conveyed. Absolute control was never possible, however, for while royal *huenuho* was the domain of specially designated court officials it was also a subject of interest and importance in nearly every family in the kingdom. Each family accordingly guarded its own distinct histories and understanding of past events.

This article examines Danhomè myths of dynastic origin and the historic figures associated with them. In this respect, my analysis complements the findings of scholars such as Robin Law who have been interested in both the manipulation and management of myths of royal origins.⁴ Drawn from interviews with individuals inside and outside the court as well as analyses of local enthronement practices and arts, the following discussion offers at once a critique and a counter-narrative to the official dynastic histories which long have been promoted in this region. Critical to this counter-narrative, as will be seen, are the early women of the state, most importantly the mothers and wives of the first rulers. The provocative stories of these women not only add an important human dimension to Danhomè history but also raise critical methodological issues, for events associated with their lives contradict much of what has been previously written about the origins of this kingdom. In Danhomè, events associated with the beginning of the dynasty have been mythologized into an elaborate fiction of leopard birth and incest. While scholars have long questioned this account's veracity, to date no one has been able to present a cohesive alternative. Through an analysis of the stories of these royal women, the forging of a new history of the kingdom's origins is now possible.

My analysis is structured around eight themes essential to our understanding of early Danhomè historiography. Key findings can be summarized as follows. (1) *The origin myth*: The Danhomè origin myth linking the royal family with Tado (in south-eastern Togo) is contradicted in numerous ways by contemporary sources, local area histories and ritual traditions on the Abomey plateau. (2) *Princess Aligbonu*: A critical figure in this myth, Aligbonu, the dynastic mother, is not a Tado princess, but rather is the *tohuio* (*toxuio*, ancestor) of Adonon, the locally born wife of the Danhomè king, Huegbadja (Wegbadja). (3) *The leopard Agasu*: The leopard prince Agasu is a fictional construction created both to give a sense of dynastic legitimacy to the new kingdom and to cover Huegbadja's origins. (4) *Huegbadja*: This ruler had no direct filial ties with the indigenous rulers Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, as court historians maintain; he probably came from the Lake Aheme area to the south. (5) *The royal mother, Adru*: From his mother, who was local, Huegbadja acquired both political support and key symbols of power. (6) *Dakodonu and Ganyehesu*: These were autochthonous (non-Tado-

and soft *d* and open and closed *o* are not distinguished, and *h* is used instead of *x* to indicate a guttural *h*. In the latter case I include the *x* form in parentheses when it first appears.

⁴ Robin Law, 'The heritage of Oduduwa: traditional history and political propaganda among the Yoruba', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xiv (1973), 207–22, and 'History and legitimacy: aspects of the use of the past in pre-colonial Dahomey', *History in Africa*, xv (1988), 431–56.

related) Guedeви chiefs whose power Huegbadja usurped. Their family retains control of the Danhomè throne and crown. (7) *The priest-king Daho*: The legitimacy of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu was eventually acknowledged (and sacralized) through the creation of a ritual priest-king, Daho. (8) *Creating the leopard myth*: The leopard myth was constructed in the eighteenth century, by Kings Tegbesu and Kpengla, to give a sense of historical legitimacy to the kingdom. With respect to the foregoing, in some cases (1 and 8) I have been able to confirm (and expand on) the findings of previous scholars; in other examples (2–7) I have presented evidence which is largely or entirely new. While in many ways interconnected, each topic can be read and examined on its own.

The reason the women's stories are so important to early Danhomè history, I argue, is that Danhomè rulers maintained a special bond with their mothers.⁵ While these rulers altered the historical narrative regarding their father's (or grandfather's) identities for their own aggrandizement and other purposes within the royal leopard myth, they could not (or would not) efface the identity of their mothers. Why the royal mothers' identities were more difficult to invent or efface than those of the royal men is an interesting question. There appear to be several factors. First the retention of the mothers' identities may reflect a desire to acknowledge the roles these women played in the ongoing power and prestige of early rulers. By maintaining the identity of these women, the king (and court historians) sought to recognize the ongoing importance of affine support within the context of royal power dynamics. Secondly this phenomenon also may find grounding in the special relationship which exists between men (and women) and their mothers in Africa, where, especially in the context of polygamous family structures, the mother is responsible not only for one's birth but also for one's overall well-being, and in the case of kings, often for one's rise to power.⁶

Why, one could rightly ask, given the long history of the study of Danhomè historical traditions, has this version of the early history only been brought to light now? One reason is that to a large extent earlier chroniclers and scholars working in the area have focused their attention on the histories of royal men. With the exception of Edna Bay's ground-breaking work,⁷ scholars have paid little if any attention to the royal mothers (*kpojito*), and what their unique histories offer to our understanding of the early history. Another factor in the above has been the ongoing scholarly stress on the kingdom's capital of Abomey, rather than on the histories of the numerous communities outside the center where the heavy hand of the court and its

⁵ On the importance of women in the context of early court history and art at ancient Ife (Nigeria), see Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Kings, crowns, and rights of succession: Obalufon arts and Ife and other Yoruba centers', *The Art Bulletin*, LXVII (1985), 383–401, and 'Contested royalty and art at ancient Ife: reading scarification as sign' (unpublished paper).

⁶ The considerable danger (and difficulty) which birth entails for the mother is important in this regard. On the importance of women in Danhomè generally see Edna G. Bay, 'The royal women of Abomey' (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1977).

⁷ Bay, 'Royal women'; 'Women in the palace of Dahomey: a case study in West African political systems', in Paula A. Treichler, Chris Kramaise and Beth Stafford (eds.), *Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship* (Champaign-Urbana, 1985); 'Belief, legitimacy and the *Kpojito*: an institutional history of the "Queen Mother" in pre-colonial Dahomey', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXXVI (1995), 1–27.

official histories was often less strong. In addition, with the important exception of the work of Patrick Manning,⁸ a primary emphasis has been placed on royal rather than rural historical concerns.

My analysis in this way may have a number of methodological implications for scholars and students of African history. Most importantly it addresses the ongoing issue of the reliability of oral history. The lives of the early women of Danhomè, I suggest, offer provocative evidence of both the pitfalls of oral history (especially as regards royal history and myths of origin) and the rich rewards which alternative oral traditions (i.e. those of women, non-royals and rural outsiders) can impart to dynastic discourse and historical reconstruction, particularly when, as here, they are coupled with supportive evidence from ritual and art. Implied in this study as well is the finding that contemporary European sources, while of vital importance as a check on local (oral) sources, often present a quite simplistic and hence misleading sense of history at the local level. In the case of early Danhomè, contemporary European sources in their omission of the vital roles of women miss the many insights which these women offer to our understanding of the history of the early period.

Another methodological implication of this analysis is one which has striking cross-disciplinary implications, namely that historical and symbolic (structuralist, psychoanalytic, semiotic etc.) analyses can be compatible (if lively, and contradictory) bed-fellows. In his provocative essay, 'Is elegance proof?',⁹ Jan Vansina argues that structuralism (particularly that espoused by Luc De Heusch in his reading of Central African mythologies) makes poor history. Danhomè dynastic myth and history would suggest a somewhat different conclusion. Both forms of reading (historical and symbolic) have their place, I would suggest. The Danhomè myth of the leopard can be viewed as a prototypical, richly symbolic origin myth, played out in the context of both universe and state. This myth, which, it should be emphasized, is a wholly indigenous 'historical' construction, can be poignantly read as a symbolic text (structuralist, or otherwise). Through such a reading one can come to understand key rationales which lie behind the negotiated history which the kingdom (or rather, its primary spokespersons) chose to construct in seeking to convey an image of itself to others. While such a reading can be seen to be in many respects 'authentic' and 'correct', in my view, an equally provocative reading is the one which lies outside of the symbolist's main purview, in the interstices of official history *comme* mythic narrative, specifically in the lives of the early women who played such a central role in the kingdom's founding.

The narrative and counter-narrative I am about to explicate is not an easy one. There are too many characters and cover-ups to make the analysis in any way neat. I begin with an overview of the royal myth of Danhomè state origins in Adja Tado (in Togo) and the historical problems raised by this myth. I then examine the myth's key female protagonist, the 'Tado princess' Aligbonu. Her identity and the story of Adonon, her descendant, I suggest,

⁸ Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁹ Jan Vansina, 'Is elegance proof? Structuralism and African history', *History in Africa*, x (1983), 307-48.

offer critical insight into Huegbadja's early life. The third woman who appears in this counter-narrative is Huegbadja's mother, Adru, a woman whose politically important local family helped to secure Huegbadja's rise to power. The fourth woman who enters into our analysis is Naye Sava, the daughter of a local Guede priest, and the mother of the pre-dynastic Guedeve chiefs, Ganyehesu and Dakodonu.

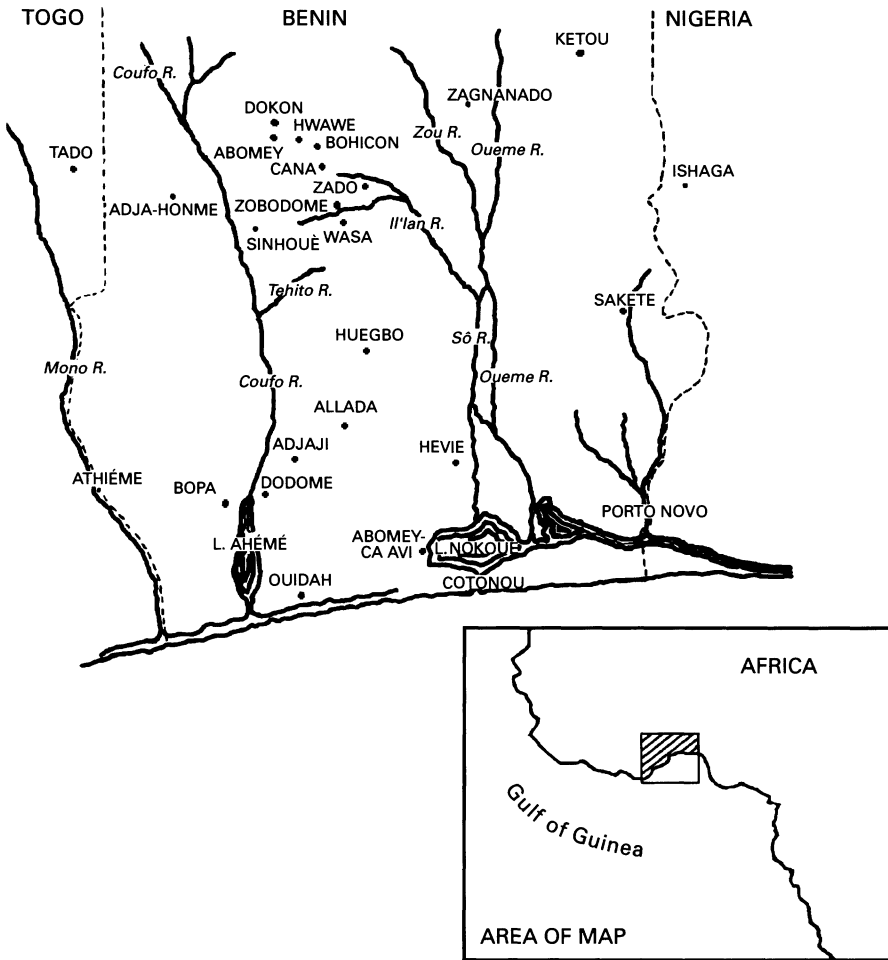
Interwoven in the accounts of these four powerful women, are the lives of a number of other figures of both mythic and historical importance, among these the 'leopard' Agasu, the early rulers, Ganyehesu, Dakodonu (commonly dated to c. 1625–45), Huegbadja (generally accorded the dates c. 1645–80), Tegbesu (1740–74) and Kpengla (1774–89), and the mysterious bush-king, Daho. I interviewed many of the 'place-holders' identified with the figures in this account, both in Abomey, the capital, and in near and more distant villages such as Hwawe, Dokon, Zunzume, Wasa, Cana, Sodohome and Zado, where individuals associated with the early history of Danhomè still have their family homes. Their stories, along with those of local Agasu and Aligbonu priests, bring to this account a diversity and richness not found in the official histories.

Several indigenous historians with knowledge of the early period of Danhomè dynastic history also have proven to be essential to this analysis. These individuals include, most importantly, the court minister Humase Adjaho, a man whose position, like that of several generations of his forebears, required that he oversee not only religious affairs and the network of spies for the state but also key political matters. The Adjaho family, who were not members of the royal family (unlike some of the ministers), retained knowledge of the unofficial (or as Adjaho would say, 'covered' history) because of their roles as political managers (and judges) both inside and outside the palace.¹⁰ From this background, Adjaho's ancestors maintained vital information on everything from court intrigue to *coups d'état*, to the personal agendas of political figures of the past, to the complexities of reconstruction in dynastic history. The second local historian whose knowledge contributed significantly to this analysis is a relatively modest man named Ayidonubokunkunglo Agbanon, a person who today is both a farmer and the head of a small village outside of Bohicon. A descendant of King Huegbadja, Agbanon's ancestors had retained important information on the early period of Danhomè history when Huegbadja came to power. Because Agbanon's family remained some distance both from the court and from its historians, his insights often differed from official or published accounts in interesting and provocative ways.

The next local historian whose name comes up with some frequency in this text is Vincent Awesu, a senior member of the once powerful Ahodomen family from Dokon, a town just outside of Abomey. Important members of this family include not only Dan,¹¹ the person the Danhomè state was named after, but also the mother of Huegbadja. This family, which was neither Fon nor Guedeve (they were Ouemenu, from the lower Oueme River area north

¹⁰ As a member of a non-royal family, his knowledge of dynastic history also was not bound by the same filial obligations as the princes who served as guardians of court history.

¹¹ Léon Pierre Ghézowounmè-Djomalia Dagba, *La collectivité familiale Yovogan Hounnon Dagba : de ses origines à nos jours* (Ouidah, 1982), 32.



Map 1.

of Porto Novo)¹² played a critical role in both the pre-dynastic and early dynastic periods. A later member of the family held the very powerful and remunerative position of Yovogan, ‘chief of Europeans’ for the Danhomè court. A fourth local historian who was essential to this analysis is Kplankun Agbidinukun, the namesake and descendant of the court historian named by King Glele (1858–89) to guard the official history of the state. Agbidinukun, like his father (who was a key source in Le Herissé’s and Dunglas’ histories of Danhomè) displayed a knowledge of royal history of sometimes astonishing breadth and depth. While the guardian of the ‘official’ court history and a rigid proponent of royal doctrine, Prince Agbidinukun’s insights also intersected in important ways with the counter-narrative of early dynastic history which emerged from my other sources.

¹² In the Abomey area their descendants are also referred to as Ananu.

I THE ORIGIN MYTH: THE FOUNDING OF DANHOMÈ

From the earliest published accounts of Danhomè's history, the first of which were undertaken by Norris (1789), Dalzel (1793) and Pires (1797) in the eighteenth century, to the increasingly more detailed historic narratives of the last 150 years by Burton (1864), Skertchly (1874), Le Herissé (1911), Herskovits (1938), Dunglas (1957–8), Palau-Marti (1964), Glele (1974), Oké (1977), Pazzi (1979), Law (1988) and others, a great deal of emphasis has focused on Danhomè dynastic origins and events affecting the reigns of its early and later kings.¹³ While sometimes fascinating in their information, many of the royal histories, as Robin Law has noted, were carefully constructed so as to emphasize official versions of dynastic history.¹⁴ The lengthy chronicles of Le Herissé and Dunglas immediately come to mind.

No historical period in Danhomè is more complex than that identified with the kingdom's founding, the period associated with both the origin of the state and the reigns of its first kings. Nearly all of the published and local accounts begin at Tado, the seat of Adja-Tado civilization, and with the meeting there of a princess and a leopard. These accounts, which have been published by Le Herissé, Herskovits, Dunglas, Glele, Lombard and Cornevin among others, generally stress the following events, here cited in a composite and much abbreviated form:¹⁵

A Tado princess named Aligbonu leaves the palace one day to get wood (or water) in the forest. There she is surprised by a male leopard (alternatively a spirit in leopard form or a hunter with leopard-like prowess). Nine months later the princess gives birth to a son (often called Agasu) with leopard-like qualities (generally described as pelting or claws, and/or traits such as great courage and agility). Raised by the princess, Agasu (or alternatively one of his descendants – who in some accounts has a child through incest with his mother Aligbonu) claims the Tado throne, is refused rulership because of his illegitimacy, and after causing destruction (breaking the royal calabash drinking vessel, or killing a member of the

¹³ Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy* (London, 1789; reprinted 1968), xiii–xvi; Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy* (London, 1793; reprinted, with a new introduction by J. D. Fage, 1967), 1–2; Vicente Ferreira Pires, *Viagem de Africa em o reino de Dahomé* [1797], ed. Cladio Ribeiro de Lessa (São Paulo, 1957); R. F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (London, 1864; reprinted 1966), 309 and *passim*; J. A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is...* (London, 1874), 10–13, 274–84; Auguste Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey* (Paris, 1911), 279–94; Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (2 vols.) (New York, 1938), i, 14–16, 165–76; E. Douglas, 'Contribution à l'histoire du Moyen-Dahomey', tome i, *Etudes dahoméennes*, xix (1957), 77–89; Montserrat Palau-Marti, *Le roi-dieu au Bénin* (Paris, 1964), 115; Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé, *Le Danxome: du pouvoir Aja à la nation fon* (Paris, 1974), 36–40, 85–6; Raymond Oké, 'Les siècles obscurs du royaume Aja du Danxome', in F. de Medeiros (ed.), *Peuples du Golfe du Bénin* (Paris, 1977), 47–66; Roberto Pazzi, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'aire culturelle Ajatado* (Lomé, 1979), 147–54, 197–8; Law, 'History and legitimacy', 437–9.

¹⁴ Law, 'History and legitimacy', 437.

¹⁵ Le Herissé, *Royaume*, 275; Herskovits, *Dahomey*, i, 166–9; Dunglas, 'Histoire', 80, 81; Glélé, *Danxome*, 26–37; Jacques Lombard, 'Contribution à l'histoire d'une ancienne société politique du Dahomey: la royauté d'Allada', *Bull. de l'I.F.A.N.*, xxix (1967), 43–4; Robert Cornevin, *La République Populaire du Bénin: des origines dahoméennes à nos jours* (Paris, 1981), 81–2.

competing faction) flees the kingdom with his family, supporters and certain *sacra* (throne, weapons, ancestral remains), finally arriving in Allada after a somewhat circuitous route that takes him to, among other places, the area around Lake Aheme. Later at Hwegbo, a town outside of Allada, after resolving a dispute over rulership, the family of Agasu splits up, some going north where eventually they will found Danhomè – Ganyehesu and Dakodonu becoming rulers in that area; others going south – to found Porto Novo; and still others remaining in Allada to maintain the throne there.

While a structuralist's dream with its references to leopard–human coupling, incest, destruction and flight, the above myth is bound to be a historian's nightmare.

Versions of this same story are recounted in the Abomey region today by individuals both inside and outside the royal line. The account of Agbanon, a descendant of King Huegbadja follows closely the leopard/princess coupling and the acts of incest cited above. In his account the key protagonists also are seen to have an important religious identity. As Agbanon explains it, after the incestuous sexual encounter between Agasu and Aligbonu, they

felt shame, for it was through incest that their sons had been born. In their shame they covered their heads with pottery vessels and turned into *vodun* [sacred forces]. It was in this act that the first *vodun* appeared.¹⁶

Particularly important in this account is the statement that Agasu and Aligbonu were transformed into *vodun*.¹⁷

Kplankun Agbidinukun, the son (and place-holder) of the well-known Danhomè court historian who provided Le Herissé and Dunglas with much of their information, presented me with a unique accounting of Danhomè's dynastic past as well. Interestingly, the current Agbidinukun's history is quite different from that which his father apparently revealed to Le Herissé and Dunglas. The present Agbidinukun rejected completely the idea that Aligbonu copulated in the forest with a leopard. He also denied that his father would have provided these individuals with such an account. Asked about the origins of the royal dynasty he explained:

The father of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu is a man called Dokpo [Dokpo Aglin]¹⁸ from Adja. When he left Adja, he walked in the forest, his gun on his shoulder. One

¹⁶ Agbanon, Jan. 23, 1986. The beginnings of Agbanon's account notes that: 'Since there were no other women at that time, he [Agasu] began to sleep with his mother. The world belonged to them. It was from her [Aligbonu's] stomach that Ganyehesu and Dakodonu emerged.' Also of interest here is the connection which is made between pottery and *vodun*, for pottery vessels are important deity *sacra*. See Claude Savary, 'Poteries rituelles et autres objets culturels en usage au Dahomey', Musée et Institut d'Ethnographie, Geneva, *Bulletin Annuel*, XIII (1970), 3–57. Also see Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Vodun philosophical and artistic roots in West Africa', in Don Cosentino (ed.), *The Sacred Arts of Vodou* (Los Angeles, in press). On the meaning of *vodun* generally in this area, see Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago, in press).

¹⁷ For other versions of this myth see Maximilien Quénum, *Au pays des Fons: us et coutumes du Dahomey* (Paris, 1938), 12; Herskovits, *Dahomey*, i, 166–9. Both sources allude to the illegitimacy of the prince-ruler.

¹⁸ Le Herissé, *Royaume*, 279, suggests that Dogbagri was the father of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu. Dunglas identifies the father as Do-Aklin: 'Histoire', 85. Maupoil may be referring to this same person when he identifies Huegbadja's sponsoring ancestor as a man

day he met a leopard. The leopard attacked him but caused no injury. Dokpo looked at the leopard after the assault and said 'as you are a leopard in the forest who traps animals, it is like this that I also am'.¹⁹

In the above account, we learn of the dynastic importance of an armed hunter from Adja whose strength and power are compared to a leopard. Concerning that part of the leopard account published by others which refers to the leopard impregnating Aligbonu, Agbidinukun noted, 'When they say that, and we hear it, we laugh. Aligbonu came from Wasa. Thus they are lying. They do not know... She did not leave there so that she would have sexual relations with an animal.'²⁰ Agbidinukun in this way reconfirms Le Herissé's earlier identity of Aligbonu as a Wasa (Ouassa) resident, not a royal woman from Tado.²¹ This, as we will see, is of vital importance to the understanding of early Danhomè history.

Scholars have questioned the veracity of the kingdom's origin myths on many grounds, not the least being the general insistence on an act of leopard-human copulation and the assumed origins of the dynasty in Allada. As early as 1895, Foà suggested that, at least to the kingdom's rivals, the myth was 'a self-glorifying invention' of the Danhomè rulers.²² More recently Maupoil observed: 'In any case, the leopard *toxwio* or ancestor [is], very much posterior to the group of dissident Aja.'²³ Yves Person in turn has noted the discrepancy between the founding dates of Porto-Novo and Abomey kingdoms, suggesting that the same brothers who are said to have resolved their quarrel at Hwegbo could not have founded both kingdoms since Porto-Novo was established in the eighteenth century, whereas Danhomè had its beginnings in the early seventeenth century. He asks: 'How can one thus reconcile this evidence with the tradition which separates the three branches of Agasuvi [children of Agasu, the leopard]... The symmetry of the three branches of Agasuvi, must be in effect a posterior rationalization of traditions.'²⁴

Robin Law also has presented a compelling argument against key details of the leopard and Allada myths, suggesting that it is a late fabrication probably put forward sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century. He cites a brief survey on Danhomè history before the 1724 Danhomè attack of Allada which was written in 1750 by two French officials, Pruneau and

named Dogbagli Genu: see Bernard Maupoil, *La géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Institut d'Ethnologie, Paris, 1981), 382. Local sources also identify Dokpo Aglin as the father of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu: Zonatchia, April 21, 1986. According to Agbidinukun (April 19, 1986), Dokpo [Dokpo Aglin] died not in Adja, but in Zado-Djodigon, a town not far from Abomey where today the coronation throne is kept (see text below). Agbidinukun also suggests that Dokpo is Huegbadja's *djoto* or sponsoring ancestor. Based on findings elaborated later in this article, the identity of Do-Aklin (Dobagri, Dokpo) as the *tohuio* of Huegbadja was probably of recent date (i.e. eighteenth century or later).¹⁹ Agbidinukun, April 19, 1986. ²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Le Herissé, *Royaume*, 279. Le Herissé also notes (*ibid.* 107) that Aligbonu came from Wasa (Ouassa). To my knowledge, however, no one has sought to examine her history further.

²² Edouard Foà, *Le Dahomey* (Paris, 1895), 3-5.

²³ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 429.

²⁴ Yves Person, 'Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto Novo)', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, xv (1975), 233-4.

Guestard. In this account, Law notes that the officers give no evidence of having heard of any dynastic link between Danhomè and Allada. They write instead that ‘Some say that this [king of] Daomet was governor, others that he was a sovereign of Bome [Abomey], others again that he was a... bandit...’²⁵

A number of other problems with the leopard myth and claims of origin from Allada also exist. For example, while Agasu today is identified with religious worship in both Abomey and communities in the surrounding area, the name Agasu appears hardly at all in the kingdoms of Allada and Porto-Novo, which are said in many of the myths to have been founded by one of Agasu’s descendants. In their study of Porto-Novo royal history, Akindélé and Aguessy thus make no mention of this figure.²⁶ At Allada, in turn, it is Adjahuto, not Agasu who is given a primary place within state history and religion. If all three kingdoms indeed were founded by descendants of Agasu, why is this figure not important in all three areas?

Another source of problems with this account is the local tradition which maintains the existence of a powerful leopard cult on the Abomey plateau before the development of the Danhomè state (thus the source of the leopard cult cannot be wholly foreign). Known locally as *kpo vodun* (leopard *vodun*), this cult is closely identified with the autochthonous Guedevis (referred to locally as *ayinon* ‘owners of the earth’), who lived in the area before the founding of the kingdom.²⁷ The importance of this pre-Agasu leopard god is discussed by the residents of the area today. As Agbanon has noted, ‘It is not the same leopard, but it is also a leopard.’²⁸ Victor Awesu, who resides in Dokon where one of these early leopard temples (called *Bosikpon*) still exists suggested in turn:

²⁵ Law, ‘History and legitimacy’, 15, citing Archives Nationales, Paris: C6/25, mémoire of Pruneau and Guestard, 18 March 1750. Some scholars who have questioned the myth have gone on to suggest alternative histories of the kingdom’s founding. N. L. Gayibor (in Pazzi, *Histoire*, 47) citing Xwla (Hwla) oral tradition (from the area around Grand Popo on the southern Togo/Bénin border) notes that Huegbadja, Danhomè’s founder, may be the son of a Xwla king, Awusa (see text below). Roberto Pazzi, an Italian scholar also working in Togo, suggests still another possibility (*ibid.* 154, 158, n. 28), that it was a dissident prince from Danhomè (Dame) who married the Adja princess, ‘emigrated and lived at a distance, finally to return to the country of [his] grandfathers...’

²⁶ A. Akindélé and C. Aguessy, *Contribution à l’étude de l’histoire de l’ancien royaume de Porto-Novo* (I.F.A.N. Dakar, 1953).

²⁷ It should be noted that the link between kings and leopards is very widespread in Africa, including at nearby Tado. Among others, see Palau-Marti, *Roi-dieu*. The early existence of a leopard cult on the Abomey plateau is discussed by Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 530–1: ‘*Kpo-vodun* [the leopard vodun] should not be confused with the royal leopard of Abomey. Before the arrival of the Aja, who took it as an emblem, the leopard was considered as a divinity by the Gedevis. Its cult is still celebrated today. It possesses the *hunkpame* where the novices are initiated, and, like all the vodun, a roko [iroko tree]. But no one should pronounce the name of *kpo-vodun* because only Agasu can have this title’. The existence of a pre-Agasu leopard god on the Abomey plateau was also alluded to by Burton, *Mission*, 297, who noted that Agassu was ‘the old Makhi [Mahi, i.e. indigenous] fetish that ruled Agbome before Dako conquered it’. Robin Law, citing this passage, observes (‘History and legitimacy’, 15) that: ‘While this might possibly reflect merely confusion on Burton’s part, it may also represent an authentic alternative (and perhaps earlier) tradition of Agasu’s origins which has since disappeared from the tradition’.

²⁸ Agbanon, Jan. 23, 1986.

When they brought [Agasu], Bosikpon had the power here, and one put [Agasu] in the temple of Bosikpon. Why were the two *tohuio* [*toxiuo*, founding ancestors] put together? The other *tohuio* came to see the *tohuio* who existed here. The one who arrived did not yet have a place, thus the one who was here and who governed, one put the new one beside him...²⁹

What is suggested in the above, is a tradition of uniting old and new religious practices through a form of religious assemblage. As Awesu explains it, *agasu* (the royal leopard) was placed in the temple of pre-existing local leopard god, Bosikpon. Agbanon suggests a slightly different version of this: 'If you had your *vodun* here before, you would place this *vodun* beside Agasu, so that it would become important like that of the king. All the *vodun* that were here before were confided to the king. Without the king they would be nothing.'³⁰ Whatever the placement order, what one sees here is an important concern with religious and political assemblage.

2 PRINCESS ALIGBONU: THE DYNASTIC MOTHER

Like the leopard Agasu, the kingdom's 'ancestral mother', Aligbonu, is a figure of critical importance in the various versions of the myth. Unfortunately Tado scholars such as Pazzi offer us little insight into the identity or origins of this woman.³¹ And, like her leopard son, Agasu, Aligbonu is little known in either Porto-Novo or Allada.³² Not surprisingly, it is again in Abomey where Aligbonu's renown is particularly prominent. About her origins, all the people with whom I spoke were in agreement. Aligbonu came from the small Guedevi hill town of Wasa about 20 km south of Abomey. Agbanon explained it this way: 'The one who gave birth to Agasu is called Aligbonu. She is from Wasa; originally she was a person but eventually she was transformed into a *vodun*.' Later he added: 'There where Naye Aligbonu put the pottery on her head is at Wasa.'³³ Agbidinukun in reaffirming Aligbonu's origins in Wasa, noted that she is referred to as Aligbo Wasanu [Aligbo, person from Wasa]. According to Agbidinukun, 'Many say that Aligbonu was a princess from Adja, they do not know. They do not understand. It is not true.'³⁴ The Agasunon or high-ranking priest of Agasu, Agasusi Hunsa, also links Aligbonu's identity with Wasa: 'The people of Wasa, it is they who worship Aligbonu – she is their *tohuio* [founding ancestor]. Her temple is there... It is there that she transformed into a *vodun*.'³⁵

Interestingly, one of the local dynastic origin myths recounted to me by

²⁹ Victor Awesu, Jan. 4, 1986. On the significance of the *tohuio* in Danhomè art and royal identity see S. P. Blier, 'King Glele of Danhomè: divination portraits of a Lion King and Man of Iron (Part I)', *African Arts*, XXIII (1990), 42–53, 93–4; 'King Glele of Danhomè: dynasty and destiny', *African Arts*, XXIV (1991), 44–55, 101–3.

³⁰ Agbanon, Feb. 24, 1986.

³¹ Pazzi, *Histoire*.

³² Indeed according to Albert Kudodeti (Nov. 19, 1985), an elder at the Allada palace, Aligbonu's place is not at Allada at all but rather at Houegbo Agon – the town where the three brothers are said to have met to resolve their differences before splitting to found their respective kingdoms.

³³ Agbanon, Feb. 7 and 17, 1986.

³⁴ Agbidinukun, Apr. 19 and May 3, 1986.

³⁵ Agasusi Hunsa, May 17, 1986.

Agbanon suggests that the forest where Aligbonu encountered the leopard was in the town of Cana, a town positioned mid-way between Wasa and Abomey (i.e. about 16 km between each). According to Agbanon:

Cana Zungo is where she saw the leopard³⁶ ... That is the beginning. When she left Wasa, it is there she passed before continuing to Adja Tado. It is there she gave birth to the children. Before going to Adja Tado, it is by this road that she passed. She was alone in the world, she went there to find the person she was looking for.³⁷

Both the mother of the dynasty and the place of inception of the first Danhomè king according to these traditions thus were local. Tado became important only *after* the sexual act.

In the village of Wasa, various accounts are given of the origins of Aligbonu.³⁸ Whatever her origins, as will be seen below, both Aligbonu's current renown and her widespread identity with Adja Tado are based on her association with Adonon, the wife of Danhomè's first king, Huegbadja. Adonon originally came from Wasa, where she appears to have worshipped Aligbonu as her family ancestor or *tohuio*. When the kingdom later sought to establish historical ties with Adja-Tado, Aligbonu's identity was shifted to the latter site. Although originally the ancestor of Adonon, Aligbonu at this point came to be identified with the royal dynastic line as a whole. As explained by the court minister, Adjaho: 'Aligbonu is the foundation of their birth – their origin. Aligbonu is their *tohuio*.'³⁹

Taken together, what the above suggests is that it was a local woman – a Guedeви indeed – who came to be known as the mother of the dynasty and the symbol of the long road to power. It is this part of her identity that is emphasized by Adjaho: 'Aligbonu is the road they took to come here. In view of all the difficulties they had on the road, they took all this to create a *vodun*; the *vodun* is Aligbonu. They gathered everything there and made a *vodun*. It is a *tohuio*.'⁴⁰ Like other local ancestral *tohuio*, Aligbonu came to symbolize family origins, in this case not only Adonon's rural family in Wasa, but also the Danhomè dynastic line as a whole, for Adonon, as the wife of the kingdom's founder, Huegbadja, was the mother of three of Danhomè's early rulers, Akaba (1685–1705), his twin sister Tassi Hangbe (1705–8) and their younger brother Agaja (1708–40). Praise names of the *vodun* Aligbonu underscore both her identity as dynastic mother and her association with the founder's road to power.⁴¹

³⁶ Agbanon argues (Feb. 25, 1985) that this forest was only a stopping point for Aligbonu on her travels from Wasa to Adja-Tado. ³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Hunpegande Assohoto, a member of the Aligbonu family, noted (Apr. 23, 1986) that 'When my parents left Allada, they brought the *vodun* Aligbonu here'. Others, however, are adamant that she was an indigenous woman who, like other Wasa residents, was a member of the autochthonous Guedeви.

³⁹ Adjaho, May 27, 1986. Agbidinukun also reaffirms this, noting that the family of Adonon at Wasa 'was Guedeви. They were here before the time of Huegbadja. The name of Aligbonu's family lineage is Azuwe, not Huegbonu like the kings': Agbidinukun, May 3, 1986. ⁴⁰ Adjaho, June 18, 1986.

⁴¹ The etymological base of the word Aligbonu reaffirms this association of Aligbonu with the road to dynastic power (*ali* [road]; *gbo* [big]; *non* [mother; owner]), the words together meaning 'mother of the long road'. Agbidinukun suggests (May 30, 1986) a variation of this: 'Aligbonu means: it is on the great road that we passed to come into life, it is our grandmother'. Adonon means 'mother' (*non*) of the 'hearth' (*ado*).

The close links between Aligbonu (the mythic ancestress) and Adonon (the dynastic ancestress) are also strongly defined. Indeed in both ritual and historic narratives, the two are often conflated.⁴² As somewhat overstated by Agbidinukun, 'Naye Adonon and Aligbonu are the same woman.'⁴³ The Agasu priest, Agasusi Hunsa of Cana-Zungo, suggests much the same thing: 'When [Adonon] came here, she took the name of Aligbonu. She is the chief of Aligbonu.'⁴⁴ Equally significant, today it is a woman from the Adonon family who is enthroned as (i.e. serves as place-holder of) Aligbonu. It is this woman who thus represents the mother of both Agasu and the Abomey dynasty. The place-holder of Aligbonu lives in a palace in Hwawe next to that of Daho, whose role in the early history of the state will be discussed below.⁴⁵

Another aspect of Adonon's life history is also important to this discussion, particularly as it relates to the subject of sexual encounter. In accounts at Wasa, Hwawe and Abomey, it is explained that Adonon played a critical role in an early dispute between Huegbadja and Dakodonu, the man who is identified in most historical accounts as Huegbadja's father. Adonon, these oral accounts suggest, was originally betrothed to Dakodonu but before she actually joined here husband-to-be she became pregnant by Huegbadja, who then was serving as Dakodonu's emissary.⁴⁶ Angered by this act, Dakodonu sent Huegbadja away, whereupon Huegbadja went into the service of Dakodonu's bitter enemy, Adenyin.⁴⁷ According to Adjaho and Agbidinukun and reaffirmed by others in both Wasa and Abomey, it was because Huegbadja impregnated Adonon, who was Dakodonu's betrothed, that Huegbadja left Dakodonu and took up allegiance with the enemy Adenyin.⁴⁸ Only later, after Huegbadja killed Adenyin in a dispute, did Dakodonu accept Huegbadja back. 'The day he killed Adenyin, it is that day Dakodonu took him as a child,' explained Adjaho.

What is particularly important in the above, however, is that while the Danhomè rulers Akaba, Tassi Hangbe and Agaja are said to be the children of Huegbadja and Adonon, they also in a certain sense may be considered as

⁴² According to Agbidinukun (May 3, 1986), the *tohuio* Aligbonu, was given to Naye Adonon to guard because: 'It is not just anyone who you will choose for this. It is someone you have confidence in... When [Huegbadja] married her, he gave her this *vodun*, saying "you will be its mother"'.⁴³ Agbidinukun, May 30, 1986.

⁴⁴ Agasusi Hunsa, May 17, 1986. The linking of Aligbonu with Adonon is also made clear in their names. Aligbonu is called variously Aligbo Wasanu (Aligbo from Wasa) and Naye Aligbonu Adonon: Agbidinukun, May 30, 1986.

⁴⁵ In this way, Huegbadja's wife, Adonon, is also closely identified with Agasu, 'the leopard'. According to Agbidinukun (May 3, 1986): 'When they came to see Naye Adonon, and saw that she was a good woman, they said that she would be Agasu's partner, she would be its mother'. Agbidinukun goes on to explain (May 30, 1986) that: 'We made a temple and we put her next to the temple of Agasu'. Agasusi Hunsa, an Agasu priest at Cana-Zungo also emphasized (May 17, 1986) the importance of Naye Adonon with respect to Agasu: 'It is Huegbadja who took Naye Adonon to take care of Agasu'. Agbidinukun noted in turn (May 3, 1986) that 'When we were looking for a good woman to represent it, it is there that we took Naye Adonon'. It is interesting in this light that a number of people with whom I spoke confused Adonon's identity, often calling her the mother of Huegbadja, rather than the mother of his children.

⁴⁶ Kujihun, Apr. 23, 1986.

⁴⁷ Known locally as an accomplished warrior and hunter, Huegbadja would have found ready employ here. ⁴⁸ Adjaho (May 27, 1986) and Agbidinukun (May 30, 1986).

the children of Dakodonu, for officially Adonon probably remained the latter's wife. This factor has critical historical significance with respect to the eventual decision of the dynasty to include Dakodonu and his older brother Ganyehesu in the official list of kings.

3 THE LEOPARD AGASU: THE CREATION OF A FICTIVE FOUNDER

As with Aligbonu, local accounts provide interesting if contradictory insight into who or what the incestuous leopard-prince Agasu is and represents. Several of my sources insisted that Agasu was a fiction, a composite *vodun* – a *tohuio* – created to represent the power, importance and historical legitimacy of the Danhomè kings. According to Adjaho, Agasu was intended both to symbolize and to embody the king's early origins and history: 'When Huegbadja arrived, he took a part from Aligbonu and a part from Adjahuto [the *tohuio* of the Allada kings], and he created the union of these two called Agasu... Aligbonu and Adjahuto were the *tohuio* of his parents.'⁴⁹ Thus, like Aligbonu, Agasu was a *vodun* created or assembled to represent a past inheritance. The late invention of Agasu and the historical elaboration that accompanied this act also is reaffirmed, however obliquely, by the person who today 'holds the place of' Ganyehesu, the older brother of Dakodonu. According to the current Ganyehesu, 'in coming here, they forgot their father, Agasu. He was forgotten along the road. Later one had to return to "recover" this.'⁵⁰

Agbanon also stresses the close interrelationship between Agasu worship, the display of family history and the need to cover one's true origins: 'When our ancestors left for Hwawe, they could not say where they had come from. They could not reveal their origin place. That is why one said Agasu.' To Agbanon, the essence of Agasu is further underscored by the etymology of his name. According to him, Agasu means 'husband of prostitution' (*aga*: prostitution; *su*: husband). 'If he were not *agasu* [someone who had illicit sex] would he have had relations with his mother? It is because of this that the other children began to call him names. In the name Agasu, one is saying

⁴⁹ Adjaho (June 18, 1986).

⁵⁰ Ganyehesu (Nov. 27, 1985). That Agasu was a late creation is also suggested by Agbidinukun. He, however, attributes Agasu's inception to events at Hwegbo, the town outside of Allada where the three brothers were said to have split up, one going to Porto-Novo, one leaving for Abomey and the third remaining in Allada. According to Agbidinukun, 'Some said we would split the inheritance; others said we would guard it. Thus when they arrived at Hwegbo they dug a hole and filled it with oil. Everyone gathered around the hole with the cloths and hats, and put all that in the hole. In this way they put their inheritance in the oil. After this they took the earth that had been removed from the hole and used it to close the hole. They said if someone returns to take that, all the things will already be ruined. It was at Hwegbo that one did that. It is from this act that Agasu was born. They said no one could go back to this thing. It is already closed. That is how one got the name Agasu [*aga*: above; *su*: closed]' (Apr. 19, 1986). This bears a striking resemblance to local traditions of *vodun* altar construction, with its burial of cloth, liquid and other precious materials in the earth: see Suzanne Preston Blier 'Art and secret agency: concealment and revelation in artistic expression', in Mary Nooter (ed.), *Secrecy: African Arts of Concealment and Ambiguity* (New York, 1993). Central here is a link between religious shrine construction and historical reconstruction.

that he slept with his mother.⁵¹ Maupoil makes a similar point: 'It appeared convenient to name it Aga-su, to avoid all allusion to his problematic parentage.'⁵² What seems to be referred to here are a series of problematic parentage issues, including not only 'Agasu's' mythic troubles as the son of a leopard and the subject of an incestuous relationship with his mother, but also Huegbadja's act of illicit sex with the intended wife of his 'father' Dakodonu. Huegbadja, by impregnating one of Dakodonu's intended wives (whether their relationship was truly filial or the result of adoption, as will be suggested below) thus became identified with incest, his own children (Danhomè's later rulers) bearing the shame of this act as well. It is tempting to read this emphasis on incest in structuralist terms, as creating an identity for the first king as one who was different from others, since he was able to break a major religious taboo without divine retribution. As suggested above, however, there also may be a certain validity to this account. What is also important to emphasize here, is that Agasu, like Aligbonu, is a creation, a *vodun* which at once defines the idea of origins and serves to cover up a ruler's own questionable past. Whatever its basis, the creation of Agasu and Aligbonu clearly was essential to the identity of the newly founded kingdom. The very act of 'naming' such *vodun* was also significant. As Agbanon has noted, even while retaining a certain fiction about Agasu: 'When we went to Adja to bring back the *vodun* [we did that because] when one does something, anything, one takes a name.'

4 HUEGBADJA: THE ORIGINS OF ABOMEY'S FIRST KING

The close association of Adonon, the wife of the kingdom's founder Huegbadja, with both Aligbonu and Agasu brings us in turn to the question of King Huegbadja's identity and origins. Published sources and individuals living on the Abomey plateau are nearly unanimous in their statements that Huegbadja is the son either of the early seventeenth-century ruler, Ganyehesu or of his brother Dakodonu.⁵³ Both were residents of Hwawe (a town a few kilometers from Abomey) and their names are closely tied to the history of Danhomè and the migration of the Agasuvi (children of Agasu) from Tado to the Abomey plateau. Ganyehesu, the accounts agree, should have ruled. He was the older brother, but when he left for Allada (variously – to be crowned, to receive the scarification marks of Agasu, or to receive the blessings of the priests there), his brother Dakodonu took over the throne.⁵⁴

Is Huegbadja indeed the son of either of these individuals?⁵⁵ The court

⁵¹ Agbanon (Jan. 27 and Feb. 25, 1986). Local etymologies such as this one are important, not only because they are associated as here with invented *vodun*, but also because they suggest something of how such terms, individuals and events are viewed locally.

⁵² Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 65.

⁵³ The ongoing confusion about whether Ganyehesu or Dakodonu was Huegbadja's father also suggests that this attribution is problematic. Interestingly, Agbidinukun, while insisting that Huegbadja is the son of Ganyehesu, notes that Huegbadja was already a young man of about 12 or 14 when his father and uncle migrated to the Abomey plateau from Adja-Tado (Apr. 19, 1986).

⁵⁴ According to Adjaho (May 27, 1986), it was due in large measure to the help of Huegbadja that Dakodonu was able to rule. See text below.

⁵⁵ Le Herissé seems to imply that this is the case (*Royaume*, 289): in his words, 'We consider Ouegbadja as the true founder of Dahomey'.

minister Adjaho refutes this: '[Huegbadja] came and saw [Dakodonu and Ganyehesu] here ... A lot of people know that he is not the son of Dakodonu. They will not say it. If you ask the question to people they will insist that he is the son of Dakodonu.' In the past to say such a thing was dangerous (and indeed, it was said that one could lose one's life). As Adjaho observed, 'If you had told them this, they would follow you, for you are in the process of breaking the country.'⁵⁶ If Huegbadja is not the son of Dakodonu or Ganyehesu, as Adjaho suggests, where does he come from? According to Adjaho, Huegbadja originally came from the area around Adjaha and Adjaji on Lake Aheme (Hen, Hin) near the Togo-Bénin border to the south.⁵⁷ This is an area of mixed Adja- and Houeda-speakers.

The possibility of a Lake Aheme birthplace for Huegbadja is of considerable interest because it offers support for an idea put forward by the Togolese historian N. L. Gayibor. Citing Hwla (Xwla) oral traditions from the area around Grand Popo, he suggests that Huegbadja is the son of a king named Awusa.⁵⁸ According to Gayibor, Huegbadja ravished a young girl who had been brought to him. The king, hearing of this act, decided to have the prince disappear, whereupon the prince fled toward the Abomey plateau, gaining a strong reputation there as a hunter and warrior. At some point, Dakodonu took him in as a son. Interestingly, this account has a certain resonance with troubles said to have erupted between Dakodonu and Huegbadja over the young woman, Adonon. If Gayibor is correct that Huegbadja was the son of Awusa, a Hwla king who signed a pact with the king of Glijé around 1700, then we can place the founding of Danhomè toward the end of the seventeenth century.⁵⁹

Is it possible that Lake Aheme was Huegbadja's homeland? As noted above, according to Adjaho, Huegbadja was the son of a ruler in the Lake Aheme area.⁶⁰ Published sources, while providing little direct support for this idea, do link the area with the early migration history of the Agasvi.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Adjaho, June 4, 1986. Interestingly, by placing the shrine of the royal *tohuio*, Agasu, in Hwawe near the homes of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, one is also identifying the latter with the lineage of Huegbadja.

⁵⁷ Since salt was traditionally prepared in this locale, the region also was called by some, Jegbaji ('the place to load salt'): Adjaho, June 18, 1986. Ahanhanzo, a descendant of King Glelé, confirmed the importance of Adjaji in the royal history: 'it is from Adjaji that we left to go to Allada' (Aug. 12, 1986). ⁵⁸ Gayibor, in Pazzi, *Histoire*, 47.

⁵⁹ One needs to bear in mind that in linking Huegbadja with the Hwla in this way, the recounters of this history may be seeking to advance their own political identity *vis-à-vis* the kings of Danhomè. Enough supportive evidence exists in Abomey, however, to take a serious look at this account. If, as Gayibor asserts, Huegbadja is the son of Awusa, active *c.* 1700, this would suggest that the founding date for the Danhomè kingdom needs to be moved forward, and appears to be much closer to the 1688 date for the founding of Porto-Novo (Akindélé and Aguessy, *Porto-Novo*, 67) than had been previously thought. Interestingly Porto-Novo royal origins are also traced to the area around Lake Hin (Aheme) (*ibid.* 26), so the possibility exists that Huegbadja and the founder of Porto-Novo are in some remote way related. ⁶⁰ Adjaho, June 18, 1986.

⁶¹ Akindélé and Aguessy note, for example, that 'According to local [Porto-Novo] history, the Dovinou ... like all the Fon of lower Dahomey fix themselves to a distant époque on an island in Lake Aheme ... where they practiced fishing from which the surname Dovi (sons of the fish net) was given to them'. See A. Akindélé and C. Aguessy, 'Données traditionnelles relatives aux Fon Dovinou de Savalou', *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.*,

Indeed it was perhaps following an incident in this area that Huegbadja took his royal strong name, the latter meaning ‘the fish that escaped the net’ (*huevi*: fish; *gbe*: refuse; *adja*: net).⁶² Adandé, discussing the source of Huegbadja’s name, notes accordingly that one

attributes Hwegbadja’s strong name to the fact that the prince...after an act meriting death, succeeded in fleeing the trap set by the partisans of his father beside a river, where one wanted to drown him. In remembering this escapade, he took the name Wegbadja.⁶³

What is emphasized in this account is that Huegbadja at some point in his early life, committed an offense, as a result of which certain individuals plotted to drown him, but did not succeed. At Abomey, tradition would have precluded the killing of a prince by the shedding of his blood. If the same custom was practiced in the Lake Aheme area, and if Huegbadja had some affiliation with the local throne, a plot to kill him by drowning is plausible.

Naturally many questions remain unanswered concerning this and other accounts of Huegbadja’s origins and eventual rise to power in Abomey.

xvii (1955), 551. Dunglas refers as well to a Guedeви account about ‘the migration of the Agasouvi, who had abandoned the banks of Lake Hen (Aheme) with its fish, to conduct themselves to the Oua-oue [Hwawe] plateau. [The Guedeви] called [the Agasuvi] “the fish who abandoned water and came onto land”’: ‘Histoire’, 87. Dunglas notes in turn (*ibid.* 82) that ‘The first step in the migration of the Agasuvi brought them to the banks of Lake Hen (Lake Aheme) into which the Cufo river flowed... A number of years later, the Agasouvi were chased by war from the borders of Lake Aheme’.

⁶² That Huegbadja’s name is an allusion to his origins is stressed by Le Herissé. As he explains it (*Royaume*, 13), a certain Agbokanzo is said to have remarked unfavorably about Huegbadja that he was like a ‘fish that left the river to live on earth’, to which Huegbadja later responded that ‘the words of Agbokanzo touched him... [for he is] making an allusion to the migrations of our tribe’. According to Dunglas (‘Histoire’, 87), ‘Soon after this... [Huegbadja] killed his insulter... saying “The fish that escaped the net never returns”’.

⁶³ Codjovi Etienne Adandé, ‘Les grandes teintures et les bas-reliefs du Musée d’Agbome’ (Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université Nationale du Bénin, 1976–7), 107. Catherine Akalogun, a maker of history appliqués in the Danhomè palace offers further insight into Huegbadja’s name: ‘they mounted a plot against him, they knew he would go to the river that day. They wanted to push him in that thing. But a person told him and he escaped. A long time later, they saw him and said they had hoped to find him to go fishing, saying “this fish escaped the net.” It is because of this that he escaped to come to Abomey. He left Adjaha. It is because of what the people did to him that he left that country’ (July 1, 1986). According to Adjaho (May 3, 1977), who gives an in-depth accounting of this episode in Huegbadja’s life, the attempted drowning incident took place at Adjaha Zouboji. ‘They stayed there and Huegbadja [caused a problem] and they wanted to put him in the river and he fled from there and went to Tado’. Adjaho suggests that it was a member of the Huntondji family who saved Huegbadja by forewarning him of the plot to drown him. Reflecting this, the Huntondji smiths historically were treated in Abomey as ‘brothers’ of the kings, and had the right to key items of royal regalia. Similar traditions of an attempted drowning in Lake Aheme are sometimes told in connection with the migration of King Kokpon from Tado to Allada: Akindélé and Aguessy, *Porto-Novo*, 25; Oké, ‘Siècles’, 63–4. The Gbaguidi family, which welcomed the ‘Agasuvi’ when they arrived on the Abomey plateau, is also said in some accounts to have migrated there from the Lake Aheme area: Dunglas, ‘Histoire’, 84; see also Akindélé and Aguessy, ‘Fon Dovinou’, 551.

Among these one wants to know why, if Lake Aheme was his birth place, was Tado so important to the Danhomè kings? My evidence suggests that Tado is not a single place – an ancient town in Togo – but rather a term which is used generally to mean place of origin. When one asks ‘where did your family come from?’, invariably the answer, at least for Danhomè royalty, is ‘Tado’. But if one asks in turn ‘which Tado?’, many people will more precisely situate the specific Tado that their family came from, for example, Tado-Ajaji.⁶⁴ Oké also suggests the multivalent identity of this term, in noting that Tado may be a deformation of the word Dota, which

designates today, either Allada, Agbome or Zogbonu – all first villages founded by Aja emigrants. This name signifies in the language of the Fon kingdoms, the summit, the point of halt, the omega, having been taken from the allegorical sentence: *Mi wa doota – mi was do lo sa* (we have marked the point of stopping, we have arrived at the end of our troubles; we have reached the summit).⁶⁵

On a number of occasions similarly, people with whom I spoke mentioned the name Tado (the first village) in conjunction with places of origin which were not in Togo. Thus Adjaji and Adjaja themselves may be understood as signifying Tado to the royal family.⁶⁶ The fact that the language of Adja is still spoken today in royal ceremonies at Abomey would be wholly consistent with this, for Adja was a language of the Lake Aheme area as well. Although Law points out that ‘the claim that Agasu originated from Tado... seems... dubious, since descent from Tado royalty was a functional claim for any aspirants to royal status and might easily be fabricated for propaganda purposes’,⁶⁷ his point needs some clarification in light of the above. While true, the term Tado also seems to have been flexible enough to be understood to mean ‘origin place’ in the context of many other Adja communities as well.

5 THE ROYAL MOTHER ADRU: LOCAL SUPPORT AND SYMBOLS OF POWER

If, as the above suggests, Huegbadja did come from the area around Lake Aheme to the south, how was he able to gain control and consolidate power on the Abomey plateau? There appear to be several factors in the above. Most important were his family ties in the Abomey area. As noted earlier, oral traditions maintain that Huegbadja’s mother was a woman from the Abomey plateau area. Her name was Adu Dakposi and she came from the

⁶⁴ The etymology of the word gives support to this idea. Tado (or rather Sado as it is more generally pronounced in the Fon area) means to crawl like an infant (*sa*: crawl; *do*: to do) (Agasunon, Jan. 22, 1986). Oké confirms (‘Siècles’, 49) the link between the name Tado and the act of crawling (although he stresses the low walls of the Tado palace, and how one had to crawl by them).

⁶⁵ Oké, ‘Siècles’, 54–5.

⁶⁶ Merlo and Vidaud note that ‘Around the fourteenth century the Houéda, who were originally from Porto Novo... began fishing in Lake Ahémé. Through marriage, the Houéda allied themselves with the royal family of Adja who exercised a sort of suzerainty over the fishermen...’: Christian Merlo and Pierre Vidaud, ‘Dangbé et le peuplement houéda’, in Medeiros (ed.), *Peuples du Golfe du Bénin*, 269. Thus the area of Lake Aheme appears to have been linked politically to Tado.

⁶⁷ Law ‘History and legitimacy’, 450.

powerful Awesu (Ahodomen) family at Dokon, 5 km from the capital of Abomey.⁶⁸ This family, who arrived in the Abomey plateau from the Oueme (Weme) river area north of Porto-Novo,⁶⁹ is, as we recall, also the family of Dan, the man whose death was to give the new kingdom its name.⁷⁰ According to Victor Awesu, a member of this family, 'Huegbedja's princely name, Aho,⁷¹ came from his maternal grandfather, Ahodomen [an early leader of the Awesu family]... As Huegbadja was our grandchild,⁷² he asked for and received from his grandfather various objects of rulership such as the drum, the cane, the *ato* [or raised sacrificial structure], the tradition of building high palace walls, and the *kpaligan* gong.'

Huegbadja's maternal relatives thus appear to have been critical both in Huegbadja's move to the Abomey plateau and in his eventual rise to power in this region. The family of his mother provided him not only with political support, but also with key symbols of power. Today, the raised *ato* platform, *kpaligan* gong, high palace walls and royal drums are among the most important symbols of Danhomè dynastic power. That these arts came from his maternal relatives serves to underscore the role which Huegbadja's mother played in his increasing authority in the area. Interestingly, the royal family of Danhomè today retains certain matrilineal features. The children of princesses trace their affiliation and inheritance exclusively through the royal matrilineal line while the rest of the populace (including the princes) trace descent through the father. Could this practice relate to the role which Huegbadja's mother, Adu Dakposi, played in the founder's rise to power? Whatever the answer, today it is Huegbadja's wife's *tohuio*, Aligbonu, who is worshipped by this king's descendants as the ancestress of the royal dynasty, for she is the *tohuio* of his children, the early rulers Akaba, Tassi-Hangbe and Agadja.

Further insight into Huegbadja's mother's role in his coming to power derives from local oral traditions which suggest that it was at the family

⁶⁸ Glele, *Danxomè*, 101. The person who today sits on the throne of Dakodonu confirmed this (Nov. 17, 1985), as did Agbidinukun (Apr. 28, 1986) and Awesu (Jan. 4, 1986). Agbidinukun suggests (Apr. 19, 1986) that the *vodun* of the mother of Huegbadja still today rests in Dokon at the house of Awesu. While the second part of this woman's name, Dakposi, appears to mean 'wife' (*si*) of Dakpo (DakoDonu), the latter moniker most likely is a late addition intended to suggest that Adu was married to Dakodonu, and more importantly, that her son, Huegbadja, was the child of this man.

⁶⁹ Interestingly, Agasu adepts speak a language identified as Hogbonu (or Gun, the language of Porto-Novo). These adepts in turn are called 'Hogbonuto' (people of Porto-Novo) (Agbanon, Mar. 18, 1986; Adjaho, Aug. 11, 1986). Hogbonu is the language spoken originally both by the Awesu of Dokon (the family of Huegbadja's mother) and the adepts of Bosikpon, the leopard god tied to this family.

⁷⁰ Dagba, *Collectivité*, 32. According to Dagba (*ibid.* 23), the Abomey plateau area around Dokon at this time was called Danzoumè 'in [*me*] the forest [*zu*] of the snake [*dan*]'. Dokon itself signifies 'near the hole'. The meaning of the term Danhomè in this light can be understood to signify not only 'in the middle [belly] of Dan [the individual]', but also 'in the middle of Danzoumè, i.e. the forest of snakes'. Interesting in this regard, a serpent is the standard icon for Danhomè in the Abomey palace bas-reliefs.

⁷¹ The name Aho appears at some point to have become conflated with the Fon institution of kingship. Thus the Fon term for king is *aho* (*axo*). The king's wife is the *ahosi* (*axosi*), and the king's son is *ahovi* (*axovi*).

⁷² Victor Awesu, however, maintains (Jan. 4, 1986) that Huegbadja's father was Dakodonu.

residence of this woman that regional chiefs historically met on the plateau in the years before the establishment of the Danhomè kingship.⁷³ During this pre-kingship era, governance was said to be in the hands of a local leader who was elected for a three-year period from the group of regional chiefs participating in this governing council.⁷⁴ Huegbadja, these sources assert, paid or offered gifts to key members of the local group of chiefs to gain their votes, in essence buying Danhomè from them. Once in power, he refused to give up his position and authority and eventually acquired control over the whole of the plateau area.⁷⁵

6 DAKODONU AND GANYEHESU – AUTOCHTHONOUS CHIEFS

Huegbadja thus appears to have been the son of a noble (chief? king?) from the south and a local Abomey area woman from the powerful Ahodomen family of Dokon. How and why did he develop such an important early relationship with the local Hwawe chiefs, Dakodonu and Ganyehesu? Who were these two brothers, and what role did they play in the early years of the kingship? Adjaho suggests that Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, like Huegbadja's wife Adonon, were members of the autochthonous Guedeve, a people who occupied much of the plateau before the development of the Danhomè state. Dakodonu and Ganyehesu 'are both Guedeve', Adjaho asserted, '[they] are Ayino [owners of the earth].'⁷⁶ Kulo Ade, a Guede priest in Hwawe confirmed this, insisting that the mother of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu was a local woman named Naye Sava, whose father, Houagni, was an important Guede priest from the village of Zounzonme.⁷⁷ According to Da Kpasali of Zounzonme at that time, 'It was Houagni who had all the land.'⁷⁸ Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, the above suggests, were born into a local Guedeve family that had key religious power on the Abomey plateau. The above is of interest historically because it confirms not only that Ganyehesu and Dakodonu did not come from Adja-Tado via Allada (as the official royal histories maintain) but also that they were Guedeve by birth.

During the pre-dynastic period there was considerable interaction between Guedeve and other residents of the Abomey plateau and the once-powerful kingdom of Allada. Although Yves Person argues that from about 1670 the Abomey area was strong enough to combat slave raids directed from Allada,⁷⁹ the relationship between these two regions more likely took the

⁷³ Nondichao, Nov. 6, 1985; Awesu, Jan. 4, 1986.

⁷⁴ See also Le Herissé, *Royaume*, 289.

⁷⁵ Still today the general term for assuming royal power in Danhomè, is that a person 'buys' the kingdom (*ho/xo* Danhomè). In like manner, when a king is forced from the throne, one says that he has become impoverished.

⁷⁶ Adjaho (June 18, 1986). According to Venance S. Quénum, Naye Sava, the mother of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu was originally from Zado-Agbogbohounou (in the region of Zogbodome). See Quénum, *Musée d'Agbome témoin du passé des rois Fon* (Abomey, 1986), 20. Daho's spokesman, Zonatchia suggests that she and her husband Dogbaglin-Guinou gave birth to Ganyehesu and Dakodonou (Apr. 21, 1986). Interestingly Lombard points out ('Histoire', 47) that while Le Herissé asserts that Dakodonu is the son of Dogbagri, 'the latter seems to be totally unknown at Allada'. ⁷⁷ Kulo Ade (July 14, 1986).

⁷⁸ Da Kpasali (June 17, 1986). Agbidinukun notes simply that 'The children of Dakodonu today are called Hwawehosu [king of Hwawe]' (May 30, 1986).

⁷⁹ Person, 'Royaume', 218.

form of a political pact, or tributary relationship.⁸⁰ As Adjaho explains, 'during this period, King of Allada had power all the way here. He was the big brother.'⁸¹

Oral accounts suggest Ganyehesu traveled to Allada in the pre-dynastic era on the occasion of his enthronement. While most sources suggest that he went to Allada to fulfill certain rituals necessary for rulership, Adjaho maintains that he went there because it was a place of judgment for disputes that could not be resolved locally: 'When Hesu, their father, died, Ganyehesu should have been king but Dakodonu said he wanted to rule... Ganyehesu, wanting someone to judge the affair, went to Allada, but while he was gone, Dakodonu took over power.'⁸² Interestingly, Ganyehesu, before taking this trip, also appears to have sought a local judgment at the house of Ahodomen in Dokon. According to Awesu, a descendant of the latter, 'Ganyehesu arrived here, and made a friendship with my ancestor Ahodomen and brought Dakodonu so that they would judge him by the chiefs...'⁸³ Huegbadja, who, as noted above, was related to Ahodomen through his mother, is said to have supported Dakodonu's coming to power. Ganyehesu, not satisfied with the decision, no doubt decided to descend to Allada for a judgment more to his liking.⁸⁴

Additional evidence for the identity of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu as autochthonous Guedevis (rather than foreigners from Allada or Tado) finds support in art and dynastic traditions in this area. Thus the high priest of Guede (unlike other priests in the state) is allowed to employ key aspects of regalia of the king of Danhomè, including the royal *kpalingan* gong, the tall *djandemen* throne and the appliquéd umbrella. The royal throne used by the Danhomè kings at the time of their inauguration provides us with another clue. This throne which is of the small three-legged *katake* type (rather than the tall Asante-resembling *djandemen* thrones displayed in the palace museum) is not kept in Abomey, but instead in the compound of a man named Djodi, who lives east of Cana in a small town called Djodigon or Zado-Djodigon. The throne in question is carried to Abomey for the

⁸⁰ The current place-holder of the early eighteenth-century Danhomè Queen Tassi Hangbe noted (May 1, 1986) in turn that during her youth she (her namesake) had been asked to sing at the court of the Allada king. As noted by Law ('History and legitimacy', 449) contemporary sources also make reference to tributary links between Danhomè and Allada.

⁸¹ Adjaho, May 27, 1986.

⁸² Adjaho, June 18, 1986.

⁸³ Awesu (Jan. 9, 1986). Whereas some scholars today concur with the idea that there was an earlier Dame or Dauma kingdom on the Abomey plateau based on a reference by Leo Africanus in 1513, I was unable to find any independent collaboration of this in repeated questioning on this subject in the area. As indicated in note 70, however, the area appears once to have been known as Danzoumè, 'in the forest of the serpent'. Dagba (*Collectivité*, 23) who traces the early history of the Ahodomen (Awesu) family on the plateau appears to be following the lead of published sources in claiming an early Dauma state. Temples dedicated to past Awesu rulers indicate that this family came to the Abomey plateau only shortly before Huegbadja. For an excellent discussion on issues related to Dauma and Danhomè see Yves Person, 'Dauma et Danhomè', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xv (1974), 547-61.

⁸⁴ Victor Awesu suggests (Jan. 4, 1986) that it was thanks in good part to the aid of Ahodomen that Dakodonu ruled instead of Ganyehesu in Hwawe. Indeed, he maintains that it was Ahodomen, Huegbadja's maternal grandfather, who enthroned Dakodonu while Ganyehesu was traveling to Allada. This would indicate that Ahodomen had considerable political authority on the Abomey plateau in the pre-Huegbadja period.

coronation and then is returned to a temple in Djodi's compound the same day.⁸⁵ Interviews with the person who today is Djodi's place-holder indicate that the original Djodi was the eldest son of Dakodonu: 'I am the son of Dakodonu,' he explained in the characteristic first person of an historical place-holder, 'It is my father who was on this throne. If the father does something, it is to the child that he will leave it. Huegbadja created another kingdom in Abomey and suppressed the kingdom of Hwawe.'⁸⁶

Bacharou Nondicharo, an Abomey noble and local historian who was present at the interview, confirmed this: 'Djodi is the eldest son of Dakodonu. When Dakodonu died, he should have been king. It is Huegbadja that replaced him... As he was replaced, we gave him the sacred throne to keep.'⁸⁷ Critical in the above are two issues. One is that Dakodonu's son, Djodi, was supposed to have ruled on the plateau following his father's death, but was prevented from doing so by Huegbadja. The second is that the stool used in Danhomè royal enthronement rites remains in the family of Djodi because he was the rightful ruler.

7 THE PRIEST-KING, DAHO: VALIDATING LOCAL AUTHORITY

Other evidence supporting both the Guedevi origins of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, and Huegbadja's appropriation of political authority from this family is found in the controversial figure of Daho (Daxo), the still powerful Hwawe priest-king. Daho, whose name means both 'great one' and 'older brother', lives in a palace in close proximity to the residences of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu. Historically so great was Daho's power that even the Danhomè kings were said to have had to kneel before him. Tradition maintained for this reason that Daho and the Abomey kings could never meet. Unfortunately, during the time I was in Abomey conducting research there was no person enthroned in the position of Daho, because the previous Daho had recently died. Nonetheless I was able to talk to Daho's spokesman, Zonatchia, and to attend the late Daho's funeral. During the latter occasion a large *Ato* platform was built at his palace, a structure which traditionally was built only for royalty.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Zado-Djodigon today is identified in many royal accounts as one of the 'stopping points' along the migration path from Tado to Abomey.

⁸⁶ Djodi (Nov. 5, 1986). On the subject of thrones in Abomey see Etienne Codjovi Adande, 'Les sièges des rois d'Agbome et le siège Akan: analyse d'un contexte de civilisation à partir de la culture matérielle et artistique (1625-1890)' (Thèse du Doctorat de 3ème Cycle, Université de Paris - I, 1984).

⁸⁷ While it may be tempting to read Djodi, the displaced elder son of Dakodonu as semiotic equivalent to Ganyehesu, the displaced elder son of Dogbagri, the two relationships are quite distinct. In the case of Djodi, he was displaced by a foreign intruder (Huegbadja); with Ganyehesu, it was his younger brother who replaced him as ruler.

⁸⁸ There is some evidence to suggest that Daho shares certain features of a sacred 'bush king'. Who exactly the 'bush king' is (was), has been the subject of a fair amount of controversy, particularly in so far as no indigenous Fon term exactly represents this idea or office. Palau-Marti suggests (*Roi-Dieu*, 130, 157-8) that the Danhomè 'bush king' complements in key respects the Gun 'King of the Night' in Porto-Novo. In an important article on the subject, Edna Bay argues instead that the 'bush king' is an imaginary figure, who during the reigns of the nineteenth-century kings, Guezo and Glele, referred at once to their pre-enthronement princely identities and to the dethroned

Two features of Daho's identity are important to our larger discussion. First, the person who is named to the throne of Daho is always a member of the family of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu. Thus the ritual power of the kingdom was maintained within this family.⁸⁹ Secondly, while Daho and Agasunon (the high priest of Agasu) are clearly two distinct individuals, their offices are in some respects overlapping.⁹⁰ Because Daho rarely if ever appears in public, the Agasunon to some degree assumes the identity of Agasu and the priest-king Daho, in the eyes of the general public. Together Daho and Agasunon represent the prior religious and political authority of the Guedevi on the Abomey plateau. Law's comments on the Agasunon are prescient in light of the above. In his view, 'The Agassuno may perhaps be regarded as representing a displaced dynasty'.⁹¹ He cites in this regard a comment by Glele that the title of Agasunon was granted to Ganyehesu specifically because he had been excluded from the throne.⁹² Thirdly, it is Daho who wears the kingdom's most important crown, a basketry and white cloth-covered cap which is decorated with sacred red *lankan* beads and red parrot feathers. In this way both the premier dynastic throne and crown of Danhomè remained in the hands of the autochthonous Guedevi. The foreign-born Huegbadja, while able to defeat (or otherwise circumvent) the power of the indigenous residents, in part through help by his mother, was never able to gain control of key artifacts of local rule. Other types of hats and stools were employed by the Danhomè monarchs as objects of prestige and authority, but none had the power and potency of the Guedevi models. Interestingly, in light of the above, the Danhomè royal sandals (the 'shoes of Huegbadja' as they are known) today carry the status of primary dynastic signifier in the Abomey court. No doubt because the Guedevi throne and

King Adandozan. See Edna G. Bay, 'On the trail of the Bush King: a Dahomean lesson in the use of evidence', *History in Africa*, vi (1979), 1–15. Although I believe that Bay is correct in her assertions, Daho shares certain features of this bush king ideation. Not only did he live in the 'bush' of Hwawe, but he also was thought to be in key respects a personification of the royal king of the bush, the leopard.

⁸⁹ Finn Fuglestad's theory that Fon rulers did not integrate the indigenous cultures into the Danhomè governance or ritual structure thus needs to be reconsidered. See Finn Fuglestad, 'Quelques réflexions sur l'histoire et les institutions de l'ancien royaume du Dahomey et de ses voisins', *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.*, xxxix, sér B (1977), 493–517. I thank Edna Bay for bringing this source to my attention.

⁹⁰ Maupoil notes (*Géomancie*, 156) in this regard that: 'The king... could not salute the Agasunon, the great priest of Agasu, the Leopard, and was careful not to go to him. His "prestige" and his pride forbade him from prostrating himself'. Interesting in this regard is Dunglas' assertion that the king 'purchased' Danhomè from the Agasunon at the time of his installation: Dunglas, 'Histoire', i, 90. In addition to the above, Maupoil notes (*Géomancie*, 158), that the enthronement of the royal diviner, Gedegbe, took place in front of this great Agasu priest at his temple in Hwawe Gbenu. Skertchly, who visited the Agasunon's palace (*Dahomey*, 150) describes it as surrounded by a long wickerwork fence, the uprights of which were sprouting out in vigorous shoots. As he explains, this fence 'enclosed the Bwemeh or residence of the priest of Agasun, who is the palladium of Dahomey and one of the most powerful of the gods in the native pantheon. This priest is the head of all the metropolitan clergy, and the Agasuno are the cardinals of the Dahoman religion'.

⁹¹ Robin Law, "'My head belongs to the king": on the political and ritual significance of decapitation in pre-colonial Dahomey', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxx (1989), 408, n. 65.

⁹² Glele, *Danxome*, 84.

crown eluded Danhomè's sovereigns, these kings claimed the sandals as their own potent symbol of dynastic rule.

8 CREATING THE LEOPARD MYTH

Exactly when the myth of the leopard child, Agasu, was invented and when Ganyehesu and Dakodonu were integrated into the Abomey dynastic line is not clear. Law suggests that the myth of Tado-Allada origins probably was created in the second half of the eighteenth century during the reign of Tegbesu or Kpengla. According to Law,

It is a difficulty that no hint of such a claim occurs in any contemporaneous account before the late eighteenth century, the earliest extant version of the tradition being that of Pires, who heard it in Dahomey in 1797. Although Pires gives the founders of Dahomey and Porto Novo, the otherwise unrecorded names of Caracute and Buricaxi, his story is clearly recognisable as a variant of that told later of Dogbagrighenu and Teagbanlin.⁹³

He adds that 'The claim to a connection with Tado does, in fact, appear to be alluded to already in one of the praise-names attributed to the eighteenth-century king Kpengla (1774-89)'.

My findings affirm the likelihood that it was in the late eighteenth century that the Danhomè legend origin myth was created. Not only do leopards appear prominently on the bas-reliefs of Kpengla's princely palace, but this ruler and his brother, Tegbesu, are also credited with building a series of temples dedicated to Agasu along the fictional 'migrational path' from Tado to Abomey.⁹⁴ Interviews with the priests of these various Agasu temples confirm their late eighteenth-century establishment dates. In creating these Agasu temples, the Danhomè kings were clearly seeking to promote a more 'noble' history for the kingdom, one having greater historical legitimacy through the tracing of dynastic ties to the major historic centers of Allada and Tado. It was around this time as well that Ganyehesu and Dakodonu appear to have been 'brought back into' the dynasty, i.e. given an identity as royal predecessors to Huegbadja. Agbidinukun refers to this obliquely in his statement that

One left them [Ganyehesu and Dakodonu] in Hwawe during the reigns of five kings. It is the fifth king who came and woke them up... Remember the number of years that had passed. There were large trees; no one could see the house. [We] went to weed there, and there where the *djebo* ['spirit house', literally 'house of beads'] was, one removed everything and redid that... One unearthed everything and brought it to Abomey. It was a bad coup d'état that one did there. When one did the bad coup d'état one suspended the royalty there.⁹⁵

What Agbidinukun seems to be alluding to here is the lack of acknowledgement accorded Dakodonu and Ganyehesu during the reigns of five kings. Although this could mean either Tegbesu or Kpengla (depending on whether or not one counts the Queen Tassi Hangbe in the official list of rulers), according to Agbidinukun it was in Tegbesu's reign 'that one woke

⁹³ Law, 'History and legitimacy', 14; citing Pires, *Viagem de Africa*, 37-40.

⁹⁴ Agbidinukun notes (May 23, 1986) that during the reign of Tegbesu, a temple was built at Alladaho (a town near Cana) for Adjahuto. This temple was called 'Allada Xwen' the name of one of Allada's founding deities. ⁹⁵ Agbidinukun, June 13, 1986.

them up'.⁹⁶ It was Tegbesu who 'woke them up', 'weeded' their ancestral *djebo*, and 'brought them' to Abomey, because earlier they had been removed from power through a 'bad *coup d'état*'.⁹⁷ As in the earlier discussion of Agasu, we see the use of metaphors of 'forgetting', 'waking up', and 'cleaning' in order to integrate new elements into the royal history narrative.

CONCLUSIONS

In the above we can see a new historical narrative emerging which has implications for our understanding of the dynasties of several Danhomè kings in the early history of the kingdom. King Agadja (1708–40) conquered vast new areas for the newly emerging kingdom (including the great centers of Allada and Ouidah). King Tegbesu, his son (1740–74), focused much of his reign on building temples and reorganizing state religion (with the support of his mother Naye Wandjele). The latter king also began the official process of recognizing the identities of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu within the royal chronology. King Kpengla, in turn, appears to have placed a primacy on the creation of a noble history for the dynasty. In this regard Kpengla actively promoted the leopard myth of Agasu.

The writing and rewriting of history in Danhomè as we have seen had important political overtones. The myth of the leopard obviously served a variety of purposes. On the one hand it made the question of origins a matter of belief (*vodun*), therefore a subject which, like the powers and origins of Hevioso, Sagbata and other *vodun*, could not be questioned. This myth also accounted in a subtle way for real questions of legitimacy with respect to Huegbadja's origins and his association with rulership prerogatives in the area. The issue of Huegbadja's incest (his marriage to his 'father's' wife) is also alluded to within this myth. Details of this legend likewise make reference to the physical prowess of Huegbadja, a man who was viewed not only as an accomplished hunter, but also as someone who possessed gifts of courage analogous to those of the leopard. While at once hiding and revealing key features of the founder's origins, the myth of the leopard served to stigmatize the new rulers and their families. These people, the myth maintained, were different from others within the realm. They were, to follow a more symbolic analogy, the product of a doubly perverse sexual act, an animal–human liaison and an act of incest. And, as part-leopards, the Danhomè kings were always potentially dangerous. In this way, the rich symbolic fabric of the leopard myth imparted a powerful political message: with members of royalty one had to be careful, for they were not like other humans.

The most important part of this story, however, is one which has been an endearing human quality and significant methodological implications.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* Some maintain that Tassi Hangbe served only as regent, others that, although a ruler, she was added to the official list of sovereigns somewhat later.

⁹⁷ The revival of the identity of Ganyehesu and Dakodonu also fits with Tegbesu's revival of Ajahuto at Allada recorded by Lombard, 'Histoire', 53. In Norris's 1789 account, which is largely a history of the reign of Tegbesu (d. 1774) there already is a conflation of Huegbadja and Dakodonu. According to Norris, *Memoirs*, xiv, it was Dakodonu (not Huegbadja or Akaba) who killed Da (Dan) and built a palace on his stomach in Abomey, thereby giving a name to the new kingdom, Danhomè.

Alluded to here is the imperative that one should never – particularly in Africa – underestimate the bond between a man and his mother. In Danhomè, the entire early history of the dynasty was altered. Yet the successors of Huegbadja could not (or would not) cover up the identity and religious affiliation of Naye Adonon, Huegbadja's wife and the mother of his children. The identity of Huegbadja's mother, like that of Dakodonu and Ganyehesu, was publicly acknowledged. Although other historical details were modified, the tradition that Adonon came from Wasa remained an important part of Danhomè dynastic history. Adu's origins in Dokon and Naye Sava's Guedeви roots were similarly maintained. In the end, as we have seen, it is principally as a result of these women's stories that the early history of Danhomè both can be at once unraveled and reconstructed. What we can begin to affirm through the stories of these women is a quite different history of the early state than that promoted in the official court histories and leopard myth.

To summarize this new version of the early Danhomè dynastic history: the founding of the kingdom of Danhomè can be correlated with the rise to power of Huegbadja probably sometime toward the end of the seventeenth century. Huegbadja was the son of Adu, a woman from the powerful Awesu family of Dokon on the Abomey plateau, and of a noble from the Adja/Hwla area of Lake Aheme to the south. Arriving on the Abomey plateau in his youth or early adulthood, Huegbadja found a position with a local Guedeви chief named Dakodonu, serving as the latter's emissary. The two had a falling out after Huegbadja had a relationship with a woman who had been affianced to Dakodonu. This woman, Adonon, was a Guedeви and came from the town of Wasa around 20 km from Abomey. Huegbadja was eventually able to claim rulership over the Abomey area, supported in part by the family of his mother, Adu, from whom he inherited the rights to key symbols of power, among these the tradition of constructing high palace walls and the use of the *kpaligan* gong. In so doing, Huegbadja ultimately undermined the authority of both the local Guedeви chiefs and the Awesu family. Prior to Huegbadja's rise to power leadership rotated among the important families, but the Awesu family had a somewhat elevated political status, as evidenced not only in its impressive high-walled palace structures and gong-playing court singers but also in their roles as regional adjudicators. At this time, the region also maintained ties with the court at Allada to the south, the latter legitimating certain aspects of rulership transition and adjudicating cases of rulership conflict.

During the reign of Huegbadja's grandson, Tegbesu, a decision was made to create a more prestigious history for the Danhomè royal family. Aligbonu, the ancestor (or *tohuio*) of Huegbadja's wife (and Tegbesu's grandmother), Adonon, became a royal *tohuio*, in this case the mythic princess who gave birth to the Danhomè royal line. Both to cover Huegbadja's paternal origins as an outsider and to create a more noble past for Danhomè *vis-à-vis* the great kingdoms of the area, Allada, Porto-Novo and Tado, a male *tohuio* was created as well. This god, who was known as Agasu, became the royal leopard of the now famous origin myth. Temples were built in the leopard's honor along a fictional migration route which led from Tado to Abomey, but which also stopped at Lake Aheme, the place of Huegbadja's birth. The main temple for Agasu was built in Hwawe, and a member of Ganyehesu's family

was named as the first priest. In this way the original Guedevi 'owners of the land' and their early chiefs, Ganyehesu and Dakodonu, were officially brought into the royal Danhomè line. At this time as well, the office of Daho, the sacred priest-king or 'big brother' of the ruler, was established to acknowledge the Guedevi's prior claim to the land.

This new historical narrative is derived from many sources, including a variety of non-royal traditions and the oral accounts of descendants of prior claimants to the throne. Why should one give greater authority to unofficial sources than to those linked more closely to the court? In other words, is this version any less subject to bias and distortion than the official royal history? I would argue yes, for, whatever biases they may hold, unofficial and prior claimants' accounts were not identified with the same sort of life-and-death pressure to conform to an official ideology. Most importantly, the revised history which I am proposing fits closely not only with the written record (i.e. contemporary sources) but also with the histories of neighboring states (Allada, Porto-Novo, etc.) and both ritual practices and art in Danhomè itself.

SUMMARY

This article examines Danhomè (Dahomey) myths of dynastic origin, offering at once a critique and counter-narrative to the official dynastic history. Critical to this counter-narrative are the early women of the state, most importantly the mothers and wives of the first rulers. The provocative stories of these women not only add an important human dimension to Danhomè history but also raise important methodological issues, for events associated with their lives contradict much of what has been previously written about the origins of this kingdom. In Danhomè, events associated with the beginning of the dynasty were mythologized into an elaborate fiction of leopard birth and incest. While scholars have long questioned this account's veracity, to date a coherent alternative has been lacking. Through an analysis of the stories of these royal women, the forging of a new history of the kingdom's origins is now possible.