

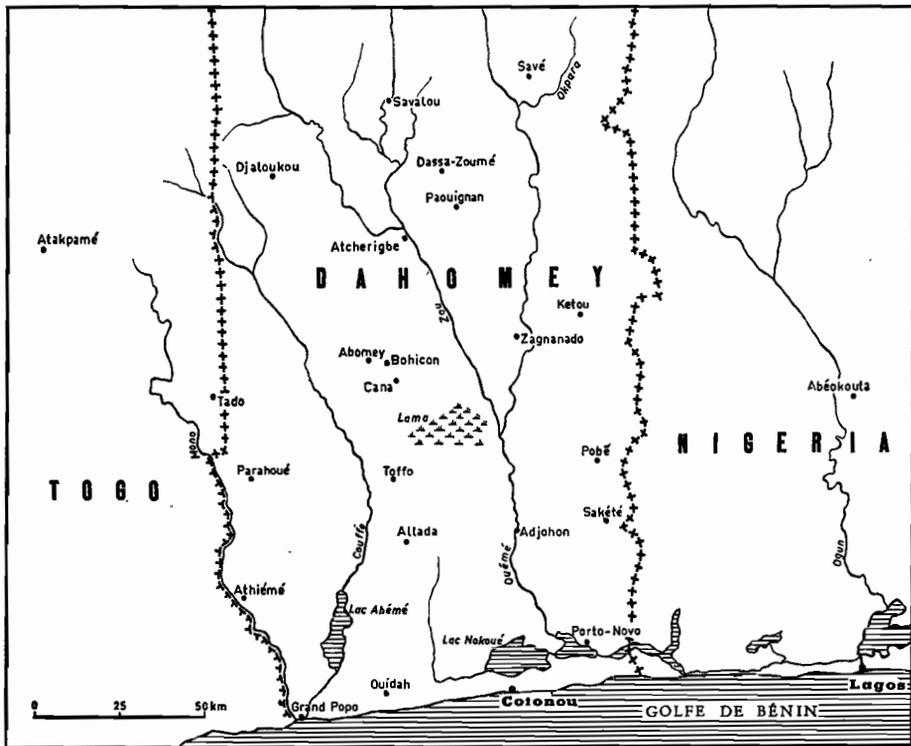
## THE KINGDOM OF DAHOMEY

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In earlier times 'Danhomé' was the name given to the fabulous kingdom of Abomey; and it is by this name that the modern republic is known. Some of the first European travellers visited the country and left eye-witness accounts of the splendour and organization of the royal court. An employee of the African Company, Bullfinch Lambe, visited the Dahomey capital in 1724. Henceforth innumerable missions—English for the most part—arrived at the capital of the Abomey kings. Norris (in 1772 and 1773), Forbes, Richard Burton, and Dr. Répin (all in the nineteenth century) were a few of the travellers who left detailed accounts of their journeys.

On the eve of European penetration the Dahomey kingdom stretched from the important coastal ports of Whydah and Cotonou to the eighth parallel, excluding Savé and Savalou. Savalou formed a small allied kingdom. East to west, it extended from Ketu, on the present Nigerian border, to the district around Atakpame in modern Togo. Towns like Allada (the capital of the former kingdom of Ardra), Zagnanado, Parahoue (or Aplahoué), and Dassa-Zoumé came under the suzerainty of the Dahomean kings. Even the Porto Novo kingdom was at one time threatened by Dahomean forces at the time of the treaty agreeing to a French protectorate. The Dahomey kingdom thus stretched almost two hundred miles from north to south, and one hundred miles from east to west. Its population has been estimated roughly at two hundred thousand.

The founding of the Abomey kingdom dates from about the beginning of the seventeenth century. According to the consensus of local traditions, it was established by Adja invaders, members of the royal family of Tado, an important town now in modern Togo, which formerly dominated certain Ewe groups. Tado was nominally a tributary state of the Oyo-Yoruba empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is not improbable that Yoruba elements had contributed to the development of this



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kingdom (Bertho, 1949). After a dynastic quarrel a group of Adja nobles fled to the east and established themselves near Allada. A further family dispute ensued, and three brothers competed for their father's throne. The eldest succeeded, and the other two left the country, one to found the kingdom of Porto Novo, and the other to establish what was to become in the north the kingdom of Abomey. There the Adja immigrants intermarried with people of Yoruba provenance, the Gedevis, thus originating the Fon ethnic group. The Adja conquest was not achieved without friction and a number of conflicts between the invaders and the indigenous chiefs, but by the seventeenth century the new kingdom was established under Wegbadja, considered by Dahomeans as the true founder of the dynasty. Nine kings succeeded him until the French occupation in 1892. In the course of two and half centuries they sought to extend the boundaries of the kingdom and especially, until the nineteenth century, to escape from the tutelage exercised by the kings of Oyo, who regarded the kings of Abomey as their vassals and exacted an annual tribute in goods, money, and slaves as a symbol of allegiance. In the early part of the nineteenth century the collapse of the Oyo empire (see Chapter II, p. 41) gave Abomey the opportunity to free itself completely from the Yoruba yoke and even to carry war into territories formerly subject to Oyo. The history of Abomey was thus dominated by a series of wars designed to 'make Dahomey always greater' (the motto of their kings), and to acquire the largest number of captives to sell to European slave traders.

In the history of the Abomey dynasty two names have stood out in the memory of Dahomeans by virtue of the renown and the conquests of the kings who bore them. The first, Agadja, who reigned from 1708 till 1732, is considered the country's greatest warrior king. Despite a recent sacking of the capital by an Oyo invading army, Agadja was still master of the Abomey plateau and was determined to establish a direct route to the coast in order to reap the gains of a considerably augmented European trade in the Bight of Benin. His way was barred by the kingdoms of Allada and Whydah. With an invading army he defeated the former in 1724, and in 1729 a second attack brought the Whydah kingdom to heel. By the early eighteenth century Dahomey had conquered an important strip of coastal territory and was able to monopolize the slave trade there. This association with European traders

made the kingdom's fortune and enabled the Dahomean army to become one of the most feared in West Africa.

Agadja's successors all extended the boundaries of the kingdom. In 1818 Gezo, the king who was to become the most revered in Dahomean history, came to the throne. He early proved himself a consummate politician and a skilful warrior and also established a close control over the whole kingdom by organizing a highly specialized administration. He managed to wrest independence from his Oyo suzerains, who were by now weakened by the Fulani invasions. He continued his predecessors' military expeditions against the Yoruba chiefdoms and kingdoms to the north and east of his kingdom. During his long reign the arts and crafts flourished at the royal court, which reached an unprecedented splendour. By 1858, the year of Gezo's death, the kingdom had reached its apogee. The abolition of the slave trade soon dealt a serious blow to the country's economy. Palm-oil, however, was found to be a new source of wealth, and Glele, the next king, continued his father's policy. He extended the eastern frontier beyond Ketu, formerly a Yoruba kingdom which had suffered an attack from the Dahomey army. But Glele's army was, in turn, routed before the ramparts of the great Nigerian town of Abeokuta. In 1892, three years after the accession of Behanzin, the last Abomey king, the French conquest brought about the collapse and disintegration of the monarchy (Dunglas, 1957, *passim*).

#### *The Dahomey People—Social Categories*

Despite the fact that the Abomey kingdom was established by conquest by foreign invaders, the population of the country exhibited a high degree of homogeneity. The Fon, inhabitants of the Abomey plateau, were the descendants of the conquering Adja and indigenous Yoruba. Small colonies of Fon were subsequently installed in all the conquered districts, particularly in the coastal towns, where they took full advantage of the lucrative European trade. By intermarriage with local inhabitants the Fon achieved a demographic revolution: over the years they successfully assimilated most ethnic groups in the region. Apart from the Yoruba, they all belonged to the same stock. But despite the high degree of ethnic homogeneity, Dahomean society was highly stratified. The four major categories were: royals—descendants of Abomey

kings; officials or 'caboceers'; free commoners or *anato*; and slaves.

The servile class was recruited from war captives for the most part, their large numbers being due to the aggressive policies of the kings. They were foreign in origin since it was a rule that no free-born Dahomean could be enslaved. And they were all, in theory, the personal property of the king. Large-scale slavery was probably instituted under Agadja when Abomey first obtained a monopoly of the trade in this region. Slaves were differentiated according to their roles. One category was destined for the royal sacrifices at the 'annual customs' which the king carried out in honour of his ancestors; another worked the royal plantations, under Abomey overseers, and provided contingents for the Whydah slavers; a third, the domestic slaves, was in a more favoured position. They were presented by the king to notables and successful warriors as rewards for their services. In theory, the master had no power of life and death over such a slave. A slave worked in the house or fields and usually became accepted as a member of his master's family; after the second generation he became an unalienable Dahomean citizen. Apart from the stigma attached to his origin, the lot of a slave's descendant hardly differed from that of a free-born Dahomean.

The next rank in society was held by the *anato* or free-born commoners: they were mostly farmers and artisans descended from indigenous families. They formed the backbone of the army, and many of them held minor official posts.

The great officials of the Dahomean central organization ranked next in the social hierarchy. These 'caboceers' or *gbonugan* included the king's ministers (all *anato* in theory), provincial and village chiefs, military commanders, and high-ranking priests.

At the top of the Dahomean hierarchy stood the royal family—all those descendants of kings, past and present. They were ranked according to their genealogical proximity to the reigning king and enjoyed many privileges barred to the ordinary Dahomean. On the other hand—and this is typical of despotic monarchies—princes were not permitted to hold important political or administrative offices. This policy minimized their opportunities for rebellion against the king. Endogamous marriages, although forbidden the commoners, were of frequent occurrence among royals. Princesses were permitted wide sexual liberty. Most royals

lived as parasites within the walls of the palace; all of them were to some extent the responsibility of the king (Herskovits, Vol. 2, Chapter 23). The exclusion of royals from official functions demonstrated the king's determination to retain political power in his own hands. His policy towards the assimilation of conquered groups was indicative of the centralizing policy of the Abomey government.

### *The Incorporation of Conquered Groups*

The Fon kingdom of Abomey did not remain confined to the original plateau. It incorporated several subject provinces populated by people of varying relationships to their conquerors. These relations seem to have been major criteria in determining the policy of the central government towards them. If the conquered territory was inhabited by people dynastically or ethnically related to the Fon, however distantly, assimilation was the rule. This was true of the region between the capital and the coast, especially the kingdoms of Whydah and Allada. Allada was a 'brother-kingdom'; its king had earlier been considered senior to the Abomey monarch. After the conquest the defeated king retained his important religious role; temporal functions were stripped from him, however, and exercised by a provincial chief who was appointed from the capital and resided at Allada. He was the viceroy and to all intents and purposes wielded absolute power in the district. In Whydah administrative control was even more closely exercised. The defeated king was forced to flee his capital and was later killed. His family went into voluntary exile, and the Whydah kingdom came under the control of the all-powerful *Yovogan*, provincial chief and minister at Abomey, who was appointed by the king. In both these important trading centres colonies of Fon were established. They intermarried with the local inhabitants, thus greatly facilitating the assimilatory policies of the Abomey kings.

In those regions where the people were of Yoruba origin—mainly in the north—the incorporation of new provinces was not followed by colonization on the part of the invaders. Provincial chiefs were allowed restricted powers. Nevertheless, a practice typical of Dahomean administration was followed: indigenous village chiefs were permitted to remain in office, but they were 'doubled' by Dahomey officials, who supervised their political

activities. In all his conquered provinces the king practised a dual method of incorporation—or assimilation—religious as well as political. All village chiefs were placed under a provincial chief or governor who was appointed from the capital. Besides this, all local cults of any significance found in conquered areas were transferred to the care of a priest at the capital and incorporated into the state pantheon under the great cult of the mythical ancestor of the Dahomean kings, the leopard Agasu. The dominion of the Abomey monarchy was thus doubly assured.

### *Territorial Organization*

The country was divided into provinces; and provinces were divided into villages, each with its own territory. If the province was of considerable extent it might be subdivided into districts. At the end of the nineteenth century Dahomey consisted of seven provinces. They included Abomey, the central province controlled most directly by the king; Whydah, administered by the Yovogan; and Allada, under the Akplogan, assisted by five district chiefs. These three provinces were the most important and came under the constant supervision of the king. The other four were of less importance, due to their distance from the capital or their economic insignificance, but were also administered by representatives of the king. Zagnanado bordering the Yoruba chiefdoms on the east, was mainly a military zone. The boundaries of the other provinces were ill-defined. Mahi, the northern province, was situated south of Savi and Savalou; Atakpame was to the west, now in Togo; the Adja region around Athieme in the south-west retained a high degree of autonomy.

The political influence and economic resources of a provincial chief or *togan* depended on the province he governed. The Yovogan was the richest and most powerful. He controlled Whydah trade and had judicial functions, but he was under constant supervision from the capital and could be dismissed by the king on the slightest pretext. Thus, provincial governors were royal agents: they were responsible for public order, collecting taxes, providing military quotas, maintaining national highways, and settling all land disputes. Conquered chiefs came under the judicial and political control of the provincial governor. The death penalty, however, remained a royal prerogative.

The smallest territorial unit in the kingdom was the village.

All its inhabitants, whether free or servile, came under the authority of the village head or *tohosu*. The *tohosu*'s office was hereditary, although his successor was obliged to accompany the provincial chief to the capital and be confirmed in office by the king. The village chief was assisted in his functions by a deputy or *tonukwe*, and the *donkpegan*, who was in charge of a body of young men who carried out communal work: weeding the chief's fields, or maintaining paths. Large villages were divided into wards; and ward-heads (*hagan*), with the *tonukwe* and *donkpegan*, formed the village council. The power of the village chief was far from being absolute; both the central government and local lineage heads could intervene if his decisions warranted it. If the chief overstepped the bounds of his authority lineage heads could take over in the interests of their members. Individual villagers had the right of appeal to the capital. The king exercised direct control at village level through his royal messengers; occasionally officials from the capital were appointed for longer periods.

The village chief advised rather than judged, arbitrated rather than laid down the law. His major role was settling land disputes and lineage affairs, particularly divorce. Witnesses were essential before decisions could be reached. During epidemics sacrifices were made at cult shrines which were chosen by the village chief and villagers in concert. In inter-village disputes—after a communal hunt or over the division of a palm grove—a royal councillor was asked to deliver judgement, with the further possibility of an appeal to the king. On the whole, the judicial role of the village chief was an important one, in spite of the limitation on the sanctions he was permitted to wield.

### *The King and the Central Organization*

At the top of the Dahomey hierarchy, dominating all social categories and wielding absolute authority over all officials, stood the king. There could have been few African monarchs whose authority was so great, and whose powers were so wide. All state polities, in theory, possess a system of checks and balances: powers are shared with a body of officials residing at the capital who succeed in influencing royal decisions; or territorial chiefs enjoy a degree of political autonomy. In both centralized and decentralized states most kings were limited by some kind of control from subjects or royals. In Abomey, however, we are

confronted by a form of absolute monarchy which reached its highest development in the nineteenth century. Absolutism must not be confused with tyranny, however. The king's powers were in fact limited by age-old traditions, established by his predecessors and bolstered by the great respect accorded the royal ancestors which precluded their violation.

One of the first rules which assured the concentration of political power in the hands of the king was the exclusion of members of the royal family from political or administrative office. Succession rules also contributed towards the stability and continuity of the monarchy. The kingship was hereditary within the royal lineage, and theoretically primogenitive. In practice, the king was free to choose as heir apparent the son who showed the greatest ability. This system of succession gave strength to the kingship and assured continuity under kings who were fully instructed in the art of government by their fathers, according to traditionally sanctioned methods. Above all, the dangers inherent in competition were reduced to the minimum: the number of eligible candidates was diminished by excluding collateral branches of the royal lineage and sons not expressly designated by their father to succeed him.

Tradition required that the king-elect should be nominated by the two principal ministers, the *Migan* and the *Meu*. In fact, these two officials were obliged to stand by the dead king's choice in this matter. The essential conditions for eligibility were as follows: to be the son of the king, preferably the eldest—the mother's status was irrelevant, she might even be of foreign or servile origin; to possess a name which did not exclude its bearer from the kingship—in the history of Abomey the rightful heir was once supplanted by his brother and his name remained cursed ever since; to be the son of a king who had died in office and been buried in the palace—in spite of these elaborate precautions there was one case of successful usurpation, but the descendants of this king were excluded from the throne; and, finally, to be *persona grata* with the royal ancestors—the king's diviners acted as go-betweens in this matter.

When the heir apparent (*vidaho*) had been chosen he was presented by the king to his councillors. He was taught the secret traditions concerning the origins of the dynasty and given a palace, with wives, slaves, and farmland attached. The *vidaho*

did not exercise any political function during his father's lifetime, apart from accompanying the king on his official tours of the country. On the king's death the heir apparent was installed as quickly as possible. The interregnum was always marked by several days of wild anarchy: royal wives killed each other so that they might accompany their husband to the grave; ordinary subjects were at liberty to indulge in all kinds of delict— theft and major crimes—without the slightest intervention of the law. Only the accession of the new king put an end to this chronic disorder—adequate proof of the state's need for a head.

### *Royal Absolutism*

In judicial, military, and political spheres the king had absolute power. He was supreme judge, with power of life and death over his subjects. Neither his judgements nor his punishments—often exceedingly severe—were ever questioned. Punishments provided him with a means of coercion, not only of the victim but also of the public at large. Thus, floggings and executions were given the greatest publicity, in this way increasing their exemplary character. The same publicity was evinced when loyal subjects and successful warriors were rewarded at the annual ceremonies. The people were given models for conduct; and the king's prestige was augmented whether he was being severe or generous.

All administrative officers were appointed by the king; ministers, provincial and village chiefs, and military officers. He also confirmed the election of priests of the national cults and even lineage heads in the Abomey province. His right to dismiss them at will sprang logically from his monopoly of all appointments. A permanent system of espionage was organized from the capital. Certain chiefs were supervised by royal agents, and in this way the king was kept informed of political decisions taken in every corner of his kingdom and was assured of the loyalty of his territorial officials. The slightest dispute or administrative problem was reported to the capital; after the king had been informed the matter was usually settled by his ministers.

The same policy was pursued in the religious field. In many African societies an equilibrium is established between secular chiefs and priest chiefs. In Dahomey, however, national cults were closely supervised by the king. The priests of these cults—which were of great importance and influence in the country—

were his loyal subordinates. Royal agents supervised their activities constantly. The king was also high-priest in a state religion. With the political elaboration of the kingdom the cults associated with the royal dynasty quickly assumed primacy over others. Unlike the chiefs of some West African societies, the king was never enstooled by an indigenous 'chief of the earth', a representative of the original inhabitants, but by the priest of the royal ancestor cult. Besides this, no religious ritual, however domestic or private in nature, could be performed before the annual celebration in honour of the royal ancestors. It is clear that the king stood in no danger of rivalry from affluent subjects, whether noble or commoner. The whole gamut of religious and political elements of society were subordinate to his might.

The king of Dahomey was also supreme commander of the army, which he often accompanied in its campaigns. If in general he left the direction of military operations to the officers responsible for them, it was he nevertheless who appointed them to the different posts of command. This army, as we shall see, was composed in the nineteenth century of a large contingent of female soldiers, the Amazons. This device was an example of the king's skill in foiling in advance any military plot. He placed in his army female companies who usually acted as his bodyguard, who were devoted to him, and charged in time of peace with his protection even within the palace.

The king's methods of reinforcing his authority and increasing his prestige were very subtle. At his court were innumerable families of craftsmen whose products the king monopolized: woodcarvers, smiths, weavers, tailors, copper-workers, jewellers, etc. Artistic themes served to increase the glory of the king. Drawings and bas-reliefs symbolized the 'strong-names' of the monarch and evoked the great events of his reign. Carved stools and richly ornamented figures were all designed to add to the power and wealth of the Abomey kings and the prestige of the dynasty. History was another royal monopoly. Traditions associated with the state, the kings, the royal clans, and the great lineages were confided to certain royal relatives only and a few of the king's wives. In some Western Sudanic states the king's authority was diminished by the influence of a caste-like group of minstrels, 'griots', who had acquired a monopoly of state traditions. The Dahomean monarchs, however, confided the secret traditions of

their kingdom to a few people in their own entourage. The exploits of the great kings were translated into song and transmitted from generation to generation within the bosom of the royal family.

Religion was one sphere which escaped their complete control—especially divination, an art widely practised in Dahomey. Diviners, *bokonon*, interpreted the wishes of the royal ancestors when the king consulted them before appointments to posts in the administration were made.

### *Officials of the Court*

The centralization of political activity at the capital required a highly specialized administration. Obviously the king was not able to cope with the minutiae of government himself. Most government business was dealt with by ministers and officials with well-defined functions, although they were not permitted to make final decisions on major questions without the royal consent. According to Forbes, who visited the capital in the middle of the nineteenth century, the royal retinue consisted of 296 nobles. In effect, however, most power was concentrated in the hands of six high-ranking ministers whose functions were considerably varied.

The first minister, the Migan (see p. 78), was the king's chief councillor. He had authority over all Dahomeans who were not members of the royal family. His original role had been that of royal executioner; he retained the official title, but the function was limited to the beheading of the first sacrificial victim at the 'annual customs'. His assistants decapitated the rest. He was always seated on the king's right; in theory, he acted as regent during the interregnum which followed the king's death. He and the Meu alone knew the exact spot inside the palace walls where the king was buried. The Migan and the Meu presided at the accession of the new king, who was usually chosen by his predecessor. The Migan had the important role of supervising the affairs of the province of Allada; the resident provincial chief was responsible to him.

The first minister of the 'left', so-called because he was always seated on the king's left, was the Meu, the second-ranking officer in the kingdom. He wielded authority over members of the royal family; and was given the task of executing royals who

had intrigued or rebelled against the king. A prince, convicted of any crime, was 'given to the Meu', who 'lost' him, according to native parlance. The execution of a royal must be kept secret; and it must be done so that no royal blood flowed. The Meu also acted as the king's spokesman in public, since the head of the state was not permitted to speak directly to his subjects. The royal speeches at the 'annual customs' were repeated by the Meu. The provisioning of the palace was the Meu's responsibility; he also organized ceremonies concerning royals, such as baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

The third councillor—second on the king's right—was the *Adjaho*, overseer and administrator of the palace. The Adjaho was also chief of police; in this role he was known as the *legede*. He received reports from the king's spies on political developments in the country. He received visitors to Abomey and announced them into the king's presence. He was responsible for those royal retainers who resided outside the palace walls. The *Tokpo* was the second councillor on the left, and administered the royal plantations and agricultural affairs in general. He was consulted in land disputes and controlled the large markets. In time of war he guarded the palace.

The office of *Yovogan* belonged to one of the most powerful provincial chiefs, as we have seen, and was created after the conquest of Whydah. As governor of Whydah the Yovogan was responsible for all commercial dealings with Europeans. He was a councillor of the left, and as such came under the orders of the Meu. The *Akplogan*, councillor and governor of the province of Allada, was charged with the maintenance of the tombs of former kings of Allada, cradle of the Abomey dynasty.

It is almost impossible to discover whether other officials also held the rank of councillor or minister; we need merely note here the titles and functions of the more important officials at Abomey. The *Sogan* was head of the royal cavalry, never a large contingent due to the difficulty of acclimatizing horses in the forest zone. The *Binazon*, the royal treasurer, supervised the palace stores, where the king's trade goods and gold were kept. Under the Binazon was a host of minor officials who fulfilled multiple functions as stoolkeepers, butlers, organizers of royal ceremonies, etc.

All these councillors and officials were appointed by the king exclusively from commoner families. It was not until the eve of

European occupation that members of the royal lineage were given honorary positions in the administration.

Apart from exercising personal control over the state administration, the Dahomey monarch also ruled an elaborate court, itself organized like a little state. It consisted predominantly of women: relatives, wives, and servants. The palace was the nerve-centre of the kingdom; its very name—Homé or Danhomé—was given to the country as a whole. It covered an area of more than fifteen acres and was enclosed by twelve-foot-high walls. Successive kings built their own palaces beside that of their predecessor, whose huts, altars, and tombs they were obliged to maintain. In this fashion each king made his contribution to 'making Dahomey always greater', since the palace symbolized the kingdom, which should extend its frontiers during each reign. Several thousand people inhabited the palace—all women, apart from a few eunuchs, who exercised police functions within the palace and guarded the gates. There were two official courts where the king gave audiences, plus innumerable apartments for his private use. The palace, as the living symbol of the kingdom, was organized along similar lines. Senior women had the same functions and the same titles as 'outside' ministers: the prime minister's female counterpart was the *Miganon*; the Meus was the *Meunon*, etc. Of the three or four thousand women inhabiting the palace, only a small proportion were actually wives of the king. Some were royal kinswomen, but the majority were servants or members of the royal bodyguard. The *kpodjito* or 'queen mothers' inhabited a special section of the palace; they represented mothers of past kings. They had large retinues of young girls and servants to help them in their functions, which were mainly honorary and ritual. There were also a number of older women (*tasinon*), members of the royal family, who saw to the upkeep of the royal tombs and offered the required prayers and sacrifices. They participated in royal ceremonies and enjoyed important privileges.

The king's wives were the *ahosi*. These were legitimate wives, as distinct from simple concubines chosen from the servant or slave class, who could not rank as royal wives. Among the *ahosi* was a small group who enjoyed the absolute confidence of the king. They acted as his personal servants and supervised all aspects of his private life. These were the *kposi* or 'leopard wives'; one of them was usually mother of the heir apparent. Other *ahosi* were

subordinate to them and were forbidden access to the king at ordinary times. Many of these were maintained at the palace only until they were given away in marriage to councillors or other notables whom he wished to favour. The king also took wives from this group. Finally, there were innumerable women who saw to the upkeep and provisioning of the vast palace, collecting supplies of water, food, wood, etc. One section was responsible for providing the royal table with game. Toughened by their endurances in the forest, they were chosen by the king to be his personal bodyguard. This may have been the origin of the Amazon corps (the name was given to the Dahomean female soldiers by European travellers), who occupied special apartments in the palace and saw to the protection of the king's person.

It is clear from the foregoing that the royal palace—with its own army, priesthood, and advisory council—was a reflection of the Dahomey kingdom itself.

#### *Ritual and Ideology of the Kingdom*

From our description of the royal prerogatives and the organization of the kingdom, it will not be difficult to appreciate the important role played by ideology and religious cults centred on the person of the king. *Dada*—the king—was an absolute ruler with sacred attributes. He was the symbol of the whole kingdom and the incarnation of the royal dynasty—all those past kings who continued to exercise a protective role over the land. His subjects prostrated themselves and smothered their heads in dust when they greeted him. At official ceremonies the area around the king's throne was delimited by bamboo poles which no ordinary subject was allowed to cross. When he drank in public everybody looked the other way. Only the king was allowed to wear ornate sandals. Only the king could be followed by a woman carrying an umbrella, richly embroidered with symbolic designs to protect him from the sun. He never appeared in public without his 'stick', a carved baton, slightly curved. The king's cloth was thrown over one shoulder; all lesser men were obliged to wear theirs tied around the waist, at least in the royal presence.

Of the great national cults, two dominated all others: one was associated with the Agasu leopard, mythical founder of the Abomey dynasty, the other with the royal ancestors. These cults occasioned splendid annual ceremonies of great significance and

also played an important role during the accession rites of the king. In the early days of the kingdom the king-elect journeyed to Allada, where he was tattooed by the high priest of the cult, receiving five tiny marks on each temple and three on his forehead—symbols of a leopard's claws. Subsequent kings, however, refused to make the journey to Allada, which had become something of a trial, and a deputy replaced them on this ritual pilgrimage. On his enstoolment the new king was consecrated by the Agasu priest with holy water which had been brought from Allada. After a brief period of seclusion, which he spent meditating on his newly acquired responsibilities in a special recess of the palace which housed the ancestral stools, the king was presented to his people. His royal name was then publicly announced: it always consisted of the first syllables of an allegorical sentence.

The king was not considered properly enstooled until he had paid due homage to the late king, his father. This involved the execution of the 'grand customs', ceremonies which have been so well described by visitors to the Abomey court, such as Burton and Forbes. These ceremonies were held each year and lasted for three months, although the 'annual customs' (*anunughome* in Fon) were of diminished splendour compared to the 'grand customs' held after the death of a king. The proceedings were primarily associated with the royal dynasty, but the kingdom as a whole was also involved. The implications were political and economic as well as religious. Loyal subjects from distant corners of the kingdom were united at the capital at this time. Territorial officers were rewarded or reprimanded according to their deserts. The king's court of appeal was in session. New laws were passed extending the royal prerogatives or further centralizing the administration of the country. Sacrifices offered to the ancestors infused the kingdom with a new spiritual force.

One of the major functions of the 'annual customs' was economic. The exchange of goods was intensified: lineages sent tribute to the king through their village chief or the provincial governor. In the days before the first ceremonies gifts poured into the palace and, in the ensuing months, were redistributed among the soldiers, officials, priests, dancers, and subjects. The extent of the king's wealth and his illimitable generosity increased his prestige and occasioned his subjects' gratitude. During the ceremonies Dahomeans were given the opportunity to admire the work of the royal

craftsmen—cloths, carvings, jewellery, etc. It all exalted the power of the monarchy and consolidated the feelings of attachment between ruler and ruled. The king did not display only the material wealth of the court. During the three months of ceremony the traditions of the kingdom and the royal dynasty were inculcated into his subjects on innumerable occasions by the guardians of Dahomean history—the court minstrels and royal wives.

The 'annual customs' were a convenient means of assuring the king's absolute ascendancy in the country. He inspected his officials, received reports, appointed and dismissed chiefs, announced new laws to his assembled subjects, heard complaints, judged important cases, gave orders, brought his soldiers' attention to the next campaign, and instilled into the people the history of their country.

Two kinds of 'annual customs' alternated annually. Both were organized in five stages: the preparatory stage, during which the people assembled at the capital and attended the initial sacrifices made over the kings' tombs—the famous 'platform ceremony' (*ato*) when slaves were thrown down to the executioners to have their throats slit before travelling beyond the grave to serve past kings—the parade of men who marched and manœuvred for the king; military exercises and demonstrations by the Amazons, who feigned attack on an enemy town; and, finally, the parade of the king's wealth through the town. At the end of the 'annual customs' preparations were put under way for the next military expedition.

### *The Military Organization and External Relations*

Social cohesion and a feeling of unity in Dahomey were reinforced by a universally held hatred of an ancient enemy—the Yoruba. The wars that resulted also benefited the royal treasury through the acquisition of large numbers of captives who were sold at the coast in exchange for arms and a variety of European goods. By the end of the nineteenth century the Dahomean standing army constituted a considerable force, due to its numbers and its armaments. Forbes, the English traveller, estimated in 1845 that the army consisted of twelve thousand soldiers, five thousand of whom were women.

The first kings had led their own armies to war. In the nineteenth century they were content to follow in the wake of the

main body with their retinues, spurring on their officers from the rear. Firearms were first introduced towards the end of the seventeenth century; in the eighteenth century the army even possessed a few cannon. Rapidly a gun became the indispensable part of a Dahomean soldier's equipment, replacing the bow and arrow entirely except for one or two companies. In the second half of the nineteenth century there were two armies: a standing army of male and female warriors, and a reserve army of all adult men and women capable of bearing arms. They were mobilized by the king in time of war. The regular army consisted of fourteen regiments of about eight hundred men strong, and three brigades of Amazons amounting altogether to three thousand. Two officers, ranked as councillors, commanded the army. The *Gau*, the commander-in-chief, led the right wing. During the campaign he shared the prerogatives of the king. The *Kposu*, second-in-command, led the left wing. In peace-time the *Gau* came under the *Migan*, on the king's right; the *Kposu* came under the *Meu*, on the king's left.

Regular soldiers wore blue-and-white tunics and were organized into regiments and companies, under the command of an officer, each with its own drums and standard. Veterans wore indigo tunics and were called *atchi*. Among the others, the more numerous were the fusiliers, who fought with bayonets, and the blunderbussmen, or *agbaraya*. The Ashanti company was the *élite corps*, formed of the king's hunters. Lastly, there were companies of archers, armed with poisoned arrows, a cavalry company, and a few artillerymen.

The Amazons were organized into two separate corps: a permanent army and a reserve. The reserve company guarded the capital, and especially the palace, in war-time. In the nineteenth century the Amazons were highly organized. They wore uniforms similar to the men's: sleeveless tunics, with blue-and-white stripes, reached to the knees; baggy breeches were held in at the waist by a cartridge belt. Members of the king's bodyguard wore a band of white ribbon about the forehead, embroidered with a blue crocodile. Amazons lived at the palace and belonged to the king, who recruited them from free Dahomeans and captives. They were celibate and were forbidden to marry until they reached middle age, when they still needed the king's consent. In peace-time they saw to their own needs by manufacturing

pots or carving calabashes; both crafts were their exclusive monopoly.

During the campaign the Amazon army was organized into three groups: the Fanti company—royal bodyguard—constituted the main body, and the left and right wings came under female officers who corresponded to the Gau and Kposu of the male army. Individual companies were distinguished by the arms they carried: bayonets, muskets (each musketeer was accompanied by a carrier), and bows and arrows (borne by the youngest recruits). The *élite corps*, the Fanti company, consisted of the famed elephant huntresses, the boldest and toughest of the Amazons.

In spite of the efficiency and the size of the standing army, the wars of the nineteenth century necessitated the mobilization of a large proportion of the civilian population. A census system was instituted to achieve the recruitment of these men. Before each annual expedition lineage heads throughout the country were required to inform their village chiefs of the number of males aged over thirteen years in their group. Each man was represented by a pebble, and a short time before mobilization the village chiefs sent bags of pebbles to the capital embroidered with the symbol associated with their village. Pebbles corresponding to the number of arms-bearing men were counted at the palace and carefully distributed among the divisions of the regular army. Each village head was expected to send at least one-half of the available warriors.

When the army was assembled the campaign began. But first the ancestors had been consulted about the opportuneness of the expedition. The king announced that 'his palace needed thatch', making an allusion to the skulls of enemies, which were traditionally placed on the roofs of certain porches. The army left the capital, taking on departure a direction opposite to that of their destination. They were guided by scouts who knew the country and who had often been sent previously as 'traders' to acquaint themselves with the situation and possibilities of defence. When nearing the place of attack the army advanced by night. During the day any enemy farmers who had ventured into the forest were captured. The main assault was launched at dawn when the population was asleep: the object was to collect captives, but those killed in battle were beheaded, the king giving a reward for every

head brought back. However, this form of *razzia* was not always employed. When the Dahomean army was fighting a powerful and well-entrenched enemy it was necessary to lay siege to a town or village, sometimes with serious losses.

Thus, by its aggressive military policies and by its unlimited need for slaves, the kingdom of Dahomey had with its neighbours only relations of war; scarcely any alliances with foreign kingdoms endured. The only possibility of escape for neighbouring populations was flight into the lagoons or the mountainous districts, refuge areas where the Dahomean army could not penetrate easily. By the end of the nineteenth century, at the time of European intervention, Dahomean expansion did not seem to have reached definitive limits.

### *Judicial Institutions*

The king, as we have seen, was supreme judge, with power of life and death over his subjects. There was, however, a well-organized hierarchy of courts. Village chiefs dealt only with civil disputes. Criminal cases were adjudicated by the provincial governor or the king's councillors. At village level there was a court of first instance only; sanctions were limited to fines and short periods of imprisonment. Village chiefs supervised trials by ordeal.

The provincial chief had wider powers. He could inflict the *bastinado* or impose lengthy periods of imprisonment. In all cases, however, the death penalty was the king's prerogative. Capital crimes included recidivist housebreaking, arson, rape, and adultery with a royal wife—in the latter case the woman was also executed. If the convicted man was also head of an extended family his compound was destroyed and his people sold as slaves. Punishments were always executed in public, usually in the main market-place in Abomey.

### *Trade and the Economic Resources of the State*

The king possessed a number of economic monopolies. He had certain traditional sources of income, which included: a capitation tax, instituted by the first king—it was paid in just before the 'annual customs'; an inheritance tax, aimed particularly at government officials; a palm-oil tax; tolls paid to local collectors installed on the major trading routes (the king did not receive

duties on goods and slaves); market dues; special reductions made by all the Europeans on goods sold to the king; elephant tusks and part of game caught by hunters; the labour of royal slaves and the income from their sale; import duties paid on certain goods.

These taxes and dues formed a considerable part of government revenue; most of them originated in commercial transactions. The king monopolized the trade in slaves, who were sold at the coast—mainly at Whydah—by royal traders. Besides this, goods leaving European warehouses were taxed by royal officials stationed at the gates of their factories—a kind of royal tithe being exacted on each transaction. Trade was facilitated by the wide use of cowries, and occasionally iron bars and gold dust.

The slave trade proved profitable until about 1830, when the embarkation of slaves from the Slave Coast became more and more difficult due to the strict watch kept on coastal ports by British warships determined to stop the traffic. It was then that the Abomey kings began selling oil products which were in great demand in Europe. Inevitably the oil trade was much less lucrative. In return for slaves or oil the Dahomean trader received armaments (guns and cannon), cloth, alcohol, and precious metals. Royal control of the trade was strict, but the general prosperity which resulted allowed the development of a wealthy commercial class—descendants of those officials and royal traders who worked for the king on commission and also managed to trade on their own account.

Trade also boosted the development of a network of communications in the southern part of the kingdom. Messages between the capital and Whydah were incessant. The direct route between the two towns could be covered in three days by relays of royal messengers. In other regions communications were less efficient. Local markets served as centres of exchange for two or three villages only. Provincial capitals were linked with the capital by fairly well-kept paths.

The Abomey kingdom in the nineteenth century constituted an almost perfect example of absolute monarchy. Even in such African kingdoms as Buganda or Zululand there was nothing approaching the concentration of powers in the hands of the sovereign. In West Africa the Ashanti king ruled over a confederation of provinces, which enjoyed a certain amount of auto-

nomy. The Mossi king presided over a more or less decentralized empire. In both states groups of nobles, related in some way to the king, enjoyed wide prerogatives as provincial chiefs. In Dahomey this was not so: the policy of centralization permitted neither any significant degree of regional autonomy nor the participation of members of the royal family in the government of the kingdom. The people had no more influence at the seat of power than the nobles. Commoner ministers were in no sense representatives of the people. On the contrary, they remained loyal retainers of the king, who had absolute control of their careers and their lives. In Dahomey the kingdom was concentrated in the person of the king and his ancestors.

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