

Arte in Africa 2

**RACCOGLIERE, DOCUMENTARE, CONSERVARE, RESTAURARE ED ESPORRE
LE OPERE D'ARTE TRADIZIONALE AFRICANA.**

**COLLECTING, DOCUMENTING, PRESERVING, RESTORING AND EXHIBITING
WORKS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ART.**

**CHOISIR, DOCUMENTER, CONSERVER, RESTAURER ET EXPOSER
LES OEUVRES D'ART TRADITIONNEL AFRICAÏN.**

A cura di Ezio Bassani e Gaetano Speranza

**CENTRO STUDI
DI STORIA
DELLE ARTI AFRICANE
FIRENZE**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PORO"
MILANO**

*a Carlo L. Raghianti
in memoriam*

Realizzazione
Centro Editoriale
Università Internazionale dell'Arte
Firenze

Copertina
Leonardo Baglioni
Firenze

© *Copyright 1991*
Centro di Studi
di Storia delle Arti Africane
50133 Firenze
Via delle Forbici 24-26

in copertina:
Artista Mbunda, Zambia: Maschera.

THE MUSÉE HISTORIQUE IN ABOMEY:
ART, POLITICS, AND THE CREATION OF AN AFRICAN MUSEUM

Every museum has its story – not only its unique history of inception and realization but also the story which it hopes to convey through its structure of exhibition spaces and its ordering and labeling of objects¹. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art here in New York, the distinctive exhibition story becomes apparent when one first enters the museum doors and the great hall which lies therein. To the right are found the artistic monuments of Egypt, to the left the arts of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome. Directly in front are the medieval galleries and up the grand staircase, one reaches the art treasures of the Renaissance, Baroque, and nineteenth century. Foundation and ascent in Western art history is thus mapped out in the program and progression of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition spaces². The Musée Historique of Abomey which is in the Republic of Benin also has a distinctive story which it tells in its exhibition spaces and display themes. In many respects this museum is a unique institution, not only in its setting (within the palace compound of the ancient kings of Danhomé [Dahomey]), but also because of its collection of art works, some of which are of on-going ceremonial use by the Danhomé nobility. The Musée Historique accordingly is identified at once as an historic site and public museum and as a ceremonial center where rituals important to the royal family still are undertaken. The broad range of arts found in the museum – including among others, figurative arts, thrones, jewelry, garments, *makpo* (scepters, *recades*), *asen* (memorial staffs), leather work, applique cloths, canes, and weapons – all are identified in some way with the once powerful Danhomé kingdom. Not surprisingly, the opening of this museum in 1945 was the source of considerable pride. As Eva Meyerowitz, the English ethnographer noted in an article at the time (1944: 147) this “...is the first national museum of an African people in West Africa, housed in buildings stylistically suitable for the contents”. She sought, in writing this article on the museum, to encourage the formation of similar museums elsewhere in Africa.

Within the confines of the Musée Historique (which comprises the former palaces of King Guezo (1818-58) and King Glele (1858-89), four structures are given over to the display of objects: – the “Throne Room” (*zinkpoho*) and “Hall of Multiple Openings” (*adjalala*) of King Guezo and the “Hall of Multiple Openings” and “Power Room” (*boho*) of King Glele. The “Throne Room” once housed thrones and other important historic artifacts of the state; the “Halls of Multiple Openings” served as royal meeting rooms; the “Power Room” was a chamber where rites preparatory to war took place. Today, recalling its former

use, the "Throne Room" is used for the display of royal thrones, stools, umbrellas, and appliques; a smaller room within this structure contains sculptures identified with the dynastic strong names (a lion, dog, chameleon, hyena, antelope, and leopard) as well as a figure identified with the god, Mawu.

During the years 1984-86 when my research in Abomey was undertaken, Guezo's "Hall of Many Openings" was in serious disrepair so that the museum's collection of *asen*, *hotagatin*, and religious sculptures was distributed between store rooms and part of the "Hall of Many Openings" in the palace of King Glele. This latter hall also contains examples of royal dress and accoutrements including: a hammock, several *makpo* (scepters or *recades*), war garments, jewelry, pipes, tobacco bags, canes, and shoes, plus a number of imported vessels (an English liquor service and several porcelain jars once used in the palace as drums). The "Power Room" (*boho*) of Glele in turn contains a collection of domestic and foreign weapons, skull arts (a vessel and several horse tail fly whisks), a memorial dedicated to slain warriors, and a copy of the famous statue of an iron warrior now in the Musée de l'Homme. In this room as well is a large stone symbolizing the immortality of the state.

In several of these halls enlargements of engravings and photos are displayed. These show the palace, key individuals, and important events of the past. A series of other palace buildings also can be viewed by visitors. The latter include: the small *boho* ("Power House") of King Guezo; the *djebo* ("House of Pearls") where Guezo's soul is said to rest; the tomb (*adoho* "Sleeping Room") of King Glele and, the collective tomb (*ahossihué* "House of the King's Wives") where a number of the latter's wives are buried.

As with the establishment of any museum, questions concerning the varying aims and orientations of those responsible for its conception are of considerable interest. It is argued here that both the French colonial authorities and the Danhomé individuals who participated in the creation of the new museum, had varying agendas which impacted in important ways both on the collections housed within and on the means and goals of their exposition. This article explores these diverse agendas and in the process seeks to illuminate both the works themselves and the social and political factors that have impacted on their means of display.

The Conquest of Danhomé: Prelude to the Collection Acquisition

The story of the founding of the Musée Historique in Abomey begins in many respects with the history of the French conquest of Danhomé in 1892-94. The conquest of Danhomé followed much the same course as that of other colonial wars in Africa. To some extent the defeat of Gbehanzin, the ruling Danhomé monarch (1889-94), was a foregone conclusion. The French concerns which led to the conquest were varied, having at once moral, political, and economic foundations. These rationales are laid out in an unpublished report on the Danhomé situation written by August Largent in 1890 (two years before the conquest). Titled "Le Conflit Franco-Dahomien"³, this document states that:

"More than any other African country, Dahomey is still in a state of barbarity from primitive times and its rulers, who rebel at all idea of civilization must evidently look with a bad eye on the establishment on their coast of men representing civilizing ideas... It is a fight of barbarity against civilization"⁴.

The conquest of Danhomé thus was justified first and foremost as an advance of civilization over savagery. But as Largent makes clear in his report, there were also significant political and commercial interests which the French saw as supporting their conquest goals.

“There is here a question not only of humanity and civilization but also of political and commercial interests for at the same time this country should be for us a source of profits that we should not let escape”.

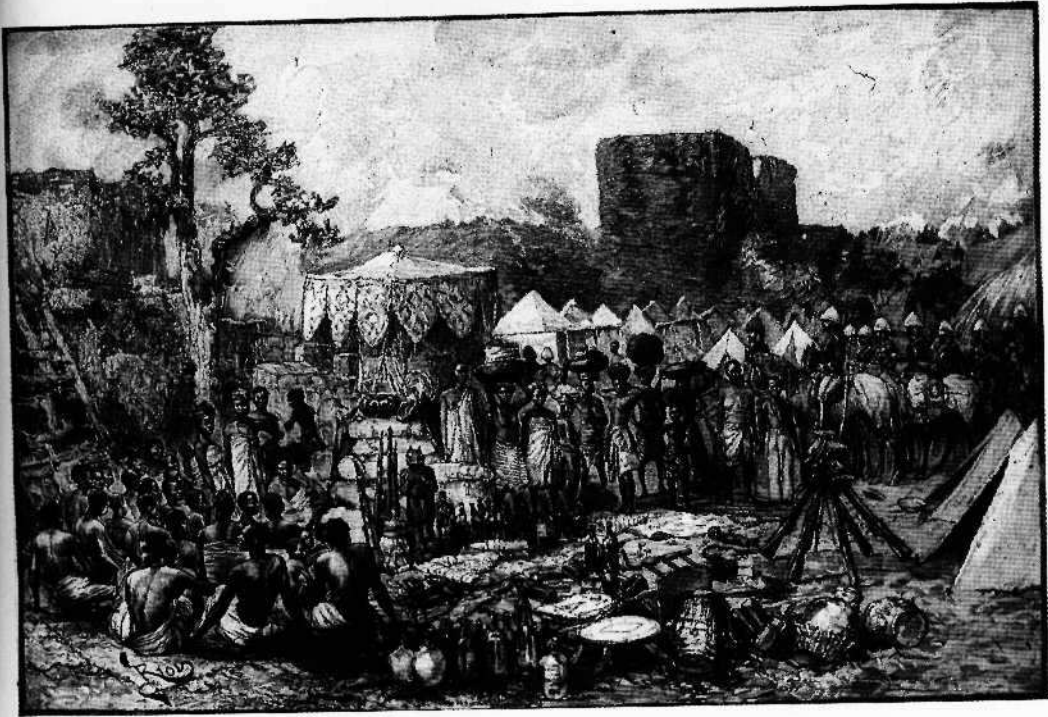
The potential profits, Largent suggests, were enough not only to pay the costs of conquest but also to make Dahomey one of the most important and rich colonies in West Africa. In addition to renumerative gold and silver mines assumed to lie in the “Kong region” to the northwest of the capital, Lafarge cites the following:

“The existence of a huge royal treasure whose size had been greatly augmented through the years by the sale of slaves; the ability of colonial powers to acquire rights over the importation and exportation of trade goods and to gain control over associated customs duties worth an estimated minimum of 250,000 F per year; a royal Danhomé tradition which maintained that all past treasure necessarily accrued to the inheritor of the throne; a local custom in which the king tried not to use any of his inheritance; the practice in which all the inheritance of ministers and family heads also was turned over to the king; a belief which identified the greatest king as the one who left the greatest wealth in the treasury; an assumption that “barils of gold, jewelry, precious silk, as well as silver in money and objects” were stored in the palace⁵”.

In all, Lafarge suggests, a treasure worth hundreds of millions of Francs might be gained through French victory over the Danhomé forces.

What wealth the French troops – led by Colonel Alfred-Amédée Dodds, a man of part Senegalese descent – found after they gained access to the palace on November 17, 1892, however, was far less than they had anticipated. The palace, having been destroyed in a fire set by the departing troops of Gbehanzin, yielded no visible treasures. The French forces found here instead (Figure 1) works of a very rudimentary nature, these consisting of various small stools, local textiles, and a quantity of indigenous and foreign liquor⁶. Although a few additional objects were later discovered by the French within the capital (including the now famous lifesize zoomorphic sculptures, thrones of Gbehanzin and Glele, and palace doors [now in the Musée de l’Homme])⁷ in all, the colonial troops acquired little if anything of commercial or artistic interest.

The above discussion of the French conquest of Danhomé offers insight into the period immediately prior to the Abomey museum’s establishment. We learn in this way the condition of the palace edifice in this period (poor because it had been largely destroyed by fire) and the source of the later museum collections (few if any works having been found within the palace). As is suggested above, following the French military campaign and victory, the palace itself lay in ruins and the royal treasury and associated arts had either been removed prior to the French arrival or had been destroyed in the palace conflagration. The above Lafarge report in turn alludes to the early orientations of colonial authorities with respect to moral, financial, and political factors. As we will see similar interests appear to have been important in the foundation of the Musée Historique.



1. *The assembly of objects found in the palace in Abomey. Albeca, La France au Dahomey 1895. p. 111.*

The First Decades of French Rule: King Agoli Agbo and the new Administrators

King Gbehanzin, who had fled the royal capital of Abomey as the colonial troops neared in November of 1892, remained on the run for over a year. In December of 1893, because of Gbehanzin's inaccessibility, the royal family living in Abomey (with the concurrence of the French forces) met and selected a brother of the exiled king, a man named Goutchili, to rule (Cornevin 1981: 353). Goutchili, under the royal name of Agoli Agbo, was enthroned at the end of December 1893 and two weeks later on January 15, 1894 was officially recognized as King by the French. Soon after, on January 26, 1894, Gbehanzin arranged his surrender, and at the beginning of February 1894 was exiled to Martinique.

Wanting to interfere as little as possible with the local political structure (except to assure that certain new laws about war, sacrifice, and juridical process would be followed) the French authorities left Agoli Agbo as head of the new – now considerably smaller and poorer – Danhomé state. Agoli Agbo, who himself would be exiled by the French in 1900, played a decisive role in the period immediately preceding the museum's foundation. This king, whose royal name, Agoli Agbo is a shortened form of the phrase, "Danhomé has stubbed its toe, but the kingdom has not fallen" and one of whose royal symbols is a broom (to sweep away the dirt and destruction of the conquest) (Figure 2) placed an important priority on rebuilding both the palace and the kingdom's lost art collection.

Although greatly hampered both by a dearth of funds which traditionally accrued to kings through war, tribute, and various financial enterprises, as well as

by a lack of free labor, Agoli Agbo focused his energies on rebuilding the palace. Discussing Agoli Agbo's rebuilding efforts, Quenum notes (1986: 4):

"Of the twelve royal palaces which the city of Agbome possesses, only two were conserved thanks to the efforts employed by King Agoli Agbo at the beginning of his reign in 1894. Lacking the means which his predecessors were disposed of he was uniquely inclined towards the work of rebuilding the palaces of Kings Guezo and Glele and retaining their most important parts⁸".

The results of this restoration endeavor however were not always optimal, for Quenum also notes that (1986: 4) the palaces of Guezo and Glele "... were constructed of local material and fell progressively more into ruin despite the permanent care emanating from King Agoli Agbo".

In addition to his interests in architectural reconstruction, Agoli Agbo also sought to restore the kingdom's lost art treasures. In conjunction with this he procured works from a number of the traditional court artists, individuals who, in the past, had been responsible for a range of royal arts. Many of the works which Agoli Agbo commissioned would eventually find their way into the museum's collections. A number of these works were commissioned for the state funeral of Agoli Agbo's father, King Glele in 1896 (Figure 3)⁹, an event which Gbehanzin had not succeeded in completing because so much of his reign had been taken up with the war with the French. Not surprisingly in light of the above, references to Glele predominate in Agoli Agbo's (and the museum's) art corpus.

In addition to objects specifically identified with Glele, Agoli Agbo also commissioned a series of works which commemorated the reigns of earlier kings. In the course of his patronage, Agoli Agbo thus set the stage for certain priorities which would later be emphasized in the Musée Historique exhibition halls – a special focus on Glele and an interest in commemorative works of past kings. It was as if, aware of the changing course of Danhomé history, Agoli Agbo saw a need not only to honor his father but also to preserve (actually to reconstruct) the past through the art works which he commissioned.

Many of the arts created during Agoli Agbo's reign were transported to Marseille and exhibited in the Exposition Universelle of 1900. The objects included ranged from jewelry (of gold, silver, bronze and glass beads) to arms, although apparently the most celebrated of the Danhomé arts were various religious works (exhibited in their own "Galerie des Fétiches") which consisted of a series of "bizarre animals covered with a silver colored metal and copper" (Brunet and Giethlen 1900: 512). Drawings of these sculptures which are clearly based on examples now in the Musée Historique, are scattered throughout the Brunet and Giethlen text. At the end of the Exposition Universelle these objects were returned to Dahomey.

As with any important art patron, the rationales which lie behind Agoli Agbo's patronage concerns are of considerable interest. In this light it is important to note that Agoli Agbo probably benefitted considerably from the luster accruing to the throne in conjunction with his reconstruction projects. Secondly Agoli Agbo appears never to have been wholly accepted as king by many of members of the royal family, and some of them even went so far as to see him as a traitor who had aided in the capture of Gbehanzin (his own brother) in order to assure a place for himself on the throne¹⁰. Undoubtedly aware of such accusations Agoli Agbo's sponsorship of the royal arts served a key role in reinforcing his own place both

within the dynastic line and within the larger history of the state.

And, since war and human sacrifice were no longer allowed by the French, art patronage provided one of the few acceptable means for Agoli Agbo to promote his own strength, identity, and viability as ruler. Furthermore, undertaking the funeral of one's deceased father was a primary obligation of a new ruler in acceding to the throne. Such an endeavor (which was a major focus of Agoli Agbo's art patronage) meant that he was now, in the eyes of other nobles, legitimately king. Ironically the other two prerequisites of rule, a successful military victory and the concomitant killing of a defeated enemy king, led eventually to Agoli Agbo's removal of power and exile to Gabon by the French¹¹. Agoli Agbo thus became King of Danhome in the full sense of the word, but in the process lost the throne¹².

An Empty Palace and French Restoration Interests

The exile of Agoli Agbo marked yet another turning point in the preestablishment period for the Musée Historique, since with the departure of the king, the now vacant palace came into even greater ruin¹³. It was at this time, in turn that the French began to play an increasingly important role in its preservation. René Le Hérissé who visited the palace between 1900 and 1903 noted (1903: 144) that

“all these constructions are in a deplorable state and after two or three winters there will exist nothing of what was once the residence of the kings of Dahomey. A long gallery, on the walls of which exist primitive sculptures retracing the high deeds of war of the amazons is the one thing one tried to conserve”.

In 1911, the first major French efforts were undertaken to restore the palace. The then colonial administrator, E. Chaudoin focused his efforts on the palace one occupied by King Glele. Chaudoin, who had been taken prisoner by Gbehanzin in 1890 and had visited the palace at that time, was especially concerned with the exterior halls and the associated bas-reliefs (Waterlot 1926: 9). After Chaudoin left Abomey in 1911 to assume a new administrative post (Quenum 1986: 4), the restoration effort was continued by A. Le Hérissé, an administrator in Abomey for five years who married a Danhomé princess and eventually published an important book (1911) on the Danhomé kingdom, its customs, and its history. For his part, Le Hérissé concentrated on the palace area once occupied by King Guezo. Additional restorations appear to have been undertaken between 1931 and 1933 by Governor Reste. As Quenum notes (1986: 4) “Gouverneur Reste executed an extensive project of caretaking for the palaces, this with the accord of the members of the royal family”. Sadly, in the course of this effort and the earlier restorations, several of the bas-reliefs were removed; and, equally significantly, a number of those destroyed were replaced with new forms (Waterlot 1926: 9).

Other palace changes were also undertaken while these restorations were underway. Most importantly, the traditional palace high pitched, wide-eaved thatched roofs (Figure 4) were replaced with low-pitched roofs of corrugated metal (Figure 5). The resulting structures are not only visually different from those of the past in texture and roofing material but also in the shape and angle of the eaves¹⁴. These changes in the long term have proven to be very damaging especially to the palace basreliefs since, without the protection of the wide-eaved

roofs, these sculptures have suffered extensive erosion and decay.

The palace *djeho* ("House of Beads"), the small round structures which served to shelter the spirits of deceased kings underwent similar changes. Here too not only was the roofing material changed from thatch to corrugated metal, but the angle and height of the roofs also were altered. The two story entry (*singbodji*) leading into Guezo's palace – which now serves as the museum entry – was also substantially rebuilt by the French during this period. Cement was mixed with earth for the walls and its once thatched roof was replaced with metal. Here too, architectural changes impacted in significant ways on the look of the structure.

During this period as well there appears to have been considerable concern for the royal art treasures. René Le Hérisse notes (1903: 144) that after the collections were returned to Danhomé from the Exposition Universelle, they were "conserved by the government in Porto-Novo while waiting for the construction in Abomey of a room suitable for their exhibition". In this act, we see the first seeds being planted for a museum in Abomey, a place where objects of importance to the history of the state could be kept in security. How long these objects were retained in Porto-Novo is not clear, but moves eventually were also undertaken in Abomey to secure remaining examples of the royal arts there.

It appears to have been during the tour of Governor Reste (1929-31) that the idea of a full-fledged museum within the ancient palace grounds was first broached (Mercier and Lombard 1959: 11). Two years later in 1933 according to Quenum (1986: 11), a legal deposit for historic pieces was established in Abomey. While on the one hand this act was a natural preparatory one to the establishment of the museum, on the other, it also appears to reflect a growing concern that some of the objects in the royal treasury were being sold. According to Patrick Manning (1990) in 1929, Prince Justin Aho Glele, grandson of the late king became *chef de canton* of Ounbégame outside of Abomey. He was also named by the French as conservator of the royal collections. Manning notes that

"opponents within the royal family accused him of robbing the museum. The French administration provided full support for its appointee, but eventually agreed that he should step down as conservator. In turning over [the collection] however, it was Justin Aho, rather than a third party who constructed the inventory..."

The need for a secure museum setting thus became even more urgent.

As noted earlier, this museum finally opened in 1945 under the auspices and funding of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire¹⁵. M.P. Thomassey was named the first conservator (Quenum 1986: 4). Baptised as the Musée Historique d'Agbome, today it is under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Youth, Popular Culture and Sports of the Republic of Benin. Museum records in Abomey unfortunately offer us little insight into the early plans for this museum, and equally importantly, into the origins of objects housed within. The handwritten log which serves as the official documentation of the collection also is devoid of information concerning artist, date of manufacture, cost, and significance. We learn from this log only the date of acquisition, dimensions, medium, and the basic subject. Maupoil notes in this light (p. 183) that "It is regrettable, that no methodological catalogue of objects contained in the Museum has yet to be made". Sadly, the situation is the same today.

While information in the museum records is lacking as to the origins of the art



2. *Applique (cloth). 20th century. (Musée Historique of Abomey). H. 48 inches. Dedicated to King Agoli Agbo (1894-1900) showing his strong name (a foot about to hit a rock) and other signs associated with his reign. Artist: Yemadje family compound. Photo: Author, June 1, 1986.*
3. *Hornbill (wood, brass, iron, glass, pigment). (Musée Historique of Abomey: Ab-7-30). H. 39.25 inches. Date: 1894-1900. Dedicated by King Agoli Agbo to King Glele. Artist: Huntonджи, Tahozangbe. Photo: author, June 5, 1986.*

works, Eva Meyerowitz, who as noted earlier, visited the palace just before it officially opened, offers a few general clues. She writes (1944: 147) that the “French succeeded in inducing the chiefs and members of the royal family to exhibit permanently their objects” here. Which members are not stipulated, but tradition maintained that all royal art remain in the hands of the king, thus suggesting that after Agoli Agbo’s exile, the selected delegates of the princes (Justin Aho Glele among others) played an important part in the process.

Stated and Unstated French Agendas in the Development of the Museum

Official French interests in and orientations with respect to the museum in Abomey appear to have been varied. While on the one hand colonial officials wanted to help to restore and preserve what remained of this important art and architectural tradition, and in turn sought to aid the museum in Abomey in acquiring pieces from the royal family, at the same time administrators also were interested in helping French museums to secure important examples of royal Danhomé art during this period¹⁶. As Eva Meyerowitz writes in her 1944 article, even as negotiations were underway for the Musée Historique, “the French government had bought [jewelry] from the impoverished royal family for the Trocadero Museum in Paris” (p. 148)¹⁷. In the end, these objects appear not to have left Abomey (perhaps in part because of her article) and today they comprise

an important grouping of works in the Musée Historique collection.

In other ways as well the French interest in the establishment of the Musée Historique in Abomey appears to have had diverse aims and ends. Monetary issues impacted in certain respects on the way that the museum was conceived. Once the museum opened, it was hoped, the palace (and its reconstruction) would begin to partially pay for itself. Tourism, it should be noted, until 1960 was still under the direction of IFAN, the agency that first established the Musée Historique. Accordingly, when Mercier and Lombard published their guide to the museum in 1959 they noted that they had been "...asked by numerous visitors [who were] looking for a detailed documentation of the royal collections..."

Related to an interest in tourism and associated revenue, the museum officials invited court artists from Abomey to set up workshops and/or booths in the palace (something that never would have taken place here in the past). These artists in turn began selling objects to the growing tourist trade. Today, as in the past, applique makers, weavers, metal smiths, calabash engravers and woodcarvers sell examples of their art here. In the process, the museum has made some effort to assure quality control and the on-going use of "traditional" subject matter¹⁸.

Political concerns sometimes also impacted on French museum strategies. Accordingly, an equally important, if perhaps unstated and unacknowledged agenda in the course of transforming the palace into a museum, was its desanctification, a process which coincided with the desacralizing of the Danhomé royal family and its property. As C.E. Adande has noted (1976-77: 210) "it was absolutely necessary [for the colonial administrators] to destroy the cult and the sense of the royal person". Directly or indirectly the establishment of the Musée Historique served these ends. To some extent Lafarge's aim in promoting "civilization" over "barbary" coincides with this orientation, for African religion at this time was popularly viewed as dominated by features of barbarism.

The process of palace secularization and its long term effect become clear when we realize that historically the Danhomé king was likened to a god; one knelt before him as a deity; he lived in a palace modelled after important temples in the nation; and, as with temples, admission into the palace interior was highly restricted. Commoners, foreigners, and for that matter even most nobles and princes never gained admittance into the interior. The opening of the palace to the public thus helped in key respects to demystify this once sacred royal space; tourists as well as descendants of the past enemies of the state now daily tramped across the formerly hallowed grounds. As a result of the tourist visits, the sacred tomb of Glele and the "soul house" (*djeho* "house of pearls") of Guezo became common visitation areas.

The process of palace desacralization also extended to the secularizing of many objects housed within the museum collection. The wood and metal plated sculptures representing animals such as the lion, dog, hornbill (Figure 3) and antelope are a case in point. These objects are identified in the labels and guidebooks as symbols of royal strong names. While in some respects this is true, works such as these once were important religious objects identified with the royal cult of Nesuhwe which was dedicated to honoring the memory of past kings (Blier 1988). These sculptures traditionally were displayed along with other royal arts in the annual "customs" ceremonies called *hwetanu*, a ritual which among other things, was intended as an offering to the gods and the royal dead. While

certain royal religious arts are displayed in the Musée Historique (*asen* most importantly) little effort appears to have been made to acquire examples of many of the other religious arts in use by royalty in Abomey. Ironically, visitors frequently see in Glele's tomb a variety of small pottery vessels which are employed by family women to transport sacred spring water to the grave chamber¹⁹. No such objects are in the collection itself²⁰.

If secularization of the kingship was an important (yet perhaps unstated) topic running through the museum and its exhibits, the opposite is true of the theme of history²¹. The vast majority of the museum exhibition halls have history as a primary or secondary organizing principle. The pervading theme of history strikes one when one enters the first of the museum exhibition halls, the "Throne Room", where one sees thrones identified with each of the kings and an associated plaque noting the dates of that ruler's reign (Figure 6). Above each of these thrones is an umbrella appliqued with the appropriate king's dynastic signs. On the walls behind are *applique tableaux* incorporating symbols referring the kings' "strong names", military campaigns, and important incidents that occurred in their reigns (Figure 2). The emphasis on dynastic chronology which we see here coincides with standard Western modes of exhibition arrangement.

The same stress on dynastic history also can be discerned in the palace building which in 1984-86 housed the royal *asen* (memorial staffs) and *hotagatin* (*djebo* finials). These works were placed along a wall in the order that each king ruled. Even in the palace building which once served as the war room (*boho*: "Power Room") of King Glele the theme of dynastic history prevails. Housed here are examples of local weaponry as well as European guns and cannons which were used by the Danhomé armies or were taken by them in the course of the kingdom's numerous wars. Because many of these foreign guns have been dated, they are a focus within museum tours of further discussion of royal history²².

There is nothing in itself inaccurate in the museum's emphasis on dynastic history – indeed one could say that the Danhomé kingdom is fortunate that so much is known about its kings. Yet at the same time it soon becomes apparent that the history that is displayed in the exhibits is an extraordinarily narrow and often inaccurate one. As C.E. Adande makes clear in his master's essay on the palace bas-reliefs and applique (1976-77: 201), the history represented in these and other palace arts emphasizes only those events which serve to edify the king – in particular military events²³. Furthermore, it is obvious that the history presented here is exclusively the "official" one, for as will be discussed below, no mention is made either of King Adandozan (1797-1818) who lost the throne in a coup d'état, or of Queen Tassi Hangbe (1705-1708), the early female ruler. Finally, it is important to note that this emphasis on history served to reinforce in the minds of all who visited that the kingdom was now dead. Like the themes of desacralization, history thus had an significant effect of disempowerment.

In view of the importance of history in the Musée Historique, the question of the "art history" is an interesting one. Desanti notes in this regard (1945: 189) that:

"[In the museum]... are gathered and conserved... the last objects belonging to the ancient kings: thrones, arms, cloth, jewelry, masks, diverse products of indigenous art presenting an indisputable character of originality".

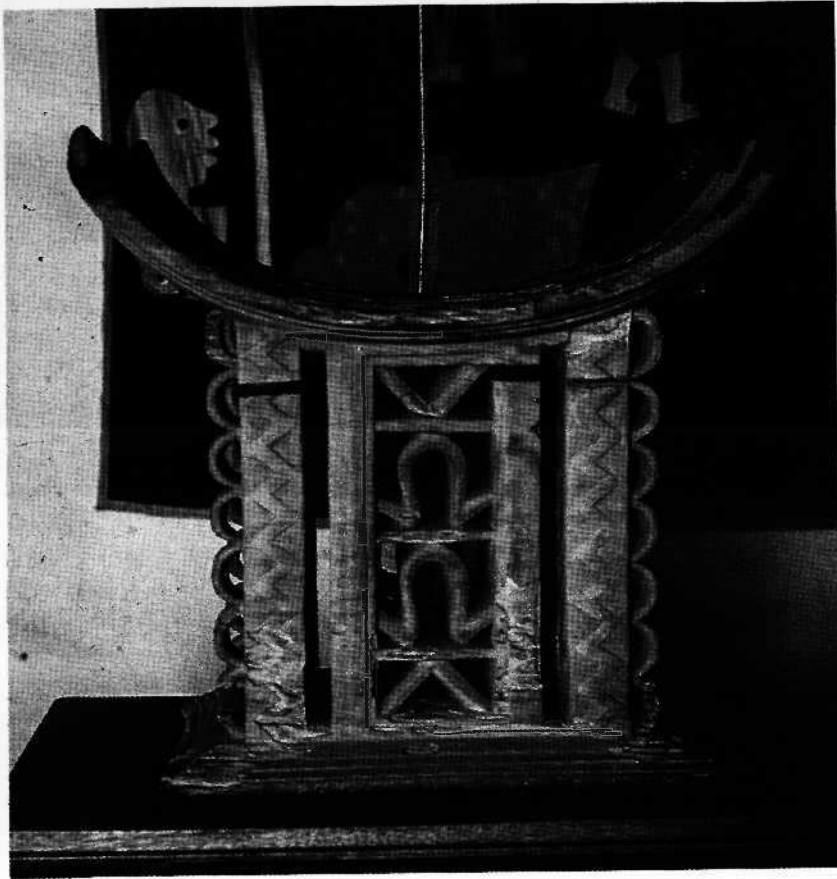
Desanti's description, however, is in many respects false for despite the



4. Adjalala "Hall of Many Openings" of King Guezo (1818-58). Waterlot, Les bas-reliefs des batiments royaux d'Abomey. 1926.
5. Adjalala "Hall of Many Openings" of King Glele (1858-89). Musée Historique of Abomey. Photo: author, Jan. 24, 1986.
6. Throne of King Agadja (1708-1774). Wood. (Musée Historique of Abomey). Date: 1894-1900? Artist: unknown.

prominent stress on history (even if narrowly defined and sometimes inaccurate) the "art history" presented in the Musée Historique is either completely overlooked or is patently fictive.

The thrones discussed above are a good example of this. Each "recognized" king (i.e. excluding Tassi Hangbe and Adandozan) from the first ruler, Dako Donu (1625-45) to the last king, Agoli Agbo (1894-1900) is represented by a throne associated with his reign, thus suggesting that the exhibit includes examples of nearly 300 years of throne manufacture. In fact, we know that the royal thrones all were destroyed in a fire in the latter part of reign of king Guezo (1818-58) (Mercier and Lombard 1959: 32) (see below). Furthermore, as is clear in looking at the museum throne collection – the kings' thrones on display appear to have been made by the same artist or workshop, thus suggesting that they date from a late (post-colonial) period of manufacture since the throne of Agoli Agbo is included in the corpus. The striking differences between these thrones and the two identified with Glele and Gbehanzin which are now in the Musée de l'Homme offers further support for this late date for the Musée Historique thrones. Furthermore, the curved topped (Asante-resembling) form of these royal thrones represents a style of throne (called *djandemen*) which itself is said to be a relatively late invention, generally attributed to the reign of King Agonlgo (1789-1797).



As we can see in the above, a fictive art history of the royal thrones thus is maintained in the Musée Historique which encourages visitors to see these thrones as part of a long and essentially unchanging tradition²⁴. The art historical inaccuracies, while at first glance surprising, none-the-less correspond with common myths of the period about African art which maintained that these works are bound by tradition and are essentially unchanging. As a result, even though it was noted by Mercier and Lombard that the thrones are of late date, no effort has been made to indicate this fact in the exhibition labels. A similar myth also lies behind the lack of documentation in the museum with regards to artist. Early myths about African art suggested in this light that such art works are the responsibility of the larger collectivity thus the input and significant role of individual artists was deemed to be insignificant. That such a myth prevailed even in light of the acknowledged importance of court artists and workshops still in Abomey at the time of the museum opening indicates just how pervasive such a myth was and in some respects still is.

The history appliques which are displayed behind these thrones (Figure 2) are also of interest in regard to art historical concerns. Although appliques have been used in a range of both royal and religious art traditions from a presumably early time, there is no documentation for the early (precolonial) manufacture of the type of dynastic history applique presented in the museum with its display of important scenes (and signs) from the life of an individual king. In the past, appliques were used in variant religious traditions – as flags, mortuary banners, dress, and wall or door coverings. They also have been used in many royal traditions including umbrellas, hats, cloth, and wall decorations.

The above described religious and royal appliques are distinct from both the dynastic history appliques displayed in the Musée Historique and the early genre appliques (showing scenes of economic and religious life) such as were purchased by Herskovits and others from the 1930s on. Both of the latter traditions appear to have been developed in this century, the genre scenes in response to increased tourist interest in Danhomé court and sacred traditions, the history appliques probably being encouraged by colonial officials at the time the museum opened as an adjunct to the throne displays. The history appliques appear to have replaced an earlier pre-colonial tradition of displaying trophy objects from war beside each king's throne. Like the history appliques, such war trophies were intended to recall a ruler's military victories. The tradition illustrated in Le Hérisse (1911: 12) of an appliqued mortuary flag which was placed on the altar of king Glele during commemorative ceremonies may also have been an important source for this type of applique. The applique published by Le Hérisse shows a series of battle scenes similar to those of the history appliques²⁵.

A similar fiction with respect to art history is presented in conjunction with the *asen* (memorial staffs) and *hotagatin* (*djebo* "House of Pearls" finials). Although labeled and displayed today in such a way as to suggest that they date from the reigns of kings with whom they are identified (and like the thrones they are associated with all the rulers from Dako Donu to the present – except Adandozan and Tassi Hangbe), in fact, as Mercier points out in his catalogue of these works (1952: 12), most if not all the museum *asen* and *hotagatin* date to the reigns of Glele, Gbehanzin, and Agoli Agbo²⁶. Thus here too visitors are encouraged to see these works as part of a long (and by and large unchanging tradition) when in fact the works are of relatively recent date²⁷.

The same ahistorical perspective can be seen with respect to the famous palace bas reliefs (Figure 5). Although the well-known French sociologist Lucien Levy-

Bruhl writes in the introduction to Waterlot's book on the palace bas-reliefs (1926: 17) that they are "historical documents of an incontestable authenticity..." here too there are a number of art historical questions. While generally assumed to be an "early" and "traditional" form of palace art, oral tradition suggests that the bas-reliefs were introduced into the palace only in the middle of the 19th C. under the reign of King Guezo (Assogbakpe 86: 7: 128a)²⁸. Early bas-relief traditions appear to have been employed principally as a temple art form. Still today, particularly in communities outside of Abomey, temple facades incorporate a rich panoply of such bas-reliefs. King Guezo, who placed a priority on public perception of the kingdom appears to have borrowed this temple art form to further his populist goals. The palace bas-reliefs which he commissioned in turn are distinct from those on temples in their overriding emphasis on themes of war and power²⁹. Here too we can see that the history represented in the Musée Historique is a very select one. Not only are the themes portrayed essentially part of an "official" court history, but also, by neglecting the larger historical context of the bas-relief tradition, and by following a myth that maintains that African art is essentially changeless and ahistorical, key inaccuracies are maintained.

Agendas of the Danhomé Princes

If the French had their multiple aims and orientations in the development of the palace museum, so too did those Danhomé individuals who were in a position to impact on decisions concerning the museum – in particular members of the large family of descendants of King Glele and to a lesser extent, Gbehanzin and Agoli Agbo. With respect to interests of the Danhomé princes one of their primary objectives appears to have been the glorification of their famous predecessor, Glele, and concomitantly the latter's father Guezo³⁰.

Guezo, it is widely acknowledged, came to power through a *coup d'état*. What is not generally known or acknowledged however is that Adandozan, the ruler he "overthrew" was an alcoholic who was too incapacitated to rule effectively. Furthermore, in spite of the *coup d'état*, Adandozan remained in residence in the palace through the course of Guezo's reign. Thus, in some ways, Guezo served more as a public king than as sacred king as traditionally understood in Danhomé³¹. With Adandozan living within the walls of the ancient Danhomé palace (Atakinbaya), Guezo built a new palace immediately to the south³². As his entry he commissioned a two story structure (now the entry to the Musée Historique) modeled after the house of his Brazilian friend Francisco de Souza (from Ouidah), a man who had helped in the overthrow of Adandozan³³.

It appears that at first there was a certain amount of accord if not amicability between Guezo and Adandozan (who was now free to indulge in his alcoholic binges without compromising the state). This changed, however, when Guezo named his own son, Glele, as crown prince, thereby removing the possibility of rule from the rightful heirs, the sons of Adandozan. In response, the latter revolted, setting fire to the state treasure houses and apparently burning much of the royal art – including the thrones (Adjaho 86: 6: 213). As a result of this treasonous act, Adandozan's sons were banished from the kingdom, and any reference to Adandozan or his rule was struck from the official record.

Accordingly no reference is made in the museum to the twenty-one year reign of Adandozan, and no throne, *asen*, applique, *makpo*, sculpture, or umbrella, is identified with this ruler. Furthermore those appliques which include the signs of

all the kings, completely neglect this now “banished” king. Guezo and Glele’s successors, many of whom had important positions of power under the new colonial reign, in this way were able to effectively assure that the name Adandozan would find no place in the history presented in the Musée Historique³⁴. This meant in turn that no one would question the legitimacy or historical viability of their father, Glele, and they in turn. As Quenum notes (1986: 14) “If the throne of King Adandozan was not exposed in the Musée Historique of Abomey despite his long reign of 21 years (1797-1818) it is because it was a question of a formal prohibition on the part of the members of the royal family”.

Consistent with this, as noted earlier, only the Guezo and Glele palaces have been restored within the palace complex. The ancient palace sections in turn are not open to museum visitors. This was not only a matter of limited funds, but also had a critical political end in underscoring the importance and viability of the Guezo-Glele line. The palaces of Guezo and Glele now constitute the main “palace” area as defined for tourists within the Musée Historique³⁵.

Recent Concerns and Future Changes

Since the museum’s opening in 1945, little new restoration was undertaken in the palace for a number of years, and as a result, many of the buildings came under increasing disrepair. Thanks to a major endeavor by UNESCO begun in the 1960s (Haas 1985), however, the situation has changed and new efforts have been made to restore key palace buildings. With an eye towards both historical accuracy and conservation, work has begun to replace the high pitched corrugated metal roofs of the Guezo and Glele palace buildings with wide eaved and more protective roofs of thatch. Hindered by severe financial problems and both difficult and on-going conservation needs, questions of new exhibition formats and themes however have generally been left to the side. At some point the issue of updated exhibitions may need to be addressed.

Several new themes could be explored. For example, the important roles and arts of court ministers presently is left untreated in the Musée Historique displays. Migan, Mewu, Adjaho, Gaou and other ministers all played significant roles in the state and each had interesting associated art traditions. Current museum exhibits also leave out to a great extent the roles, identities, and arts of women. Other than passing references (in objects and engravings) to female warriors (“amazons”) and queen mothers, the importance of women is left untreated. This omission is all the more striking in light of the legendary importance of queen mothers (Naye Wandjele, mother of Tegbesu stands out among others)³⁶. Also left from the exhibit, is the one female ruler, Tassi Hangbe (1705-08), a twin sister of Akaba (1685-1705) who upon the latter’s death came into power because tradition maintained that twins necessarily are treated in the same way. Reference to Tassi Hangbe is all the more important because her palace still stands immediately to the west of the main palace³⁷. Likewise overlooked are the critical roles that women played as ministers; for, every male minister had his parallel in a woman living in the palace³⁸. In its overriding emphasis on history and “tradition”, another important theme which is overlooked within the palace museum exhibitions, is the contribution which other cultures – African (Yoruba, Mahi, Ouemenu, Adja, Asante) and European – have made to the formation of Danhomé arts, religion, and culture. So too, it may be time to incorporate non-royal arts within the museum collections. As Adande

has noted (1976-77: 201): "the material is exclusively centered on royalty. This art speaks of the king and only of him. The great absence is the common person". Arts identified with many of the popular religious traditions in the area may also be of interest.

Conclusion

The palace museum in Abomey is a museum with a rich and complex history which reflects the diverse interests and perspectives of those who played a part, and continue to have a role in its existence. We have seen in the above how the varying agendas of both colonial and local individuals have impacted on the museum's identity. From Lafarge's report we see the concern which the first colonial forces placed on the triumph of "civilization" over "barbary" and on a desire for both political and financial gain. These themes have impacted in subtle ways on the way the museum was conceived and later structured. In Agoli Agbo's art patronage and interests in reconstructing the kingdom's past we can see, in turn, how he sought both to legitimate his own position as ruler, and to place himself within the on-going history of the state.

Restoration interests on the part of the later colonial administrators also were important. The on-going process of secularizing the palace grounds and collections and the emphasis placed on the history of the now "dead" kingdom served to reaffirm in the minds of visitors, that the palace indeed represented something which was without real power and which existed essentially as a memory of an ancient era. The interests of Danhomé princes, in particularly the descendants of Glele also come into play – for to them it was critical that only the "correct" history – that which emphasized Glele's legitimacy (and that of his father) would be displayed. Together these varying agendas have melded together in the creation of a museum which still today holds a unique place among African and indeed world art museums.

¹ Research for this article was in part supported by a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship and a Social Science Research Council Fellowship.

² Needless to say as more areas and periods have been added to the museum – Islamic, African, Asian, American, among others – the plan becomes less neatly defined.

³ And located today in the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence (A.N. - Om [Aix] Dahomey II, Dossier 1, April 1890).

⁴ All translations from the French within the text are my own.

⁵ The above quote was condensed by the author.

⁶ In the past, Yoruba forces had invaded the Danhomé palace on several occasions, the king abandoning the palace prior to their arrival. In one such situation, the Danhomé troops left considerable liquor for the advancing enemy warriors, and after the latter had consumed much of it, the Danhomé forces returned to roust them. The army of Gbehanzin may have hoped that the French forces would also succumb to the temptation of the alcohol and for this reason they left a quantity of it.

⁷ Unfortunately no records appear in the military journals of General Dodds or his officers regarding these works and their location within the capital.

⁸ Agoli Agbo constructed his own palace within a part of the "old palace" area immediately to

the north of the palace of Guezo.

⁹ According to Cornevin (1981: 324) at the beginning of 1890 the celebration of the first part of the funeral of Glele was marked by Gbehanzin. For more information on the arts commissioned by Agoli Agbo for Glele see Blier 1990.

¹⁰ Another problem in the view of some princes was the fact that Agoli Agbo immediately after his enthronement (i.e. while Gbehanzin was still in exile) took control of the wives and property of Gbehanzin as was the royal custom. Cornevin notes (1981: 353) that this act engendered hatred for Agoli Agbo on the part of Gbehanzin and those members of his family who had fled with him.

¹¹ In 1895, according to Quenum (1986: 19) Agoli Agbo brought war against the inhabitants of Agonli. Vehoundo, chief of the area and his Migan were trapped and brought back to Agbome. In 1898 when Agoli Agbo undertook work on the *djebo* "house of beads" for his late father, the Agonli chief and his associates were executed «because, according to tradition human blood is absolutely indispensable for this type of construction. The bloody scene which occurred during the French occupation was clandestinely reported by his brothers two years after to the commandant of the Cercle d'Agbome, Mr. Versaire. This resulted in the 1900 deportation of King Agoli Agbo to Gabon for 10 years».

¹² Agoli Agbo returned from exile in 1910 and was required to live first in Save (the ancient Yoruba city), and then in Mougnon (a town to the northwest of Abomey). He returned to Abomey in 1927. He died there in May 28, 1940.

¹³ The palace served various unrelated functions during this period including that of prison for German expatriots during the first world war.

¹⁴ During this period as well the walls were painted with lime. René Le Hérissé notes in 1903 (144) that at that time too the walls were covered with lime.

¹⁵ According to Cornevin (1981: 495) an IFAN Center was created in Porto-Novo in 1944 under M.P. Thomassey and Tijani Serpos.

¹⁶ There may also have been a monetary factor with works going to France receiving a higher price.

¹⁷ This collection also included a crucifix and diamond ring which Glele purportedly bought for 2000 slaves (Meyerowitz 1944: 148).

¹⁸ This practice also helped to support local artists whose patronage no longer came from the king. Ironically a number of the arts sold at the palace as "traditional" Danhomé arts, are post-colonial innovations or modifications. The popular brass-casting arts are a good example of this. Lost wax casting which appears to have been developed under the encouragement of the French at the the turn of the century (Bay 1985) has become one of the more important of the art forms sold in the palace. Many such works in their emphasis on "traditional" court and peasant genres, show a concern with historicism which is strikingly different from the emphasis on power, innovation, and display that characterized the arts created when the monarchy was still in power (Blier 1988). And, unlike many of the precolonial metal objects – which frequently were of considerable size and were made of wood covered with metal foil, the newer traditions of lost wax casting are generally small and hence more easily portable by visiting tourists.

¹⁹ The fact that none of these vessels is part of the museum collection may also reflect earlier Western biases against works which have utilitarian function.

²⁰ This despite the fact that pottery was and continues to be one of the most important religious art forms in the kingdom.

²¹ This should not be surprising since the theme of history was promoted both by the early travelers to Danhomé and later colonial administrators who wrote about the kingdom.

²² The only exception to this general theme are the exhibitions halls which contain the sandles, *makpo* (scepters, *recades*), jewelry, garments, pipes, and vessels. The primary focus here is that of royal attire.

²³ How might the exhibitions have been displayed differently? One way is to give a fuller historical context to each of the kings. Tegbesu (1732-74) reorganized the state religion – creating a distinctive religion of the princes – Nesuhwe. Kpengla (1774-89) played an important role in creating a state history, tracing the origins of the first kings back to the ancient sites of Tado and Allada, and linking royal inception to the coupling of a leopard and a princess. Agonglo (1789-1797) was an artist king – purportedly carving his own throne, and establishing a special

compound for weavers. Adandozan (1797-1818) a king who achieved independence from the Yoruba but lost the throne due to alcoholism. Guezo (1818-58) is known to have been a ruler who stressed the public perception of the state. Glele (1858-89) was not only a great warrior – but also an individual who looked to Europe as a key source for ideas about art and architecture.

²⁴ Mercier and Lombard write (1959: 32) that the thrones in the Musée de l'Homme are reproductions of originals in the museum in Danhomé. Yet in their scale, unique workmanship, and integration of foreign imagery (neo-classical palmettes) it is more likely that these are the originals, and the palace museum thrones are late copies.

It is important to note however that there are precedents to identifying recent “replacement” arts as the works of earlier individuals.

²⁵ Further support for the late inception of the history applique tradition comes from the fact that many are read from top to bottom, and from left to right much as one would read a manuscript. Furthermore, the applique forms incorporated into religious works are far more ideographic (even geometric) and repetitive, displaying fewer colors.

²⁶ Although many of these would appear to be by the same hand, no information within the museum records offers us any indication of the artists' names or the dates of manufacture (both of which were probably still obtainable at the time the museum was established and even as late as 1952 when the Mercier catalogue was completed.

²⁷ In like manner, the jewelry and *makpo*, appear to all date to the nineteenth century or later.

²⁸ Parenthetical source notations in the text which are followed by a numerical series refer to individuals interviewed in the context of field work. The first two digits refer to the year of the interview, the second single or double digit refers to the month of the interview and the last numerical grouping to the page of that month's field journals.

²⁹ Although King Agaja (1708-40) is also identified with basreliefs (unfortunately now destroyed) many of the motifs on these works are associated with Guezo thus suggesting that they date to this later period as well.

³⁰ In line with this emphasis on the Guezo-Glele line, Glele's descendants rather than those of any of the other kings have maintained the important position of representative of the princes (today with the title of President of CAFRA), serving thus as the royal spokesperson. This person today, as in the past, also has considerable say in museum policy and perspectives. In royal ceremonies which take place at the palace, it is this person who assumes the place of the king.

³¹ The tradition of a “bush king” developed at this time in part to cover this fact (Bay 1979).

³² Although tradition maintained that each Danhomé king should create his own palace, oral tradition suggests that Agaja, Tegbesu, Kpengla, Agonglo, and Adandozan, shared the large Atakinbaya palace area (Adjaho 86: 6: 206). Each none-the-less was identified with a separate portal into the palace.

³³ De Souza had other reasons to support Guezo over Adandozan, for as Hazoume notes (1956), Adandozan had at one point imprisoned the Brazilian merchant.

³⁴ Because the descendants of Glele also served as the principal sources (informants) for many of the early anthropologists and writers, their view of royal history has been in large retained.

³⁵ Interestingly, the palace of Glele's successor, Gbehanzin, though never completed, also remains outside the main museum grounds visited by tourists. Completed by the sons of Gbehanzin (in conjunction with the return of the latter's body from exile), this unfortunate king is considered by many of the descendants of Guezo and Glele to have failed in his mission to preserve the kingdom because of his defeat at the hands of the French.

³⁶ Also never made clear in the palace exhibitions are the important roles of women in representing the past kings. Each king is seen to come back to life in the form of women known as a *dadasi* “wife-king”. Such women live still today in a section of the old palace, and have an important place in court religious ceremonies.

Women who have assumed the places and identities of the queen mothers also still reside in the palace today. Like the *dadasi* their houses are in areas not open to visitors.

³⁷ Today a woman also bears the name and identity of Tassi Hangbe.

³⁸ It was female ministers who were in charge both of the state treasury and of munitions

according to the court minister Adjaho (86: 7: 156). Their roles in the economy was also important. Not only are palace women said to have spun all the cotton used in the capital (much of this cotton, after being woven, was used as a monetary source), but they also were responsible for cording the local currency, cowries.

Bibliography

- ADANDE, C.E., *Les Grandes Teintures et les Bas-Reliefs du Musée d'Agbome*, Memoire de Maitrise d'Histoire. Université du Benin, (Abomey-Calavi 1976-77).
- BAY, E.G., *Asen - Iron Altars of the Fon People of Benin*. Emory University Museum of Art and Archaeology, (Atlanta 1985).
- "On the Trail of the Bush King: A Dahomean Lesson in the Use of Evidence", *History in Africa*, 6 (1979), 1-15.
- BLIER, S.P., "Melville J. Heroskovits and the Arts of Ancient Dahomey", *Res: Anthropology and Art* 16 (1988), 124-42.
- "King Glele of Danhomé: Portraits of a Lion King and Man of Iron", *African Arts* (in press).
- BRUNET, L. and GIETHLEN L., *Dahomey et Dépendances*. (Paris 1900).
- CHAUDOIN, E., *Trois Mois de Captivité au Dahomey*, (Paris 1981).
- CORNEVIN, R., *La République Populaire du Benin - Des origines Dahoméennes à nos Jours*. (Paris 1981).
- DESANTI, H., *Du Danhomé au Bénin-Niger*, (Paris 1945).
- HAAS, R.L., *Les Palais royaux d'Abomey, Musée d'Abomey*. UNESCO, (Paris 1985).
- HAZOUmé, P., *Le Pacte de Sang au Dahomey*. Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, 25, (Paris 1956).
- LE HÉRISSE, A., *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey: Moeurs, Religion, Histoire*, (Paris 1911).
- LE HÉRISSE, R., *Voyage au Dahomey et à la Cote d'Ivoire*, (Paris 1903).
- MANNING, P., "Personal Communication", (July 19, 1990).
- MERCIER, P., *Les Asen du Musée d'Abomey*. IFAN, (Dakar 1952).
- MEYEROWITZ, E.L.R., "The Museum in the Royal Palace at Abomey, Dahomey", *Burlington Magazine*, 84, 6 (1984) 51-147.
- QUENUM V.S., *Musée d'Agbome: Sa Création*. Musée Historique. (Abomey 1986).
- WATERLOT, G., *Les bas-reliefs des batiments royaux d'Abomey*. Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, 1. (Paris 1926).
- MERCIER, P. and LOMBARD J., *Guide du Musée d'Abomey (Etudes Dahoméennes)*, (1959).