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Precolonial Dahomey

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BELIEF, LEGITIMACY AND THE *KPOJITO*: AN INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF THE 'QUEEN MOTHER' IN PRECOLONIAL DAHOMEY

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THE *kpojito*, the female reign-mate to the king of Dahomey, is said by twentieth-century Dahomeans to have been the richest and most powerful woman in the kingdom, a woman of common origin who rose to an office that ranked second only to that of the king himself.¹ Beginning in the early eighteenth century, each king named a *kpojito* from among the wives of his predecessor. Like other persons of renown in Dahomey, each *kpojito* filled her office in perpetuity, passing her name and estate down to a female heir in the patrilineage of her birth. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, observers at court in Abomey, the kingdom's capital, recorded appearances of women embodying not only the *kpojito* of the reigning king, but also those of the king's predecessors. They noted that the *kpojito* of the reigning monarch ranked highest among the collective reign mates. At least six *kpojito* associated with Dahomean kings have lived on through positional succession into the present in Abomey.

This article analyses the office-holders and the office of the *kpojito* from the early eighteenth century until the office's disappearance at the beginning of the colonial period. It is of necessity speculative, for enormous problems of documentation surround the *kpojito*. Written sources for the kingdom and oral accounts collected after its fall have provided several comparatively detailed descriptions of *other* women's offices in Dahomey. All are oddly vague about the *kpojito*. Even the term *kpojito* does not appear to have been recorded until the twentieth century;² 'female reign-mate' is my own appellation for the office. Pre-colonial sources and many more recent accounts describe the office-holder as the 'mother of the king' or the 'queen mother.' Their debate over whether or not the *kpojito* was the biological mother of the king remains unresolved. Finally, though *kpojito* replacements for earlier kings continued to be named in the twentieth century, the naming of new *kpojito* abruptly ceased at the beginning of the colonial period, even though local canton chiefs in the twentieth century otherwise acted as pretenders to the throne, creating courts that replicated the offices of the kingdom. If in fact the office of *kpojito* was so important, why was it not continued, and why has so little been recorded about it?

¹ I would like to thank Robin Law for sharing a copy of the unpublished De Chenevert and Bulet manuscript, for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and for providing constant encouragement to me to complete this work. Portions of this article were included in a paper presented at a conference on 'Queens, queen mothers, priestesses and power' held at New York University in April 1991, to be published in *Queens, Concubines and Consorts: Case Studies in African Gender* (Carbondale, forthcoming in 1995).

² So far as I can discern, A. Le Hérisse was the first to use the term in print: *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey* (Paris, 1911), 28.

I argue that the answer to that question lies in the history of the office itself. The women who became *kpojito* in the eighteenth century were central to the struggles of the kings to establish legitimacy and assert control over the territory of Dahomey. The office reached its zenith in mid-century when *Kpojito* Hwanjile and King Tegbesu gained office and in effect ruled in tandem, thereby solidifying an ideological model for the office that persisted to the end of the kingdom. Like Hwanjile, subsequent powerful women of the king's household worked with ambitious princes to build coalitions to seize power at times of royal succession. When their efforts succeeded, the prince was installed as king and the woman as *kpojito*. By the nineteenth century, however, princes began to find alternative sources of support in their struggles for the kingship and alternative sources of guidance once enthroned. By the late nineteenth century, even though alliances between princes and their fathers' wives continued, non-royal women within the palace were more constrained in their ability to wield power. The influence of the *kpojito* fell into steep decline. This article traces chronologically the rise and fall of the office of *kpojito* from its probable creation by King Agaja through its high point under King Tegbesu to its tragic ending in a singular act of desperation by King Gbehanzin.

The story of the *kpojito*, however, has implications broader than the discussion of a single office in pre-colonial Dahomey. Dahomey has a rich historiography based on a wealth of pre-colonial records and twentieth-century scholarly and oral accounts. Though literally dozen of scholars and travelers have over nearly 200 years debated the nature of the Dahomean state, few have attempted to analyse changes in its nature over time.³ The administrative machinery and its relative efficiency and effectiveness have attracted descriptive notice, but scholars have otherwise operated under a tacit assumption that the outlines of institutional structures visible by the early to mid-eighteenth century continued, albeit with elaboration, until the abolition of the state by the French in 1900.⁴ What has been overlooked are important changes over time in the functions of offices, the manner by which individuals were named to them, and the kin and class backgrounds of office-holders. Those changes in turn reflect dynamic struggles within the monarchy – that small group of persons who advised the king and who wielded power in his name – as the monarchy coped with the challenge of maintaining its own legitimacy and consolidating power in a changing political and economic environment. The experience of the *kpojito*, though an extraordinarily dramatic example, is in certain respects a paradigm of the general changes in offices and institutions traceable over time in Dahomey.

³ See Robin Law, 'Dahomey and the slave trade: reflections on the historiography of the rise of Dahomey', *J. Afr. Hist.* xxvii (1986), 237–67, for a review of the debate on the nature of the state.

⁴ Boniface I. Obichere, 'Change and innovation in the administration of the kingdom of Dahomey', *J. Afr. Studies*, 1 (1974), 235–51, notes when several administrative structures were introduced, but does not provide an analysis of reasons for change. Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750* (Oxford, 1991), discusses the administrative structures of the kingdoms of Allada, Whydah, Dahomey and other states along the Slave Coast, but regrettably, his analysis of the evolving Dahomean institutions ends in the mid-eighteenth century.

DAHOMEAN BELIEF SYSTEM

The history of the *kpojito* can be understood only in the context of the religious history of the kingdom, for Dahomean religion works as a lens that brings into focus the shifting circumstances of the office. Religion was also a crucial motivating factor that affected the office within the context of the political history of the kingdom. A brief review of religious principles provides a backdrop against which the actions of the Dahomean players can be interpreted.

There were literally thousands of *vodun*, or gods, in Dahomey. All can be classified into one of two categories: those that were associated with the kinship system and those that were not. The former included deified ancestors, mythical founders of clans and, by the nineteenth century, powerful and dangerous spirits born into families as deformed children. Gods not associated with kin relations were the so-called popular *vodun*, deities often associated with forces of nature. *Vodun* were believed to be linked to humanity through complex relationships of mutual interdependence. All inhabited the land of spirits or shadows, *kutome* (*ku* = 'dead', *to* = 'country', *me* = 'in'), a universe that exactly mirrored the visible world of human beings. The royal dynasty reigned in both worlds, and lineages and their members enjoyed the same relative status and wealth in *kutome* as their kinspeople in the visible world. Birth and death were passage points from one world to the other, while communications between the two were maintained through prayer, sacrifice, and divination. Each world could affect the other. If angered or neglected, the ancestors or other *vodun* could injure or kill. Alternatively, they could bless individuals or the kingdom as a whole. The living could also modify the well-being of those in *kutome*. If, as sometimes happened, the king stripped a powerful man of his title, seized his lands, imprisoned his sons, and made his wives and daughters servants in the palace, the man's ancestors were likewise reduced.⁵ If the king elevated a *vodun* and its priests in the visible universe, that *vodun* similarly rose in *kutome*. Bernard Maupoil has noted that:

A bond of solidarity connects *vodun* and humanity; they complement each other and could not do without each other. By their prayers and sacrifices, humans 'give power to the *vodun*.' The more numerous and sumptuous the offerings, the more the divinities have power and the better their intentions towards humankind; if the number of offerings declines, the *vodun* are weakened.⁶

The monarchy consciously manipulated the *vodun*, embracing some and ignoring others. Certain popular *vodun* were encouraged at certain historical moments; certain deities born into the royal lineage were promoted at other points in history. Choices of which *vodun* to revere and which to neglect were made consciously as an attempt to alter power relationships among the gods for the benefit of the monarchy and the state. But because the world of the gods and that of humanity reflected each other, the social structures and

⁵ Le Hérisse, *Royaume*, 158–60.

⁶ Bernard Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Paris, 1943), 57. Karin Barber has demonstrated in the Yoruba context how conceptions of human power relationships applied to the gods permit believers to create gods yet still be dependent upon them. Her argument is equally applicable to Dahomey: 'How man makes God in West Africa: Yoruba attitudes towards the Orisa', *Africa*, LI (1981), 724–45.

hierarchy of the *vodun* represented changing conceptions of the nature of power by the Dahomean rulers. In effect, the gods in Dahomey have a history, one created by the monarchy in its own image. Reading the parallel history of the gods provides insights and confirmations of trends which are but dimly visible in the human world of Dahomean politics.

The most public manifestation of human devotion to the *vodun* were the annual ceremonies sponsored by the monarchy and called *Hwetanu* in Fongbe and 'Customs' in English.⁷ The cycle of ceremonies was meant to honor and strengthen the ancestors of the royal family, and most specifically the deceased kings and *kpojito*. Described by numerous European visitors and residents, who along with all royal officers and lineage heads were encouraged if not required to attend, Customs grew increasingly elaborate over time. Events associated with Customs included human and animal sacrifice, public punishment of enemies of the regime, parades of the riches of the king, military demonstrations, gun-firing relays between Abomey and Whydah, the conferment of prizes and offices, political debates, law-making, tax- and tribute-paying, and gift-giving from the king to the population, including the granting of women as wives.

Maurice Glélé argues that Customs were simply the normal honoring of ancestors done by every Dahomean, raised to the level of the state with the king as head of the royal lineage acting as priest.⁸ Though he is correct, other scholars have recognized – and sometimes have overly stressed – the ceremonies' political, military or economic overtones. Karl Polanyi, for example, decides that Customs were 'an economic institution of unique proportions,' the center of the redistributive state sphere during which the king received gifts and tributes and then redistributed a portion of this wealth to the citizenry.⁹ Focusing on political debates during the period of Customs, David Ross argues that Customs centered on the making of major policy decisions by a political class whose effective power outweighed that of the king, a perspective that is echoed by John Yoder's discussion of debates in a 'Great Council' at Customs.¹⁰ The only scholar to devote an article-length analysis to Customs, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, provides a more balanced view that begins with the religious meaning of Customs but then stresses that the larger sense of Customs involves '...the imperatives – military, religious, or political – to which Customs responded; for the different portions of the festival appeared as *revealing signs* of the civilization,

⁷ The English term Customs is used here for the sake of simplicity. Interestingly, the term was adopted by Dahomeans and became a synonym for ceremony. Gezo, whose *kpojito* came from the town of Tenji, told Frederick Forbes that 'that he was going ... to Tengee, to make a Custom to the memory of his mother.' F. E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (2 vols.) (London, 1851), ii, 84.

⁸ Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé, *Le Danxome* (Paris, 1974), 80. Certainly virtually all the elements of Customs are visible in some form in the annual ceremonies undertaken up to the present by families in Benin. Though it seems reasonable to assume that such ceremonies took place in similar form in the past, it is not clear from the written record if Customs were an elaboration of common ceremonies or if contemporary ceremonies were inspired by Customs.

⁹ Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade: An Analysis of an Archaic Economy* (Seattle and London, 1966), 33.

¹⁰ David A. Ross, 'The autonomous kingdom of Dahomey, 1818–94' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1967), 421–4; John C. Yoder, 'Fly and elephant parties: political polarization in Dahomey, 1840–1870', *J. Afr. Hist.* xv (1974), 417–32.

the society and the economic life of Dahomey.¹¹ Couched in the language of lineage solidarity, Customs were an effort to forge national unity, even as they expressed, consolidated and celebrated the powers of the dynasty – religious, economic, political and military.

Near the beginning of each reign, some 18 months to two years after the death of the previous king, a new monarch performed what were known as Grand Customs, ceremonies that constituted the final funeral for the preceding king and the formal installation of his successor. The *kpojito* was probably also enthroned at Grand Customs. A form of Grand Customs also appears to have been performed at the death of the first woman named *kpojito* by each king. In 1876, for example, Glele was reportedly busy with ceremonies for Zoïndi, his *kpojito*.¹² At least in the eighteenth century, the death of the king was an open secret during the interval between his demise and Grand Customs. It was only after the completion of the appropriate ceremonies that the succeeding king was legitimate in the eyes of his ancestors:

The king did not owe his title only to his birth: as long as he had not completed the ceremonies in honor of his father, he was not truly linked to the dynasty. An Abomean explained the relationship saying 'it is not enough that a king have a proper relationship with the living, he must also establish a correct relationship with the dead.'¹³

Both Grand Customs and Annual Customs were marked by human sacrifice. Carried out for religious reasons, human sacrifice, like other aspects of the ceremonial life of the kingdom, can also be interpreted as a reflection of power relationships between the monarchy and the populace. In a society where wealth was measured in terms of the numbers of dependants under any person's control, human sacrifice signaled the greatest possible expenditure of wealth. Strictly controlled by the monarchy, its use was nearly exclusively directed to the support of the ancestors of the royal lineage.¹⁴

Persons to be sacrificed were generally asked to perform one of two services after death: to deliver messages to the dead or to staff their households. For example, at the time of Annual Customs, messengers were

¹¹ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: historique et essai d'interprétation', *Annales*, XIX (1964), 696–716.

¹² 'Les Affaires du Dahomey', *France*, p. 40. FO 84/1466, Public Record Office, London.

¹³ P. Mercier and J. Lombard, *Guide du Musée d'Abomey* (Porto-Novo, 1959), 9. See also Vicente Ferreira Pires, *Viagem de Africa em o Reino de Dahomé*, ed. by Clado Ribeiro de Lessa (São Paulo, 1957), 73.

¹⁴ Guillevin was told in the mid-nineteenth century that two wives of a high-ranking man in Cana were required to take poison on the day of the death of their husband: M. Guillevin, 'Voyage dans l'intérieur du royaume du Dahomey', *Nouvelles Annales des Voyages* [June 1862], II, 284. Herskovits claims nearly constant human sacrifices in Dahomey, some of which would clearly not have been directed to the royal dead, and many of which, such as a sacrifice prior to digging a well, were relatively mundane activities. He wisely seems to doubt his own field data when he comments that '... royal Dahomeans... may, of course, have exaggerated figures when speaking of past practices no longer possible of execution...': Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (2 vols.) (New York, 1938), II, 53. Herskovits may have been referring here to his chief informant, René Aho, a member of the royal family and the younger brother of a powerful canton chief who at the period of Herskovits's field research had been accused of performing human sacrifice to strengthen his own position.

despatched to notify the ancestral kings and *kpojito* that ceremonies were being done in their honor. They were sometimes provided with the wherewithal to sustain them on the long voyage to the land of the dead; messengers at the end of the eighteenth century were given cloth, alcohol and cowries.¹⁵ In the mid-nineteenth century, J. A. Skertchly witnessed the sending of four messengers. The prime minister announced their mission publicly:

You seen the man, the alligator, the cat, and the hawk; these are about to depart to the next world to acquaint all the inhabitants of the great respect Gelelé has for his fathers. The man will go to the dead men, the alligator to the fish, the cat to the animals, and the hawk to all the birds, to tell them of the great things done by Gelelé. Hear and tremble when Gelelé, the lion king, speaks.¹⁶

Messengers would also be sent with prayers, to plead directly to the king's ancestors for assistance in war, for example. Though messengers were the usual persons sacrificed at Annual Customs, at the time of the burial of kings and *kpojito* and on the occasion of Grand Customs, larger numbers would be sent to serve as household staff. Describing non-royal ceremonies in honor of the dead in the early twentieth century, Le Hérissé writes

...to honor the ancestors, to prove that they are always remembered, it is natural to offer them what they have need of in life. On their tombs people sacrifice animals, pour water and alcohol, place diverse foods. The souls of all these beings and all these things join the souls of the dead.¹⁷

Logically, the dead, and particularly the high-ranking dead, also needed people to assist them in *kutome*, and particularly to staff the residences they used on their arrival, which accounts for the relatively larger numbers of sacrifices at transitions between rulers.

Human sacrifice, like all offerings to the dead, not only sent individuals into *kutome* to serve the ancestors. It also provided sustenance to the dead. The blood of sacrifices was poured into receptacles placed at the graves of the kings and the *kpojito* or was sprinkled on altars erected to memorialize them, leading European visitors to talk of 'watering the graves' of the ancestors. In both cases, the blood nourished and strengthened the dead to make them better able to assist the living.

As part of a sacred act, most sacrifices were made directly through decapitation or a blow to the head, in contrast to the execution of enemies of the state, who were often killed in excruciatingly painful or gruesome ways. The person who physically made the sacrifice was important, too. The king, the prime minister, and the chief priest of Agasu (the mythical founder of the ruling lineage) were among those who publicly performed the sacrifices in the nineteenth century. The greatest honor for a sacrificed person was to be killed by the hand of the king.¹⁸

The choice of persons to sacrifice was not arbitrary. Criminals and captives of war were most commonly sent as messengers. However, status alone neither condemned nor exempted people. At least at the end of the eighteenth century, members of the royal family were sometimes sacrificed.¹⁹ The question of who was sacrificed became central at the time of the burial

¹⁵ Pires, *Viagem*, 83. See also J. A. Skertchly, *Dahomey as it is* (London, 1874), 339, 361.

¹⁶ Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 352.

¹⁷ Le Hérissé, *Royaume*, 159.

¹⁸ John M'Leod, *A Voyage to Africa* (London, 1820; repr. 1971), 64.

¹⁹ Pires, *Viagem*, 75.

of the king, when certain persons in the king's household were expected to accompany him in death. They included individuals closest to the person of the king and most trusted by him. Pires claims that 80 women, the caretakers of the king's person during his lifetime, were required to accompany King Agonglo to *kutome* in 1797, while Skertchly reports that the head of the eunuchs was normally despatched. Ellis also names persons close to the king, including the *kposi* (literally 'wives of the leopard'), the women associated with the sacred animal symbol of the dynasty who were probably mothers of those princes eligible for the throne.²⁰ Such requirements would have been reassuring to the king: with the greatest opportunities to inflict harm, those women and eunuchs in most intimate contact had every reason to keep him in good health.

Despite the requirements, evidence suggests that not everyone who had been designated to do so joined the king. At the time of the transition from Gezo to Glele, neither the female nor the male *tononon*, head of the eunuchs, died.²¹ Le Hérissé claims that many persons would offer to be sacrificed but be refused by the new king. They would later claim that the king had 'bought back their life,'²² an idiom that perhaps expressed gratitude and loyalty to the new king. One senses that the monarchy took care to sacrifice only those persons who were expendable. Individuals central to the new king, who had perhaps shown signs of extraordinary loyalty or whose knowledge or skills were highly valued, lived on. In any case, no more were sacrificed than was considered necessary. At the death of Tegbesu, for example, when 285 women had been killed in the fighting that brought Kpengla to power, only six women were sacrificed. The remainder of his entourage was made up of the 285 women already on their way to the land of the dead.²³

THE PALACE OF DAHOMEY

One of the few things that is known with certainty about the *kpojito* is that each woman named to the office had been a wife of her reign-mate's predecessor. As such each was, like all her co-wives, a mother of the king, and hence a queen mother. Prior to her enthronement, each *kpojito* had been part of a massive organization of women and eunuchs popularly called the 'palace.' In previous work on the kingdom, I have described this institution, which included an estimated 3,000–8,000 women and which served both as a state bureaucracy and the king's personal household.²⁴ The palace population of women was a cross-section of Dahomean society that included slaves and war captives, free-born commoners, women from the upper classes and from various branches of the royal family and, at least in the late nineteenth century, sisters and daughters of the reigning king.

The palace organization was in its essence a polygynous household writ large. All of its inhabitants, whether women or eunuchs, were legally wives of the king, or *ahosi* (*aho* = 'king'; *si* = 'wife' or 'dependant'). The

²⁰ Alfred Burden Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1890), 127. ²¹ Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 446. ²² Le Hérissé, *Royaume*, 180.

²³ Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey* (London, 1789; repr. 1968), 130.

²⁴ Edna G. Bay, 'The Royal Women of Abomey' (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1977); 'Servitude and Worldly Success in the Palace of Dahomey', in Clare C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), 340–67.

organization was based on principles that were shared throughout Fon culture: hierarchy and advancement through merit. Hierarchy placed women within the strict ordering of the palace organization according to their social rank in Dahomean society, their physical appearance, and their manner of recruitment to the organization. The principle of advancement through merit provided a leavening of hierarchy, for it allowed women by dint of hard work, intelligence and political acumen to rise to positions of prestige and power within the palace. Like wives in any household, women within the palace operated on the basis of divided loyalties – to the patrilineage of their birth and to the patrilineage of their husband. Because slave women were in principle removed from contacts with their patrilineages, the prevailing mythology of the palace held that slave women were more to be trusted, for their loyalties were not divided. Like women in any polygynous household, *ahosi* worked on their own behalf and on behalf of their husband, the king. Many carried on common income-producing activities, as farmers, food processors, traders, porters, artisans or ritual specialists.

However, since no distinctions were made between the palace as household and the palace as state bureaucracy, many of the activities of the *ahosi* had implications for national policy and administration. Women of the palace also worked as guards, soldiers, messengers, spies, state-sponsored prostitutes, political advisors, ministers of state and governmental record-keepers. They controlled access to the king and served as his working memory. The kings rewarded certain palace women with access to great resources: land, slaves or control over other non-free persons, and the right to engage in the overseas trade through the port of Whydah. A woman could use these resources to establish an estate that would be considered her property, to be managed and inherited by members of the patrilineage of her birth.

There was no single office or rank within this large and complex organization from which the kings drew the women named *kpojito*. Sources stress only her status of origin, a common woman who is sometimes said to have been a slave. However, the women who became *kpojito* were probably well known at court, for they appear to have been relatively high-ranking and powerful women. A story that dates to the reign of Tegbesu suggests that they were not women whose sons might be considered for the throne. After the woman keeper of the king's storehouses attempted to solicit help from Oyo for her son, Tegbesu forbade women with sons from holding such important responsibilities.²⁵ The new *kpojito* became publicly visible only upon her enthronement, when she moved to the western portion of the central palace compound in Abomey, where she set up her court, which included male and female officers, and which resembled that of the king and his household.

Apart from suggesting that the *kpojito* controlled great wealth, sources say little of their functions. The *kpojito* to the reigning king apparently was empowered to judge certain kinds of disputes, though the limits of her jurisdiction are unclear. At least in the late nineteenth century, the *kpojito* heard appeals in certain religious cases from the court of the *Ajaho*, the minister who controlled access to the palace, with final appeal to the king himself.²⁶ *Kpojito* may also have acted as intercessors with the kings, giving

²⁵ Le Hérissé, *Royaume*, 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 133.

refuge and pleading on behalf of Dahomeans.²⁷ There is no evidence indicating that the *kpojito* in some way represented women's interests as opposed to men's.

These sketchy descriptions of the office of *kpojito* have some parallels in comparable offices within Fon families and among the Akan. Each Fon lineage was headed by a male and female pair, theoretically the eldest family members, who ruled in tandem over the lineage. The *taninon*, the female head of family, had responsibilities that revolved around her role as intermediary between the living lineage members and the ancestors. In addition, she served as regent at the death of the male lineage head and installed his successor. She actively participated in family councils and, in the event of a dispute, consulted the ancestors and interpreted their response. The queen mother or *asantehema* of Asante maintained her own court and could interfere in judicial proceedings, giving pardons or mitigating sentences imposed by the *asantehene*. She also was influential in naming new chiefs and in nominating candidates for *asantehene*, and she played a central role in chiefs' enstoolments. She had the right to advise and admonish both the chief and his courtiers.²⁸

The model of the *kpojito* of Dahomey departs from those of common Fon lineages and of the *asantehema* in two very important ways: (1) kinship links to the king's lineage and (2) the *kpojito*'s role in selecting the king. Female lineage heads among the Fon and queen mothers among the Akan were members of their male counterpart's lineage. The Dahomean *kpojito*, in contrast, was a woman whose relationship to the royal line was that of wife. Because the *kpojito* were not of the royal lineage, it seems reasonable to assume that they would not have had claims to a formal role in the selection of the king. There is considerable evidence to suggest that daughters of the royal lineage, on the other hand, could and did play a role in the selection and installation of the king, paralleling to some extent the Akan model. Although Dahomean *kpojito* do not appear to have had the formal authority to influence the choice of their reign mates' successors, nearly all were directly involved informally in bringing their own reign mates to power.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE *KPOJITO*

The first *kpojito* was Adonon, a woman from the town of Wassa, some 25 km south-south-east of Abomey (see Table 1).²⁹ Adonon is associated with Kings Dakodonu and Wegbaja as wife, and with Kings Akaba and Agaja as *kpojito*. Though we do not have a great deal of biographical detail about her, myths of the early days of the kingdom link Adonon to the royal lineage's attempts to legitimize their rule over the Abomey plateau. Adonon's history

²⁷ René Aho, Abomey, 3 May 1972. René Aho was a grandson of King Glele. He served as chief informant for Herskovits and later produced several articles on Fon social structures. Aho worked as guide and informant for scholars and film-makers for some 40 years until his death in May 1977. ²⁸ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (London, 1923), 81-2.

²⁹ René Aho, Abomey, 23 April 1972. Lists of *kpojito* provided by twentieth-century Dahomeans typically include women linked to Dakodonu and Wegbaja who appear to have reigned before Adonon. However, in Dahomean tradition names are frequently cited for persons who purportedly held offices prior to the known historical creation of such offices, a practice that helps enshrine the sense of immutability in Dahomean institutional structures.

Table 1. *Kings and kpojito of Dahomey*

Dates	King	<i>Kpojito</i>
?	Dakodonu	Sava
?	Wegbaja	Adulu
?	Akaba	Adonon
1716?-1740	Agaja	Adonon
1740-1774	Tegbesu	Hwanjile
1774-1789	Kpengla	Chai
1789-1797	Agonglo	Senumé
1797-1818	Adandozan	Kentobasin
1818-1858	Gezo	Agontime
1858-1889	Glele	Zoïndi
1889-1894	Gbehanzin	Kamlin
1894-1900	Agoliagbo	Kanai

is also connected to unresolved controversies over the founding of the kingdom and to the identity of the first king.

Myths of the origin of the royal lineage describe its founding through the mating of a leopard with a princess, Aligbonon. The princess gave birth to Agasu, a creature with leopard-like characteristics, who begat the clan from which the ruling dynasty of Dahomey came. Both Aligbonon and her son, Agasu, were considered *tohwiyo*, *vodun*-founders of the royal line. Traditions also link Aligbonon to Adonon. Scholarly sources have tended to identify Tado or Sado, the putative home of Aligbonon, with a site in present-day Togo. However, Tado or Sado in contemporary Fon usage also signifies place of origin, opening the way to the claims of the people of Wassa that Aligbonon's origins were in their town, where in fact she was a prominent *vodun*.³⁰ Some oral sources say that Adonon was Aligbonon, or that Adonon became Aligbonon, and others that Aligbonon was given to Adonon 'to guard.' The phrasing is similar to that commonly used to describe the relationship of a priest to her *vodun*, suggesting that Adonon was a *vodunon* or priest of Aligbonon.³¹

The foundation myth that argues Togo as the place of origin of the royal lineage claims that the royal family migrated to Allada, lived there for a time and then, as a result of a succession dispute, broke into three branches, with one moving north to found Dahomey, one south-east to found Porto Novo and the third remaining in Allada. Several writers have pointed out inconsistencies in the myth that suggest that the Allada phase was a later

³⁰ Field notes, Hountondji family, Abomey, 1984. See also Suzanne Blier, 'The path of the leopard: myth, history and the question of dynastic origins in Dahomey', paper presented at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 1988 (revised version in *J. Afr. Hist.*, forthcoming), 9-13. The Dahomean mythic history recorded by Monserrat Palau-Marti attempts to bridge the two traditions by claiming that a daughter of the king of Sado was married into the clan of the Aligbononvi Wasanu (literally children of Aligbonon at Wassa): *Le Roi-dieu au Bénin* (Paris, 1964), 115.

³¹ Blier, 'Path'; 'A Propos de Mythe et Inceste dans l'Ancien Royaume du Danxome', unpublished paper commissioned by E. Bay and prepared by Albert Tingbe-Azalou (Cotonou, 1993), 15-16.

invention.³² What has been accepted, however, is that the royal or Alladahonu lineage originated elsewhere, and at some point established itself at Wawe, a town midway between Abomey and Cana. It gradually expanded the area under its control by conquering neighboring villages and towns. What remains in dispute is precisely when Dahomey can be recognized as a state and which of the line of Alladahonu lineage heads can be considered the first king.

Robert Norris, who recorded what became the first published account of Dahomey's founding, claims that Dakodonu was its first king. From his base in Wawe, Dakodonu conquered Cana and then moved on Abomey, killing the king, Dan, and building his capital on Dan's stomach – hence the name Danhome (literally 'in the stomach of Dan').³³ Writing more than 100 years later, Le Hérisse claims that Wegbaja, the successor of Dakodonu, killed Dan and was the first king. Richard Burton also calls Wegbaja the first king, saying that his predecessor was a 'mere captain',³⁴ and twentieth-century written sources have tended to agree, though king-lists invariably include Dakodonu. Ritually, too, Wegbaja but not Dakodonu is associated with the name Aho, meaning 'king.' Each successor to Wegbaja in turn became Aho. This curious lack of consistency over dynastic beginnings raises the question, if Wegbaja was indeed the first king and the acknowledged founder of the dynasty, who was Dakodonu and why is he included in the king-list? In short, if Dakodonu was a member of the royal lineage, why would the dynasty *not* acknowledge the person who first ruled in its name as the first king? Arguing against nearly unanimous royal oral memory, Suzanne Blier has proposed an answer – that Dakodonu was not a member of the royal Alladahonu lineage.³⁵ Her evidence suggests that Dakodonu was integrated into the royal king-list at a later point in Dahomean history. Adonon was a central figure in that integration.

Finn Fuglestad has argued that the ruling dynasty of Dahomey violated the usual manner by which intrusive lineages in Africa established themselves over conquered lands and peoples. By refusing to acknowledge the sacred links between the land and its earlier inhabitants and by instead proclaiming themselves owners of the land, the Dahomean dynasty, Fuglestad claims, alienated the older population that had spiritual authority over the land, leaving the usurping rulers with fragile control over their subjects.³⁶ However, there is evidence that the Alladahonu did make the kind of ceremonial accommodations that conquering dynasties typically made in Africa to recognize the rights of autochthonous peoples. The evidence resides in the office of the chief priest for Agasu (the royal leopard), which according to Blier was always filled by the descendants of Dakodonu.³⁷ The chief priest or Agasunon was involved in installation ceremonies for the Dahomey kings and enjoyed ritual precedence over them, having the right to

³² See Robin Law's discussion of the Allada myth in 'History and legitimacy: aspects of the use of the past in precolonial Dahomey', *History in Africa*, xv (1988), 448–51.

³³ Norris, *Memoirs*, xiii–xiv.

³⁴ Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (2 vols.) (London, 1893), ii,

111.

³⁵ Blier, 'Path', 24.

³⁶ Finn Fuglestad, 'Quelques réflexions sur l'histoire et les institutions de l'ancien royaume du Dahomey et de ses voisins', *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, xxxix, sér. B, no. 3 (1977), 493–517.

³⁷ Blier, 'Path', 26.

use royal prerogatives such as sandals. He was ritually senior to the king, who was required to prostrate before the Agasunon. Most significantly, at the time of their installation, the Alladahonu king 'purchased' the country from the Agasunon. Moreover, two nineteenth-century visitors to Dahomey were told that Agasu was a deity in place on the Abomey plateau prior to the arrival of the Alladahonu.³⁸ All this suggests that at some point the Alladahonu legitimized their position by making an accommodation with a ruler of Wawe, possibly Dakodonu, that both acknowledged the owners of the earth and linked the Alladahonu to a common West African symbol of royalty, a leopard.

Adonon, the first *kpojito*, is a crucial element in the story. Traditions vary about her relationship to Dakodonu, but all point to her as a link between Dakodonu and Wegbaja. One account claims that she was a sister to Dakodonu, which would imply that her marriage to Wegbaja followed classic lines of alliance among the patrilineal Fon, linking the invading royal lineage through marriage with the lineage of the owners of the earth.³⁹ Other traditions provide a more complex linking of the two lineages through Adonon. They claim that Adonon was not a sister of Dakodonu but rather a fiancée who was impregnated by Wegbaja. As such, her children would have been considered to be the children of Dakodonu. Myths of the royal family claims that Dakodonu was a member of the Alladahonu lineage; Blier, as noted above, denies this but argues that Wegbaja was the adopted son of Dakodonu. In either case, Wegbaja's act would have been incestuous, and Dakodonu is said to have disinherited Wegbaja as a result. A reconciliation was effected only after Wegbaja killed an important enemy of Dakodonu.⁴⁰ However, Adonon's position as *kpojito* makes immaterial the question of whether or not Dakodonu and Wegbaja were members of the same patrilineage. As *kpojito* she was the symbolic progenitor of the Alladahonu. Dakodonu thus becomes father of the Alladahonu dynasty and Adonon through marriage and incest links the Alladahonu to the previous owners of the land. Wife to one king, Adonon is simultaneously mother to another dynasty, which by patrilineal code is descended from her husband, Dakodonu.

The Alladahonu kings claimed descent directly from Agasu and each in his turn as head of the lineage embodied the strengths of the leopard. But Agasu's parent was Aligbonon, whose priest was Adonon. Adonon/Aligbonon becomes, then, the founding mother of the dynasty. Her title, *Kpojito*, underscores the symbolism of her office. *Kpojito* means literally the person who whelped the leopard. *Ʒi*, the verb, means to engender or create and can be used to refer to either a male or female parent. Each *kpojito* and king in Dahomey became metaphorically Aligbonon and Agasu, and each pair of successors renewed and gave rebirth to the leopard. From a Dahomean perspective, the question of the biological relationship between the *kpojito* and her reign-mate is irrelevant, and to ask if the *kpojito* was biological mother of the king is to pose a tautology. Each king stands in place of Agasu. Because she stands in the place of Agasu's mother, Aligbonon/

³⁸ Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 472; Burton, *Mission*, ii, 97.

³⁹ Daa Adonon, Abomey, 22 Dec. 1972.

⁴⁰ Tingbe-Azalou, 'Mythe', 18-19; Blier, 'Path', 13, 17.

Adonon is by definition mother of the king, as is each *kpojito* that succeeded her.

The myths, speaking through the idiom of kinship and marriage, legitimize the Alladahonu as rulers over the subjects of Dakodonu and by extension, Dahomey. Yet the human players – Dakodonu, Adonon, Wegbaja – were not myths. Traditions tell us little of them as persons. We can trace the period of the establishment of the office of *kpojito*, and the naming of Adonon to that position, to the reign of Agaja.⁴¹ We also know that, like later *kpojito*, Adonon was able to use her position to settle scores. Agaja made war on Adonon's behalf on Weme Jigbe, a town where a son of hers had previously been captured and killed.⁴² Adonon also established the pattern of wealth associated with the office. There are presently four families in the area of Abomey that trace their heritage to her, which suggests that she controlled large numbers of people. Moreover, there are still farms in and around Abomey that are managed in her name and from which the current Adonon derives income.⁴³

The patterns of involvement in the monarchy that were to become typical of the *kpojito* can first be seen during the reign of Tegbesu, the successor of Agaja. Tegbesu gained power with the acknowledged assistance of Hwanjile, the first *kpojito* for whom we have documentation of direct involvement in a succession struggle. Not only is Hwanjile credited with assisting Tegbesu to gain power, but she was also involved in helping the monarchy to consolidate power through altering the religious life of the kingdom. Hwanjile is without question the most powerful female figure in eighteenth-century Dahomean history and arguably one of the most important individuals in the history of the kingdom. So widespread is her fame that there is a divinity of her name (Ouan-Guile) in the Antilles.⁴⁴

Hwanjile was an Aja woman from Ajahome, a town nearly due west of Abomey. Mother of two non-royal children born before she entered the palace, she was reputedly a powerful priest who perhaps was brought to the palace of Abomey because of her knowledge of the occult, in the words of Maupoil, 'a powerful woman, expert in making charms and a great psychologist.'⁴⁵ Traditions justify and legitimize her position by claiming that she was a good friend of Adonon and that Adonon was responsible for marrying her to Agaja.⁴⁶ Like Adonon, Hwanjile as *kpojito* is said to have exacted revenge on enemies; the first recorded execution by crucifixion in Dahomey was an Aja enemy of hers.⁴⁷

Traditions do not say how Hwanjile became an ally of prince Avissu, the

⁴¹ Forbes and Burton, both of whom attended Annual Customs in the mid-nineteenth century, list Adonon as the first 'king's mother' honored: Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 128–74; Burton, *Mission*, ii, 270–1. The person enthroned as Adonon in 1972 herself confirmed this, noting that she was enthroned only during the reign of Agaja: Adonon, Abomey, 13 Oct. 1972.

⁴² Adonon, Abomey, 13 Oct. 1972. Burton indicates that a war against Weme Jigbe was waged during the reign of Akaba: *Mission*, ii, 268.

⁴³ Tingbe-Azalou, 'Mythe', 16–17; Adonon, Abomey, 16 Oct. 1972.

⁴⁴ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 47, n. 1. Both Burton and Skertchly confuse the names of the *kpojito* to Tegbesu and Kpengla, incorrectly linking Tegbesu to Chai and Kpengla to Hwanjile.

⁴⁵ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 47, n. 1.

⁴⁶ Sagbaju Glele, Abomey, 25 July 1972; Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des orisa et vodun* (Dakar, 1957), 450.

⁴⁷ Le Hérissé, *Royaume*, 303–4.

future king Tegbesu. However, they credit Hwanjile with helping him to win a war of succession against his elder brother, Agidisu. Agidisu in turn was also said to have been allied with a woman of the palace, the keeper of the royal storehouses. She supposedly offered gifts from the king's stores to the Alafin of Oyo to try to gain backing for Agidisu.⁴⁸ What emerges from this story of a succession struggle is a pattern that would continue until the abolition of the kingdom by the French: powerful women within the palace would ally themselves with ambitious princes to build coalitions aimed at taking over the throne. The winning prince would rule as king; the king's female ally would become *kpojito*. Though many of the kings appointed heirs (*vidaho*), no heir apparent became king without some kind of struggle against his brothers. Would-be kings saw control over the palace as key to control over the kingdom. Writing about Whydah, for example, William Bosman observes that possession of the palace was a prerequisite to recognition as king:

for the eldest Son no sooner hears of the King's Death, than he immediately makes his interest amongst his Friends, to take Possession of the late King's Court and Wives; and succeeding happily in these Particulars, he need not doubt the remainder; for the Commonalty will not easily consent that after that he shall be driven from the Throne.⁴⁹

Tegbesu himself was said to have raced to the palace to take power as soon as he heard of his father's death. Kpengla and Adandozan are similarly associated with haste to reach the palace at the time of their predecessors' deaths.⁵⁰ Women within the palace could aid or oppose a would-be king with military, political and religious power. A powerful woman close to the king, with her followers within the palace, could provide crucial intelligence, most importantly the news of the death of the king, could muster armed female (and possibly eunuch) guards and possibly take physical control, could provide supernatural support, and sometimes could even hurry the demise of the reigning monarch.

The reign of Tegbesu saw both a war of succession between rival princes and continued strife over the legitimacy of the Alladahonu dynasty. Traditions collected by Melville and Frances Herskovits suggest that religious institutions in the eighteenth century were perceived by the monarchy as threats to its authority: 'In early times, when the gods came into the heads of *vodunon*, and even *vodunsi*, they would prophesy. But the kings did not want this. A man or a woman in any village in Dahomey might then rule in the name of a god.'⁵¹ The Herskovits claim that under Agaja

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 300. Pogle K. Glélé argues that the story of the mother of Agidisu is designed to mask the reality that Tegbesu himself was imposed on Dahomey by Oyo. Since Tegbesu is said to have been sent to Oyo as a hostage in his youth, Glélé hypothesizes that Oyo would have welcomed him as someone known who could be manipulated: 'Le Royaume du Dan-hô-min: Tradition orale et histoire écrite' (unpublished paper deposited in Archives Nationales, Paris, 1971), 49.

⁴⁹ William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705; repr. 1967), 366a.

⁵⁰ Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomey* (London, 1793; repr. 1967), 222; Norris, *Memoirs*, 130.

⁵¹ Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief* (Menasha, WI, 1933), 36.

there had been 'many plots against the monarchy instigated by the Sagbata gods and by the gods of the rivers and the silk-cotton trees.'⁵² Tegbesu upon achieving power was similarly faced with 'the disaffection of the people, who were being swayed by the priesthoods of the autochthonous gods to resist the monarch.'⁵³ The solution to popular unrest, which is credited to Hwanjile, was to reorder the hierarchy of the *vodun* to reflect the dynasty's interests more closely and control the *vodun*'s earthly followers more effectively. To Hwanjile's credit, Robin Law claims that within a generation of the time Tegbesu came to power, Dahomey 'had become a stable, highly autocratic and centralised state.'⁵⁴

Different traditions credit Hwanjile with bringing nearly a dozen *vodun* to Abomey.⁵⁵ However, her most important contribution to the efforts to legitimize and stabilize the monarchy was the establishment in Dahomey of Mawu and Lisa, who were brought from Aja country to preside at the head of the Fon pantheon of *vodun*. Installed just outside the central Abomey palace, they were (and are) 'commanded' by Hwanjile herself. Mawu and Lisa theoretically controlled all the other *vodun* of the realm and by extension all the living persons who served those deities. Their priest, Hwanjile, became the head of religious life in Dahomey, outranking even the Agasunon.

Though generally referred to as a creator couple, Mawu (female) and Lisa (male) were two gendered deities, both of whom were associated with acts of creation, but who do not appear otherwise to have been linked as husband and wife. In Yoruba thought, Mawu (Yeye Mowo) was wife of the creator god Obatala; by mid-nineteenth century in Dahomey, she had become synonymous with the Christian supreme deity. Lisa (Oshala) in his Yoruba incarnation had been the deity that molds human beings out of clay; as early as the seventeenth century, his name had been used by missionaries to translate the name Jesus.⁵⁶ In the early twentieth century, Melville and Frances Herskovits found Mawu and Lisa described variously as twins or as an androgynous mother and son. In either case, they were a pair with contrasting attributes: female/male, moon/sun, night/day, coolness/heat, older/younger, west/east.⁵⁷ The joining of Mawu and Lisa reinforced the ideological message established through the pairing of Aligbonon with Agasu, and *Kpojito* Adonon with King Agaja: that power and authority

⁵² *Ibid.* 35.

⁵³ Herskovits, *Dahomey*, ii, 104.

⁵⁴ Robin Law, 'Ideologies of royal power: the dissolution and reconstruction of political authority on the "slave coast", 1680-1750', *Africa*, LVII (1987), 323.

⁵⁵ Herskovits records a tradition that claims the following as *vodun* imported by Hwanjile: Mawu, Lisa, Sakpata, Heviosso, Gu, Dan Aidowhedo, Nesuhwe, Tovodun, Fa, Menona, Boko-Legba (*Dahomey*, ii, 104). Le Hérisse credits to Hwanjile or Tegbesu the following: Mawu, Lisa, Heviosso, H'lan, and the Tohosou (*Royaume*, 102, 112-13, 121-2). Most other sources list only Mawu, Lisa and the hunter deity, Age. These three latter *vodun* remain under the direction of Hwanjile in a sanctuary located adjacent to the palace of Akaba and facing the central palace of the kings. It is clear that both Mawu and Lisa were known in Dahomey before their elevation by Hwanjile. The distinction being claimed may be the specific shrines brought from Aja or the joining of the two as chief deities.

⁵⁶ Olabiyi Yai, 'From Vodun to Mawu: monotheism and history in the Fon cultural area', *Sapina newsletter*, iv, 2-3 (1992), 10-29; Verger, *Notes*, 438, 504-6.

⁵⁷ Herskovits and Herskovits, *Outline*, 11, 14; P. Mercier, 'The Fon of Dahomey', in Daryll Forde (ed.), *African Worlds* (Oxford, 1954), 219.

derive from a male–female pair with contrasting attributes. It is significant that in neither case was the pair husband and wife, a relationship in which the female is considered to be dependent and subordinate. Moreover, Aligbonon/Agasu, Adonon/Agaja and Hwanjile/Tegbesu pair individuals from royal and commoner lineages. Though royalty had initially resided in the female, Aligbonon, and the Alladahonu traced their royal blood matrilineally to her, with the creation of the *kpojito* and king dyad, royalty was derived from the male, following patrilineal succession. Drawing on the ideological images at the end of the nineteenth century, Maurice Glélé argues that the king and *kpojito* formed the central ideological unity – man and woman, royal and commoner – upon which the state was based. Glélé could be speaking directly to the challenges of the reign of Tegbesu, and the solutions found by Hwanjile, when he asserts:

Thus an equilibrium, a counterweight, was established and continually strived for at the very heart of the monarchy's conception of power. The power of the king was limited in its very essence, on the one hand, by other princes who could on the basis of their origin claim the throne. It was limited on the other hand, at the level of the people, by the commoners from whom his mother had come and whom he could neither deny nor forget.⁵⁸

Bloody battles involving the palace and its female inhabitants characterized every kingly succession for the 50 years following Tegbesu's death in 1774. Women armed with guns were in the king's entourage as early as the 1720s.⁵⁹ They give every indication of having been able to use their weapons effectively; a would-be successor to Agonglo, for example, was beaten off despite having arrived at the palace with an armed force of 300, and 200 persons were left dead in the wake of the fighting.⁶⁰ Norris's description of eighteenth-century successions is typical of accounts of fighting within the palace:

A horrid scene commences in the palace, the moment the king expires; which continues until Tamegah and Mayhou have announced that event to his successor, and till he takes possession of it: this he loses no time in doing, that he may put an end to the mischief going on there. The wives of the deceased begin, with breaking and destroying the furniture of the house, the gold and silver ornaments and utensils, the coral, and in short, every thing of value that belonged either to themselves, or to the late king, and then murder one another. Adaunzou [Kpengla], upon being nominated king, hastened with his retinue to the palace gate, which he broke down, and taking possession of it, put a stop to the carnage; but, before he could accomplish this, a great part of the furniture, etc. was destroyed, and two hundred and eighty five of the women had been murdered.⁶¹

A total of 595 women were killed over a two-and-one-half day period after the death of Kpengla in 1789.⁶² Two battles took place in the palace following

⁵⁸ Glélé, *Danxome*, 100. See also Palau-Marti, *Roi-dieu*, 215, and Paul Mercier, *Civilisations du Benin* (Paris, 1962), 284.

⁵⁹ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London, 1734; repr. 1971), 34. Both Hélène d'Almeida-Topor, *Les Amazones* (Paris, 1984), 36, and Robin Law, 'The "Amazons" of Dahomey', *Paideuma*, xxix (1993), 247, note the Snelgrave evidence. Neither, however, comments on the significance of arming women with firearms, which sets Dahomean woman apart from female fighters documented elsewhere in West Africa.

⁶⁰ Pires, *Viagem*, 71.

⁶¹ Norris, *Memoirs*, 128–30.

⁶² Dalzel, *History*, 204–5.

Agonglo's death in 1797, with fatalities estimated at more than 250 persons.⁶³ The accounts of fighting are strikingly similar at each succession; they end only after the accession of Gezo, who met heavy resistance by women soldiers at the time of his 1818 coup, and who for the future ended the practice 'by extorting a solemn fetish oath from all his chiefs, men and women.'⁶⁴

Norris claims that the new king was announced only when the two top male ministers, the Migan and Meu, had conferred and agreed upon the successor. However, a pair of eighteenth-century French visitors, writing shortly after the accession of Tegbesu's successor, Kpengla, suggested in contrast that palace women had crucial control over the choice of king:

All the children of the king are reared during early childhood in the harem. The women who have the right to give heirs to the throne compete to have their children adopted. An apanage is given to the child that the king selects; he and all his brothers remain far from the court. And those who are responsible for taking care of him guard the secret at the risk of their heads. This heir only re-appears after the death of his father and when the women announce that the throne is vacant. Often this event is kept secret from the public for some time by the women who during this sort of interregnum sometimes make changes in the last wishes of the dead king. The women are the trustees of his last intentions and have the right to proclaim the new king. It thus can happen that the one who was chosen by the king loses the benefit because the mother of his brothers has plotted and formed a party. From that arise divisions and civil wars.⁶⁵

The identity of women wielding power is seldom clear, though it is obvious during the late eighteenth century that Dahomeans and foreigners were aware that women were deeply involved in politics. Upon his accession, Agonglo, for example, appears to have tried to minimize palace women's influence, announcing to his subjects that 'he had adopted Ahadee's [Tegbesu's] principles of governing, to which he should adhere; that he would hear no complaints but through his Caboceers; and threatened to punish with instant death, the least whisper to his women: a crime that had been too common in his father's time.'⁶⁶

The personal names of the *kpojito* are often preceded by the honorific 'Naye' (Naie, Nae), a term variously used to refer to women within the palace. Pires uses the term Naie to describe a small group of highly privileged and powerful women within the palace, claiming that each had her own seraglio separate from that of the king. He describes a Naie Dada (Dada = honorific for the king) who was equivalent to the king in authority, able to impose the death penalty over both her slaves and her Dahomean vassals, though her fellow *naie* were permitted to execute only their slaves. In government councils, these *naies* had overwhelming influence.⁶⁷ Though his testimony is not corroborated elsewhere, Pires's description of special powers of the *naie* resonates with the special privileges reserved for the *kpojito*, rather than with the prerogatives of the wives of the kings.

Following the reign of Tegbesu, the monarchy appears to have faced continued questioning of its legitimacy. Blier cites oral accounts that point to

⁶³ Pires, *Viagem*, 71, 79. ⁶⁴ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 13, n.1; Ross, 'Autonomous', 17.

⁶⁵ 'Réflexions sur Juda par les Sieurs de Chenevert et abbé Bulet' (Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, ms. 111), 72. ⁶⁶ Dalzel, *History*, 224. ⁶⁷ Pires, *Viagem*, 84.

International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, the Survey was planned as the first in a series of investigations designed to revolutionize official policies in combating malnutrition throughout the dependent empire. A multi-disciplinary team consisting of an anthropologist, agriculturalist, botanist, medical officer and food investigator embarked under the leadership of Dr B. S. Platt, the leading colonial nutritionalist of the day, on a comprehensive socio-economic study of three villages in the Nkhotakota district. A further investigation was made in Ndirande, an African suburb of Blantyre, and within 18 months a mass of information had been collected that led Platt to claim that the results of the survey, when published, would be of fundamental value to all those interested in the welfare of 'backward peoples' whether in Africa or elsewhere.

The subsequent history of the survey provides an example of academic procrastination on a positively heroic scale. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Platt returned to London as adviser to the War Cabinet on nutritional issues, leaving his report incomplete. Frequent enquiries as to its progress from anxious officials in the Colonial Office went unheeded. For three years, a Nutrition Development Unit attempted unavailingly to put Platt's recommendations into practice on selected sites in the Nkhotakota district, but in 1943 this was finally withdrawn. Further delays followed the ending of the war, by which time soil erosion had replaced malnutrition as the major concern among development experts. Platt, now Professor of Nutrition at London University, expressed intermittent interest in completing the report but never got round to doing so. It is therefore only now, through the welcome initiative of Veronica Berry and Celia Petty, that the scattered papers have been rescued from the archives of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine where they have lain virtually untouched for more than fifty years. (It is worth noting, however, that copies of the originals in the Malawi National Archives have been used by John Iliffe, Megan Vaughan and this reviewer.)

For readers of this journal, the value of these papers is likely to lie as much in what they reveal about the colonial construction of knowledge as in the light they throw on standards of living in the 1930s. In common with parallel investigations, notably those conducted by Audrey Richards in neighbouring Zambia, frustratingly little information is provided on historical processes or on the wider economy of which the rural villages were a part. Household production, both agricultural and non-agricultural, receives a great deal of detailed attention, however, and full weight is given to the significance of gender and generation in shaping patterns of work and consumption. No simple conclusions on the extent of malnutrition can be drawn from the evidence. Rather, the findings point to the extraordinary variations that existed in diet: from one village to another, at different times of year and between men and women, young and old. In the hill village surveyed, for example, men were comfortably in excess of calorie requirements in 1938-39, but women, infants and boys aged between 10 and 16 consistently suffered a deficiency. Calorie deficiencies were more marked among the urban poor of Ndirande than among rural villagers, particularly those in the lakeside village who had access at certain times of year to fish and mangoes in quantities not found anywhere else. During the hoeing season, more than half the food consumed by men in the hill and foothill villages consisted of beer.

The papers provided by Berry and Petty include not only the incomplete report but also a miscellaneous collection of other documents, among them reports from the Nutritional Unit in the early 1940s and a belated conclusion, written about 1946 by W. T. Berry, the doctor on the Survey. This conveys views strikingly at odds with those expressed six years earlier by Platt. Together they comprise a rich collection of source material, uneven in quality and difficult to assess, yet of value to any scholar seriously interested in the history of the food supply in southern

deities in the New World. Her memory was maintained in Dahomey because she was named to the position of *kpojito* by Adandozan's successor, Gezo. Traditions say that Gezo sent two delegations to the western hemisphere to locate Agontime and bring her back to Dahomey, but they disagree on whether or not she was found. Indeed, at least one source hints that the delegations were sent for a different reason, to improve Dahomean relations with the lusophone world. It is known, however, that about 1840 someone was installed to reign as *kpojito* under the name Agontime.⁷²

Gezo's accession to power marked a departure from all previous succession struggles, for Adandozan was dethroned but, inexplicably, not killed by his successor. Because he remained alive (and apparently outlived Gezo himself), Gezo could not honor Adandozan with the elaborate funeral ceremonies that normally marked the formal installation of a new king and *kpojito*. A number of ritual innovations are possibly related to Gezo's attempts to legitimize his rule: for example, Customs were greatly expanded in size with the institution of ceremonies in the name of Gezo-as-prince, a being who became known to Europeans as the 'king of the bush';⁷³ and to permit Gezo to honor his father in his name as king, Adandozan was forgotten, his reign literally eliminated from the Dahomean king-list. A more important consequence of Gezo's coup from the perspective of women's institutions, however, was the fact that it was not carried out by an alliance of a prince with a woman of the palace. Though Gezo apparently had help from some women within the palace, he did not credit any single woman by naming her *kpojito*. Rather he named as *kpojito* Agontime, who had plotted and lost 21 years previously, and who at the time of his accession was somewhere in the western hemisphere. Ironically, the choice of a woman resident in the new world proved symbolic recognition of Gezo's source of support, for credit for assistance against Adandozan went to the Afro-Brazilian slave trader, Felix Francisco da Souza. Da Souza was to become a close confidant and adviser to Gezo as king, particularly as the monarchy faced increasing pressures from the Europeans to end the slave trade and develop commercial agriculture. Gezo's choice of Agontime, then, may have been a recognition of an interest in closer ties with Brazil. Although both of Gezo's immediate successors were opposed by palace women allied with princes, neither Glele nor Gbehanzin appears to have worked closely with a woman within the palace in order to gain or consolidate power. Nevertheless, visitors to Dahomey in the 1860s still pointed to the *kpojito* as wielders of power: 'At the Dahomean court, the greatest influence is held by the mother of the king... This woman, who could do much good, uses her power only for ill.'⁷⁴

Two religious transformations are visible in the early nineteenth century.

⁷² Pierre Verger, 'Le Culte des Vodoun d'Abomey aurait-il été apporté à Saint-Louis de Maranhon par la mère du roi Ghézo?', *Etudes Dahoméennes*, VIII (1952), 19-24; Herskovits, *Dahomey*, ii, 64. Verger notes that the commander of the Portuguese fort in Whydah claimed that one of the expeditions was sent to the court of King Don João VI. An elder of the Dosso Yovo family, whose ancestor was head of the delegation, said that the Dahomeans also recruited Bahian families to settle in Dahomey (Whydah, 9 Nov. 1972).

⁷³ Edna G. Bay, 'On the trail of the bush king: a Dahomean lesson in the use of evidence', *History in Africa*, VI (1979), 1-15.

⁷⁴ Abbé Laffitte, *Le Dahomé* (Tours, 1873), 73.

Both mirrored a trend toward consolidation of state power within the royal family and ultimately threatened the access of palace women to power. The changes were the growth of congregations dedicated to *tohossu* and *nesuhwe*, deified members of the royal family, and the increasing prominence of the Fa (Ifa) system of divination. The implications of these changes in religious life point to a changing perception on the part of the monarchy of the importance of the royal lineage as opposed to all other lineages within the kingdom. Honorat Aguessy has observed that the hierarchy of the gods was never the same from one reign to the next, but that the constantly changing pantheon was manipulated with an eye to ensuring that 'all that is of royal origin takes precedence over the rest.'⁷⁵ From the perspective of a concept of power, the growth of ritual that placed the royal lineage at the center moved away from the ideology that nevertheless continued to be expressed, that the kingdom at center was a balance between royal and commoner, man and woman. The nineteenth century would see greater emphasis on royalty alone, and by its end a vision of power as male-centered and male-controlled.

The first *tohossu* was a fearsome and powerful creature named Zumadunu, said to have been fathered by Akaba. *Tohossu* (literally 'kings of the water') were children who died at birth or shortly thereafter, or children born with what by Dahomean cultural standards were deformities. Both were returned to the waters from which they were believed to have come. The *tohossu*, according to tradition, did not become a problem until the reign of Tegbesu, when they demanded to be recognized and priests had to be trained to serve them.⁷⁶ Parallel to the worship of the *tohossu* was the development of congregations of *nesuhwe*, dedicated to deified ancestors of the royal family. At least by the late nineteenth century, *nesuhwe* included both the dangerous *tohossu* and royal family members who had lived to adulthood. During that period, commoners were permitted to recognize and worship *tohossu* in their own lineages, but only if they were subordinate to a branch of the royal family.⁷⁷ Overall control over the congregations of the *tohossu* and *nesuhwe* was given to Mivede, an officer appointed by the king. At least in the eighteenth century, he reported to Hwanjile.⁷⁸ However, by the late nineteenth century, the heads of all the Dahomean *vodun*, including Mawu and Lisa, were reportedly subordinate to Mivede and the Agasunon.⁷⁹

A parallel trend that underlines the subordination of common lineages to the royal line became evident by the nineteenth century. The monarchy began to draw non-royal lineages into closer alliances and hence control by the Alladahonu lineage by using the idiom of marriage. The kings bargained for the loyalty of male officials by 'marrying' them and appointing them *zinkponon*, literally 'owners of the stool,' with authority that by-passed and consequently undermined that of the traditional male and female heads of common lineages. Families linked to the royal lineage through fictive marriage were subject to the authority of that line. Their children's marriages, for example, had to be approved by the head of the relevant

⁷⁵ Honorat Aguessy, 'Du mode d'existence de l'Etat sous Ghezo' (unpublished thesis, troisième cycle, University of Paris, 1970), 230.

⁷⁶ Le Hérisse, *Royaume*, 120-23; Herskovits and Herskovits, *Outline*, 31.

⁷⁷ Michael Houseman, Blandine Legonou, Christiane Massy and Xavier Crepin, 'Note sur la structure évolutive d'une ville historique', *Cah. Ét. afr.* xxvi (1986), 542-4.

⁷⁸ Herskovits, *Dahomey*, i, 230-1.

⁷⁹ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 65.

branch of the royal lineage. Like the placement of royal *vodun* at the center of spiritual life in the kingdom, the co-optation of common lineages into branches of the royal line downgraded the importance of those lineages as balances to royal power. To the extent that they reflected a changing perception of the balance between the king and a common woman, they boded ill for the future of the office of *kpojito*. By the mid-nineteenth century the continued emphasis on the importance of the royal lineage as opposed to non-royal Dahomeans became more evident as the kings began to name members of the Alladahonu line to high offices. Gezo made his own brothers and sisters assistants to high officials. By the time of Glele, princes and princesses were being named to ministerial office in place of outsiders to the royal lineage.

Another major influence was that of the Fa system of divination. Borrowed from Yoruba culture, Fa had been introduced in Dahomey in the reign of Agaja, supposedly to discredit the diviners associated with the indigenous people, and Tegbesu had been the first king to learn his personal divination sign in the sacred forest.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Hwanjile imported an additional competing *vodun* capable of seeing into the future, Bagbo, since 'two safeguards are better than one, and the monarchy might have an interest in setting diviners at variance with each other.'⁸¹ Fa in the nineteenth century gradually became supremely prominent.

Fa departed from other *vodun* in two important ways. Firstly, as a conceptual system, it was individualistic, based on a process by which an individual, working through a diviner or *bokonon*, attempted first to discover a personal destiny. Subsequent divinations provided continuous advice to the individual as he moved through life. Private, removed from congregations and regular public performances, Fa focused on the individual's relationship to spiritual powers and offered clients the possibility of developing close one-on-one relationships with its *bokonon* or priests. At the level of the monarchy, the several *bokonon* of the king by mid-nineteenth century were among the most prominent officials at court, wielding immense political power in their capacity as confidants to the kings. Secondly, Fa focused on men. In contrast to the numerous other Yoruba-derived deities that had been established in Dahomey in the eighteenth century or earlier, Fa did not conform to the standard structure of Dahomean cult organization, with male and female priest-caretakers leading congregations of devotees of both genders. Fa instead was led by a priesthood that was exclusively male.⁸² Initially an anomaly in a culture characterized by women's leadership in cults, both royal and popular, Fa displaced women's central role in spiritual life. Not only was its priesthood male, but Fa was directed to male clients and male concerns. Relatively few women learned their signs, and women were limited to the early stages of the lifelong process of discovery of personal destiny under the assumption that their fate was part of that of their father or husband. In the late nineteenth century the monarchy encouraged the establishment of an openly misogynous allied deity, Gbaadu (or Odu), a *vodun* that represented

⁸⁰ Herskovits and Herskovits, *Outline*, 35; Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 47.

⁸¹ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 48.

⁸² Maupoil (*ibid.* 153-4) was able to cite only two women during the entire history of the kingdom who became *bokonon* or diviners of Fa. As princesses, both were socially male.

the entirety of the knowledge of Fa. Apparently brought to Dahomey during the reign of Glele, the cult of Gbaadu and its various accoutrements were absolutely forbidden to women. An instant killer of adulterous wives, Gbaadu's strength was based in part on genitals cut from deceased pregnant women and preserved in the *vodun*'s shrines.⁸³

In the realm of the *vodun*, as emphasis was placed on the royal deities and their allied *vodun*, attempts were made to isolate the non-royal or popular *vodun*. By the nineteenth century, members of the royal lineage were forbidden to participate in any popular cult and no initiated woman entering the palace could continue to worship the *vodun* to which she had been pledged.⁸⁴ Common women in the palace thus lost any possibility of being able to contribute to the dynasty's efforts to legitimize itself religiously, as Hwanjile had done in the previous century. In short, by mid-nineteenth century the ideological underpinnings of women's previous contributions to the strengthening of the dynasty had disappeared.

Gezo's death in 1858 precipitated yet another succession struggle. Though Glele had been named heir, he was opposed by a prince named Wensu who was allied with Yavedo, one of the highest-ranking women of the palace. No woman was credited with assisting Glele, who ultimately won the struggle and named as his *kpojito* a woman said to have been his biological mother, Zoïndi. It was the diviner of Fa, Gedegbe, Zoïndi's classificatory brother, who became the most trusted advisor of Glele, in the way that earlier kings had been assisted by their *kpojito*. Gedegbe was made director of all religious life. Fa in turn was considered the premier deity, for in the view of Gedegbe, without divination even Mawu and Lisa had no voice.⁸⁵ Following a stay in Abomey near the end of Glele's reign, a French observer reported that, though the organization of the kingdom included a council of ministers, the king submitted all decisions to the power of *vodun* priests, 'of which he takes the first grade on mounting the throne,' an allusion to the process of discovery of destiny associated with Fa.⁸⁶ By the time of Glele, women were being excluded from important private discussions. Glele's diviner later claimed that the king received visitors in his audience court 'surrounded by some of his wives. When it was an important matter, he made them go out.'⁸⁷

Yavedo, who had failed in her attempt to help a prince to power, remained in the palace in her position as *tononon*, one of the highest offices within that structure. The woman who became the new *tononon* under Glele was Visesegan. Though like Yavedo she ultimately failed to win the office of *kpojito*, Visesegan's history suggests the tremendous potential for influence available to a woman in high office within the palace. Visesegan was first noticed at court by Burton, who listed her in 1863 as an assistant to Yavedo.⁸⁸ By the 1870s, Visesegan had clearly emerged as the most influential woman in the palace. According to a son of Glele, she enjoyed a position similar to that of a commoner's head wife, that is, she 'commanded' all the other women of the palace.⁸⁹ By trading actively through her agents at Whydah, Visesegan had become the palace's richest woman. Glele further entrusted her with the issuing of commercial licenses, a position which likely enhanced

⁸³ *Ibid.* 86–91, 99–100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 68–9, 136.

⁸⁶ E. Chaudoin, *Trois Mois de Captivité au Dahomey* (Paris, 1891), 269.

⁸⁷ Maupoil, *Géomancie*, 162.

⁸⁸ Burton, *Mission*, i, 152.

⁸⁹ Sagbaju Glele, Abomey, 1972.

both her income and her political influence.⁹⁰ Visesegean was closely allied to Ahanhanzo, Glele's first heir and a prince apparently much loved by the king. When Ahanhanzo died mysteriously in the 1870s, Visesegean promoted another protégé, Sasse Koka, for the position of heir apparent. However, prince Kondo (the future Gbehanzin) had enough support at court to defeat her and be named heir himself. Nevertheless, Visesegean, probably thanks to her close personal relationship with the aging Glele, persisted in promoting Sasse Koka. In the words of a descendant of Glele:

Since Sasse Koka's mother, Visesegean, commanded all the palace, one could expect to see her son everywhere. He seated himself in councils of the family, like Gbehanzin. Yet he was not of the same rank as Gbehanzin. It was only because his mother commanded that he could act like Gbehanzin, that is, like the *vidaho* [heir apparent]. People began to ignore Gbehanzin and to forget that he held first place. People began to assume that Sasse Koka was the first. Thus Gbehanzin chased him away, told him to leave, that he had no right to be there.⁹¹

By the late 1880s, an open struggle between the Gbehanzin faction and supporters of Sasse Koka raged, sweeping around and over the aged and ill Glele. In the last days of Glele's reign, as the king's health failed and the Europeans became more menacing, Visesegean emerged as a powerful spokesperson for accommodation with the French, in political opposition to the heir. Gbehanzin gained power at the moment of his father's death, and a plot led by Visesegean failed to dislodge him.⁹² Gbehanzin is said to have seized Visesegean's property in revenge. Local court records of the early 1900s attest to her attempts to maintain control over women who had been granted to her by Glele.⁹³

Gbehanzin came to power at a moment of serious crisis. Aligned with a coalition that had been opposed to accommodation with the French, Gbehanzin in 1890–2 embarked upon a series of military and diplomatic maneuvers and negotiations that centered on two issues: French military control over Cotonou, and Dahomean incursions into territory claimed by the French protectorate of Porto-Novo. Meanwhile, the king had not had time to prepare and perform Grand Customs, the cycle of ceremonies that normally marked the end of competition for the throne by acknowledging the effective king, and that solidified a king's support in the realm of the ancestors.

In October 1892 the French attacked Dahomey, moving up the Weme River valley along Dahomey's eastern frontier and then turning overland towards Cana and Abomey. Though they resisted, the Dahomeans were defeated at each engagement and were gradually forced back. Gbehanzin meanwhile made overtures to the French, trying to sue for a settlement and the establishment of a tributary relationship, as was the usual response to defeat by an African enemy. After a final desperate stand before Cana, Gbehanzin was offered a treaty of protectorate that included an unacceptable

⁹⁰ d'Almeida, 'Dahomey,' ii, 335, n. 1. ⁹¹ Agbalu Glele, Abomey, 1972.

⁹² 'Rapport adressé par l'interprète X. Béraud à Monsieur le Résident de France aux Etablissements du Golfe de Bénin', 12 march 1891. Dossier 1E3, Register X, National Archives of Benin.

⁹³ *Peines Disciplinaires*, 21 Feb. 1906, 16 Dec. 1906. Unclassified archives of the sous-préfecture of Abomey.

provision, the occupation of Abomey by French troops. The king responded by burning the palace and fleeing north with his army, ministers and palace population. Gbehanzin remained outside Abomey for the next 14 months, trying to rebuild his forces in face of hunger and an epidemic of smallpox. Gradually his entourage was thinned by defections that by late 1893 began to include more and more high-ranking officials – ministers and siblings of the king.⁹⁴ Great controversy surrounds accounts of how and why Gbehanzin was replaced in January 1894. Suffice it to say that the French, perhaps unwittingly, succeeded in dividing the royal family permanently over the enthronement of Gbehanzin's brother and former war minister, Agoliagbo. When Gbehanzin finally surrendered to the French, the royal family condemned him, sending an official messenger who accused him of poisoning Glele, of having lost the support of the ancestors and of having destroyed the nation.⁹⁵

Captured by his enemy, cursed by his family, and deprived of his throne, Gbehanzin was taken to Cotonou where he remained for nearly a week before being sent into exile with four wives, a close advisor, and one son. During this period, the French officer charged with his imprisonment befriended the king, taking meals with him and talking with him through an interpreter. He recorded an extraordinarily moving account of Gbehanzin's final days before his surrender. The narrative reflects Gbehanzin's desperation and despair, and his deep belief in the power of the *vodun* to intervene in the affairs of humans. As such it deserves to be quoted in full:

At the beginning of the war my father, the great Glele, protected me and I was successful. At one point, at the engagement at Dogba, I even believed that I would be able to throw the French back to the sea, but from that moment on I was abandoned and despite the envoys that I sent every evening to him, my bravest warriors, nothing came of it. The French continued to win land and force me to flee into the bush after having abandoned my capital and my main cities. Heart-broken, helpless, I no longer knew who to confide in, being persuaded that my envoys sent to Glele did not complete their missions; I thus appealed to my aged mother and asked her to sacrifice herself for her son and country by consenting to go herself to intercede with my father. She agreed, but with the single provision that her head be cut off by me, her son, and that the execution take place on the banks of the sacred river, the Couffo. After the execution I waited eight days, then seeing nothing happen of advantage to me, and recognizing to the contrary that the French columns were closing up and fearing to be betrayed and delivered to my brother who would have immediately put me to death, I preferred to appeal to the feelings of generosity of the French government. I now await my fate.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Alexandre L. d'Albega, *La France au Dahomey* (Paris, 1895), 185, 188, 193.

⁹⁵ d'Albega (*ibid.* 94) quotes the messenger as saying 'Je suis chargé de te dire que tu ne fais plus partie de la maison d'Alada. Tu as empoisonné ton frère Sassé, tu as empoisonné ton père. Les dieux t'abandonnent. Ton règne a été plus mauvais que celui d'Adandozan. Tu as perdu le Dahomey. Tu n'es plus rien pour nous.'

⁹⁶ *Carnets du Général Tahon : Avec les bâtisseurs de l'Empire* (Paris, 1949), 65–6. Three other sources acknowledge the death of the *kpojito* by Behanzin's hand: Abbé Th. Moulero, 'Conquête de Kétou par Glele et conquête d'Abomey par la France', *Etudes Dahoméennes*, n.s. IV (1965), 67; Glélé, 'Dan-hô-min', 73; and Jules Leprince, *Mes Deux Premiers Voyages* (Coulommiers, 1897), 185.

CONCLUSIONS

Created in the 1720s or 1730s, the office of *kpojito* appears to have been established to provide ritual legitimacy to the Alladahonu lineage as ruling dynasty of Dahomey. By linking the ruling lineage to the previous owners of the land, Adonon, the first *kpojito*, embodied the resolution of competing claims to legitimacy and, as a priest, she established a model for the intervention of the *kpojito* in religious questions. The office of *kpojito* reached its most powerful point under Hwanjile in the mid-eighteenth century. Providing leadership that helped to settle a violent succession struggle and reordered the hierarchy of the *vodun*, Hwanjile further associated the *kpojito* with efforts to legitimize the regime. With formal powers that were designed to control the religious life of the kingdom, Hwanjile became a paradigm for the patterns of involvement of women in the politics of the monarchy of Dahomey. Following her, strong and ambitious women within the palace formed coalitions with princes to seize control at moments of succession. Ideally, the successful man and woman would reign in tandem, with the *kpojito* offering counsel to her reign-mate and participating in perpetuity in the small grouping of persons that controlled the centers of power of Dahomey, the monarchy itself.

Having enjoyed visible and effective power in the late eighteenth century, the *kpojito*, and the women of the palace organization from which she was drawn, began to lose influence by the early nineteenth century. The *kpojito*'s decline was paralleled by a loss of power by persons who were not of the royal lineage as more and more commoners were co-opted into relations of dependency on the Alladahonu dynasty. By the late nineteenth century, the ideological model of power as a studied balance between male and female, royal and commoner, was a hollow shell respected in principle and violated in fact. The last two independent kings of Dahomey, Glele and Gbehanzin, surrounded themselves with kinsmen, fictive and factual, and put their trust in a system of divination that stressed the individual and the male.

Kpojito and would-be *kpojito* in the nineteenth century had little recourse. Though women's right to be involved in political questions and to promote candidates for king was still acknowledged, they had lost the ability to dominate politics as they had in the eighteenth century. Ironically, larger numbers of women were under arms in the nineteenth century, but their activities were focused on warring at the frontiers of the kingdom. Meanwhile, the kings named as *kpojito* women who had not been involved in bringing them to power. Like earlier *kpojito*, Gezo's Agontime was a woman noted for her ritual powers, but having been sold into the overseas slave trade a generation earlier, she was clearly not involved in assisting or advising Gezo in his struggle for power. Gezo's choice of a woman believed to be living in the western hemisphere symbolized the king's actual sources of support, the overseas traders at Whydah, and his choice may even have been an intentional effort to signal an interest in closer contacts with Brazil. Similarly, Glele chose as *kpojito* a woman from among the *kposi*, those palace women who were the biological mothers of potential heirs. Presumably his actual mother, Zoïndi as a *kposi* would have been deliberately excluded from involvement in activities that would have allowed her opportunities to build a coalition of supporters. The *kpojito* to Gbehanzin remained loyal to her

reign-mate even as most other members of the monarchy slipped away to surrender to the French. Nevertheless, she found that her political importance had diminished to the point that she was literally expendable.

This article has argued that important changes in the office and power of the *kpojito* took place over nearly two centuries of Dahomean history. It has suggested that, paralleling the *kpojito*'s experience, there was a decline in the ability of commoners – men and women – to wield power as part of the kingdom's administration. However, it has not directly addressed the question of how and why power slipped from the hands of women and commoners. What caused the monarchy of Dahomey to adopt a vision of power as male-centered and royal-controlled? Is the experience of Dahomey simply a confirmation that greater centralization and concentration of power exacerbates class and gender differentiation and the subordination of women? Is Dahomey an example of the pattern of loss of influence that has been described for women under the impact of European colonialism? Or are there other factors operating that might explain the loss of influence by women and non-royal men?

There are at least three possible trends with explanatory value for these questions, all of which may be interrelated.⁹⁷ The trends include economic decline in nineteenth-century Dahomey (which has not been analysed in this study), the impact of European influence on the kingdom and the effects of cultural contacts with Yoruba-speaking peoples. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the transition from the slave trade to commercial agriculture reduced the income of the monarchy. Possibly because less wealth was available for the redistributive activities that were required to support major officials, the kings began to appoint to high office certain members of their own lineage whose welfare in any event was their responsibility. This subordination of commoner to royal interests was reflected socially and ideologically in the predominant influence given to cults of the royal dead, and particularly those of the dangerous malformed children called *tohossu*. European influence had, of course, begun well before the nineteenth century, for Dahomey from the 1720s was in constant contact with Europeans, Afro-Europeans and the male representatives of European governments (who sometimes spoke in the name of a female monarch). The Dahomean kings clearly were intrigued by European culture and technology and could have been influenced by models of governance that excluded common women. However, the conquest of Whydah that put Dahomey into direct touch with Europe also led to warring contacts with a culture more patriarchal than Dahomey, that of Yoruba-speaking peoples. Whether cause or effect, the centrality of Fa in the politico-religious life of the monarchy by the late nineteenth century underlined the dramatic change in the perceptions of the kings of the bases of their own authority and power. No longer concerned with the appeasement of the original owners of the land, no longer recognizing the importance of working closely with commoners, the kings focused on the power that they embodied as individuals, setting up their personal male priests as rulers over the spiritual life of the kingdom in ironic parallel to the previous pairing of man and woman. The *kpojito*, along with

⁹⁷ The author is currently preparing a book-length study that explores these trends more fully.

all the other women of the palace, became simple auxiliaries to the enterprises of the male monarch.

SUMMARY

This article traces chronologically the rise and fall of the office of the *kpojito*, the female reign-mate to the kings of Dahomey. The women who became *kpojito* in the eighteenth century were central to the efforts of the kings to establish legitimacy and assert control over the kingdom's expanding territory. The office reached its zenith in mid-century when *Kpojito* Hwanjile and King Tegbesu gained office and effectively ruled in tandem, thereby solidifying an ideological model that persisted to the end of the kingdom. The model posited a balance of power between male and female, royal and commoner. Subsequently, powerful women of the king's household worked with ambitious princes to build coalitions to seize power at times of royal succession. When their efforts succeeded, the prince was installed as king and the woman as *kpojito*. By the nineteenth century, princes began to find alternative sources of support in their struggles for the kingship and alternative sources of guidance once enthroned. The royal family became more central in the state as princes and princesses replaced commoners in high offices. Even though alliances between princes and their fathers' wives continued, non-royal women within the palace were more constrained in their ability to wield power and the influence of the *kpojito* fell into steep decline.

The institutional history of the *kpojito* is discerned through an analysis of religious change in Dahomey. Because the hierarchy of the gods was manipulated by the monarchy to reflect its changing conceptions of the nature of power, the history of religion represents an intellectual history of the ruling class. Central among the religious changes and cultural influences that had a probable impact on the office of the *kpojito*, and more broadly on the ability of women to exercise power in the state, were contacts with Europe and with Yoruba-speaking peoples. Those influences were associated with cultural and religious visions that promoted the individual, the male, and the royal.