Some Correspondence between the German Empire and Dahomey in 1882-1892

Monsieur Milan Kalous

Citer ce document / Cite this document:


Document généré le 02/06/2016
Some correspondence
between the German Empire and Dahomey
in 1882-1892

The correspondence started only in 1882 when the following letter, written in English and signed by Bismarck1, was sent to Abomey:

Foreign Office of the German Empire, Berlin
January 16th 1882.
To His Majesty Gelele, King of Dahomey, Abomey

Your Majesty!

The German firm C. Goedelt, being desirous to extend its (already considerable) existing commerce with other countries of Western Africa to the Kingdom of Dahomey, has bought, subject to the consent of Your Majesty, the factory at Whydah which has hitherto belonged to the English firm F. A. Swanzy & Co. Hoping that Your Majesty may behold with favor this first effort to open direct intercourse between Germany and Dahomey, (which can not fail to contribute to the welfare of Your people and) to the benefit(s) of (which will be shared by) both countries, I (take leave) beg to recommend to Your Majesty's good will Mr. Adolph Elliot, who is bearer of this letter into Whydah, where he is to act as Agent of the said German firm. He is a highly respectable German merchant. (and a subject of William the First, German Emperor and King of Prussia) I (beg and) trust that Your Majesty will bestow upon him and other Germans, who may come by themselves or with their ships and cargoes to any places or ports (of Dahomey) belonging to Your Majesty, the same protection, rights and privileges which are, by treaty or otherwise, granted to the subjects of (any) other nations while residing, travelling or trading within the boundaries of Your realm. (His Imperial Majesty) King William, Emperor of Germany, My Most Gracious Sovereign, will feel gratified and thankful when hearing from me at the time that, by consenting to the transfer of the above mentioned factory to the German firm, and by patronising its

1. The following is the transcription of a draft presented to Prince Bismarck by the Foreign Office of the German Empire. Bismarck made some slight changes in the text. The passages struck out by him are in brackets in this article. Words and letters written in his own hand are in italics.
trade and protecting its Agent, Your Majesty had manifested, also on
Your part, the wish of seeing friendly relations established between
Dahomey and the German Empire. In the meantime I beg to sign,
with highest respect, Your Majesty’s most obedient humble servant

Prince Bismarck
Chancellor of the German Empire.

The above said agent of the Goedelt firm A. Elliot evidently was not a very
suitable person for the delicate task of being the pioneer German merchant in
the region. He behaved tactlessly with respect to the religious ‘customs’ in
Whydah, and the Yovogan and the chiefs of the city complained in Abomey.
Nevertheless, the head of the said German firm, C. Goedelt, stressed in his letter
to Count Hatzfeld, German Minister of State, that the incident with his agent
did not affect the general friendly relations of the Dahomeyan Court towards
Germany and that an expedition should be sent to Abomey to make a treaty
between the two States. This nevertheless did not happen, as it seems, because
of financial and time reasons. The German authorities were afraid of the strange
custom of the Dahomeyan King, to keep European visitors for several months
at his Court, of course mostly at their expenses.

The following is a report on Dahomey written in January 1885 by H. Bey,
Imperial German Consul of Lagos and Porto Novo:

The Dahomeyan power is obviously in decline. Gelele’s despotic
reign and that of his predecessor Ghezo has leaned on a well disciplined
Army of 10 000 men, which formed together with the regiments of the
Amazones* the body guard of the King. The maintenance of this army
and of the Great Court was, as tributes and customs did not exist in
Dahomey, founded on the selling of slaves caught during military
campaigns against the neighbour nations. According to the English
Lieutenant Forbes who was 1850 at Abomey [ . . . ] in the twenties

---

1. Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Potsdam, Reichskolonialamt (further DZA,
R Kol A), Nr. 9028, ff. 44-45.
2. Ibid., Nr. 9029, I. 24.
3. May, 1883.
5. Ibid., Nr. 9030, ff. 20-22. See also Richard F. Burton, A Mission to
6. The original Ms. is of course in German.
7. This also was the general impression Burton got through his visit in
Dahomey as early as 1863 (see Burton, II, p. 85 and elsewhere).
8. See Ibid., pp. 80-84, where the number of soldiers of both sexes and the
force of Dahomeyan army are discussed. See also Frederick E. Forbes,
II, pp. 107-127.
9. This was not so. “Taxes are heavy to all parties [ . . . ]. The holders of
the Customs have collectors stationed at all markets, who receive cowries in
number according to the value of the goods carried for sale. Besides these,
there are collectors on all public roads leading from one district to another, and
on the lagoon on each side of Whydah; in short, every thing is taxed, and the
tax goes to the king” (Forbes, I, p. 35). See also Robert Cornevin, Histoire
du Dahomey, Paris, 1962, p. 120.
and thirty du Souza\(^1\) paid about thirty million dollars\(^2\) to the king Ghezo in exchange for slaves [ . . . ]. Clapperton when travelling from Okeodan northwards found still a long row of thickly inhabited towns and villages, whereas today not even their names and sites are known. The whole Western Yoruba country has been changed into desert by these attacks [ . . . ]. Inhabitants who could not feel safe escaped to Porto-Novo and to the neighbouring districts of Lagos [ . . . ] and there they built many densely inhabited villages which [ . . . ] considerably contributed to the production of the country. The export of Dahomey, on the other hand, was still decreasing and in the present time it makes only one third of the sum which was exported twenty years ago . . . .\(^3\)

Von Frantzius wrote alike in 1888:

> As these all [the king and noblemen] want gains, it is not strange to hear that to the worker from his six days' wages only the reward for four days remains, for one third of it is without saying to be delivered to his nearest chief [ . . . ]. The standing army of the king is estimated at several thousand soldiers; besides he has an amazonian corps of about 5 000 women . . . .\(^4\)

In 1889 the following letter, written in English, was sent "to the German Imperial Commissioner Zimmerer, Sebbe" (Togo):

Dahomey, Zanado Palace

May 12th 1889.

Beg to acknowledge your Favour of calling your attention to the Matter between I. The King of Dahomey and King Tofa of Porto-Novo\(^5\) [ . . . ]. I have written them that what they can do to satisfy me is to catch the king Tofa and send him to me if not they may discharge him from the Thrown (sic) that he may not be any more king [ . . . ] if not during this eight Months time I will cut all the Palm trees in there interior villages and Bombard those Places which there will be no more trade in those Ports [ . . . ]. I beg to call your attention that it was in 1876 the French Gunboat came and fire at my country Whydah\(^*\) which I got the balls here with me at hand. 2nd it is hapened that in 1886 the French brought some Misunderstanding between my Chiefs of Whydah concerning my town Kutonu they said that the Town was given to them, which agreement was made without my knowing or my order\(^7\) [ . . . ]. All these Misunderstandings came from

---

2. I could not find the sum in the Forbes' book. One South American dollar was exchanged for about 4 s. (see FORBES, II, p. 224; and NEWBURY, p. 101).
5. See NEWBURY, p. 128.
6. See CORNEVIN, pp. 291-292; NEWBURY, pp. 103-104.
7. The whole "Traité passé entre la France et le Dahomey" concerning "Cession de Kotonou" (see L. BRUNET & Louis GIETHLEN, *Dahomey et dépendances*, Paris, 1900, pp. 86-87). It is clearly stated there, of course, that the treaty was concluded "au nom de Sa Majesté Glé-Glé, roi de Dahomey, lequel a préalablement pris connaissance du projet de traité et lui a donné son approbation".
the French agents who are trading in my country this was written as a news from me to all the Europeans to see and judge and to know what the Europeans are doing in my country on the coast of Africa. I conclude with my best love

Yours faithfully Friend
For His Majesty King Guélélé of Dahomey
writer Henry A. Dosoo¹.

A year later, Gelele's successor Behanzin wrote to the German Emperor a letter as follows:

Dahomey, Palace of Sinborjee 2nd March 1890.

Dear Friend

Sir I beg to inform your Majesty to known about the Frenchmen came and bombard my country Kutonu [...]. I am ready to receive any German Merchants to come and trade in all my parts as I am now a new King and likes to do a good trade with the Germans and other Europeans only is a law for Dahomey, that Dahomey never give there ground to any body, if any European Merchants wishes to Establish factories in my Countries I am ready to receive him kindly and trade with him and protect him in every point [...]. With my regards to your Majesty yours faithfully Friend for Gbehanzin King of Dahomey.

Secretary sign: Henry A. Dosoo.³

These last two letters mark the end of the correspondence between Germany and Dahomey, and also the end of an independent Dahomeyan State. In November 1892 the German Imperial Commissioner for Togo von Puttkamer wrote⁴ to the Reich Chancellor Count Caprivi:

I have the honour to send to your Excellency two letters from the King of Dahomey to H. M. the Emperor and to the President of the République Française, which were given open to me by the secret messenger of the Chief Kusugan of Whydah [...]. The situation in Dahomey seems to be still the same; every day there are petty skirmishes and clashes of arms; colonel Dodds considers nevertheless his army still too weak, to give the decisive stroke and waits for further increase of his army.

von Puttkamer.⁵

To this, the Emperor added:

There is no reason, in the present state of war, to assume the rôle of negotiator for Gbehanezin, which France could only explain in a false way.

Ad acta 10.1.1893.⁶

1. About him, see Cornevin, p. 292.
2. DZA, R Kol A, Nr. 8976, ff. 29-31.
3. Ibid., Nr. 8977, ff. 27-28.
4. In German.
5. DZA, R Kol A, Nr. 8979, f. 99.
6. Ibid.
The following are original letters by Behanzin:

[on the envelope]
To His Majesty the Emperor of Germany William II
Hamburg (sic)

[inside]
Dahomey 21st October 1892.
To His Majesty the Emperor of Germany William II

Your Majesty

I have the Honour to write these few lines to Your Majesty, whom I take to be my friend since I enter to the throne of my father; — the German Merchants here in my Dominion can always certify that I did take the most interest to the Germans especially; and that my treatment to them has been in a very good; and most friendly way all the time, the Germans here are free they can go at any time they choose; but it is by there own willing, they are staying here in my country and I assure Your Majesty that no harm will hapen to them, under my protection the reason I write this all to Your Majesty is, to give me a help in some way, I have written many times to the Honourable President of France, but as they officers on the here stationer French Vessel refusse to transmis my letter I beg Your Majesty to do me the Favour and forward the enclosed letter to the Honourable President of France, I assure Your Majesty by the help of God that this war was not caused by me or my People, no danger will be hapend to the Germans here from my side, they will be saved in any way, with exception of the bombardment of the French where to I cannot interfere, with most thanks to Your Majesty and best Compliment

I have the Honour to remain
Yours Friend
Gbehanzin
King of Dahomey.

Dahomey le 24 Octobre 1892.

Monsieur Carnot
President de la Republique Francais
Paris

Le Roi de Dahomey Behanzi Aijere vous salu bien. Il me charge de vous ecrir le evenment de 1890 que au bout de 10 jour apres qui il avez pris le trônee de son Père que Mr. J. Bayol, avait fait la guerri avec lui, et nous avons de já fait la paix et fini la question. Maintenant

1. On the whole, the English one seems to be written by himself, in his own hand. The French one is composed as written by a second person on charge, but it seems to me that both handwritings are by the same person, though some differences occur, caused probably by the existence of different standard scripts in the two languages.

2. Both letters are written on ordinary paper in violet ink. They both bear in the left corner above an oval mark, probably of a rubber stamp: “Gbehanzin King of Dahomey”.

3. DZA, R Kol A, Nr. 8979, f. 100.
MILAN KALOUS

je viens de vous informer la raison de cet guerri qui se trouve entre moi et vous. Les 3 Pays nommés Béconu, Ketin, et Douba sont les nations le temps de mon Grand Père avaient porté la guerre à Dahomey et brûler les Parlement ; pour ça tous les Rois de Dahomey ne manquaient pas de porter la guerre à ces Pays ; et je avais écrir à M. Amiral Cavaleri Cuvervil [...] le mois de Août 1890 et lui expliqué que ces pays partient à Dahomey, que les Rois de ces pays sont nommés par mon Père, et quan j'étais le trône ils ont tuer Gens de Dahomey, et ils ont pris mes femme et comme je entendu dire-cella jai envoyez la guerri a ces Pays pour leur prendre avant arriver de mes troup est ces Pays ils ont tous fuir alors mes troup est brûler leur maison ; et M. Ballot envoyez son petit Vapeur avec des troup Francais et ils ont tirer sur mes troup et mes troup aussi sont tirer sur eux, et quand je entendu cela jai disais que cela nest pas bon alors jai fais tuer 4 Chef de guerri qui est Dahomien par ce que ils ons tirer sur les troup Francais sans consentement, et jai fais changer 9 Chef de Guerri pour le meme motif. C'est vrais que mes troup on la raison mais ils on tirer sur les troup francais sans mes permission [...] et jai écrir M. Ballot de venir [...] pour nous parler il ne veux pas venir [...] lorsque jai envoyez quelque recad. pour vous les Officier de Porto Novo, ne vous envoi pas et quand que je parle bien de vous les Officier disent tout au contraire, ils ont dit que jai vous insulté cest pas vrais ne le croyez pas [...] Alors les Francais on commencé à Bombadié Whydah et tout les Pays que ma appartient [...] les Francais sont arranger de faire passer la guerri pa lagune nommé Hôme, et la ils ont combattu avec mes troup je fais retirer mes troup jusqu'à mon Pays nommé Côtonou les troup Francais sont venir jusqu'à la [...] je ne veux pas faire la guerri avec la France ne aucun Europien, par ce que tous sont mes ami veuillez envoyez un Officier pour venir me trouver a Dahomey pour nous parler [...] pour empecher tous les entrie quand vous voulez me parler vous me enverez quelqu'un et moi aussi je ferai la meme chose [...] je voi le etat de la question entre moi et votre Officier, je pense que je me suis entrie par eux contre a vous [...] Ici je vous fait voir le ami que j'ai à la France, quand que les agent des deux Factoris Francais, de Monsieur Manti freres & Borelli de Regis Aine, & M. C. F. Fabre & Cie, sont parler leur Employes, que sont charge par l'ordre des Gerants a garder les Factoris, pendant leur absent, et ces Employes ils ont fait vol de 3 2 apeu près, quand que jai attendu ça jai fait mes Autorité de Whydah pour leur prisoner, et faire la justice le prezence de Consule Allemagne, et pour rendre l'argent a lui pour qui lui fait garder a maison Fabre [...] Le grand Bombadiament de 9 Août je voir que je suis obligé ordiner mes Autorité de Whydah a retirer tous les Marchandes qui se trouve dans les deux Factoris [...] pour que ne perte rien [...] Le 7 de courrant jai ecrir une lettre à M. Ballot avec la liste de Consule Allemagne, et lui demande pour faire la paix que je ne veux pas faire la guerri avec la France et le 16 jai le meme chose au M. Ballot et une lettre au M. Do

3. Probably Ouémé (see Cornevin, pp. 339-343).
4. The date is exact (1892). See Brunet & Giethlen, p. 142 ; and Cornevin, p. 342.
Dodd Lieutenant Colonel jusqu’a ce jour je n’ai aucun réponse, et tous les deux lettres sont embarquées à bord de Navire de Guerre Français que se trouve sur le Rad de Whydah je fait tous ces-chose pour bien des deux pays France & Dahomey, et surtout votre officier et Gouverneur de Porto Novo, M. Ballot ne voulez pas entendu rien que faire la guerre. Moi de ma parti je ne veux pas faire la guerre avec un Ami pas ce que cet huante ici a la Afrique. Je vian de vous expliqué l’autre chose que votre officier avait pratique avec moi au arrivé de M. Lieutenant Colonel Dodd, le 28 Mai à la Côte il me avait écrire une lettre le 2 juin que vien charge par vous pour décider la question qui se trouve entre Dahomey, et la France, et moi j’ai lui repondui avec plaisir comme un Ami et je lui envoyé mon Baton avec mes Messager et une lettre pour lui salue de bon arrivé et lui avez garder mon Baton jusqu’a ce jour j’ai lui demande il ne veux pas me envoyez sont les manier que votre officier avait fait avec moi, et moi je reconnatre France toujours comme mon Ami, et je ne veux pas être jamais mal avec la France, Toufa à Porto Novo, qui voulez mettre ça entre nous.

Veuillez agreez monsieur President mes sincere salutation.

Sa Majesté ROI de Dahomey
Behanzi Aijere.

1. The date is exact (1892). See Cornevin, p. 341.
2. DZA, R Kol A, Nr. 8979, f. 100.