On the African Role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Dahomey.
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Between the end of the seventeenth century and the end of the nineteenth some seven million Africans were transported from the west coast of Africa to the American continent and the West Indies, many of them from the Dahomean port of Whydah. According to Pierre Verger, the French ethnologist who has studied the trade in depth, in the four years between 1706 and 1710, one hundred and fourteen boats full of merchandise left Bahia for the Slave Coast to return with the labor force needed to work the mines of precious metals. These transactions, known as the slave trade, connote the existence of a full-scale economic affair: seller or supplier (Africans), buyer, representing demand (Portuguese, or in general whites), commodity (the slaves), and compensation (imported merchandise). The supply of slaves seems to have paralleled the rising demand for slaves: the trans-Atlantic slave trade flourished from the middle of the seventeenth century, when the demand for slaves to work in the mines and plantations of the New World began, and not prior to that date, in spite of the long-term presence of whites. Consequently, the Africans appear to have turned to capturing and dealing in slaves as a response to the demand for them. Ergo: these activities must have been deemed profitable by the Africans.

The connotation of the term slave trade and the recording of it

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2. Verger, 1964, pp. 10-12; 368 boats between 1681 and 1710.
are not alone in implying economic transaction. The large amount of published material on the precolonial, traditional kingdom of Dahomey, written in the main by visiting slave traders and ship captains, and the much less extensive publication since the end of the nineteenth century suggest the same. Melville Herskovits calls Dahomey a slave trading kingdom. Karl Polanyi devotes an entire book to the slave trade *qua* the Dahomean economy. The Nigerian historian I. A. Akinjogbin considers the slave trade to be Dahomey's international trade. In the article cited above, J. D. Fage examines "three widely held and influential views about slavery and the slave trade in West Africa," which, as do all the above sources, appear to take for granted that Africans were engaged in wars to capture slaves to trade them for profit. Thus, while views differ concerning the amount and effects of the slave trade, there is no apparent hesitation in projecting European attitudes concerning slaves and trade onto the African side.

These conclusions stem from the writers' view of precolonial Dahomey as a political entity headed by a sovereign king whose unique role in the slave trade is interpreted as an economic activity in and of the kingdom which he is presumed to have represented politically. From the very earliest accounts Dahomey was referred to as a kingdom and its apparent head as king. Following Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's now famous classification of African political systems, Dahomey was ranked in the "primitive state" category, thus reinforcing previously-held opinion. With Dahomey considered to be a state and the king in Abomey its political head, all economic activities (including the slave trade) were taken to be the economic activities of the state and the attitudes and motivations of the African participants in these activities to be the attitudes and motivations of the European participants. Upon analysis of the traditional political system during a recent field study in Dahomey, I have found sufficient evidence to suggest modification of the interpretation of Dahomey as a state. Although this does not negate the fact which, in my opinion, Evans-Pritchard intended to show—that Dahomey was a complex society or a complex political system, more so than the Tallensi for example—it does modify the hitherto believed *nature* of this complexity, which

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in turn bears direct relevance to the nature of the activities related to the slave trade itself.

Pointing out some of the salient features of the traditional Dahomean system, I intend to underline the following suggestions concerning the slave trade in Dahomey:

1. The *profit* motivation of the African kings in the slave trade was minimal, or altogether non-existent.
2. The *slave raids* were not carried out for the purpose of selling those captured to white traders.
3. The *Africans were not slaves* in the same sense prior to and after their transfer to white hands.
4. It is safe to assume that, apart from the king, *few other Africans* were involved in the “trade”.

There is no intention on my part of refuting all existing arguments concerning the slave trade, but rather of arguing that through shift of focus to analysis of relevant aspects of the traditional political system, the questions of slavery and the slave trade will gain a new dimension. I do not therefore question the facts that Africans turned over captured African slaves to European traders and that the Africans received something in return, but I do question our unanimous attribution of the particular motives or attitudes in their doing so. To point out the particular reason(s) for any aspect of slavery can make a world of difference, quite similar to the recognition, legal and otherwise, of the wide variety of motives, condemnable in differing degrees, for one man's taking the life of another.

It would be outside the scope of this short paper to analyze in detail the Dahomean kingdom's political structure, its foundation and history. It seems sufficient to refer in a summary form to some of its principles.

Dahomey was a complex social system composed of a large number of politically autonomous units. There appear to be two basic principles of this social system: a) the ancestor cult, an all-encompassing socio-religious creed, "the focal point of Dahomean social organization,"\(^1\) and b) kinship relations, a basis for all social units. One may think of the first as the vertical line of relationship connecting people to their real or mythical ancestors, and of the second as the horizontal line of relationship interconnecting the living into social units.

These principles, common with minor variations to all peoples of the Benin civilization, are the core of all social life and are much too abstract for schematic description. They are much more than an individual's belonging to his beloved relatives and laying flowers on the graves of the dead on every anniversary. Serpos Tijdani, a noted Dahomean ethnologist, writes:

\(^1\) Herskovits, I, p. 194.
“Individualism, as it is known in Europe, did not exist in Black Africa. Each man was a part of a group which in turn was an integral part of a collectivity [. . .]. The collectivity is the reunion of several big families united by blood relationship and the allegiance to a common ancestor [. . .]. The biggest kinship group is that of people united in the cult of the same mythical ancestor; this is the Ako of the Fon that one can translate as tribe.”

Thus the individual belonged to his lineage, on what has been termed above the horizontal level of kinship relations which gave him the framework of his earthly life. The lineage in turn was part of a clan, through the mythical figure of the founder (the vertical level, the ancestor cult). The living and the dead together formed the Dahomean society; the founder was the link with the dead and only a society with a founder would stay together. Therefore, a very clear distinction can be made between the authority on the vertical clan level, which may be called religious or ritual, and authority on the horizontal lineage level, which can be called political.

The king in Abomey was the representative of the ancestors of all Fon (Dahomeans), and as such was the ritual head of all Dahomeans. In this capacity of ritual leader the king performed the Annual Customs, a most important institution as far as the slave trade is concerned. The Annual Customs were a series of ceremonies held in Abomey (sometimes several years apart) where, theoretically at least, every Dahomean had to attend or be represented. The central feature of the Customs was the sacrifice of human beings who were to serve the ancestors in the other world. The Annual Customs were also the occasion for the presentation of gifts to the king, distribution of presents by him to Dahomeans, and rendering justice in cases brought before him.

Several European visitors had the opportunity to attend the Customs, and reported on them, focusing, quite understandably, on the human sacrifices which took place. One cannot doubt that, to the observer discounting or not knowing the social structure of Dahomey, the Annual Customs would appear as a demonstration of power on the part of a king in front of his subjects who, by their attendance and active participation, demonstrated their subjugation to him. The other events were attributed to additional manifestations of the powerful and tyrannical king. This image was transmitted to Europe and has been held in large part since.

Putting the same events in different perspective will give a different

picture. The Annual Customs served the ritual function of renewing the ties between the living and their ancestors through the earthly link of the king. Sacrifices were part of the ritual worship of the ancestors and those sacrificed were destined to serve the dead ancestors. This is a religious belief, not at all unique to Dahomey or to Africa, and necessitates neither explanation nor defense. Only captives and criminals were sacrificed; no free Dahomean was sacrificed, so that no Dahomean’s life was at the “mercy” of a “tyrannical king”. Human beings were needed for the Customs; and since no Dahomean could be sacrificed (except those guilty of major crimes), other humans had to be captured, which was done in the Annual Wars which preceded the Annual Customs. It cannot be proved unequivocally that all wars were waged for the purpose of acquiring captives for the annual ceremonies, but it also appears incorrect to assume that Dahomey was a slave trading state in the sense that it waged wars solely, or mainly, for the purpose of capturing slaves for sale. It appears that the socio-religious aspects of war were far more important than its economic aspects. Polanyi himself points out that “no additional profit through the sale of slaves would induce the king to spare a single victim from the number required [for the sacrifice to the ancestors].” Herskovits also speaks of “the surplus of slaves who could be sold out of the country.” But most revealing is the oft-referred to statement of the Dahomean king Kpengla made to Dalzel in the 1790’s:

“Your countrymen therefore, who allege that we go to war for the purpose of supplying your ships with slaves, are gravely mistaken [. . .]. In the name of my ancestors and myself I aver, that no Dahomean man ever embarked in war merely for the sake of procuring wherewithal to purchase your commodities [. . .]. We do, indeed, sell to the white men a part of our prisoners, and we have a right so to do. Are not all prisoners at the disposal of their captors? [. . .] You have seen me kill many men at the Customs [. . .]. Some heads I order to be placed at my door; others to be strewed about the market-place, that people may stumble upon them when they little expect such a sight. This gives a grandeur to my Customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy [. . .]. If I should neglect this indispensible duty, would my ancestors suffer me to live? Would they not trouble me day and night, and say, that I sent nobody to serve them; that I was only solicitous

2. See Burton, p. 201 (“The annual slave-hunts, here dignified by the name of ‘wars’”): Herskovits, II, pp. 97-98; Polanyi, p. 36.
3. W. J. Argyle (The Fon of Dahomey: a History and Ethnography of the Old Kingdom, Oxford, 1966) draws the most explicit correlation between the Customs and the Wars.
4. Polanyi, p. 35.
5. Herskovits, I, p. 100 (emphasis is mine).
about my own name, and forgetful of my ancestors? [. . .] The few that can
be spared from this necessary celebration, we sell to the white man."1

From the evidence presented here, it appears that war in Dahomey
fulfilled two functions. First, it was waged to capture men for the
sacrifices to the ancestors, which was an “indispensible duty” of the
king, and his exclusively. The number of captives required for sacri-
fices were set aside and only those left over were used as replacements
for fallen Dahomeans or were transferred to the European traders.
The second function of war was to enlarge the society, or, in Argyle’s
words, “the destruction of one social group to the benefit of another.”2
These were the societies raided for slaves.

The question that arises here is not whether the procedures of the
Annual Customs are fact or not. Numerous observers report on the
undeniable existence of this ceremony. The question is the inter-
pretation of these facts, their meaning. The prevailing interpretations
seem to be that the Annual Customs were regular ceremonies, a show,
during which sacrifices were made. Here I argue that the Annual
Customs were The Sacrifice Holding, i.e. The Ancestor Worship, and
that whatever happened there was an integral part of Ancestor Worship,
including the allocation of ‘captives’ for the ‘purchase’ of additional
weapons to secure more ‘sacrifices’—and not a part of a ‘show’.

Another important activity carried out at the Annual Customs
was the collection of taxes by the king and the redistribution by the
king of these taxes and of the material received in exchange for the
slaves. The slave trade, together with ‘taxation’, were institutionally
distinct from markets, and belonged, to use Polanyi’s term, to the
“state sphere.” The local or neighborhood trade carried out in village
markets was an entirely separate entity, the “non-state” or “state-
free” sphere. While in the state sphere redistribution was the main
pattern, reciprocity and householding were dominant in the non-state
sphere. The great redistributive ceremony took place during the
Annual Customs. There the king, who had received cowrie shells
(which were used as money), cloth, guns, and other items from the
European traders in exchange for slaves, distributed cowrie and other
imports among the Dahomeans. All the participants at the same
ceremony, as many as thirty or forty thousand, then presented gifts
to the king, who in turn redistributed the gifts among them. “These
formal gift exchanges celebrated Dahomey’s wealth and power.”3

1. Argyle, pp. 81-82; quoted from Archibald Dalzel (Governor at
Whyda, etc.), The History of Dahomey, an Inland Kingdom of Africa (London,
1793, pp. 217-221) which is also referred to in Journal of African History articles.
3. Polanyi, pp. 35-36. See also Herskovits, I, pp. 96 ff.
Taxes in a modern European society are collected for the purpose of converting them into *public community* goods and services. Taxes fulfill, primarily, an *economic* function; without them there would be no roads, education, garbage collection, etc. In Dahomean society taxes, it appears, fulfilled primarily an *integrative* function, an expression of loyalty to the king and to the social unit as a whole. The rationale behind the redistribution of the ‘taxes’ and the payments can better be understood if they are conceived to be performing an integrative function, quite similar to the Western giving of presents. Polanyi correctly recognized the redistributive character of the economic activity related to the slave trade at the annual ceremonies in Abomey. To misname it “state-economy” or “international trade” seems neither appropriate nor useful.

The following schematic description is intended to show the place of the slave trade and the importance of the annual ceremonies in Dahomey. Captives taken during the annual raids were brought to the ceremonies where some of them were sacrificed to the ancestors, some of them were set aside to be absorbed over several generations by the Dahomean society (sometimes referred to as the group of slaves retained for work on the king’s plantations); and some were transferred to European slave traders’ hands to be transported to the New World.

![Diagram showing the flow of captives and their ultimate destinations](attachment://diagram.png)

This analysis, as well as the schema, depicts a static picture, refers to a principle, and does not go into eventual deviations from this principle. In other words, while it is argued that the Dahomeans did, in all probability, not set out to war to capture merchandise (i.e. slaves), but rather to capture foreigners to absorb and to sacrifice, it is possible that the king in Abomey had, especially in the nineteenth century, become more attentive to the trade aspect. The reasons for this changing awareness, however, should be seen in a proper perspective and *not* be generalized to become the guiding element in the principle itself.

The trading activities were carried out mainly in Whydah between the king’s representative, the *yovogan*, and the European traders.
There were also European missions from Whydah to Abomey for various reasons, among them for the purpose of buying up slaves. According to Newbury, in the twenty years between 1843 and 1863, sixteen or seventeen such “formal representations” visited Abomey. There is no evidence of European slave trading installations in Dahomey other than at Whydah, and the restrictions placed on European traders there are well-known. There was no European settlement other than on the coast. In sum, apart from the king and those employed at the embarkation port of Whydah, Dahomeans did not necessarily have to be involved in the process of the slave trade. The role of yovogan or white chief, was filled by Francisco de Souza, a Brazilian trader, not an African one, whose sphere of activities and relationship with the Dahomean king are indication of the degree and the kind of influence a slave trader might have had (or did have).

Francisco de Souza first arrived in Whydah in 1788 from Brazil, probably as a political exile, and died there in 1849. His first known ‘political’ activity was his alliance with Guezo against King Adandozan, Guezo’s brother. In 1818, the year Guezo became king, de Souza—known also as the chacha—was named yovogan in Whydah; and in that capacity as personal representative of the king, all trade at Whydah went through his hands. To this office was coupled the title of director of the Portuguese fort, near to which the de Souza compound was located. He was in effect the powerful ruler of Whydah with influence much wider than his titles might indicate. De Souza and Guezo were close friends, to their mutual benefit. De Souza was an important, if not the only, supplier of arms and ammunition to King Guezo. He helped to organize the Dahomean army to be more effective in supplying him, de Souza, with slaves, his major commercial enterprise. With his help Guezo reorganized and enlarged the army of the Amazons. Upon becoming the governor or viceroy of Whydah, de Souza became directly responsible for the administrative organization of the growing trade in Whydah and of the relations of Abomey with the outside world. With the decline of the slave

3. The historical accounts are conflicting. According to some, Adandozan was only a regent for the young Guezo. Others claim that Adandozan was king, but unlawfully. Argyle (pp. 34-37) cites the various opinions and quotes Guezo as saying, when he was urged to depose his brother, that “he could not displace the rightful king unless a sign had been given that the ancestors had disowned Adanzan” (p. 37).
trade because of the more effective control of the seas by the European powers, he induced Guezo gradually to adopt the development of legitimate trade, and introduced the palm plantations around Abomey which later supplied important export products.

De Souza was only one of the several Brazilian traders established in Whydah who had considerable personal influence in the years before the French occupation. They were instrumental in arranging audiences with the king, from whom they sought to secure permission for the newcomers' activities. The point that it seems appropriate to make here is that de Souza, or the role of the yovogan, was more an extension, an agent, of the European side of the transaction rather than of the African side. So was Whydah, the town, an extension of the white trading establishment, rather than of the Dahomey kingdom.

In conclusion it seems appropriate to emphasize that very little is known factually concerning the African role in the slave trade. Much of what is believed to have been that role is inference from the hitherto assumed role of the king in Dahomean society coupled with projections made from the actions and attitudes of the European side of the trade onto the African side. (The term 'king' itself connotes supreme political authority to engage, i.a. in international trade for the economic development of the kingdom he rules.)

It is suggested here, basically as an inference from a re-analysis of the role of the king, that the 'slave raids' were not carried out for the purpose of selling those captured but for the glorification and the aggrandizement of Dahomey (by means of sacrifice and absorption), the prime function of the king in his ritual role in the society. The surplus captives were exchanged for weapons and gifts, and were then sold as slaves by the European trader, quite possibly together with others that the latter, with his own men, had hunted. The weapons he gave the Dahomeans were used in the Annual Wars and the gifts redistributed to Dahomeans at the Annual Customs. Dahomey was not a slave trading state and slaves were not a trading item in the Dahomean economy, but Dahomey was a society dominated by the ancestor cult and had an economy based on agriculture. Traditional Dahomey should be freed both from the moral accusations of existing on trade in humans as well as from the white man's 'generosity' of attributing to it, almost as a compensation, a complex, centralized political system.

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