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Wives and warriors
The royal women of Dahomey as representatives of the kingdom

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In Ryan Coogler’s comic-based film *Black Panther* (2018), women play integral roles in the fictional kingdom of Wakanda as queen mother, princess, spy, council members, and warriors. The principal bodyguard of the king, Okoye, leads the elite corps of female warriors known as the Dora Milaje, who wear red armor, have clean shaven heads, and carry spears made of the fictitious potent metal vibranium. At the film’s climax, their choreographed attack on the antagonist Killmonger constitutes a display of Black female representation full of courage, grace, and power, anomalous in mainstream media.

While influences for the costumes and weaponry of the Dora Milaje have roots in the Maasai and Turkana peoples of east Africa,¹ the notion of an African female army has a precedent in the precolonial west African kingdom of Dahomey (c. 1645–1894). Not unlike those in Wakanda, royal women of Dahomey played significant roles in the kingdom’s politics, religion, and military endeavors. Visual and spatial indicators of their importance, in the forms of regalia, uniforms, and palace architecture, functioned as signifiers of the kingdom within and without its borders. Beginning likely in the mid-eighteenth century, every male officer in the royal court had a corresponding female position. Moreover, Dahomey’s female military troops were famous for their fierceness in combat. In addition to representing the kingdom on the battlefield, these women became signifiers of Dahomey in French publications and exhibitions abroad. Though the king functioned as Dahomey’s political head, royal women played crucial roles in representing the kingdom within the palace, in religious ceremonies, on the battlefield, and in international media.

Royal women in the palace of Dahomey

The kings of Dahomey ruled from a large palace complex located in the precolonial capital of Abomey in the present-day Republic of Benin. Just as the borders of the kingdom expanded with the conquests of various kings, the Palace of Dahomey evolved throughout the kingdom’s history. Over the course of the Dahomean dynasty, from King Huegbadja, who settled in Abomey in the early to mid-seventeenth century, to King Behanzin, who was exiled by the French colonists in 1894, the earthen palace complex expanded until it ultimately covered more than 108 acres, was surrounded by a wall approximately two and half miles long, and housed...
several thousand people, almost all of whom were women. Access into the royal palace was highly restricted. Robert B. Edgerton explains, “Royal palaces helped to symbolize the king’s separateness and his greatness. No one could enter any of his palaces without his invitation, and except for eunuchs, no man did so after sunset.”

The inner-most courtyards of the palace constituted the residential quarters of the king, royal women, and some slaves and eunuchs. The palace evolved to maintain a female interior/male exterior dichotomy, which provided royal women with a privileged closeness to the monarch but also separated them from the outside population. Royal women had primary access to the king and controlled access to him. They were the first to know when a king died and sometimes had a hand in determining royal succession. As the numbers of royal women within the palace increased, they developed an economy whereby they were able to earn money and spend it in an exclusively female market located within the palace precinct.

The reigns of the nineteenth-century kings Guezo (r. 1818–58) and Glele (r. 1858–89) are remembered as a golden age of Dahomean history. The kingdom was politically stable, facilitating economic growth, diplomatic relations with foreigners, and an increase in the number of wives at court. While exact numbers are difficult to gage, somewhere between 5000 and 8000 ahosi, wives or followers of the king, as well as slaves, royal daughters, and female descendants of past kings, resided in the Abomey palace. These ahosi included the corps of female warriors, discussed at length later, which became more regimented and notorious during this period.

While the kings’ wives and many of the princesses resided in the palace, princes over 10 years of age were forced to leave. King Agadja (r. circa 1716–40) established a school for the royal sons, called the Vihondji. A male descendant of the king remained with his mother in the palace until the age of 10, when he was sent to the Vihondji for an education. Here, he learned the qualities of composure, firmness, and resilience. After 10 years of schooling, each prince returned to report to the king on the success of his education, at which time the king, if satisfied, would grant permission for a prince to marry and establish a private home. Generally, only one of each generation of princes would reside in the palace again as king, and not until his predecessor had died.

Dahomean kings maintained sexual control over their wives even when they had occasion to leave the palace walls. Laws forbade anyone to look at these women. Touching one of the ahosi was grounds for execution. When leaving the palace, for whatever reason, each wife was accompanied by three or four female servants. One of these former servants, a Yoruba woman, explained in an interview: “If one of the king’s wives was going out two female servants would go before and two behind. The two in front would shout, so no one would see them on the way, A fe su sijaa me dagbe! A king’s wife is coming!” She explained that one of the servants used a hand gong as an additional warning. Upon hearing the call or gong, citizens would evacuate the area. John Duncan, who visited the kingdom of Dahomey in 1845–46, described his experience thus: “The moment this bell is heard all persons, whether male or female, turn their backs, but the males must retire to a certain distance. In passing through the town this is one of the most intolerable nuisances.” J. Alfred Skertchly, in his nineteenth-century travel account, made it more vivid when he wrote that with an approaching wife on the road, men and women were forced to “hurry from the path as though a man-eating tiger were approaching.” In this way, the king was able to maintain spatial protection of his wives legally to compensate for what he lacked architecturally.

On other occasions, however, royal women were displayed under the king’s strict surveillance. In addition to accompanying the king while he received guests in the palace, women took part in processions outside the palace walls. Well-dressed women often ushered the king to ceremonial and political events. In the annual “display of wealth,” observed as one of a series of
ceremonies and celebrations known as the Annual Customs, women were among those carrying and displaying wealth objects. Using royal wives for this served a two-fold purpose. The king, in this manner, was able to display not only his wealth but also his wives as wealth. Both were indications of the king’s power and control, the former showing an economic power and the latter a social and sexual power.

When the larger public was invited to observe such a procession, special precautions were made. In 1772, Robert Norris observed a procession of the royal women during which “a number of men under arms were drawn up at a distance, to prevent the populace from approaching them.” As the kings of Dahomey expanded their borders, they often chose wives from every conquered lineage and thus used their wives not only to display their economic, sexual, and military power but also as a symbolic gesture of their political power over the various peoples of the kingdom.

In his nineteenth-century account, Richard Burton describes a procession in which women of rank were carrying sticks of office. Certain also fulfilled administrative duties. For every male office in the royal court, there was a corresponding female position. Even the king had a reign mate, known as the , who acted as his female counterpart. The establishment of this gender-balanced court likely began with the reign of King (r. 1740–74), whose mother, , aided him in overcoming opposition to the throne. Both male and female officers wore robes, traditional men’s gowns, with distinct appliquéd patches sewn onto them. Richard Burton, in his report to the Ethnological Society of London, explained, “With regard to the position of women, it must be remembered that the king has two courts, masculine and feminine. The former never enters the inner palace, the latter never quits it except on public occasions.” Thus, these gender divisions had spatial manifestations in terms of the palace. Male and female court ministers had corresponding names. Burton explains, “There are, for instance, the female Mingan and the man Mingan, the she Meu and the he Meu, and the woman officer is called the ‘no,’ or mother of the man.” Thus, in title, the feminine positions, through this maternal designation, were granted a slight privilege over the male, just as spatially they were granted access to the privileged palace interior. These women fulfilled administrative duties and functioned as an integral part of the kingdom’s government. Gender balance in the kingdom of Dahomey extended beyond the court ministers and into the military.

**Royal women as warriors**

As Dahomey was an expansionist and slave-trading state, war became a regular part of its political agenda. Unlike many of its neighbors, whose armies disbanded after a conflict’s end, Dahomey maintained a standing army. In fact, the kings of Dahomey eventually maintained two armies, one female, who resided in the palace, and the other male, whose quarters were outside the palace complex. Though considered , the king’s female soldiers served a unique function. These were warriors, trained to expand the kingdom’s borders and provide the king with slaves and sacrificial victims. They often performed dances, songs, and reenactments of battle at ceremonial court functions. On such occasions, they praised the king, declared their loyalty, and demonstrated their desire to fight ruthlessly in his name.

As sources vary, it is difficult to make definite conclusions about the formation of the corps of Dahomean female warriors. Oral sources recount a band of elephant huntresses known as the , who served the court as far back as King Huegbadja (r. circa 1645–85). Some sources credit Tassi Hangbé, daughter of Huegbadja and twin sister to Akaba (r. 1685–1708), who likely served as regent for several years after her brother’s death. It seems plausible that she would have had an armed female guard to protect her person in the palace during her regency. There
is evidence that her successor, Agadja (r. circa 1716–40), used armed women in a 1729 battle to march in the back of his army in order to increase its size sufficiently to scare off their opponents, but not necessarily to fight.19

King Kpengla (r. 1774–89), in 1781, marched at the head of 800 armed women, whom historian Edna Bay concludes would have been his palace guard, to battle at Agoonah.20 Some contemporary oral sources credit Guezo (r. 1818–58) with the creation of the corps of female warriors and mention the previous incidents of armed women as merely his inspiration. To be credited with the establishment of a standing female army, Guezo must have developed and strengthened the already armed palace guard and set them apart as their own corps. Their development may have been impelled by the increasingly disproportionate female to male ratios caused by the Trans-Atlantic slave market.21

Unlike other West African armies, Dahomean troops wore uniforms. By the mid-nineteenth century, male and female soldiers of Dahomey dressed in distinctive apparel for battle and ceremony. While the battle uniforms went through several iterations, they tended to be somber in color: browns, whites, blues, grays, and blue and white stripes, and for the women, they generally consisted of shorts that extended to just below the knee, a sleeveless tunic that went to the mid-thigh, and a waist sash to hold the tunic close and carry weapons and other items.22 Female scouts wore an additional grass skirt over their uniform.23 Several visitors to the kingdom mention that female warriors wore caps or headbands, each appliquéd with a symbol such as a crocodile, shark, cross, or crown to show rank or regiment.24

For celebration and ceremony at home, costumes were more colorful, used finer fabrics, and took liberties with the styles, such as the use of knee- or ankle-length skirts to replace the shorts.25 Uniformed and armed, the Dahomean army acted as an impressive visual indicator of power. As stated by Edgerton, “When Dahomey’s large professional army of both men and women paraded, their numbers, flamboyance, and military menace dramatically reaffirmed the king’s authority.”26 Unlike other ahosi, the female warriors met with men on the battleground without any physical barriers to separate them. However, though they paraded and fought aside men, they were still technically wives of the king, who maintained sexual control over them and executed anyone who sexually defiled one of his female warriors.

This corps of female warriors became known in colonial accounts and abroad as the Amazons of Dahomey. As women who were feared for their military prowess, they upset expectations of nineteenth-century European gender roles, thereby provoking curiosity abroad. They contributed to France’s justification for colonization under the dictates of the Mission Civilisatrice. French ideology conflated notions of civilization with principles of mastery and restraint: over the body, nature and disease, and social behavior.27 In both illustrated newspapers and public expositions, Dahomey was presented as desperate for the imperial imposition of this principle of mastery. Notorious among westerners for its human sacrifices, warmongering kings, and Amazon warriors, Dahomey became “an archetype of depraved savagery, its name synonymous with barbarism.”28

The popular “penny press” papers, the Petit Journal and Petit Parisien, began to include illustrated supplements in 1889, just in time for the Franco-Dahomean wars.29 On March 15, 1890, two weeks after the outbreak of fighting in Cotonou, Le Monde Illustré published a full-page image of female Dahomean warriors in the thick of battle, claiming the heads of their battle victims and wielding guns. The next day, on March 16, 1890, the Petit Parisien published a full-page, six-image montage on Dahomey which included depictions of human sacrifice — skewered heads, a snake-filled “Python Temple” in Ouidah, and the famous Amazon warriors (see Figure 22.1). This largest, centrally placed image portrays three female warriors facing their approaching enemy, one lunging forward aiming her rifle, one running with her gun held high, and one armed with a knife in one hand, a trophy head in the other, and a foot planted on her
recently decapitated victim. These images, starkly contrasted with the portrayal of the composed, uniformed French colonial administrator Jean Bayol in the page’s upper right-hand corner, did more to endorse colonial expansion than to promote accuracy and educate the public on current events. These and other such images of Dahomey enjoyed a wide circulation with the general public, thereby presenting the French “with a vivid picture of the new opponents which colored all subsequent debate on intervention.”

Dahomey’s infamy was likewise perpetuated in public exhibitions. The “World’s Fair” forum, which had been used to demonstrate and promote progress in the scientific and technological realms (including geographic discoveries), by the end of the nineteenth century began incorporating exhibits of colonial acquisitions. Displays of human menagerie and fictive architecture, like the newspaper engravings, were framed through colonial eyes and manipulated to meet political agendas, but in a more immediate and degrading way. For an audience whose opinions of Africans had been tainted by the civilizing cause and by theories of Social Darwinism, witnessing their physical presence in the demeaning state of display and in theatrical reenactments of historic events provided tangible evidence to reinforce those pre-established notions. Dahomey’s female army continued to be used as stock signifiers of the kingdom for these events.

Figure 22.1 Illustration published in the *Petit Parisien* on March 16, 1890.
Dahomey was one of the cultures that occupied the Chicago Midway during the famous Columbian Exposition of 1893. The Midway Plaisance, interspersed with an animal show, a Ferris wheel, and other fair sensations, consisted of a mile-long series of exhibits displaying different ethnic groups arranged roughly from what was considered savage to civilized by most Americans. Occupying the west end, along with the East Indian and American Indian Villages, and across from “Captive Ballooning,” the Dahomey Village featured war dances and battle reenactments. Over the entrance to this exhibit a sign read, “Dahomey Village, Benin French Colony, West Africa Coast” (see Figure 22.2). It was crowned by a French flag and flanked by parallel images of a French colonial officer waving his white pith helmet over his head triumphantly and a female Dahomean warrior holding high a severed head as a war trophy. In addition, two life-size, full-length portraits of bare-breasted female warriors armed with weapons and trophy heads were set down at the viewers’ level. Although this exhibition took place in the United States, the billowing tri-color and painted colonial officer, as well as the focus on violence in the depictions and performances of the Dahomeans, indicate a condoning of the colonial cause, while the Midway’s general layout and content reveal the pervading racism of the period.

While Dahomey continued to be included in the grand, occasional, international expositions, such as the 1900 Paris World Fair and the colonial exposition held in Marseille in 1922, it also became a subject for the smaller venues. The Jardin D’Acclimatation located outside Paris started doing ethnographic exhibits in 1877. For Dahomey, exhibitions in 1891 and 1893 transpired directly following the Dahomean wars and included war dances, mock battles, and military exercises. Le Casino de Paris had staged performances by the same group of Amazon

Figure 22.2 Entrance to the Dahomey Village at the Columbian Exposition, 1893, Chicago. Reprinted with permission from the Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.
warriors who performed in the Chicago Columbian Exposition, and those who performed in the spring of 1891 in the Parisian Gardens went on to perform in Prague the next year.  

The portrayal of Dahomeans in both the press and the expositions shaped and were shaped by colonial agendas in regards to Dahomey’s governance. The same female warriors whose fighting instilled fear in Dahomey’s neighbors before colonization became objects of curiosity and justification for colonial endeavors as the French usurped and held power. The French ruled the former kingdom of Dahomey as part of a larger colony, also called Dahomey, from 1894 to 1960. They exiled both King Behanzin (r. 1889–94), the last independent king, who had set fire to the royal palace in 1892 so as not to have it fall into enemy hands, and King Agoli-agbo (r. 1894–1900), who despite being appointed by the French, was not loyal to them. The colony’s first governor, Victor Ballot, while working to restore a portion of the Dahomey palace complex, strategically also built several colonial administration buildings within it, from which he initially governed. Ballot’s manipulation of the royal architecture was meant to symbolically demonstrate the rise of the new colonial regime and the demise of the old monarchy. Despite colonial efforts to dislodge the power and significance of the precolonial kings, they remain an important part of the cultural and religious landscape of contemporary Abomey, in large part due to the efforts of their female descendants. Throughout the period of colonization and since independence, women have played important religious roles to help preserve the memory and potency of the precolonial kings.

The **dadasi**

Though the last kings of the Dahomean dynastic line had been exiled, the palace was not completely vacated. Designated female descendants of the kings entitled **dadasi** continued, and still continue, to reside in a centrally located section of the palace complex called the Dossoémé. Each of these women is selected through divination to serve as the “wife” of her particular royal ancestor. In accepting this call, each **dadasi** commits to live in the palace, to perform the rituals associated with the altars located in the Dossoémé, and to participate in royal ceremonies.

Historian Bachalou Nondichau claims that the position of **dadasi** was created in the early colonial period as a way to protect the spiritual and physical treasures located in the Dossoémé. In addition to containing important altars associated with the palace and the founding ancestor of the Dahomean line, treasury items which escaped Behanzin’s palace fire are said to be buried there. It is therefore forbidden to dig holes within this section of the palace. Whether the **dadasi** existed since the foundation of the Dossoémé, which is believed to date back to the reign of King Agadja in the eighteenth century, or were created to guard the spiritual core of the palace with the onset of colonization, they were firmly established as residents of the palace by the time colonial officer Em. G. Waterlot visited in 1911. He noted, “The palace was no longer inhabited except by some old women” who “devoutly watch over the sacred objects which escaped the fire that took Abomey.”

The Dossoémé constitutes a religiously charged, exclusive, female space. While the **dadasi** may marry and have families, their husbands are forbidden to sleep within the Dossoémé, thus maintaining the precolonial restrictions concerning gender and space imposed on the inner portion of the palace. The **dadasi** are permitted to leave the Dossoémé for periods of time on grounds of health and pregnancy but are not allowed to travel a great distance. Once they are set apart in this spiritual calling, their daily clothing consists of no shoes and a **païigne**, or rectangular piece of fabric, wrapped around the body and tied under the armpit. However, for certain ceremonies, they dress in elaborate robes and jewelry, carry canes and parasols, and have their heads bound with white fabric (see Figure 22.3). While for the purposes of ceremonies, it
is only necessary to have one dadasi stand in for each royal ancestor (the 12 dynastic kings and the founding ancestors Aligbonon and Agassou), it is possible to have as many as four dadasi designated to each king: two assigned to the royal ancestor, one for his kpodjito, or reign mate, and one for his djoto, or ancestral protector. As of 2013, there were more than 20 women residing in the palace as dadasi.

By residing in the palace, the dadasi ensure that the palace and royal history remain living and relevant for the people of Abomey. They not only ensure that kings are remembered, but in certain ceremonies, they even facilitate their presence. The culmination of religious activity for the palace and for other royal historic sites is a four-month-long ceremony, which traditionally took place every seven years, known as the Gandaxi. As part of this ceremony, the dadasi perform dances in different portions of the palace and at other significant royal sites in Abomey. During some of these dances, a dadasi is possessed by the spirit of her ancestor king and performs on his behalf. By enabling the spiritual presence of the precolonial kings, the dadasi make immediate the relevance of the kingdom’s history to the contemporary population of Abomey. These spirit possessions, as well as the use of royal sites for religious purposes, function to remind the Abomeans of a history, before the imposition of European colonization, that they can claim as their own.

**Conclusion**

While the historic royal women of Dahomey had substantial political and spiritual influence, the question remains: were they ultimately supporters or even enablers of a patriarchal system? In Coogler’s *Black Panther*, there is a moment during the hero T’challa’s enthronement ceremony when his sister Shuri raises her hand and thereby appears to challenge him for the throne. After
the gasps of those attending subside, she quips, “This corset is really uncomfortable, so can we all just wrap it up and go home?” While the strong female characters in this film have largely been received with feminist approval, this scene inserts female discontent both by referencing corsets, a symbol of feminine restraint, and by making it obvious that Shuri was never earnestly considered for the throne. The fictional women of Wakanda, while they vary in roles, motives, and talents, all arguably serve to support and protect the king. Can the same be said of Dahomey’s royal women?

Were the Dahomean women who met in court councils, performed in ceremonies, fought on the battlefield, and had access to the king ultimately subservient to him and thus, to a patriarchal system? Conversely, should we consider that the king did not reign alone? The eventual gender balance that Dahomey maintained in its royal offices and armed forces could also be found in the monarchy. The king reigned with his kpodiito, or reign mate, the queen mother, who though not as publicly prominent as the king, held comparable power. The complexity of these issues increases when we consider the diversity in roles and status of women considered wives of the king. Undoubtedly, there were women who increased in power and agency by taking on the title ahosi and others, depending on their status and attitude, who endured it as a prison sentence. In our suppositions about Dahomey’s women, we must likewise be wary of imposing a western, contemporary version of feminism on another culture, time, and place.

Ultimately, the royal women have been integral in shaping the politics of, opinions about, and memories concerning the kingdom of Dahomey. Throughout history, regalia, uniforms, and palace architecture have visually signified the kingdom at home and abroad. In the kingdom’s precolonial history, royal wives represented the king’s social, economic, military, and sexual power. The inner courtyard of Dahomey’s palace constituted a privileged female space where royal women had access to the king. By the nineteenth century, thousands of wives resided in the palace, many paraded in celebrations, a select few served in the royal court, and others fought in battles.

The representation of Dahomey’s female warriors in public expositions and in print media throughout the colonial period exoticized the kingdom and further justified French colonization, a sharp contrast to the contemporary positive portrayal and reception of the Dora Milaje in Coogler’s Black Panther. Colonizers manipulated the palace and attempted to abolish the kingdom’s power and importance. Despite this, women continue to assert the importance of the precolonial kings in the postcolonial moment through ceremonies that revitalize royal architecture and facilitate the spiritual presence of the kings. The dadasi, by living in the palace, create a spiritual continuity from the precolonial kings to the postcolonial present. Being female, they resonate the importance and influence of historic royal women while simultaneously emphasizing the potential influence of women in the contemporary moment.

Notes


3 Ibid.


5 Bachalou Nondichau (traditional historian), in discussion with author, February 20, 2013, Abomey.
6 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 137.
21 In places of concentrated slaving, Patrick Manning “calculates an overall average sex ration of seventy adult men for one hundred women in Gbe-speaking areas” (Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 146).
23 Ibid., 56.
24 Ibid., 55.
25 Ibid., 55.
26 Ibid., 72.
29 William H. Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa, 1870–1900* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 5. Schneider explains that sales for these papers between 1870 and 1900 reached over one million copies daily, and that the illustrations were often in color. Thus, these became powerful tools for shaping public opinion during this period of colonial expansion.
30 Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses*, 103.
31 Ibid., 8–9.
34 This was a mirror-imaged, topless version of the *Petit Parisien*’s March 16th or *Monde Illustré*’s March 15th Amazon published three years earlier.
35 Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses*, 9. The obvious rise in ticket sales in conjunction with ethnographic exhibits and consequent financial benefit motivated the Garden’s administration not only to continue them but to look for ways to draw crowds.
36 Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses*, 142.
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39 Ibid.
40 Em. G. Waterlot, *Les bas-reliefs des bâtiments royaux d’Abomey (Dahomey)* (Paris: Institut d’ethnologie, 1926), 3. He also mentions the residence of women with the title *kpodjito*, which would have represented the deceased queen mothers/reign mates of the precolonial kings.
42 Ibid., 12.
43 Ibid., 12.

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