

THE POLITICS OF COMMERCIAL TRANSITION:
FACTIONAL CONFLICT IN DAHOMEY IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE ENDING OF THE ATLANTIC
SLAVE TRADE

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IN 1858, after a reign of forty years, King Gezo of Dahomey died and was succeeded by one of his sons called Badahun, who took the royal name of Glele by which he is more generally known. Badahun had been Gezo's designated heir apparent for at least nine years prior to this but his accession to the throne was nevertheless challenged. The name Glele which he adopted alludes to these challenges, being according to Dahomian tradition abbreviated from the aphorism *Glelile ma ñôn ze*, 'You cannot take away a farm [gle]', meaning that he would not allow anyone to appropriate the fruits of his labours, which is explained as expressing 'his contempt for the attacks to which he had been exposed as heir apparent'.¹

The fact that the succession to the throne was disputed on this occasion was, in itself, nothing unusual. Almost all royal successions in Dahomian history were contested among rival princes claiming the throne. Although the succession passed in principle to the king's eldest son, this rule of primogeniture was qualified in two ways. First, the king might choose to set aside the claims of his eldest son if he was considered in any way unfit for the throne and designate as heir apparent another of his sons instead – as, indeed, had occurred in the case of Badahun himself. Moreover, the designated heir did not succeed automatically since the king's choice could be set aside in favour of another prince by the Migan and the Mehu, the two highest-ranking chiefs of the kingdom. Consequently, even when an heir apparent had been formally designated, the succession regularly became a matter of factional intrigue, often even before the reigning king's death. An eighteenth-century account thus noted that the king's senior wives customarily 'intrigue to have their sons adopted' as the heir;² and a contemporary account of the last years of Gezo, alluding to Badahun's status as heir presumptive, describes how 'each prince seeks to form a party and a little court for himself'.³

* An earlier version of this paper was presented to a seminar of the African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town, April 1993.

¹ A. Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey* (Paris, 1911), 20.

² De Chenevert and Abbé Bullet, 'Réflexions sur Juda' (MS of 1776, in Archives Nationales, Section d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence: Dépôt des Fortifications des Colonies, Côtes d'Afrique, 111), 72. For the role of palace women in Dahomian royal successions more generally, see Edna G. Bay, 'Belief, legitimacy and the *Kpojito*: an institutional history of the "Queen Mother" in pre-colonial Dahomey', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxxvi (1995), 1–27.

³ A. Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, 1 (1860), 341.

It appears, however, that in 1858 more was involved than the competing claims of individual princes. Although there is no clear recollection of this in Dahomian tradition, contemporary evidence shows that the challenge to Glele's accession in 1858 reflected a wider background of dissension within the Dahomian ruling élite. Gezo during the last years of his reign had faced growing opposition from among his chiefs, with which Badahun, as heir apparent, was associated. These divisions arose immediately over the issue of human sacrifice, which Gezo was seeking to curtail, but this in turn reflected more general disagreements over Dahomey's response to the problems posed by the decline of the Atlantic slave trade. The episode thus bears upon the influential (but contested) argument of Tony Hopkins, that the transition from slaves to alternative 'legitimate' forms of trade posed a 'crisis of adaptation' for the rulers of West African states.⁴

The interpretation of these political divisions offered here is not new, having been briefly adumbrated in earlier publications of the author.⁵ The question of internal divisions within Dahomey over the slave trade and human sacrifice, and of their connection with the disputed royal succession of 1858, has also been treated from different perspectives by David Ross (1967), Susan Hargreaves (1978) and John Reid (1986).⁶ All three studies, however, have regrettably remained unpublished and their influence on perceptions of Dahomian history has therefore been limited. Conversely, the factional divisions within Dahomey in the 1850s are not mentioned at all in some published work, either on the reign of Gezo in general or on his commercial policy in particular.⁷ Even the sole published account which deals in detail with factional divisions within the Dahomian ruling élite during Gezo's later years, by John Yoder (1974), fails to link these to the disputed royal succession of 1858.⁸ In view of this general neglect, it seemed

⁴ A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), 142–8. For an assessment of the current state of the debate in general, see Robin Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995). For a recent analysis of the case of Asante, which presents parallels with that of Dahomey, cf. Gareth Austin, "'No elders were present'": Commoners and private ownership in Asante, 1807–1896', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxxvii (1996), 1–30.

⁵ Robin Law, 'Human sacrifice in pre-colonial West Africa', *African Affairs*, lxxxiv (1985), 83–6; cf. also 'Slave-raiders and middlemen, monopolists and free-traders: the supply of slaves for the Atlantic trade in Dahomey, c. 1715–1850', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxx (1989), 67–8.

⁶ David Ross, 'The autonomous kingdom of Dahomey, 1818–94' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1967); Susan Hargreaves, 'An ideological interpretation of Dahomian politics, 1818–1864' (M.A. dissertation, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1978); John Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats in crisis: the political effects of the transition from the slave trade to palm oil commerce in the nineteenth-century kingdom of Dahomey' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Stirling, 1986).

⁷ Augustus A. Adeyinka, 'King Gezo of Dahomey, 1818–1858: a reassessment of a West African monarch in the nineteenth century', *African Studies Review*, xvii (1974), 541–8; E. A. Soumonni, 'Dahomean economic policy under Ghézo, 1818–1858: a reconsideration', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, x (1980), 1–11. The issue is mentioned, albeit only briefly, by Adrien Djivo, *Guézo, la rénovation du Dahomey* (Paris, 1977), 91–2.

⁸ John C. Yoder, 'Fly and Elephant Parties: political polarization in Dahomey, 1840–1870', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xv (1974), 417–32.

worthwhile to pull together the available relevant material to present this more detailed account and analysis.

The context of the factional disputes of the 1850s was, as already indicated, the ending of the Atlantic slave trade.⁹ For Dahomey, this process had two aspects: first, the decline of trans-Atlantic demand for slaves, which became critical with the effective cessation of slave imports into Brazil after 1850; and second, the more direct pressure of the British government for Dahomian co-operation in ending the slave trade, which culminated at the end of 1851 in a naval blockade of Dahomey.¹⁰ Although the decline of the slave trade coincided with the expansion of an alternative trade in palm oil, this transition posed considerable difficulties for the Dahomian state. In part, the problem was that the state was not able to maintain the degree of control, and therefore the level of revenue, in the new trade which it had enjoyed in the old.¹¹ But even more critically, partly in consequence of its long history of participation in the slave trade – the principal source of slaves for which was capture in warfare – Dahomey was a warrior state, with a deep-seated military ethos which involved a disdain for agriculture.¹² As Gezo protested to a British mission demanding the ending of the slave trade in 1850:

they were a military people, the Dahomians, and of course unaccustomed to agricultural pursuits... He asked if we had seen any farms between the swamp [i.e. the marshes of the Lama which separated the Dahomian heartland around the capital Abomey from the coastal provinces to the south] and Abomey? He could not disgrace himself and subject himself to be laughed at by sending the women from his palace yard to plant and cultivate cotton...

Or even more melodramatically, according to an alternative account of the same conversation 'I cannot send my women to cultivate the soil, it would kill them'.¹³ Re-orienting Dahomey's overseas commerce from slaves to agricultural produce therefore implied the undermining of this traditional militarism.

These cultural obstacles were compounded by the fact that the economic issue of the slave trade was bound up with the religious issue of human sacrifice. Human sacrifice in Dahomey was practised mainly at the 'Annual Customs', the principal public ceremony of the monarchy, at which victims were offered to the deceased kings of the Dahomian dynasty. Those killed on these occasions were principally captives taken in Dahomey's wars, whose sacrifice served to celebrate Dahomian military prowess. Human sacrifice and the export slave trade were thus closely inter-connected, both being

⁹ For the general background, cf. C. W. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961), chs. 2–3; Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960* (Cambridge, 1982), 50–6.

¹⁰ For a fuller account, see Robin Law, 'An African response to Abolition: Anglo-Dahomian negotiations on ending the slave trade, 1838–77', *Slavery and Abolition*, xvi (1995), 281–310.

¹¹ See further Robin Law, 'Royal monopoly and private enterprise in the Atlantic trade: the case of Dahomey', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xviii (1977), 572–6.

¹² For supporting argument for this view of the historical origins of Dahomian militarism, cf. Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991).

¹³ Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP], Papers Relative to the Reduction of Lagos, 1852 [hereafter PRRL], no. 9: Consul Beecroft, Prince's Island, 22 July 1850; enclosure 3 in no. 13: Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, 4 July 1850.

linked to Dahomian militarism, the former constituting part of its ideological superstructure and the latter an important aspect of its material foundation. If ending Dahomey's involvement in the slave trade would necessarily imply undermining Dahomian militarism, any attempt at the latter would in turn necessarily put in question the institution of human sacrifice.

THE LEGACY OF GEZO'S ACCESSION

The response of Dahomey's ruling élite to British demands for the end of the slave trade and human sacrifice has also to be related to the internal history of Dahomey itself earlier in the nineteenth century. Gezo had come to the throne irregularly in 1818 by forcibly deposing his elder brother, Adandozan.¹⁴ Although the deposition of Adandozan is generally portrayed in Dahomian tradition as representing a unanimous response of the people, chiefs and royal family to his tyrannies, contemporary evidence suggests that Gezo's position in the early years of his reign was in fact very precarious. An account of 1825 reports that Gezo had lately become 'unpopular', in consequence of recent military defeats by the Mahis to the north-east, and for having resorted (presumably as a result of this lack of military success) to 'selling great numbers of his own people, and destroying his own towns and villages for the purpose of procuring slaves', in contradiction to the usual convention prohibiting the sale as slaves of native Dahomians. Gezo's position was so weakened that he had even offered to reinstate Adandozan on the throne. But the latter refused, hoping that popular pressure would eventually force his restoration against Gezo's will rather than by his favour.¹⁵

Although in the longer run Gezo's position was consolidated by a series of brilliant military successes (including the eventual conquest of the Mahis), the difficulties he faced at the beginning of his reign are reflected in significant modifications in Dahomian political institutions. In general terms, it must be supposed that the circumstances of Gezo's accession made him more dependent than earlier monarchs on the goodwill of his chiefs, and especially of the two highest-ranking of these, the Migan and the Mehu. The British naval officer Frederick Forbes, for example, who served in the British mission of 1850, noted that the king could not act without the 'concurrence' of the Migan and the Mehu, who had, 'if united, more power' than he.¹⁶

Likewise, Gezo was obliged to make concessions to other royal princes in order to restore the unity of the royal lineage and secure its loyalty to himself. In the eighteenth century as a matter of deliberate policy, royal princes other than the designated heir apparent had been systematically excluded from positions of power and rank, but Gezo broke with this precedent. The classic recension of Dahomian traditional history recorded by the French official Le Herissé in the 1900s states that he introduced the practice of appointing

¹⁴ Mousa Oumar Sy, 'Le Dahomey: le coup d'état de 1818', *Folia Orientalia*, vi (1964), 205–38.

¹⁵ Public Record Office, London [hereafter PRO]: ADM.55/11, Hugh Clapperton, 'Remarks on Little Popo and Whydah', Nov. 1825. My profound thanks to J. R. Bruce Lockhart, who is currently working on a biography of Clapperton, for drawing this hitherto neglected source to my attention.

¹⁶ Frederick Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (2 vols.) (London, 1851), i, 83.

relatives as aides or counterparts to the principal chiefs of the kingdom, though it is stressed that these posts were 'purely honorary', carrying no real power.¹⁷ More recent testimony recalls more specifically that he appointed two of his own brothers, Ganse and Tometin, respectively as Migan and Mehu (i.e. evidently as counterparts or deputies to these chiefs) in reward for their assistance in overthrowing Adandozan.¹⁸ The contemporary account of Forbes, attending the Dahomian Annual Customs in 1850, mentions both Ganse and Tometin among the officers in attendance at the royal court, though they are not recorded to have played any active role in the discussions of policy which Forbes witnessed.¹⁹ Ganse outlived Gezo, dying in 1861.²⁰ The British Consul (and pioneer anthropologist) Richard Burton, visiting Dahomey on another abortive anti-slave trade mission under Gezo's successor Glele in 1864, also saw a Ganse and a Tometin taking part in a ceremonial procession, but these were younger men who had inherited the status and names of Gezo's brothers.²¹ Much more prominent than Ganse or Tometin in Forbes' account of the Customs of 1850 were two other brothers of Gezo called Linkpehun and Ahokpe, who did frequently intervene in the policy debates.²² One legacy of the circumstances of Gezo's accession, therefore, was the more active involvement of members of the royal family in the politics of the Dahomian court.

Other significant institutional changes deriving directly from the events of 1818 related to the organization of the Atlantic slave trade. Gezo's *coup d'état* against Adandozan had been financed by a Brazilian slavetrader, Francisco Felix de Souza, who in recompense was installed by Gezo as his principal trading agent (with the title Chacha) at the Dahomian port of Whydah, a post which he held until his death in 1849.²³ Slavetrading interests were thus being consolidated in a position of greater social prestige and political influence in Dahomey at the very time when Britain was beginning its campaign to bring the slave trade to an end, thereby significantly restricting Gezo's room for manoeuvre in response to British demands. In 1845, for example, Gezo claimed that it was difficult for him to take action against the slave trade at Whydah because 'he was under obligations to a certain large slave-merchant in that settlement'.²⁴

Even more critical in their long-term effects on Dahomian politics,

¹⁷ Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey*, 33.

¹⁸ Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé, *Le Danxome* (Paris, 1974), 118, 142.

¹⁹ 'Gan-seh' and 'Toh-mah-tee' are listed among those receiving the royal bounty: Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 243. Cf. also ii, 247, referring to 'Toh-mah-tee (king's brother)'.

²⁰ Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (2 vols.) (London, 1864), ii, 400-1.

²¹ *Ibid.* ii, 125, n.

²² Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 102, 123, 162, 170 ('Leh-peh-hoong'); 28, 93, 102, 130, 147, 213 ('Ah-hoh-peh'); and cf. Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, ii, 126, n., who gives these names in the forms 'Enekpehun' and 'Ahopwe'. For traditional recollection of a brother of Gezo called Linkpehun, see Paul Hazoumé, *Le pacte de sang au Dahomey* (Paris, 1937), 28. Ahokpe was the son of King Agonglo (1789-97) by Sophie, an Afro-European woman formerly married to Ollivier de Montaguère, Director of the French fort at Whydah in 1775-86: Reynier, 'Ouidah: organisation du commandement' (1917), in *Mémoire du Bénin*, II (1993), 58.

²³ David Ross, 'The first Chacha of Whydah: Francisco Felix de Souza', *Odu*, 3rd Ser. II (1969), 19-28.

²⁴ John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa* (2 vols.) (London, 1847), ii, 269.

however, were the reasons adduced in justification for the overthrow of Adandozan. The earliest recorded accounts of the circumstances of Adandozan's deposition cite only his alleged cruelty: a report of 1823, for example, asserts that his 'cruelty was so great that it was considered a disgrace to the state'; and that of 1825, already cited, that he 'had become addicted to drunkenness, and when in that state indulged in the most wanton cruelties'.²⁵ Forbes in 1850, however, was told that Adandozan was deposed because of his 'unmilitary character', as being 'unfit to reign over a brave warlike nation such as Dahomey'.²⁶ More recently recorded versions of Dahomian tradition further invoke the issue of human sacrifice. The classic account of Le Herissé claims that Adandozan 'affected to neglect the cult of the dead and no longer pour water [i.e. human blood] on their tombs'; and a subsequent account even that 'he refused, for twenty years [i.e. throughout his reign, 1797–1818] to make sacrifices to the memory of his father Agonglo'.²⁷ The suggestion that Adandozan was opposed to human sacrifice in principle, however, seems implausible; it is contradicted by the evidence of a letter which he sent to the King of Portugal in 1804, which openly refers to his having offered human sacrifices to his father.²⁸ Although it is conceivable that Adandozan changed his mind on this issue after 1804, it seems more probable that the original complaint against him was merely that his lack of military success was yielding insufficient supplies of captives to maintain the sacrifices at their customary level.

Ade Akinjogbin, although not mentioning the issue of human sacrifice, has suggested that Adandozan did pursue a conscious policy of demilitarization, intending to abandon the slave trade and replace it with exports of agricultural produce.²⁹ The only evidence cited in support of this view, however, is a record that in 1808 Adandozan celebrated a ceremony called the 'small corn [i.e. millet, as opposed to maize] custom'.³⁰ As Ross pointed out, there is nothing in the original report which implies even that this ceremony was an innovation, far less that it was part of wider project of promoting agriculture as an alternative to the slave trade.³¹ (Nor, it may be suggested, would the celebration specifically of millet cultivation have been at all relevant to the export trade.) It may also be noted that Dahomian tradition (in a different context) attributes to Adandozan an emphatic reassertion of Dahomey's traditional militaristic values: 'Our fathers... cultivated not with hoes but with guns. The kings of Dahomey cultivate only war'.³² If the slave trade declined under Adandozan, this too was more likely

²⁵ *Royal Gold Coast Gazette*, 11 Feb. 1823; PRO: ADM.55/11, Clapperton, 'Remarks on Little Popo and Whydah', Nov. 1825. ²⁶ Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 7; ii, 23.

²⁷ Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey*, 315; Glélé, *Le Danxome*, 116.

²⁸ King of Dahomey, 20 Nov. 1804, quoted in Pierre Verger, *Flux et reflux de la Traite des Nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia to Todos os Santos, du XVe au XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1968), 281, n. 38.

²⁹ I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours 1708–1818* (Cambridge, 1967), 193.

³⁰ PRO: T.70/1163, Day Book, William's Fort, Whydah, 23 Oct. 1808.

³¹ David Ross, 'The anti-slave trade theme in Dahoman history: an examination of the evidence', *History in Africa*, ix (1982), 265.

³² Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume de Dahomey*, 313 (Adandozan's reply to an embassy from Oyo, demanding tribute, which suggested that he should cultivate the soil to earn the wealth needed to pay it).

due to his lack of military success than to deliberate policy. What is not in doubt, however, is that Gezo sought to legitimize his usurpation by stressing his own status – in contrast to Adandozan – as a successful warrior king, and that the series of military campaigns which he consequently launched yielded increased supplies of captives, which fuelled a revival of both the slave trade and of human sacrifice. This, even more than his alliance with the Chacha de Souza, had the effect of committing him firmly to the maintenance of these policies in direct contradiction to the demands of the British.

Recollections of Adandozan's deposition and the reassertion of Dahomian militaristic values which it involved dominated Dahomian politics during Gezo's reign, and indeed in the reign of his successor Glele. In resisting British pressure for the abolition of the slave trade and human sacrifice, both kings repeatedly cited the danger of revolution. In 1839, for example, when a visiting British trader expressed disapproval of human sacrifice, Gezo replied: 'I am king over this people whose customs I must observe, if I were not to give them these victims they would rebel and sacrifice me'.³³ Likewise in 1848 Gezo asserted that he could not give up the slave trade:

The form of his government could not be suddenly changed, without causing such a revolution as would deprive him of his throne, and precipitate his kingdom into a state of anarchy... He held his power by an observance of the time-honoured customs of his forefathers; and he would forfeit it, and entail upon himself a life full of shame, and a death full of misery, if he rejected them.³⁴

Similar statements were made subsequently by Glele, on the issue of human sacrifice. In 1862, for example: 'if I do not carry out the Custom as usual I am afraid that I shall be dethroned or hurt by the subjects'.³⁵ In 1863: 'If I were to give up this custom at once, my head would be taken off tomorrow'.³⁶ And again in 1871: 'if he attempted to stop the Custom his people would rise up against him and dethrone him; and then where would be the gain?'³⁷

GEZO'S LATER YEARS, 1850–8

Given the political constraints arising from the circumstances of his accession, whatever his personal inclinations Gezo was clearly in no position to accede to British demands for the immediate suppression of the slave trade. He did not, however, reject the British overtures outright, but attempted to maintain friendly relations by encouraging the growth of the new trade in palm oil and holding out the prospect that it might replace the slave trade in the longer term by gradual transition. But this policy of compromise was feasible only as long as the British were willing to be patient, and it broke down decisively with the naval blockade of 1851–2, under pressure of which Gezo was obliged to accept a treaty banning the export of slaves from Dahomey, in January 1852.

³³ PP: Report of the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa, 1842 [hereafter RSCWCA], Minutes of Evidence, W. M. Hutton, 10329.

³⁴ PP: Missions to the King of Ashantee and Dahomey (1848), Report of B. Cruickshank, 18 Nov. 1848, 17.

³⁵ Bernasko, 3 Oct. 1862, quoted in Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 404.

³⁶ PP: Despatches from Commodore Wilmot, respecting his Visit to the King of Dahomey (1863), 10. ³⁷ J. A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is* (London, 1874), 304–5.

While the content and style of Gezo's diplomacy in dealing with the British down to 1852 are clear enough, there is some disagreement over whether his policy represented the united view of the Dahomian ruling élite in this period or reflected factional divisions within it. Ross argued that Gezo faced significant opposition among his chiefs throughout his reign and had indeed been able to maintain his position initially only through his alliance with the Chacha Francisco Felix de Souza. When de Souza's commercial fortunes declined in the 1840s, therefore, Gezo sought alliance with the British as an alternative source of support, culminating in his acceptance of the anti-slave trade treaty of 1852.³⁸ This analysis, however, is unpersuasive. Although Gezo, as has been seen, did recurrently stress the danger of a revolution against him, this is best understood as referring to a hypothetical possibility rather than to actually existing opposition, and was cited by Gezo as a reason for resisting rather than acceding to British demands. Certainly, Gezo eventually accepted the banning of the slave trade in 1852 under duress rather than as part of a pro-British policy. Nor is there any evidence of disagreement with this action on the part of Gezo's chiefs, such as the Migan and the Mehu, both of whom also 'signed' the 1852 treaty.³⁹

Yoder also posited political divisions between Gezo and some of his chiefs over the issue of British demands for the end of the slave trade in this period, although unlike Ross he placed Gezo in the anti-British rather than the pro-British faction.⁴⁰ Yoder based his argument on an analysis of debates at the Annual Customs of 1850, recorded by Forbes, which in fact concerned the question of against whom the next Dahomian campaign should be directed: Abeokuta to the east or Aja to the west. Since an attack on Abeokuta implied direct defiance of Britain, which was seeking to protect Abeokuta, Yoder argued that this issue symbolized a more general debate over whether to accommodate British demands and hence, by implication, over whether to accept the abolition of the slave trade.

Yoder dubbed the opposing factions whose existence he inferred the 'Fly' and 'Elephant' parties, on the supposition that these terms were employed in the debates of 1850 to allude to the two alternative proposed objectives for the next campaign, respectively Aja and Abeokuta. Forbes quotes a military officer as declaring: 'If we go to war, we cannot come back empty-handed; if we fail to catch elephants, let us be content with flies'.⁴¹ There seems no doubt that this represents a genuine Dahomian idiom, more or less accurately reported by Forbes, since very similar language (albeit with the substitution of ants for flies) occurs in a twentieth-century account of Dahomian court ceremonial: 'The King has said that Dahomey is the enemy of all the world, and that his chiefs must use as much force in killing an ant as they would to kill an elephant, for the small things bring on the large ones'.⁴² Ross questioned whether, at the Customs of 1850, this metaphor should be understood as alluding to the choice between Aja and Abeokuta, but since this question was central to the debates reported by Forbes, this

³⁸ Ross, 'Autonomous kingdom', ch. 2.

³⁹ Cf. the argument of Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 266–304, 381–5.

⁴⁰ Yoder, 'Fly and Elephant Parties'. ⁴¹ Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 109.

⁴² M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom* (2 vols.) (New York, 1938), i, 68.

interpretation is surely a reasonable one.⁴³ The more critical point, however, is that there are no compelling grounds, either in Forbes' account of the 1850 debates or in the more general logic of the situation, for supposing that opposition to war with Abeokuta was evidence of support for the ending of the slave trade. If the purpose of war was to secure captives for the slave trade, indeed, a campaign against a weaker opponent such as Aja might well have been regarded as more appropriate.⁴⁴ Forbes' narrative affords little support for the idea of divisions within the Dahomian ruling élite over the issue of the slave trade, as opposed to that of war with Abeokuta. When Gezo refused to sign the anti-slave trade treaty, Forbes noted that 'the ministers all showed their pleasure'; the only visible dissentient was the Yovogan, or Governor of Whydah, who 'could not disguise his anxiety' that the refusal might lead (as indeed, in the event it did) to a commercial blockade.⁴⁵

Yoder's argument, in fact, rests less upon explicit evidence in Forbes' account of the 1850 debates than upon the imputation of an inherent conflict of interest between slavetraders and palm oil traders in Dahomey, the former presumed to be largely Brazilian and the latter indigenous Dahomians. Forbes noted the existence in Whydah alongside the resident Brazilian slavetraders of a significant group of indigenous entrepreneurs, referring specifically to 'five native merchants, who may be termed very rich', among whom he named three: Adjovi, Gnahoui and Houenou (or Quénou).⁴⁶ The supposed dichotomy between Brazilian slavetraders and Dahomian oil traders is, however, certainly untenable.

In the first place, Yoder's suggestion that the Brazilian traders were opposed to the establishment of trade in any other commodities than slaves is unwarranted. The only supporting evidence cited is a report of the British explorer John Duncan in 1845 that Gezo had prohibited the manufacture of shea-butter except in small quantities for domestic consumption, allegedly at the instigation of 'the Spanish and Portuguese slave-dealers' at Whydah, who feared that the development of an export trade in shea-butter would divert energies from the slave trade.⁴⁷ This account, however, does not relate directly to the much more important trade in palm oil, which clearly was not suffering any similar official discouragement at this time. It seems possible, in any case, that Duncan misunderstood the significance of the restriction of shea-butter production, since an account of the 1850s recording a parallel prohibition on the cultivation for export of groundnuts reports on the contrary that this was intended to prevent the diversion of labour required for the harvesting of palm oil.⁴⁸ Dahomian official tradition records that the leading Brazilian merchant, the Chacha Francisco Felix de Souza, far from opposing the palm oil trade, in fact advised Gezo of the potential commercial value of palm oil.⁴⁹ The contemporary evidence also implies that de Souza was supportive of, rather than opposed to, the new trade in oil. When the British palm oil trader Thomas Hutton sought permission to open a factory

⁴³ Ross, 'Anti-slave trade theme', 266–7.

⁴⁴ As argued by Hargreaves, 'Ideological interpretation', 35.

⁴⁵ Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 189.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* i, 112–13; cf. Law, 'Slave-raiders and middlemen', 63–4.

⁴⁷ Duncan, *Travels*, i, 285–6. ⁴⁸ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 352.

⁴⁹ Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey*, 86, 327.

at Whydah in 1839, for example, he travelled to the Dahomian capital Abomey 'under de Souza's protection'.⁵⁰

In any case, as earlier work had already shown, by the time of Forbes' visit to Dahomey in 1850, the Brazilian traders themselves were no longer trading exclusively in slaves.⁵¹ De Souza himself, although in 1844 he had told a visiting French officer that he 'despised' the palm oil trade as being 'too insignificant to support the position he had made for himself', had in 1846 begun to sell palm oil for export.⁵² Duncan, returned to Whydah as British Vice-Consul in 1849, reported that 'the whole of the merchants who during my last residence in this place in 1845 and 1846 were extensively engaged in the Slave Trade at that period, are now very extensively engaged in the palm-oil trade'.⁵³ Forbes himself noted that another of the Brazilians settled in Whydah, José Francisco dos Santos, 'although a slave-dealer, is also a palm-oil purchaser to a great extent', and had 'a plantation on which he manufactures oil'.⁵⁴ These Brazilians had turned to the oil trade not as a substitute for the slave trade but as a supplement and aid to it, since the oil was sold for European manufactures which in turn were exchanged for slaves. Domingo Martinez, the leading Brazilian trader in Dahomey after the death of de Souza, told Forbes that 'the slave and palm-oil trade helped each other, and that in connection he did not know which was the most profitable'.⁵⁵ Contrariwise, the suggestion that the native Dahomian merchants traded exclusively in palm oil is also unwarranted. Forbes in 1850 did report that at least one of the Dahomian traders of Whydah, Adjovi, was engaged in the oil trade, owning 'a very extensive palm-oil plantation'; but he equally documents the involvement of another, Gnahoui, in the slave trade, 'as great a merchant as exists in Dahomey, and as great a slave-dealer'.⁵⁶ Forbes records, indeed, that Gnahoui, who served as interpreter to the British in the negotiations of 1850, remarked that 'he was working against his own interest in explaining matters to us, saying that the Slave Trade was sweet to him'.⁵⁷

The only source which supports Yoder's interpretation (though not cited by Yoder himself) derives from the traditional history of the Quénium family of Whydah, which maintains that it was Azanmado Houenou, the head of the family at this period, who persuaded Gezo to develop trade in palm produce, against the advice of the Chacha de Souza, who claimed that such exports would undermine the provisioning of the Dahomian army.⁵⁸ In view of the contradictory evidence about de Souza's role cited above, this story can hardly be accepted at face value. As told, it is also manifestly confused in

⁵⁰ PP: RSCWCA, Minutes of Evidence, W. M. Hutton, 10329.

⁵¹ Cf. David Ross, 'The career of Domingo Martinez in the Bight of Benin 1833-64', *J. Afr. Hist.*, vi (1965), 81; Verger, *Flux et reflux*, 565-7.

⁵² De Monleon, 'Le Dahomé, Fernando-Po et l'Ile du Prince, en 1844', *Revue Coloniale*, vi (1845), 74; PRO: CO.96/12, T. Hutton, Badagry, 7 Dec. 1846.

⁵³ PP: Correspondence Relating to the Slave Trade [hereafter CRST] 1849-50, ii, no. 4: Vice-Consul Duncan, Whydah, 17 Aug. 1849. ⁵⁴ Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* ii, 85.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* i, 115; ii, 175.

⁵⁷ PP: PRRL, incl. 3 in no. 13: Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, 4 July 1850.

⁵⁸ Maximilien Quénium, *Les ancêtres de la famille Quénium* (Langres, 1981), 63-4; the anecdote had also been given earlier, in Quénium, *Au pays des Fon* (3rd ed., Paris, 1983; first published 1936), 134.

detail, since it associates the introduction of the palm produce trade with a French merchant called Médard Béraud, who did not arrive in Whydah until 1862. An earlier version of the story in fact credits Béraud with introducing the trade specifically in palm *kernel*s (which developed only from the mid-1860s), and – consistently with this – links him with Azanmado Houenou's son, Kpadonou Houenou, rather than with Azanmado himself; it further states that the objection to this trade came from the Yovogan, rather than from the Chacha.⁵⁹ There is no doubt that de Souza and Houenou were rivals and that the latter rose to prominence at the former's expense, but this represented a personal feud between individuals rather than a conflict between Brazilian and indigenous merchants (or between slavers and palm oil traders) as groups; Azanmado Houenou was, in fact, closely associated in his early commercial activities with another Brazilian slavetrader, Joaquim d'Almeida.⁶⁰

There is more convincing evidence for the emergence of factional divisions in Dahomey after the imposition of the treaty banning the slave trade in 1852, when Gezo adopted much more radical policies of reform. The British indeed maintained that he did not in practice observe the 1852 treaty, but this was largely a matter of definition. Gezo himself insisted that he was observing the treaty, but evidently interpreted his obligations under it more narrowly than the British.⁶¹ In 1856, for example, he insisted that he personally was not selling any slaves and that he had also prohibited the shipping of slaves 'from any of the ports in his dominions', but remained evasive about the supply of slaves from Dahomey for shipment from neighbouring places, declaring that 'he cannot interfere with the internal slave trade, that being carried on in all parts of Africa'.⁶²

In the present context, the critical point is that Gezo grasped that the ending of the slave trade implied the demilitarization of Dahomey. Other evidence shows that in this period he suspended large-scale military campaigns: when, at the end of his reign in 1858 Dahomian military operations were resumed with an attack on the town of Ekpo (in the kingdom of Ketu), the British Consul at Lagos to the east acknowledged that 'It is some years since the King of Dahomey has made so successful a foray, or slave hunt'.⁶³ Gezo declared to a visiting French mission in 1856, in stark contrast to his earlier insistence on the political impossibility of renouncing war: 'Peace is a good thing, it allows one to devote oneself to cultivation and trade; I only make war when I am forced to'.⁶⁴

As a substitute for the declining slave trade, Dahomey's participation in the export of palm oil was intensified. The French mission in 1856, for example, reported that the volume of palm oil exports was 'increasing every year', and that 'the number of recently planted palm trees... is incalculable around nearly all the villages'.⁶⁵ The area devoted to palm oil cultivation was now extended geographically into the Dahomian heartland in the interior:

⁵⁹ Reynier, 'Ouidah', 63.

⁶⁰ Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 60–1; cf. also Édouard Foà, *Le Dahomey* (Paris, 1895), 23.

⁶¹ Cf. Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 322–4.

⁶² PP: CRST 1856–7, incl. 1 in no. 7: Major Ord, The Hague, 26 July 1856.

⁶³ PP: CRST 1858–9, ii, no. 3: Consul Campbell, Lagos, 3 Mar. 1858.

⁶⁴ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 2, *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, II (1861), 344.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Part 1, 357.

whereas in 1850 (as cited earlier) Gezo had stressed the lack of farms north of the Lama, Burton in 1864 found the area immediately south of the capital, Abomey, 'scattered with valuable plantations of the oil palm'.⁶⁶ Levels of taxation on the palm oil trade were also increased. In particular, the production as well as export of oil was now subject to taxation: whereas Forbes in 1850 had alluded only to a tax on sales of oil, by the 1860s there was also a tax on the oil harvest.⁶⁷

Gezo also now entered the production of oil for export on his own account. Whereas Forbes in 1850, as cited earlier, described the palm oil plantations which then existed at Whydah as owned by either Brazilian or Dahomian private merchants, later evidence documents the existence of royal oil plantations also. The evidence for the 1850s is, admittedly, somewhat ambivalent. The French in 1856 reported that the king had reserved to himself 'vast plantations' on which slaves were employed to produce oil for export, but noted that they were run for him by 'king's traders' who paid him a proportion of the profits.⁶⁸ The wording suggests that this may relate to private Dahomian merchants in the Whydah area who held their estates and slaves technically as grants from the king rather than to royal plantations in a strict sense. Burton in the 1860s, however, reported more unambiguously that the oil plantations in the vicinity of the capital Abomey belonged to 'the King and his ministers'.⁶⁹

The ideological objections to the monarch thus becoming directly involved in commercial agriculture, which Gezo had earlier cited to the British as an obstacle, were apparently overcome by the invention of a fictitious alternative identity for the king, as king of 'the bush' or countryside, in whose name the king's transactions in palm oil could be conducted. The Annual Customs were elaborated by the inclusion of additional ceremonies celebrating the king's new agricultural role, which are first attested in contemporary sources in 1856. Although it has been suggested that the institution of the 'Bush King' dates from the beginning of Gezo's reign and was therefore unconnected with the rise of the palm oil trade, the absence of any reference to it in Forbes' very detailed account of the Customs in 1850 suggests that it was in fact an innovation of the early 1850s.⁷⁰

The ideological dimension of Gezo's reform programme also extended into the centrally important (because politically sensitive) issue of human sacrifice. In 1853 he sent a message to the British authorities that 'he would give up the practice of human sacrifices altogether, according to the recommendation of the English'.⁷¹ As with the treaty banning the slave trade, there is room for dispute over whether Gezo in practice carried out this promise, and indeed for uncertainty as to what precisely he meant in

⁶⁶ PP: CRST 1864, ii, no. 19: Consul Burton, Bonny River, 23 Mar. 1864.

⁶⁷ Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 111; Abbé Laffitte, *Le Dahomé* (Tours, 1874), 99. Dahomian tradition confirms that the tax on the oil harvest was introduced in the 1850s (after the war with Abeokuta in 1851): Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey*, 87.

⁶⁸ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 343; also Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', *Le Tour du Monde*, vii (1863), 100.

⁶⁹ Burton, *Mission*, i, 280; cf. Law, 'Royal monopoly', 573.

⁷⁰ 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.

⁷¹ PP: CRST 1853-4, i, no. 118: Rear-Admiral Bruce, Ascension, 25 Apr. 1853.

making it. Sacrifices at the Annual Customs certainly continued, but on a substantially reduced scale: the British Consul at Lagos in 1857 acknowledged that the number of sacrifices 'in the last years have been reduced from hundreds to tens'; and in 1858 that the numbers sacrificed 'of late years had diminished to some thirty or forty'.⁷² Accounts recorded by French missionaries in Dahomey a few years after Gezo's death claim further that in this period he sacrificed 'virtually only' convicted criminals, implying that the killing of war captives had been discontinued.⁷³ It seems probable in fact that it was specifically the ending of the sacrifice of war captives which Gezo intended to promise in 1853; as was suggested earlier, this restriction symbolized the renunciation of Dahomey's traditional militarism.

From 1857, however, Gezo's policies were reversed, with a revival of slave exports from Whydah. In early 1858, a British naval officer reported that Gezo was giving 'every encouragement to the Slave-dealers', and expressing 'the greatest hostility' towards the British.⁷⁴ Later in 1858, the reversal of Gezo's policies was more decisively and dramatically marked by the resumption of military aggression, in the attack on Ekpo noted earlier. The British Consul at Lagos, reporting this campaign, anticipated that it would result in an increase in the numbers of human sacrifices, as well as of slave exports.

This reversal of policy was clearly due in part to the recovery of demand for slaves at this time (with exports now going mainly to Cuba). But it also reflected political changes within Dahomey itself, with the emergence of overt opposition to Gezo among the senior chiefs. Members of the French mission which visited Dahomey in 1856 thus allude to the existence of a faction opposed to Gezo's reforms: 'the old party discontented with the European tendencies of Gezo', or 'the party of resistance... what would be called elsewhere, in Turkey for example, the old national party'.⁷⁵ Burton, retrospectively, spoke of 'the reactionary party'.⁷⁶ The leader of this 'national' party is said to have been the Mehu, the second-ranking chief after the king;⁷⁷ one account also links the Yovogan, or Governor of Whydah, with him.⁷⁸ The later French missionary accounts, however, speak of the opposition to Gezo as led by the 'fetisheers' or priests of the Dahomian religious cults.⁷⁹ Precisely which aspects of Gezo's policies the Mehu and his allies objected to is not made clear in the contemporary accounts of 1856; but the later missionary accounts imply that they were opposed above all to his reduction of human sacrifice.

⁷² PP: CRST 1857-8, ii, no. 4: Consul Campbell, Lagos, 4 Apr. 1858; 1858-9, ii, no. 3: Consul Campbell, Lagos, 3 Nov. 1858. Gezo's reduction in the scale of sacrifices at the Customs had, however, begun even before his declaration of 1853: cf. e.g. Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 33.

⁷³ Laffitte, *Le Dahomé*, 92; Abbé Borghero, Whydah, 30 Sept. 1861, in 'Missions du Dahomey', *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, xxv (1862), 219-20.

⁷⁴ PP: CRST 1858-9, i, no. 142: Rear-Admiral Sir F. Grey, Sierra Leone, 11 Feb. 1858.

⁷⁵ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 341; Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', 83.

⁷⁶ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 26, 255 - but Burton may here be merely echoing the published account of Vallon rather than providing independent corroboration.

⁷⁷ Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', 83.

⁷⁸ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 2, 342.

⁷⁹ Borghero, in 'Missions du Dahomey', 219-20; Laffitte, *Le Dahomé*, 92.

The position of the heir apparent Badahun within Dahomian politics also underwent an evolution. Badahun was not Gezo's eldest son, but was preferred to an elder brother called Godo because of the latter's drunkenness.⁸⁰ According to Burton, Badahun was aged thirty-eight at his accession in 1858, which suggests that he was born *c.* 1820.⁸¹ Dahomian tradition asserts that he was adopted as Gezo's heir 29 years after the latter's accession, i.e. in *c.* 1847, when he would have been aged around twenty-seven.⁸² He had certainly been designated by 1849, when Forbes recorded his name (as 'Bah-dah-hoong') and noted his official residence as heir apparent at Jegbe, outside Abomey.⁸³ It does not appear, however, that he yet exercised any real influence over Dahomian policy: an account of 1851 noted explicitly that, although entrusted by his father with command of a contingent of the army, 'he is not at all concerned in political matters, and was never called to any council'.⁸⁴ Although he did in fact take part in the debates of 1850 witnessed by Forbes, his only recorded contribution was an emphatic support of his father: 'So long as I live, I shall call upon the fetish to cause my father's life to be happy and continued'.⁸⁵

Subsequently, however, the situation changed. In 1855 the British missionary Joseph Dawson, visiting the Dahomian court, noted that he had to approach Gezo 'through' the heir apparent.⁸⁶ The French in 1856 likewise noted Badahun's enhanced influence, reporting that 'his voice carries great weight in the council'.⁸⁷ More critically, his influence was exercised in support of the conservative opposition, against his father's reforming policies. In 1855, Badahun dealt with Dawson to urge him to encourage the establishment of a British factory at Whydah, which implies that he still supported his father's policy of promoting the oil trade. The French in 1856, however, described him as a member of the 'national' party opposed to the king: 'much less desirous than [Gezo] to see civilisation and the customs of the whites penetrate his realms', and 'much more attached, as a matter of considered policy, to the old customs of the country'.⁸⁸ Badahun's official residence at Jegbe seems to have become a sort of rival court, where he held aloof, 'contenting himself with the company of the old party' opposed to Gezo's policies.⁸⁹

Ultimately the reactionary opposition attained such strength that it was able effectively to take over the government of Dahomey. Already in 1856, the French reported that the Mehu 'enjoys great influence over Gezo'.⁹⁰ The

⁸⁰ Burton, *Mission*, i, 207, n.; ii, 407.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* ii, 407. The French in 1856, however, thought Badahun was then aged forty to forty-five, making him four to nine years older: Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', 83; Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 341.

⁸² Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 68.

⁸³ Auguste Bouet, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', *L'Illustration*, xx (1852), 70, n. 2.

⁸⁴ Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 169.

⁸⁵ PP: CRST 1855-6, ii, incl. 1 in no. 15: Joseph Dawson, Whydah, 29 Aug. 1855.

⁸⁶ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 341.

⁸⁷ Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', 83; Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 352.

⁸⁸ Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 341. Burton's later references to

Badahun having 'retired from the court, disliking French innovations', and staying at Jegbe 'cultivating the reactionary party', are, here again, probably derived from Vallon rather than independent corroboration: CRST, 1864, ii, no. 19: Consul Burton, Bonny River, 23 Mar. 1864; Burton, *Mission*, ii, 255. ⁹⁰ Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', 86.

Mehu's influence was such, in fact, that the French erroneously regarded him, rather than the nominally higher-ranking Migan, as the senior chief, or 'prime minister'.⁹¹ One member of the 1856 mission who returned to Dahomey in 1858 observed further that in the interval Gezo's advancing age had transformed the Dahomian polity from an absolute monarchy into 'a real oligarchy'; Gezo is described as 'contenting himself with reigning' and 'most often, absolutely uninvolved in the business done in his name', and only approachable through his officials, especially the Mehu.⁹² Another French officer in 1858 described Gezo as 'only the shadow of his son and his Minister [referring evidently to the Mehu]'.⁹³ A later account indeed even claims that Gezo had 'voluntarily abdicated' in favour of Badahun shortly before his death.⁹⁴

The implication is that the revival of militarism, the slave trade and human sacrifice symbolized by the attack on Ekpo in 1858 represented the capture of the government by the conservative faction rather than a change of mind on Gezo's part. Disagreement over the Ekpo campaign (as well as over human sacrifice) is in fact explicitly acknowledged in the French missionary accounts, which report that Gezo had refused to sacrifice the prisoners taken in it, distributing them instead as gifts.⁹⁵ Corroboration that Gezo opposed the war against Ekpo is provided by Dahomian tradition, which recalls that Gezo himself was reluctant to attack it, but was overborne by the insistence of his war chiefs.⁹⁶ Gezo's reluctance to attack Ekpo is said to have been due to a prophecy that, if he did, he would die; and this is at least not an *ex post facto* invention, since already in 1850 Forbes heard of a prophecy that if Dahomey attacked Ketu (to which Ekpo belonged) the king would die.⁹⁷ The attack on Ekpo was, indeed, very shortly followed by Gezo's death and Glele's accession to the throne.

GLELE'S ACCESSION, 1858

The French missionary accounts of the 1860s claim that Gezo was murdered, poisoned by the priests opposed to his reduction of human sacrifice.⁹⁸ This seems doubtful, Burton more credibly reporting that he died of smallpox.⁹⁹ Since, however, smallpox was believed to be caused by the god Sakpata, Gezo's death may well have been attributed to divine retribution.¹⁰⁰

As noted earlier, despite Badahun's status as the designated heir apparent, his succession was disputed. The rival claim to the throne came not from his discredited elder brother Godo but, according to Burton, from 'other

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 83; Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 335.

⁹² Vallon, 'Le royaume de Dahomey', Part 1, 334–5, 340.

⁹³ Protet, 20 May 1858, quoted by Ross, 'Autonomous kingdom', 146.

⁹⁴ Foà, *Le Dahomey*, 27.

⁹⁵ Borghero, in 'Missions du Dahomey', 220, referring to Gezo's 'last war'.

⁹⁶ Thomas Mouléro, 'Guezo ou Guedizo Massigbe', *Études Dahoméennes*, (NS) IV (1965), 58.

⁹⁷ Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 20.

⁹⁸ Laffite, *Le Dahomé*, 92; cf. Borghero, in 'Missions du Dahomey', 220.

⁹⁹ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 407.

¹⁰⁰ Some later sources claim that Gezo died of a wound suffered in the campaign against Ekpo: e.g. Hazoumé, *Le pacte de sang*, 109–12. This story is probably also spurious, having perhaps arisen as embroidery of the assertion that Gezo was 'killed' (magically) by the Ekpo war.

brothers'.¹⁰¹ More recently recorded tradition names a brother called 'Ouinsou [Huensu?]' as having claimed the throne, with the support of the Yavedo, a senior female official of the royal palace.¹⁰² Beyond the individual claims of rival princes, however, the challenge to Badahun involved the progressive elements who had earlier supported Gezo's reforms. According to the French missionary accounts, the disagreement among the chiefs over the succession reflected a division on the issue of human sacrifice: 'one side wanted the maintenance of the old customs which demanded the immolation of thousands of victims every year; the others wanted their abolition'. Badahun's succession thus represented the triumph of the conservative faction.¹⁰³

The perception of Badahun (or Glele, as he should now be called) as standing for the reversal of Gezo's policies was not peculiar to the missionaries, but shared by other Europeans. A French trader in 1860, for example, reported that Glele 'gives the impression of inaugurating a policy very unfavourable to the Europeans who live at Whydah... Gezo, by contrast, had much preference for the whites'.¹⁰⁴ Gezo's repudiation of his father's policies, it should be stressed, was far from total, since some of Gezo's key innovations, including the royal palm oil plantations, direct taxation of the oil harvest and the institution of the 'Bush King', were retained under Glele. What Glele's reversal of Gezo's policies meant in practice was a reassertion of Dahomey's traditional militarism, the new king proceeding to launch a series of aggressive campaigns against neighbouring countries. As the French trader Béraud observed in 1866, 'Less peaceful than Guezo... Grere [Glele] dreams only of martial adventures'.¹⁰⁵

This reassertion of Dahomian militarism was linked to the revival not only of the export trade in slaves but also of human sacrifice. The French missionaries claimed that Glele's accession was followed by a massive increase in the scale of human sacrifice.¹⁰⁶ On this, however, some caution is in order, since perceptions were clouded by the celebration of the actual funeral ceremonies (or 'Grand Customs') for Gezo in the years immediately following his death; although these certainly involved a much larger scale of human sacrifice than the regular Annual Customs, this did not in itself necessarily imply an increase over previous levels in the longer term. Even after the 'Grand Customs' were concluded, however, there are indications that Glele did practise sacrifice on a larger scale than Gezo in his last years.¹⁰⁷ The British naval officer Wilmot, on a mission to Dahomey in 1863, for example, observed that in the ceremony of the 'Platform Custom' (one of the most important public episodes of the Annual Customs, in which human victims were killed and thrown down from a platform), Glele had four

¹⁰¹ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 407.

¹⁰² Édouard Dunglas, 'Contribution à l'histoire du Moyen-Dahomey', Part 2, *Études Dahoméennes*, XVIII (1957), 102.

¹⁰³ Borghero, in 'Missions du Dahomey', 220; cf. Laffite, *Le Dahomé*, 92.

¹⁰⁴ Lartigue, 9 Aug. 1860, quoted by Thomas C. Maroukis, 'Warfare and society in the history of Dahomey, 1818-1894' (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1974), 269.

¹⁰⁵ M. Béraud, 'Note sur le Dahomé', *Bulletin de la Société de la Géographie*, XII (1866), 376.

¹⁰⁶ Borghero, in 'Missions du Dahomey', 220-1.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 402-11.

platforms, whereas his predecessor Gezo had never had more than two, and explained that 'he is determined to excel him in everything, and to do as much again as he did'.¹⁰⁸ Burton in 1864 recorded the total number of those publicly sacrificed at the Customs as 39, which he regarded as a modest increase over the 32 deaths witnessed by Forbes in 1850.¹⁰⁹ Burton also, echoing the French missionaries cited earlier, acknowledged that the circumstances of Glele's succession had made it politically impossible for him to accept the demand for the abolition of human sacrifices which Burton had to transmit: 'the present King is for the present committed to them; he rose to power by the goodwill of the reactionary party, and upon it he depends'.¹¹⁰

Glele's reassertion of Dahomian militarism and his elaboration of the ceremonial cycle associated with it also had the effect of undermining the palm oil trade by withdrawing labour from the agricultural sector.¹¹¹ In 1862, for example, the British Consul at Lagos complained that in Dahomey 'agriculture is at a standstill, and legitimate trade next to nothing; the population of the villages is most scanty, and liable to be called out at any moment to go on some slave-hunting expedition'.¹¹² Likewise Béraud in 1866: 'the present king, by his wars and continual ceremonies, is annoying the people, who are thus obliged to spend a large part of the year at the capital, ruining trade by making the exploitation of the palms almost impossible'.¹¹³

It should be noted that, in contradiction to the interpretation adopted here of a reversal of Gezo's reforming policies by Glele, the latter on several occasions insisted on the essential continuity between his and his father's policies. On his accession in 1858, indeed, Glele 'publicly proclaimed' not the repudiation of his father's policies but 'his intention to follow in the steps of his father, and to continue slave-hunts and the Slave-Trade'.¹¹⁴ Likewise, Glele told the British missionary Peter Bernasko in 1860: 'War, bloodshed [i.e. human sacrifice] and slave selling had been left to him by his father, he could not avoid them'. And in 1862, in response to the demand that he end human sacrifices: 'Had my father put aside all the Customs before he died I could never resume them'.¹¹⁵ This, however, should be understood as alluding to the fact that, as has been seen, Gezo had indeed been obliged to abandon his anti-miliarist policies under pressure from Badahun and the conservative faction; although not strictly inaccurate, the assertion of continuity with Gezo's policies was disingenuous.

¹⁰⁸ PP: Despatches from Commodore Wilmot, 8. Forbes' account of the 1850 Customs mentions only a single platform; the increase to two was related to the institution of the 'Bush King', separate ceremonies being conducted for the king and his fictive double (cf. Burton, *Mission*, ii, 170), and had therefore presumably occurred during the later years of Gezo.

¹⁰⁹ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 22 (misremembering Forbes' total as 36); cf. Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 177. The figures for 1850 and 1864 are not strictly comparable, since Forbes' total included 8 sacrifices made at the royal graves after the main ceremonies, whereas Burton's did not: the real increase was therefore from 24 in 1850 to 39 in 1864.

¹¹⁰ Burton, *Mission*, ii, 27; cf. also ii, 149. ¹¹¹ Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 496-9.

¹¹² PP: CRST 1862, ii, no. 21: Consul Freeman, Lagos, 1 July 1862.

¹¹³ Béraud, 'Note sur le Dahomé', 375-6.

¹¹⁴ PP: CRST 1858-9, ii, no. 17: Consul Campbell, Lagos, 7 Feb. 1859.

¹¹⁵ Bernasko, Oct. 1860 and 3 Oct. 1862, quoted in Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 403-4.

AFTERMATH, 1859–90

The accession of Glele in 1858 did not resolve the disputes which Gezo's reforming policies had occasioned. Those who had supported Gezo's policies now formed a dissident group within Dahomey. Widespread hostility to Glele's revival of militarism was noted, for example, by Wilmot in 1863:

People have no time for peaceful pursuits: war, war, war is alone thought of, and the King gives them no rest. Many of the Chiefs complain of this, and seem heartily tired of it. I am sure they would gladly turn to a better state of things if they dared.¹¹⁶

Opposition to Glele was especially strong in the coastal town of Whydah, which was most committed to the trade in palm oil. In 1860, for example, the British Consul at Lagos reported that:

It appears, from all I hear, that the present King of Dahomey is much disliked at Whydah, his government being more intolerable than that of his father... I hear that at the present moment it would require but little to cause a revolt against the authority of Guelele.¹¹⁷

Likewise Burton in 1864: 'The people of Whydah are worn out with wars and customs, and many of them are flying with their wives and families to the adjoining provinces'.¹¹⁸ Burton refers specifically to forty families who had recently fled from Whydah to Porto-Novo to the east, lately brought under French protection, 'as a land of liberty'.¹¹⁹

Tension between the newly installed Glele and the merchant community of Whydah is also reflected in the liquidation of one of its leading figures, the Chacha. The eldest son and successor of Francisco Felix de Souza, Isidoro, having died in 1858, shortly before Gezo himself, this office was now held by another son of the original Chacha, Ignacio de Souza; but in about 1859 he was arrested on suspicion of supplying information to the British anti-slaving naval patrol and 'disappeared', and property at Whydah was 'broken'.¹²⁰ Although another brother succeeded him in the office of Chacha, he did not exercise the earlier power of the office: in 1860, it was reported that the office of Chacha was 'little more than a name'.¹²¹ Around this time, indeed, Glele promoted Azanmado Houenou, an old enemy and rival of the de Souza family, to the new position of *ahisigan*, i.e. 'chief of traders' at Whydah, effectively superseding the Chacha.¹²² When this man died in 1866, his position was inherited by his son Kpadonou Houenou.¹²³

Glele also reorganized the political administration at Whydah. In 1860 it was noted that a relative of the king had been appointed to the Whydah

¹¹⁶ PP: Despatches from Commodore Wilmot, 13.

¹¹⁷ PP: CRST 1860, ii, no. 8: Consul Brand, Lagos, 18 Apr. 1860.

¹¹⁸ PP: CRST 1864, ii, no. 19: Consul Burton, Bonny River, 23 Mar. 1864.

¹¹⁹ Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, ii, 85, n.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* i, 91.

¹²¹ PP: CRST 1860, no. 8: Consul Brand, Lagos, 18 Apr. 1860.

¹²² Reynier, 'Ouidah', 63. Burton in 1864 describes Houenou as 'now promoted' to this rank: *Mission*, ii, 126, n. However, he is already described as 'minister of commerce' in 1861: Laffitte, *La Dahomé*, 198–202. Cf. also Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 62–3, which however erroneously dates the appointment to the reign of Gezo.

¹²³ Reynier, 'Ouidah', 63; cf. Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 70–1 (where '1886' on p. 70 is clearly a misprint for '1866').

administration, to 'watch over and direct the proceedings' of the Yovogan.¹²⁴ Later accounts show that this individual's name or title was Chodaton.¹²⁵ He was a cousin of Glele, the son of one of King Gezo's brothers.¹²⁶ The appointment of such royal counterparts to leading officials was not wholly new, but had been initiated by Gezo, as has been seen, early in his reign. The absence of any reference to such a counterpart to the Yovogan in the abundant contemporary documentation before the 1860s, however, suggests that its extension to the Whydah administration was an innovation. Unlike the earlier royal counterparts appointed by Gezo, moreover, the Chodaton's was evidently not a purely honorific post, but involved a real sharing of authority with the Yovogan. The seriousness of Glele's purpose in appointing him as a reassertion of royal power is suggested by the name Chodaton, meaning literally 'Everything belongs to the King'.

The evidence of Burton in 1864 shows, moreover, that the appointment of deputies or counterparts was not restricted to Whydah since he noted the existence of similar 'lieutenants' to the Migan and the Mehu, and also to the senior military commanders, the Gau and the Posu: called respectively Adandéjan, Bihuento, Matro and Ahwígámen. Like the Chodaton, these seem all to have been originally members of the royal family: the Adandéjan is described as a cousin and the Matro and Ahwígámen as brothers to the King, while the Bihuento of 1864, although not himself of royal blood, had 'lately succeeded to the name and rank of a nephew of the king' who had suffered disgrace.¹²⁷ Here again, these were clearly substantive rather than purely honorary posts: Burton explained elsewhere that their purpose was to 'neutralise' the officials inherited by Glele from his father without immediately dismissing them, 'by appointing as their aids younger men, of higher rank in the empire', in order to 'keep the elder in check'.¹²⁸

The purpose of this policy was evidently not only to 'neutralise' officials who had opposed Glele's succession, since it was applied also to his supporters such as the Mehu and the Yovogan; rather, the intention was to curtail the influence of all chiefs in order to enhance the king's effective independence. It served in practice to institutionalize rather than end divisions over policy since some of those appointed ended by espousing the reformist attitudes which Glele himself had repudiated. Already in 1864, Burton was given to understand that the Chodaton was 'a firm friend to the English', in contrast to the monarch's more ambivalent attitude. In the capital, Abomey, where Burton thought he could distinguish between 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' chiefs (admittedly on the subjective, or at least impressionistic, grounds of their demeanour in greeting him), he included among the former the Bihuento and the Matro, royal deputies to the Mehu and the Gau.¹²⁹ It may be, indeed, that the structural tension between chiefs and their deputies itself tended to push the latter into opposition, the pro-British attitude of the Chodaton and the Bihuento being perhaps the reflex

¹²⁴ PP: CRST 1860, ii, no. 18: Consul Brand, Lagos, 18 Apr. 1860.

¹²⁵ E.g. Laffitte, *Le Dahomé*, 93 ('Schoundaton'); Burton, *Mission*, i, 209 ('Chyudaton'). Cf. also Casimir Agbo, *Histoire de Ouidah* (Avignon, 1959), 204.

¹²⁶ Burton, *Mission*, i, 101, n., 209; Gléle, *Le Danxome*, 143.

¹²⁷ Burton, *Mission*, i, 221–5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* i, 53.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* i, 101, n., 375–6. The supposedly unfriendly chiefs included the Migan and the Tokpo (the official responsible for agriculture).

of the conservative posture of the Yovogan and the Mehu. Likewise, although Azanmado Houenou was presumably promoted as a partisan of Glele's pro-slaving policy, his son and successor Kpadonou Houenou became a supporter of 'legitimate' commerce, as noted earlier, championing the new trade in palm kernels against the opposition of the Yovogan.

The revival of the slave trade proved only temporary, with exports to Cuba effectively ceasing by 1866. The divisions arising from Glele's policies, however, persisted beyond the 1860s, with the Whydah merchant community in particular resentful both of the military mobilization which disrupted oil production and of high and arbitrary levels of royal taxation of their activities.¹³⁰ It seems likely that these continuing tensions are reflected, as Patrick Manning has suggested, in conflict over the succession to Glele himself which developed from the 1870s onwards.¹³¹ Glele initially appointed one of his sons called Ahanhanzo as his heir apparent, but his claims were contested by another son called Kondo; and when Ahanhanzo died prematurely (like Gezo earlier, of smallpox) it was alleged that he had been killed by 'black magic' employed by Kondo.¹³² Kondo in turn was installed as heir apparent in 1876, and it was he who eventually succeeded Glele, under the name Behanzin, in 1889. There is some suggestion that Ahanhanzo was associated with a policy of relative friendliness towards European influence while Kondo stood for more uncompromising resistance. It is at least consistent with this hypothesis that Kpadonou Houenou, the spokesperson of commercial interests at Whydah, supported the claims of Ahanhanzo against Kondo.¹³³

There is more concrete evidence for continuing tensions between Glele and the merchant community of Whydah during the 1870s and 1880s. A renewed clash was occasioned by the second British naval blockade of Whydah in 1876–7, provoked by the mistreatment of a British trader by the Whydah authorities. Although local Dahomian officials were initially conciliatory towards the British demands for compensation, they were overruled by Glele, who insisted upon defying the British.¹³⁴ After the blockade had been lifted, Glele summoned to Abomey several of the Whydah merchants whose behaviour he judged disloyal, including both Brazilians and Dahomians, and detained them there for varying periods.¹³⁵ Among these was Kpadonou Houenou, who was accused of intriguing to place Dahomey under a British protectorate with a view to making himself king; his property in Whydah was confiscated and he himself died still in prison in 1887.¹³⁶ His son, Tovalou Quénum, sought refuge in Porto-Novo.¹³⁷ Although the fall of the Houenou family in part reflected factional struggles within the Whydah

¹³⁰ E.g. Serval, 'Rapport sur une mission au Dahomey', *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, LIX (1878), 188.

¹³¹ Patrick Manning, 'Le Danhomé face aux contradictions économiques de l'ère impérialiste, 1858–1889' (Paper presented at the International Conference on the Life and Work of King Glele, Abomey, Dec. 1989).

¹³² Bernard Maupoil, *La géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Institut d'Ethnologie, Paris, 1943), 138, n.

¹³³ Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 78–9.

¹³⁴ Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats', 480–2.

¹³⁵ Serval, 'Rapport', 191; Foà, *Le Dahomey*, 36.

¹³⁶ Reynier, 'Ouidah', 65; cf. Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 78–80.

¹³⁷ Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 85.

merchant community, and in particular the intrigues of their old rivals, the de Souza's, it was also symptomatic of the growing tensions between the merchants generally and the Dahomian state.¹³⁸

When war broke out with France in 1890, the loyalty of Whydah was again regarded as suspect, and over 1,000 people considered sympathetic to the French were arrested and carried into imprisonment in the interior, to be released only by the French conquest two years later.¹³⁹ One of those arrested, who died in prison, was Atinzala Houenou, brother of Kpadonou, and now head of the Houenou family at Whydah; Tovalou Quénum at Porto-Novo meanwhile allied with the French against Dahomey.¹⁴⁰ The internal divisions arising from the mid-nineteenth century crisis of the Dahomian monarchy had thus contributed to undermining its solidarity in the face of European imperialism.

SUMMARY

This article examines the background and significance of the disputed royal succession in Dahomey following the death of King Gezo in 1858, when the accession of the designated heir apparent Badahun (Glele) was contested. This dispute reflected divisions over the practice of human sacrifice, which Gezo was seeking to curtail; Badahun was associated with a conservative opposition to Gezo's reforms and his accession marked the repudiation of his father's policies. It is argued that the controversies over human sacrifice related to disagreements within the Dahomian ruling élite about how to respond to the decline of the Atlantic slave trade. Gezo in the 1850s was seeking to promote the export of palm oil as a substitute for slaves. This policy implied the demilitarization of the Dahomian state and this in turn implied an attack on human sacrifice, which in Dahomey was bound up with the culture of militarism. The case thus illustrates the ideological dimension of the 'crisis of adaptation' posed for West African rulers by the transition from the slave trade to commercial agriculture. The divisions arising from this crisis persisted beyond Glele's accession, into the late nineteenth century, when they undermined the solidarity of the Dahomian élite in the face of European imperialism.

¹³⁸ Ironically, indeed, the de Souza's in turn were to suffer disgrace, liquidation of their leader, and confiscation a few years later (1887): Foà, *Le Dahomey*, 42–4.

¹³⁹ Agbo, *Histoire de Ouidah*, 74–5: Agbo himself, as a child, was one of those imprisoned on this occasion.

¹⁴⁰ Reynier, 'Ouidah', 65; Quénum, *Les ancêtres*, 84, 87–9.