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## Coastal Society in the Republic of Bénin: Reproduction of a Regional System

The society of coastal Bénin has sustained a remarkable continuity over the centuries of its recorded history. The source of the continuity, as I will argue, lies primarily in the environment of the region—its fertile lands and connected waterways—and in the culture which has developed in close interaction with that environment. At the same time, this African region has been among those most systematically in contact with the Atlantic world for over five centuries. Interactions with adjoining regions of the West African coast have also been a consistent dimension to regional life, and links between this coastal region and the hinterland to the interior have been more significant than is often supposed.

The purpose of this study is to reconsider the characteristics of a well-known coastal society, contrasting the self-generating reproduction of the regional system with the transformative influences of external linkages.<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Chauveau (1986: 179-184) has made the case for the integrity of coastal African societies, as compared with empires of the interior, which have appeared to many scholars as more imposing and, perhaps, more truly African. For Bénin, it cannot be said that the coast has been neglected in favor of the interior: rather, scholars have neglected the interior areas of Bargu and the Atakora to concentrate on the coast. Nonetheless, for the coast, recent interpretations have gone to various extremes. For Polanyi (1966), Danhomè was an 'archaic' economy organized to take advantage of the slave trade yet remain isolated from the social effects of outside contacts. For Peukert (1978), the slave trade was negligible in the regional economy. Even Akinjogbin (1967), who did significant primary research, focused so heavily on state policy

1. In the course of the analysis we will also encounter cases of transformation through local influences (e.g. the development of the *ahadja* fish shelters) and of reproduction of the local system through external linkages (e.g. the steady imports of cowries and other currencies).

as to imply that the regional economy ran on command. All these interpretations, centred mainly on a single kingdom, have underestimated the texture, the continuity, and the resiliency of the coastal economy and culture. My purpose, then, is to survey the structure, the linkages, the transformations and the reproduction of this coastal society. In so doing, I seek to highlight the relevance of the regional framework to such a survey, and the importance of environment, economic structure and culture in sustaining the region's identity.

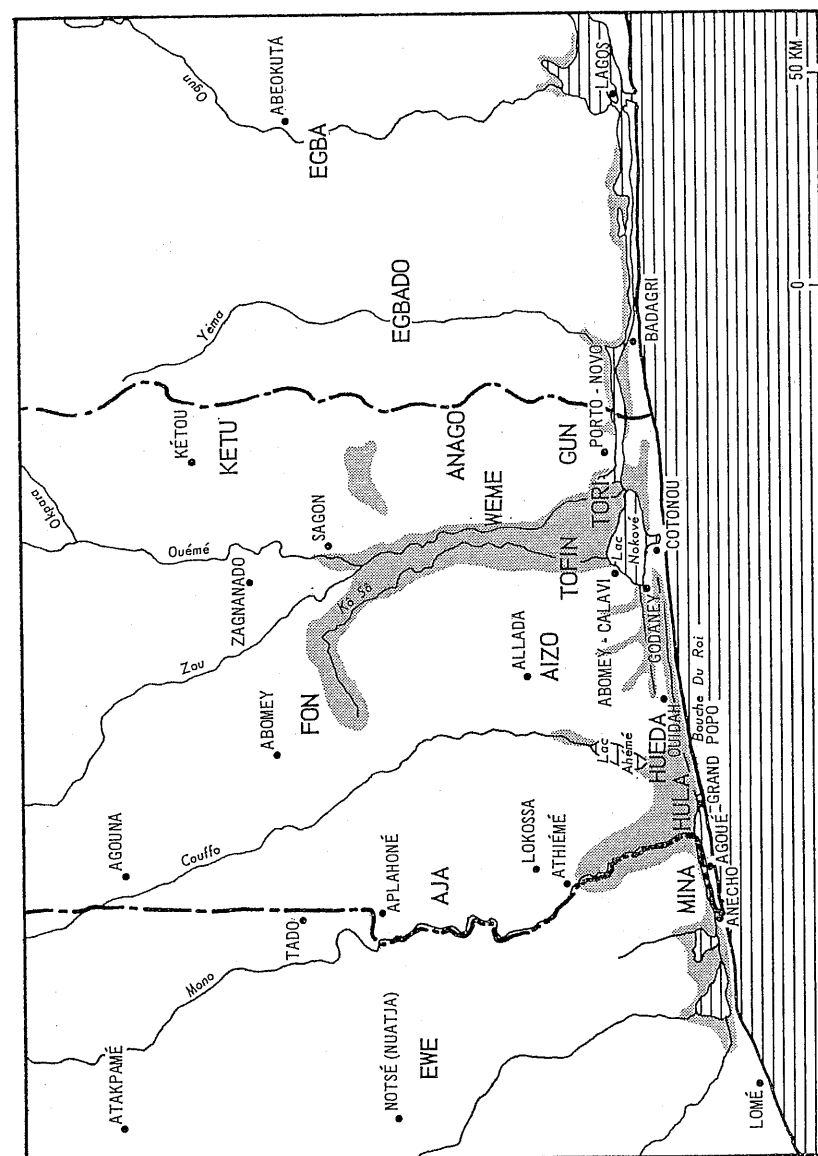
### Structure and Symbolism in the Coastal Economy

The microenvironment of coastal Bénin, with its unusual intermixture of lands and waterways, is rendered unique by its placement at the southern limit of the Dahomey Gap. This portion of the coast, where the savanna comes all the way to the Atlantic, is well watered but still drier than the forested areas to the east and west. The southern extension of savanna was influential in the early peopling and development of agriculture in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of the rainy season, particularly in the months of August and September, floods cause the level of the rivers and lagoons to rise so that the waterways seem to dominate the region.<sup>3</sup> The lagoon system of the Republic of Bénin breaks into two subsections, east and west, with an occasional linkage between them near Ouidah. To the east, the Ouémé River is the main source, as it flows first north and then south from the Atakora mountains on the northern frontier of Bénin and Togo. Its two main affluents are the Okpara from the east and the Zou from the west. The lower Ouémé valley, navigable by large canoe as far north as Sagon, includes a broad flood plain into which it spills from August to November; from there it flows into the wide Porto-Novo lagoon (see Map). The lagoon continues eastward for 100 kilometers before finding its opening to the sea at Lagos; on its way east it collects the waters of the Yewa and the Ogun Rivers in Nigeria. The salt content of the lagoon falls during flood season, but rises as the rivers fall.

Lake Nokoué is a large and shallow portion of the lagoon, connected by a series of creeks to the Porto-Novo lagoon, and fed from the north by the Sô, a short river which drains the marshes of the Kô (or Lama) to its northwest, and the floodplain of the Ouémé to its northeast. In

2. The geography of the Dahomey Gap has had its influence in more recent times, for instance in permitting the cavalry of the Oyo empire to punish Ardra in 1698 and to subjugate Danhomè in the 1730s.
3. On the rare sunny day one August when I had the chance to fly along this coast at a low altitude, a beautifully varied countryside stretched northward from the sea, with the green fields and wooded areas seemingly reduced to islands and peninsulas separated by the lagoons, rivers, and lakes.



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addition, an arm of the lake pointing seaward was occasionally open to the ocean at Cotonou. The salt level in the lagoon thus varied not only seasonally but from year to year, as high water in the lagoon occasionally broke an opening to the ocean, enabling salt water to flow in for some weeks or even some years.

In the western half of southern Bénin, the Couffo River flows southward through a series of marshes and opens up into the shallow Lake Ahémé, which in turn is connected to the coastal lagoon by a short affluent, the Aho. To the west, along the frontier of Bénin and Togo, flows the larger Mono, meandering through marshes in its lower but navigable reaches, and providing the main contribution to the lagoon. Between the Mono and the Aho, east of Grand Popo, the lagoon opens to the coast. The modern French name for the opening, *Bouche du Roi*, is a deformation of the more descriptive Portuguese '*boca del rio*'. The lagoon continues west to Lake Togo and, with occasional interruptions, to Keta near the mouth of the Volta.

The eastern and western portions of the Bénin lagoon system are only connected at high water. Ouidah is linked by one lagoon to the Grand Popo lagoon, while a parallel and shallower lagoon (slightly further inland) empties eastward into Lake Nokoué at Godomey. For most of the year, a portage is necessary to make the passage between the eastern and western lagoon systems.

The environment has conditioned the population of the region, and has created and recreated a regional culture. Influences from beyond the region, meanwhile, have led to modifications of regional life. These include migrations of families and larger groups; commercial ties to east and west, to the interior and to the Atlantic; diffusion of new technology in agriculture, fishing and manufacture; and ultimately the political conquest of the region by French invaders. As a result of these external contacts, coastal Bénin has undergone migrations and displacements in ethnic boundaries, changes in the dominant towns and markets, changing items and directions of commerce, rise and decline in population, and new forms of political and social organization.

This network of land and lagoon has long been the homeland of the Gbe-speaking or Aja-Ewe peoples.<sup>4</sup> The Gbe-speakers inhabit the coastal savanna of the Dahomey Gap, between the Yoruba-speaking peoples to the east and the Akan-speaking peoples to the west; the territories of the latter two groups, in contrast, include forest as well as savanna. The ancestral culture of the Aja-Ewe peoples is based on the cultivation of yams and oil palms, on fishing, and on associated craft work. The hoe, the matchet, and the canoe are three key tools and products of the

artisanal tradition. The dependable productivity of the farms and fisheries of the region have permitted the early rise of permanent settlements, so that the towns and villages of the regions have long histories.

Town, countryside, and market place interact intimately, each fulfilling its own function. The performance of the many tasks in sustaining the coastal society reinforced the distinctions in occupational and ethnic groups. Thus, in recent centuries, the Gun, Aïzo, and Aja have farmed three distinct sections of the coastal plateau; the Weme and Kotafon have farmed and fished two river valleys; the Tofin and Tori have fished Lake Nokoué and the Porto-Novo lagoon, respectively; and the Hula have combined agriculture, boat handling and salt manufacture along two sections of the lagoon system. These ethnic groups have usually shared markets and sometimes shared towns. The Hueda, Fon, Aïzo, and Gun have supported strong monarchies at various times; most of the others have preferred more decentralized political structures.

Yam, oil palm and lagoon fish may serve to symbolize the productive economy of the region; hoe, matchet and canoe may serve similarly to symbolize the tools used to produce and harvest these products. D. G. Coursey (1967) has argued that the bitter yam, *Dioscorea rotundata*, was domesticated in the Dahomey Gap, and that its spread east and west along the coast is reflected in the distribution of Kwa-speakers from Liberia to Cameroon. The linguistic division between Yoruba and Gbe is one of the most important divisions within Kwa, and is thus consistent with a presumed gradual rise of linguistic and cultural distinctions among populations long in place. Coursey has emphasized the symbolic importance of yams throughout the Kwa-speaking zone, notably in social significance of festivals at the first fruit of the yam.<sup>5</sup>

By the same token, the oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis*, has been basic to the economy of the region from earliest times. The relative density of oil palms in the savanna areas of Bénin attests to the regular attentions of farmers to this crop essential in the production of cooking oil, soap, and palm wine. As with yams, the symbolic importance of oil palms in the regional culture attests to its early significance. Oil palm trees, palm oil, palm kernels (used, for instance, in divination) and palm wine appear repeatedly in proverbs, songs, and now in modern poetry. In modern times, something over ten percent of the population of coastal Bénin have been involved in activities related to fishing, and this may also have been the case earlier.<sup>6</sup> Fish are key to the diet of coastal Bénin, not only for fishing folk themselves, but for all in the region. Here too, the long-term importance of fishing in the regional culture is

4. The term Gbe has now been adopted by linguists to refer to the languages formerly known as Ewe or Aja-Ewe. The suffix *-gbe* means language in these tongues: hence fongbe, ewegbe, gungbe, etc.

5. For two good general statements on the distant beginnings of the region's population and culture, see ADAGBA 1986-87, ADANDÉ 1988.

6. For a detailed study of fishing techniques at the beginning of this century, see GRUVEL 1913; see also BOURGOIGNIE 1972, PÉTREQUIN 1984.

reflected in proverbs. Thus, Huegbaja, the founding monarch of Danhomè, took for his strong name the image of the fish who has escaped from the net.

Of the many kinds of artisanal work, iron manufacture was perhaps the main one. This technique was learned, probably at the beginning of the Christian era, from peoples to the north. It is most commonly believed that iron use spread into West Africa either from North Africa or across the savanna from the Nile valley; on the other hand, Jean-Baptiste Kiethega has noted the wide variety of techniques for making iron in ancient Burkina Faso, and he implies that this may be evidence of independent development of iron technology in the West African savanna. In any case, the hoe—the key agricultural tool, reflected in the *récales* of the region's kings—and the machet also gained great symbolic importance. Other important artisanal work included pottery, textile production, salt manufacture, and the making of canoes and many smaller household items in wood and basketry.

The interaction of farms, fisheries, and workshops—of town and countryside—reinforced exchange among the many occupational roles and groups. Markets and hence money became central to the functioning of the regional economy. But money seems to have come originally from the north. According to Félix Iroko,<sup>7</sup> the terms for cowrie and for money are the same in the languages of the region. This gives support to the view that coastal Bénin became—before the opening of maritime contact beyond Africa—a part of the cowrie currency zone which was created through the overland import of cowries from the Indian Ocean to the West African savanna.<sup>8</sup> Early participation of coastal Bénin in the cowrie zone meant not only monetization of the economy, but commercial links with the Niger valley. At present one must imagine the items of commerce, but if later trends provide any clue, they included the northward movement of salt purified in coastal lagoons, and the southward movement of food crops and artisanal products.

The opening of seaborne commerce between West Africa and Asia in the sixteenth century led to a reversal in the direction of cowrie flow. Henceforth cowries entered the cowrie currency zone from the Bénin

coast, and flowed northward to satisfy the demand throughout the system. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the expansion of slave exports, demand for cowries in this region appeared to be insatiable. All were imported along a narrow band of the coast, yet sustained the money supply in an area including several million people (Hogendorn & Johnson 1986).

Cowries came to be of central symbolic value to the peoples of coastal Bénin. Not only was the economic and metaphoric operation of the economy impossible without money, but the religious functions and connotations linked to cowries have become equally profound.<sup>9</sup> Cowries serve at once as a symbol of the local market and of outside economic contacts. Thus the proverbial means of obtaining cowries, as reported by Iroko, was to drown a slave in the lagoon, and wait while cowries grew on the corpse of the unfortunate; in time the body was dragged up and the cowries harvested. The metaphor, outrageous on the face of it, is rich in its evocation of the significance of surrendering human lives in order to obtain money (Iroko 1988).

Markets required more than commodities and money: they could only function where linked, as they were in coastal Bénin, by a satisfactory transport system. Waterborne transit provided the most efficient segment of that system, particularly at high water, when bulky staples could be moved along rivers and lagoons at reduced expense. A network of transport by portage picked up at the nodes of waterborne transit, and provided the unique linkage in areas beyond waterways.

Descriptions from the turn of the twentieth century give some idea of the magnitude and direction of canoe and portage transit. In addition to the major east-west route along the lagoons, many goods were shipped along the lower Ouémé, Mono, and Couffo. Major portage route went inland from Tokpli on the Mono to Djougou, and from Sagon on the Ouémé to Savè and Parakou. An important east-west portage route went from Abeokuta to Atakpamé via Kétou, Abomey, and Tahoun. At that time, there were some five thousand laborers specializing in lagoon and river transport throughout coastal Bénin, and roughly four hundred men specialized in transporting goods across the coastal bar in surf boats. A much larger number of persons had to be involved in portage (which was far less labor-efficient), and few of them were full-time specialists. For instance, on the route from Grand Popo and Tokpli to Djougou, an estimated five thousand full-time equivalent porters were required to carry the known volume of commerce, and these were drawn from a total adult (male and female) population of between 40,000 and 80,000 (Manning 1985).

7. Personal communication. See also IROKO 1988.

8. An alternative thesis is that coastal Bénin used a currency of local shells—of an unspecified species—before the arrival of cowries. The use of Maldivian cowries as currency is documented for Mali and adjoining areas of the Upper Niger for the fourteenth century. In Hausa, cowries appear to have first arrived from the west—hence from the Upper Niger—but are not known to have been utilized before the seventeenth century. Portuguese accounts and archaeological digs appear to confirm the use of cowries in the Benin kingdom, and probably also in coastal Bénin, before the Portuguese arrival (HOGENDORN & JOHNSON 1986: 17-19, 104-105). The questions remain as to the route by which the first cowries reached coastal Bénin. One is left to presume that they descended the Niger (with Songhai or Dendi merchants) to northern Bénin, then went southward overland.

9. For a revealing study of proverbs and traditional economic wisdom among Yoruba, see BELASCO 1980.

The economy and society of coastal Bénin were structured by a political system balancing royal authority against lineage autonomy. The political tradition of the Gbe-speaking peoples is founded on myths of origin in Tado, located in the middle Mono valley. Almost all the Aja-Ewe peoples claim their origin in Tado, and archaeological surveys indicate the likelihood of an early and significant settlement at this town, perhaps in the fourteenth century. The Ewe peoples, most of whom now live in Togo and Ghana, have traditions of dispersal from Notse, southwest of Tado, but the people of Notse also clearly point to Tado as their place of origin. Further, the traditions of Tado indicate an earlier migration from Ketu or perhaps another area of western Yoruba country (Gayibor 1977, 1986; Bertho, 1949).

All of these traditions of origin are best interpreted as reflecting dynastic or aristocratic movements, rather than movements of whole populations. The underlying populations and their culture go back much further than the fourteenth century. Ironically the traditions, while referring to relatively recent dynastic movements, are used in their ideological applications to refer to the deeper historical unity of the region's peoples. For instance, the formulation of this myth emphasized in Danhomè focused on a mythical coupling of a woman and a panther near Tado, which gave rise to a family (the Agasuvi) that was later to found the kingdom of Danhomè: this statement of the myth not only legitimized the royal family, but also laid a basis for a claim to hegemony over all the peoples linked to Tado.<sup>10</sup>

The above, then, were the main elements of the regional economy and culture as of the fifteenth century.

### Linkages beyond the Coast: Fifteenth through Nineteenth Centuries

With the beginnings of documentary evidence on the Bénin coast from the fifteenth century, one can begin to get a more specific sense of the region's linkages to other areas. Not least among these are linkages along the lagoon system to both east and west.<sup>11</sup> Thus the kingdom of Benin, in the period of its greatest extent, expanded its influence to the west of the modern Bénin-Nigeria frontier. The *oba* of Lagos got his title from Bénin, and the Bini kingdom extended at least a vague suzerainty further westward along the lagoons (Ryder 1969).

10. For a recent discussion of the Agasuvi myth, see BLIER 1988. The myth of Yoruba ancestry for Tado has the advantage of suggesting that many more small-scale movements and interactions of Yoruba and Aja-Ewe people must have taken place.

11. For a pathbreaking analysis of linkages among economic regions, see ROBERTS 1980-81.

Initially, the arrival of the Portuguese did more to facilitate than to interrupt contacts along the coast. Lagoon trade in fish, in foodstuffs, and in textiles has been documented for these early days. The Portuguese carried slaves from Bénin to Elmina to exchange for gold, and presumably carried other commodities along the coast as well (Kea 1982).

Meanwhile, migrations along the coast modified the political complexion of the region. Emigrants from the Ga-speaking area of Accra moved eastward to the vicinity of Grand Popo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; there, as they settled and intermarried with the local population, they established the Gë ethnic group, also known as Mina. Fante emigrants who followed the Ga eastward and settled among them also became part of the Gë. These settlers, under the leadership of Foli Bébé, formed the kingdom of Glidji and played a major role in the political restructuring of the region (Gayibor 1986).

Portuguese contacts with the region eventually meant ties not only with Europe, but with Asia and the Americas as well. The significance of cowrie imports has already been discussed. In addition, the Bénin coast was now in contact with American, Asian and European crops. Those which were to have the greatest influence in the long run were maize, peanuts, and sweet potatoes. In addition Asian yams and such fruits as oranges, mangoes, coconuts, pineapples, breadfruit, and papaya also became significant; from the nineteenth century, manioc became a major addition to the regional diet.<sup>12</sup>

The timing of these changes is not always clear. The most significant change, over the long term, was the adoption of maize. The first recorded export of maize from coastal Bénin was in the seventeenth century (Verger 1968: 159); it had clearly become important in the local economy by the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The nutritional impact of this change has yet to receive any detailed assessment.<sup>14</sup> It is unlikely, however, given the relative productivity and nutritional value of yams and maize, that maize led to an increased food value or an increased population for the region. Nevertheless, since maize is more easily stored and transported than yams, it may have become a more convenient crop in the course of the many displacements accompanying the slave trade. In any case, by the early twentieth century coastal Bénin had become the most

12. For a description of the full range of crops in the region, as well as the main products of fishing, animal husbandry and artisanal work, see MANNING 1980.

13. For a detailed analysis of available texts on coastal crop use in the period before 1750, see WIGBOLDUS 1986. He argues that millet had been little used in the region, but that its cultivation increased dramatically in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Millet, in his view, was then displaced by maize in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

14. For an argument that adoption of maize led to West African population growth, see CURTIN 1969: 270-271. ADANDÉ (1988), however, has emphasized that no research has yet shown any decisive advantage of maize over yams in productivity or nutritional value.

intensive cultivator of maize of any African region, and maize paste, *akassa*, ultimately became the best known single food of the region (Miracle 1966).

Social changes accompanied the technical changes in the first centuries of contact with Europeans. A Christian community formed in coastal Bénin, in response to the missionary activities of the Portuguese and the benefits of commercial contacts with Europe. Indeed, as Thornton (1988) has shown, this community was important in developing and sustaining a vision of Christianity which was spread widely through the Americas as a result of the slave trade; only the regions of Kongo and Angola were more crucial in the development of African Christianity. This Christian community was influential in inducing the king of Ardra to request baptism in 1658 and to call for the establishment of a mission in his kingdom.<sup>15</sup> While this initiative did not lead to baptism for the king, it did bring about the writing of a catechism in the Gbe language which was used in the instruction of slaves not only in Ardra but in the New World. Although the Christian community in coastal Bénin did not grow large until the twentieth century, it always carried some weight and remained linked to European Christians.

The growth of slave exports in the late seventeenth century brought a new and ultimately devastating pattern to coastal Bénin. The kingdoms of Ardra and Hueda began supplying large numbers of slaves in response to the demands of Dutch, Portuguese, English and French merchants. Wars among the coastal peoples increased in this time, and migrations of groups to new homes in marshes and on lakes were particularly extensive in this time. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, virtually half of all the slaves carried across the Atlantic came from this region (Manning 1987). Although a certain number of the slaves was sent from the interior by Oyo and the Bargu states, the great majority were Aja-Ewe people from the coast. As a result, the population of the whole Bight of Bénin, and of the coastal area of modern Bénin in particular, began to decline in the late seventeenth century and continued until the early nineteenth century.

Under these new pressures, the coastal economy underwent restructuring, yet did not collapse. Danhomè became the dominant regional power, and was in turn forced to accept the broader hegemony of Oyo (Akinjogbin 1967, Law 1977). Though their wealth had greatly increased, European merchants were virtually imprisoned in their forts and were prevented from exercising any independent political power in Danhomè. Massive imports of cowries caused the money supply to expand; imports of textiles, tobacco, alcoholic beverages and various

luxury goods spread through the regions network of markets. Old towns gave way to new: Togodo and Savi, the capitals of Ardra and Hueda, were supplanted by Abomey and Ouidah (Adandé 1986-87). Smaller towns such as Grand Popo and Ekpé retained their significance. Later in the eighteenth century, as the focus of slave exports began to shift eastward, the towns of Porto-Novo, Badagri and Lagos gained more importance.

Contacts of coastal Bénin with interior regions appear to have increased through the eighteenth century. Exports of slaves from all the interior regions expanded: from the Atakora, from Bargu, from Oyo, and even from Nupe and the Hausa territories further inland. The growth of Oyo slave exports via the ports of Porto-Novo and Badagri in the late eighteenth century is clearly documented; the export of interior slaves via Grand Popo is less securely documented (Law 1977; Manning 1982). In exchange, salt from the lagoons and cowries from the Atlantic flowed north. Many other goods certainly flowed in every direction.

Meanwhile, the effects of the *jihads* of the Sokoto Caliphate began to be felt. For Oyo, the export of slaves by a strong state was succeeded by invasion, civil war, and collapse. Throughout the nineteenth century, Yoruba states warred against each other. Danhomè renounced its vassalage to Oyo in 1818, and became free to expand to the eastward. The results of these wars and continued enslavement combined with the declining European market for slaves to bring about a decisive social change: a substantial increase in the holding of slaves by many of the coastal peoples during the nineteenth century.

The expansion in slaveholding on the African coast was reinforced by another change in Atlantic trade: the increase in demand for palm oil, which was felt on the coast by 1840. While the region had exported palm oil (along with maize, poultry, salt and many other goods) as ships' supplies for the whole period of the slave trade, the level of exports now greatly rose.

Other developments, also associated with the decline of the Atlantic slave trade, reinforced these changes. After 1835 a significant number of Brazilian ex-slaves were repatriated to the Bight of Benin. These migrants, who totalled some four thousand, greatly expanded the size of the Christian community on the coast. Their metropolis was Agoué, which grew to be a major market town, but they also settled in each of the towns along the coast from Anecho to Lagos (Turner 1975, Verger 1968). With them came the expansion of manioc cultivation and the consumption of *gari* prepared from manioc.

Yet another change brought with the palm oil trade was that in the salt industry. French purchasers of palm oil found that they could readily exchange imported salt for palm oil. The result was to undermine the salt industries of Grand Popo, Kéténou and other points of the coast; former producers of salt found it profitable to turn to production

15. On mission work in Ardra, see LABOURET & RIVET 1929. For an archaeological study of Togodo (near Allada), the capital of Ardra, see ADANDÉ 1986-87.

of palm oil or, later copra. The trade in salt to the interior, however, continued: French officials in the early twentieth century estimated that 218 tons passed the post of Kambolè in a single year (Manning 1985).

In sum, the first four centuries of contact with the Atlantic economy brought substantial changes to coastal Bénin, yet these did not break the framework of the regional economy or the regional culture. Population declined during the severe days of slave exports, but then began to recover. New crops were added to the old, and maize displaced yams as the principal source of cowries in many (but not all) areas. The coast became the center of the cowrie zone, rather than its periphery; with time, new currencies—silver dollars and British sterling coins—began circulating alongside cowries. A new set of towns rose to dominance, and the populations of marshy and riverain areas rose along with the desire to escape from raids or from tax-hungry sovereigns. Ethnic groups shifted in their location and their relative size. Thus, some Hueda moved west beyond Lake Ahémé as their kingdom was destroyed while the power of Danhomè caused others to assimilate to Fon ethnic identity. The Tofin of Lake Nokoué became more numerous as the flow of refugees from plateau areas to the lake continued. The Christians of coastal Bénin, previously restricted to the vicinity of the European forts, now spread all along the coast as their numbers grew with the arrival of Brazilian repatriates. Palm oil was now traded not just locally, but was exported in large quantities, and so were palm kernels. The work of lagoon transporters and surf boatmen at the coast expanded with the increased volume of export and domestic commerce.

To rephrase in emblematic terms the transformations from 1450 to 1890: the yam festival continued, but *akassa* became the typical food; cowries retained their value, but were supplemented by silver (nineteenth-century sculpture for the kings of Danhomè used vast quantities of silver); canoes were supplemented by surf boats (and king Agaja of Danhomè took a Portuguese ship as his emblem); peasant cultivators, fishers, and artisans were supplemented by growing numbers of slaves. Artisans manufactured clay pipes for consumption of imported tobacco; merchants imported wooden puncheons carrying spirits one way and palm oil the other. The *vodun* (Aja-Ewe gods) took responsibilities for new trade and new diseases (Sakpata became the god of smallpox), but new religions served those involved in long-distance trade: Christianity for those in Atlantic trade, Islam for those trading with the Niger valley. Savi and then Ouidah and Abomey became major towns with the rise of the slave trade, while Porto-Novo and then Ahoué grew in the nineteenth century, particularly with palm oil trade.

## Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century

The French conquest of 1892-94 opened up another era, more significant at first for its political changes than for any economic transformations. The old kingdoms were rendered powerless and, in the case of Danhomè, destroyed. New rulers, a new legal system, a more powerful army, a new language of government—these were the changes that first seemed most important. Even as the French took power, however, the survival of the previous system remained evident. Colonel Alfred Dodds succeeded in his attack on Danhomè not so much through brute force as through careful alliance with forces then at odds with the Fon monarchy. He maintained broad support in Porto-Novo, and gained the support of at least a portion of the Ouidah elite. With this alliance, he recruited a huge flotilla of large and small canoes, and led his army up the Ouémé during the annual flood to land and begin his attack deep in the interior of Danhomè. Even then, it took two months of difficult combat to vanquish his enemy.

The new French administration sought to establish firm borders to the east and west, and to tax trade. In some cases it succeeded, and with unfortunate results. In 1897, France ceded the right bank of the Mono river to German Togo, with the consequence that the prosperous town of Agoué was cut off from its fields, its major marketplace, and its economic hinterland—all of which were located on the north (now German) side of the lagoon. Within three years the population of the town has dropped from a reported eight thousand to a few hundred (Manning 1982).

More important than the political changes brought by French rule, ultimately, were the economic changes brought by the combination of colonial rule and the changing world economy. The regional economy and society underwent transformation through the effects of a new monetary system (the French government expropriated and destroyed cowries where possible, replacing them with francs), the construction of a railroad, and the increased availability of industrially produced goods.

For instance, with the construction of the railroad, Cotonou became the main port of the coast, and gradually displaced Ouidah and Grand Popo. The work of the surf boatmen disappeared as ocean commerce ended at the smaller ports, and as a pier at Cotonou reduced the labor requirements of cargo handling. Slavery, as a mechanism for labor recruitment, rapidly declined, and in its place grew varieties of wage labor: forced labor under government command (notably in road maintenance), wage labor for European states and private enterprises (railroad workers or commercial clerks), and wage labor for small local enterprises—although this last one had its antecedents in the precolonial wage labor of boatmen and commercial employees.

At the end of the colonial era, the construction of the deep-water port

at Cotonou, though modernizing the Atlantic commerce, compromised life on the lagoons. The port's breakwater interrupted the eastward transport of sand and caused the lagoon's opening to the sea to become permanent, thus sharply increasing the salinity of Lake Nokoué and causing the yield of fish decline.

Yet for all these transformations, the regional economy and society continued to function and even to grow; further, some of its changes and developments had little to do with colonial rule. In the fishing communities of Lake Nokoué and the Porto-Novo lagoon, for instance, the late nineteenth century saw the initial spread of a technical innovation: the *akadja*. These fish shelters, formed of thousand of wooden stakes thrust into the shallow waters, and harvested periodically with the aid of great nets, sharply increased the productivity of the lagoons (Pélissier 1963).

And while the railroad and (later) trucks provided a new transport system, even the colonial government continued to rely heavily on the old. As late as 1930 the colony's capital in Porto-Novo was still not linked to its port at Cotonou either by road or rail. Instead, a huge fleet of canoes shuttled through the lagoons and creeks between the two towns.<sup>16</sup> The canoemen were organized, as always, into teams each having their own chief; the head of the canoemen's corporation acted as dispatcher. In later years, after the road had become dominant, the fleets of taxis linking the two towns were organized according to the same labor system.

In general, the list of subtle changes in twentieth-century life is longer than the list of dramatic reorganizations. Pipes gave way to cigarettes, palm wine gave way in part to beer, and some canoes were affixed with outboard motors. The lagoon trade between Porto-Novo and Lagos continued, though now largely as contreband. Alfred Mondjannagni (1963) has documented the role of the border village of Méridjonou, whose youngmen became full time specialists in spiriting goods across the border, taking advantage of price differentials brought by customs duties.

The Christian community grew rapidly during the twentieth century. In part this reflected the early and dedicated missionary activity of Fathers Steinmetz and Aupiais, but also the historical role played by the Christian community in mediating the region's trans-Atlantic economic and cultural links.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the *vodun* and the *orisha* were

16. The road and railroad from Cotonou reached the lagoon across from Porto-Novo in 1930; the bridge across the lagoon was completed in 1938. Even then, roughly half the goods moving between the two towns went by canoe (DESANTI 1945).

17. The Christian community had utilized the Portuguese language for religious purposes and for international communication, even requiring nineteenth-century French and Italian missionaries to operate their school in Portuguese. Within a few years of the French conquest, however, coastal Christians had switched to use the French language.

brought up to date: the god of iron and war (Gù in Gbe, Ogun in Yoruba) also became, most appropriately, god of the road.<sup>18</sup>

Some changes of the twentieth century, of course, have fundamentally restructured the conditions of southern Bénin. Most notably, the political structure of colonial Dahomey brought the coast into an intimate relationship with what is now northern Bénin. As a result of national independence within this unit, and particularly since the revolution of the 1970s, a shared sense of Bénin citizenship, linking north and south, has grown in addition to local and regional identities. Yet this and other changes, despite their profundity, have not gone so far as to erase the significance of the environment of coastal Bénin or of the culture based on it.

To illustrate the continuing validity of such ancient images as the oil palm and the canoe in addressing the key questions facing the region today, we may call on the distinguished poet Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos, who grew up in Porto-Novo. Here is a selection from his poem 'Paroles éotériques', which he utilized to support his argument in a university inaugural lecture (Tidjani-Serpôs 1988) on the role of human sciences in cultural development:

Je ne sais pas si tu es prêtre du Vodun  
 Je ne sais pas si ta femme  
 Est prêtresse d'Orisha  
 Car sur le chemin de ma vie  
 Mon proverbe a enragé  
 Le maître du Couvent  
 Mes paroles ont mis en transe  
 Les Initiés.  
 Et pourtant  
 Et pourtant  
 Ami Rameur,  
 Si tu t'encordes pour grimper  
 Dans le palmier des paroles d'antan  
 Si tu t'encordes pour aller chercher  
 Le vin de palme de ton héritage  
 Assure-toi bien de ton équilibre.  
 Coupeur de feuilles de palmes  
 Cueilleur de régimes de palmistes  
 Assure-toi de ton équilibre  
 Celui qui s'élève  
 Trahit les lois des bipèdes  
 Et dégringole.  
 Si tu tombes et te fêles le péroné  
 Laisse le Vodun tranquille

18. For a drama based on this development, see Wole SOYINKA's *The Road* (1968); see also SOGLO 1986-87. The slow growth of Islam in twentieth-century Bénin reflects the minimal growth of commerce to the north. Most Muslim Béninois are concentrated in the southeast and are of Yoruba ethnicity; some of them have commercial ties with Nigeria.



Laisse les Orishas tranquilles  
 Adjalla ne t'a rien fait  
 Eshu n'est point coupable  
 Alabgara n'est guère responsable  
 Coupeur de feuilles de palmes  
 Cueilleur de régimes de palmistes  
 Laisse  
 TON ORI  
 TON TA  
 TON CHI  
 Dormir en paix.  
 Rameur,  
 Si tu te penches trop sur l'eau  
 Si tu te fies trop à la pagaie  
 Tu tomberas dans l'eau  
 Dans l'eau où Bonou t'attend.

If the poem of Tidjani-Serpos makes clear in one way the cultural and economic continuity of coastal Bénin, a final and prosaic example from daily life should illustrate it in another way. From the western outskirts of Cotonou, university students leave their dormitories each day or take buses (or motorbikes if they are fortunate) to their classes. They ride northwest past Godomey (the seventeenth-century port of Ardra) to the campus at Abomey-Calavi (also a lagoon port from the early days). But if motor transport is *de rigueur* today, and if gasoline is now indispensable, it is the old lagoon system which brings gasoline to Cotonou. Cheap Nigerian gasoline, smuggled across the border, is brought by motor launch and canoe through the lagoons to the west side of Cotonou. There, young men waving hoses attract motorists to roadside displays of their wares: ten-liter *bidons* of gasoline for cars, and one-liter bottles of fuel for motorbikes.

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