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978-1-107-04018-2 - The Precolonial State in West Africa: Building Power in Dahomey

J. Cameron Monroe

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## THE PRECOLONIAL STATE IN WEST AFRICA

This volume incorporates historical, ethnographic, art historical, and archaeological sources to examine the relationship between the production of space and political order in the West African kingdom of Dahomey during the tumultuous Atlantic Era. Dahomey, situated in the modern Republic of Bénin, emerged during this period as one of the principal agents in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and an exemplar of West African state formation. Drawing from thirteen years of ethnohistorical and archaeological fieldwork in the Republic of Bénin, the central thesis of this volume is that Dahomean kings used spatial tactics to project power and mitigate dissent across their territories. J. Cameron Monroe argues that these tactics enabled kings to economically exploit their subjects, promote a sense of the historical inevitability of royal power, and naturalize social distance between rulers and the ruled.

J. Cameron Monroe is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the director of the Abomey Plateau Archaeological Project in the Republic of Bénin, West Africa. His research broadly addresses the political, economic, and cultural transformation in West Africa and the African Diaspora during the era of the slave trade. His work in Bénin examines the political economy of landscape and the built environment, and the nature of urban transformation in West Africa during the Atlantic Era. He has published in *Historical Archaeology*, the *Journal of African History*, the *Journal of Social Archaeology*, *Current Anthropology*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, and *American Scientist Magazine*. He is a coeditor of *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological Perspectives*. Monroe currently serves on the editorial board of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*.

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## BUILDING POWER IN DAHOMEY

**J. CAMERON MONROE**

University of California, Santa Cruz



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*For Stephanie, Natalie, and Nathan*

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE IN BÉNIN CAME FORTUITOUSLY IN 1999, WHILE I WAS A PhD student in anthropology at UCLA. At that time, I was in search of a dissertation topic in the historical archaeology of West Africa, and my advisor, Merrick Posnansky, recommended that I travel to Bénin to explore the archaeology of Dahomey. Dahomey had captured my attention in graduate school as a polity that, on one hand, had been studied intensely by historians and anthropologists alike, serving as a classic example of a precolonial West African state. Yet not one shred of archaeological research had been produced to flesh out the material contours of political centralization in Dahomey. At Merrick's encouragement, I bought a plane ticket to Bénin and arrived in Cotonou soon thereafter. Unlike most graduate students preparing for field research, I came to Bénin with very little in the way of a structured plan of research. In fact, I arrived with my wife, Stephanie, in tow on what was, at least in my mind, the perfect honeymoon. We were fortunate enough to land in Kenneth Kelly's field house at Ouidah, where Ken was in full swing on a final season of fieldwork at the site of Savi. From there, we made our way to Abomey, where we stayed in the Hotel Guedevi for nearly a month while exploring the town and gauging the potential for initiating archaeological research in the region. Since then, I have had the extremely good fortune to return to Bénin nearly every year to explore the archaeology and history of that West African civilization. This volume is the product of these explorations, and I owe a great deal to many people who have shared this journey with me since that first visit.

This volume evolved out of my PhD dissertation research, and a number of individuals at UCLA were particularly influential in shaping its early trajectory. Merrick Posnansky introduced me to West African archaeology and opened numerous doors for me in Bénin, and on both counts I shall be forever in his debt. I treasure his continued insight into the West African past, as well as his ongoing friendship. In graduate school, Richard Leventhal first introduced me to the literature on architecture and political power in complex societies, and he has continued to serve as a welcome sounding board for my thoughts on this and

other topics. Similarly, I was introduced to regional approaches in archaeology during a number of graduate seminars and reading groups organized by Chip Stanish, and it was through his encouragement that I initially sought to explore the nature of Dahomean political authority at the regional level. Additionally, Ken Kelly provided greatly needed hospitality for my wife and me during our first trip to Bénin, and over the ensuing years has continued to encourage the research presented here.

The input of a number of colleagues dramatically impacted the direction I took this research since my time at UCLA. In 2004, Timothy Parsons brought me to Washington University in St. Louis as a postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of African and African-American Studies, a department that gave me both the time and space to explore the results of my dissertation research from a more nuanced historical and cultural perspective. I can't thank him enough for this opportunity and his continued interest in my research. Since our first meeting in 2006, Suzanne Blier has been a constant source of information of Fon material culture and oral traditions, and has provided invaluable commentary on drafts of earlier iterations of these chapters. Robin Law has also had an enormous influence (directly and indirectly) on this project. Law's book *The Slave Coast of West Africa* (1991) served as my first introduction to Dahomey's historical past, and since my time at UCLA he has graciously contributed his thoughts on drafts of articles as well as on this book. Last, Neil Norman has proven to be a valued partner in exploring the archaeology of Bénin, and an equally valued friend. His study of the regional nature of Huedan political organization has served as a model for comparison with Dahomey, and he introduced me to the best pizza in Cotonou (le Livingston for those interested). For both I am eternally grateful.

In Bénin, colleagues in the Department d'Histoire et Archéologie at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin have provided a great deal of support throughout all phases of this project. In particular, I owe my sincerest thanks to Elisée Soumonni and Joseph Adandé for supporting this project in its early years (2000–3). Additionally, Alexis Adandé, Obaré Bagodo, and Didier N'Dah encouraged the project in later seasons of fieldwork (2005–10) and have provided cadres of students from the Université d'Abomey-Calavi for field training over the years. Colleagues at the Direction du Patrimoine Culturel, Bénin (DPC), have also proved instrumental in facilitating this research. Directors Eric Totah, Constant Noanti, Nicholas Ago, and Richard Sogan, as well as DPC staff members Zéphiran Daavo and Calixte Biah, were enormously helpful in their capacity as the guardians of Bénin's cultural heritage. Their support was instrumental in acquiring necessary permits for field research, as well as to export material for analysis, and their assistance in working out the protocols for storing excavated materials in Abomey was essential. In Abomey, the staff of the Musée Historique d'Abomey (MHA) helped to organize this project over the past decade and provided a safe and secure environment in which to store the artifacts we recovered. In particular, museum directors Zéphiran Daavo, Urbain Hadonou, and

Leonard Ahonon have provided an administrative home for us in Abomey, and have been ready to help with a range of logistical issues in the field at a moment's notice. Each was a gracious host during my stays in Abomey, providing support and resources unattainable by my own devices. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Leonard Ahonon for granting permission to take the photographs of the palace interior at the MHA that are included in Chapter 6.

I would also like to express my thanks to the people of Abomey and Cana, who have welcomed me into their community for months on end over the past decade. I owe a major debt of gratitude to Nondichao Bachalou, who was willing to share his astounding knowledge of royal dynastic oral history with me in 2000 and in subsequent years, and who first introduced me to the palace complexes at Cana. I would like to acknowledge the major contribution to this study made by the king of Cana, Da Langanfin Glélé Aihotogbé. Since the day I met Da Langanfin in July 2000, as a dusty student asking permission to investigate the homes of his ancestors, he has been the local pillar upon which this project has rested. He appreciated immediately how archaeology could contribute to his interest in furthering knowledge of Cana's role in Dahomean history and he made himself constantly available to me. He assisted in the identification and interpretation of numerous palaces at Cana, and was a principal source of Cana's dynastic oral history. Additionally, however, Da Langanfin introduced me to the people of Cana as someone interested in their history and culture. I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for his support in this regard.

I am particularly indebted to my good friend and colleague Christian Médard Assogba, Professeur d'Histoire et Géographie, Collège de Ouinhi. I met Christian in 1999 at Ouidah, where he was working with Ken Kelly as a student volunteer from the Université d'Abomey-Calavi. Since 2000, Christian and I have lived and worked together through every phase of this research. He provided invaluable field assistance and served as a cultural interlocutor whenever needed. His understanding of traditional politics and government bureaucracy and his aptitude as a field archaeologist and an oral historian were critical components to the successful completion of this research. Christian has also proven an exceptional cultural guide, and it is through his influence that I have come to know and love Fon culture. He has also been an enormously patient collaborator over the years, forgiving the transgressions of an American archaeologist who was, at times, embarrassingly ignorant of cultural protocol and process. Indeed, it is through Christian's influence that "patience" became the mantra of the project. Last, he played a lead role, within the context of the broader project, in both scheduling and translating the oral interviews on which much of the argument of Chapter 5 hinges.

Over the years, this project has benefited substantially from the involvement of a significant number of students during all phases of fieldwork. These include undergraduates from the United States, Canada, and Bénin (Didier Ahuandjinou, Amour Ayibatin, Phillipa Baker-Rabe, Laurie Darcus, Yvonne Degbey, Jason

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Sections of this volume emerged out of a series of papers presented at conferences and colloquia. Chapter 4 evolved out of two papers presented at the conferences “Windows from the Present to the Past: The Archaeology of African & the African Diaspora” held at Howard University (February 2010) and “The Archaeology of Slavery: Toward a Comparative, Global Framework” held at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (March 2012). Chapter 5 matured from two papers initially presented at the “Emerging Worlds Workshop” in the Department of Anthropology, UC Santa Cruz (March 2009), and at the conference “Excavating the Past: Archaeological Perspectives on Black Atlantic Regional Networks” held at the Center for 17th- and 18th-Century Studies, UCLA (April 2009), and subsequently published in *Current Anthropology* (Monroe 2011). Last, Chapter 6 builds upon a paper presented at the conference “Common Ground, Different Meanings: Archaeology, History and the Interpretation of the African Past,” held at Syracuse University (October 2009), and subsequently published in the *Journal of Social Archaeology* (Monroe 2010a). I am extraordinarily grateful to the organizers for inviting me to participate in those events (Florie Bugarin, Lydia Marshal, Lisa Rofel, Andrew Apter, and Christopher DeCorse, respectively), and for the critical feedback participants so generously provided. I would also like to extend my thanks to the editors of *Current Anthropology* and the *Journal of Social Archaeology* for their permission to republish sections of these articles here.

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One person in particular has been by my side since my first forays into the archaeology of Bénin, and has borne many burdens during the preparation of this volume. My wife, Stephanie Monroe, has seen this and other projects go through numerous transformations, some satisfying, some less so. My field research in Bénin has required us to spend months apart each year, and writing this volume has demanded that I be sequestered from family life regularly. Throughout this process, however, she has been a never-ending source of patience and optimism, and the emotional anchor I have depended on. I cannot thank her enough for her encouragement and support. Since the summer before their birth in 2008, my children, Nathan and Natalie, have suffered a similar burden. During long field seasons in Bénin and shorter trips to conferences, they have tolerated, as well as any young children can, the periodic absence of their father from family life. It is my hope that one day they might read these pages and know that their father missed them immensely.