



The restoration of

King Gbehanzin Palace

Royal Palaces of Abomey

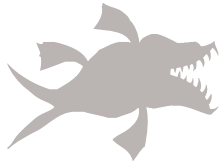
A World Heritage property



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



World Heritage Convention



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King Gbehanzin Palace

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Edited by
JUNZO KAWADA
Anthropologist

Cover photograph

Sacred baobab tree planted
by King Gbehanzin before
the conflict with the
French troops

Hereunder

The adjalala, the reception
hall of the King



Preface

Koichiro MATSUURA
Director-General of UNESCO



Kan to gbe nu e no gbe kan do

[It is at the end of the rope woven by the father that the child starts to weave his own].

It is through the protection and restoration of a property inscribed on the World Heritage List, that we can perpetuate the link between one's own heritage and the common heritage of humankind, between the times of our ancestors and the rooting of the identity of future generations. The saying above, taken from the Trupinmeji, one of the signs of the Ifa, Deity of divination, a mediator between men, the dead and the gods, tells us about the chain which connects the tangible – the bas-reliefs molded inside the cob walls of the adjalala – with the intangible – the living dimension of the allegorical accounts that recall the history of the kingdom of Danhome.

Benin ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention on June 14th, 1982, and, as such, became the sixteenth country in the African continent having committed itself to protecting its cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. Three years later, in 1985, the site of the Royal Palaces of Abomey was simultaneously inscribed on the prestigious World Heritage List and on the World Heritage List in Danger.

Since then, this outstanding testimony of a Kingdom ruled by twelve successive kings between 1625 and 1900 – which I had the privilege to visit in 2002–, this “unique historical document” has been subject to intense conservation campaigns, aiming at repairing the damages caused by time, as well as by natural or human factors.

In 2001, UNESCO, Japan and Benin signed a cooperation agreement for the restoration of the Palace of King Behanzin, one of the greatest testimonies of the Dahomean philosophy, art and history, which are so well represented in the symbolism in the specific life of the Royal Palace-Museum of the kingdom of Dahome – one of the kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa which developed outstanding royal cultures in the 18th Century.

This kind of attention on the part of the Government of Japan in favor of the safeguarding of this memory inscribed into the clay, echoed by the litanies of Kotoja – the sacred rhythm of the Royal court of Abomey –, could only inspire UNESCO in its mission to facilitate international co-operation relevant to the protection and the safeguard of a heritage that belongs to the history of humanity as a whole.

May this encourage the international community in the years to come to pursue other actions of rehabilitation in accordance with the safeguard measures promoted by the 1972 Convention relative to the World Heritage.

May the international community take the responsibility to protect heritage at the global level, for it is the symbol of the diversity of the creative genius of the peoples and societies, a strong base towards the construction of a sustainable development and a renewed hope for a dialogue between men and cultures.



Statue of Gbehanzin,
King of Abomey, in Goho square, at the entrance of the town of Abomey, erected in co-operation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in March 1979.

Picture of King
Gbhanzin
and his court during his
exile in Martinique
© Musée du quai Branly,
photo Fabre



Forward

King Gbehanzin

© Musée des Armées



IT WAS VERY FORTUNATE THAT BENIN was the first African country to have the honour to benefit from a financing support from the UNESCO/Japan Fund in Trust for World Heritage, for the restoration of one of the country's major heritage sites, the Palace of Gbehanzin, king of Dahomey. It is also by chance that the restoration came to an end at the same time as the celebration to mark the centenary of the king's death that took place in December 1906 in Algiers.

But, actually, the wonderfully generous gesture on the part of Japan was not just a matter of chance. We know about the richness of the multi-millenary cultural heritage of Japan, the depth and refinement of the heritage consciousness of its people, as well as the generosity of its government towards countries in the southern hemisphere. The publication of this remarkable booklet carries a strong symbol: that of Japan contribution not only to the Benin's national remembrance duty, but also and probably above all, to the emergence of a new global appeased perception, that of Gbehanzin being an international symbol of resistance against colonial conquest.

In other words, international co-operation and heritage have been associated in favour of peace: the ultimate goal of UNESCO. In that respect, we would like to thank Mr. Koïchiro Matura, Director General of UNESCO, as well as the Japan and UNESCO experts, Professor Junzo Kawada and Professor Tito Spini who, through their patient efforts, guided and supported this fruitful pioneering venture: a clear example of a well accomplished, solidarity-based, international cultural co-operation.

His Excellency, Mr Olabiyi YAI

Ambassador

Permanent Delegate of Benin to UNESCO



I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS my great satisfaction at seeing the completion of the restoration works on the palace of King Gbehanzin of Abomey, which is commemorated by the publication of this brochure.

Beyond borders, civilisations, languages or time, Cultural Heritage bonds mankind together, creating a brotherly link. Cultural heritage transmits the history and memory of mankind to future generations, and its traces offer an absolutely unique view of the various cultures that make up our world.

However, at this present time and on each continent, there still exist various remains, historic monuments or other heritage in danger of disappearance, as a result of their extreme state of degradation. All this cultural heritage belongs to the entire mankind and it is necessary to rapidly take appropriate protective measures.

In reaction to this situation, the Japanese government created, in 1989, the "Fund-in-Trust for the preservation of world cultural heritage" at UNESCO, in order to contribute to the protection of remarkable cultural sites, be they historic monuments or archaeological remains.

At the initial stage, the beneficiaries of this financial support were mainly cultural sites in Asia, and this project in Abomey is the first to have been carried out in sub-Saharan Africa, from 2001 to 2004.

From the 17th to the 20th century, twelve kings succeeded each other within the fortified enclosure of Abomey, each one building his own palace on his accession to the throne. While the remains of these palaces constitute a precious testimony of the evolution of this civilisation and its past glory, especially as there are no written texts, natural

catastrophes such as tornadoes and floods have caused serious degradation to these remains. As a result, in 1985, UNESCO simultaneously inscribed the site on the World Heritage List and the World Heritage List in Danger.

Facing this reality, the Japanese Government decided to deploy a mission to Abomey in collaboration with UNESCO, to develop a restoration project for the site with the participation of relevant experts who eventually participated in the execution of the project. Several discussions and dialogues were held with the Beninese Government and representatives of the community in order to examine how assistance could be rendered through the Japanese Fund-in-Trust. This resulted in the activities which were carried out by UNESCO and which are presented today in this superb brochure.

The Royal Palaces of Abomey still remain on the World Heritage List in Danger. On the occasion of the publication of this brochure, I would like to express the wish to see more and more people testify of their interest in this unique site, and in their turn, participate in preservation and promotional activities for Abomey.

His Excellency, Mr Seiichi KONDO

Ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary
Permanent Delegate of Japan to UNESCO

One of the most important sacred tree of the palace is planted close to the adjalala



Restoration of the Palace of King Gbehanzin

an example of a dynamic partnership in the valorisation and development of local know-how

Ayari RACHIDA DE SOUZA
Anthropologist - Curator

THE PALACE OF KING GBEHANZIN is part of the architectural genealogy of a great Royal city, a home for the living and the spirits of the ancestors, spread over approximately 44 hectares.

Since the rule of Houegbadja (1645-1685), each King built his palace next to that of his predecessor, along a north-south-west axis, directed towards Adja-Tado and following the line of expansion of the kingdom.

The palace, in this context, represents the uniqueness of the royal person as a central point within the universe; the centre of gravity of the political life where the great annual ceremonies and the celebrations take place, for the king is the absolute monarch, the epicentre of political, economic and social activities.

"Master of the living, *Semedo*, Master of the world, *Ayrhunnon*, Master of pearls, *Jexasu*, Master of wealth, *Dokumon...*"

The palace is the central security zone for the kingdom, and plays an important role in the economic, social and spatial organization of the kingdom's defence.

The palace of Gbehanzin has a unique symbolic dimension within the Royal complex. Not only does it bear testimony to a period of rule, it also represents an active and itinerant resistance in the eye of the Beninese general public and the local communities. It represents and incarnates the bravery and the heroism of prince Kondo, who seized the power in 1889, under the name of *Gbè han zin* (Gbehanzin). He had to face the French troops in order to defend the sovereignty of his kingdom and resisted to the colonial influence over a period of several years.

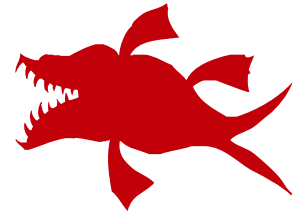
King Gbehanzin could not to complete the construction of his palace, Dowomè, for lack of time. It is symbolically thought of as having ten-layer walls. Thus the oral tradition states:

"... We are in *Singbo*, in front of the *Adjalala* of Gbehanzin and you know that the kings cannot do anything without the *Ifa*" (statement of Gbehanzin Agboyidu, July 1995, recorded by Tito Spini).

"Looking in the direction of Tado, the axis of reference, the predictions that the *Ifa* had made in Houégbadja are accomplished - the palaces shall continue up to the tenth wall (with the tenth king) and not any further. A building, the *Adjalala* of Gbehanzin (built in the 1950's by the descendants of the dethroned king) closes a chapter in history, and represents the material presence which combines anthropological, historical and metaphorical languages by translating them into spaces."

But this palace remains a living place whose history is a language of signs, symbols and matter, a space where history is reconstructed through a combination of micro-histories, secret and local history and official history, where meaning is reflected through the decoding of symbols, the study of orientation, construction techniques, the placement of the bas-reliefs and the mystical and supernatural links existing between the buildings and their environment (sacred trees, rituals, sacred places and temples).

Here, time is discontinuous, and space is continuously rebuilt through the ritual practices and the spoken words. The historical continuity between the different places is a space-time circle, always mobile, dynamic and in accordance with the divinity



Zoomorphic wooden statue
representing a shark, the main
symbol of King Gbehanzin

The adjalala of
King Gbehanzin
after restoration



Ayido Xuédo, the crowned snake which biting its own tail that incarnates at once the concepts of movement, permanence and continuity.

These aspects must be taken into account when analyzing the language of space and the knowledge that define the Dowome palace, which have determined many of the choices made regarding its restoration. It is also through the will to respect this "cultural space" that this restoration project has been conducted, carefully associating the application of improved traditional technologies and local know-how, and preserving the various organic spaces of the palace.

The team that directed the restoration comprised two experts:

- Junzo Kawada, Professor of anthropology at the University of Hiroshima - Japan ,
 - Tito Spini, Architect-Professor at the School of Architecture of Rome - Italy,
- and a Beninese team comprising: an architect, an anthropologist, heritage managers and representatives of the royal families concerned.

The restoration took place from 2002 to 2003. It was financed by the government of Japan, under the UNESCO/Japan Fund-in-Trust, to the amount of US\$ 416.932 (the convention was signed on July 16, 2001).

The project's main objectives were:

- The physical restoration of the main walls and buildings of the palace, as well as the rehabilitation of the accesses and the surrounding spaces, covering an area of about three hectares;
- The reinforcement of capacities through the organization of three on-site training workshops during the course of the restoration, on traditional/vernacular technologies of construction, building with stabilized earth, wooden structures, and modelling of bas-reliefs;
- To deliver a training on the principles of management, operation and promotion of the site;
- The implementation of an exhibition to promote the site;



Reconstruction of the roof of the Adjalala

© A Gonçalves

- The acquisition of audio-visual material and the production of photographic and audio-visual documentation on the restoration of the site.

The preliminary and technical studies, as well as the architectural works were undertaken by Cabinet Modular. These made it possible to accomplish:

- The clearing of undergrowth, the drainage and signalling on the site;
- The restoration of the existing enclosure walls: excavations, consolidation of the foundations and the erection of wall bases over the traces of missing enclosure wall parts;
- The restoration of five buildings:
 - *Honnuwa*, the entrance gate
 - *Tassinanho*, the building sheltering the priestesses during ceremonies
 - *Logodo*, the covered access leading to the interior court of the palace
 - *Adjalala*, the royal reception room
 - The hut of the guardian
 - The temples : *Djebo*, a temple devoted to the spirit of the king and *Adoho*, the royal tomb.

The training was given by master craftsmen during the course of the restoration; it made it possible to train 25 young craftsmen in the techniques of wooden framing for roofs, roofing and bas-relief, and to introduce them to methods of building care and maintenance. These young craftsmen will be able to intervene on other royal and secondary palaces, undertaking similar work.



The École du Patrimoine Africain (School of African Heritage) also contributed to train three museum staff members in the techniques of preventive conservation and management (between November 11 and December 5, 2003).

To enhance the guiding and accessibility of the visitors, the creation of a historical interpretation centre within the palace has been envisaged. This centre could be located in the *adjalala* (royal reception room) and surrounded by a concise exhibition consisting of reproductions of sketches, charts, engravings and photographs to illustrate the life and work of King Gbehanzin, as well as the main stages of rehabilitation and restoration of the site.

This exhibition offers:

- A double approach, featuring the local historical interpretations (oral traditions) and the official history of the site;
- An introduction to traditional construction technologies and know-how, associated with historical building restoration techniques.

The royal families were involved in its realization. Through the presentation of various types of documents, including written data, photographs and objects, the visitors are given access to a flexible vision of an evolving history, a mix of micro-histories and the dynamic reading of space. Elements of oral history remain essential, along with the characteristic gestures and ritual uses of the different places and objects.

Inside the museum space, the daily circulation of the visitors is periodical and in harmony with the royal site while respecting its off-limits areas. The two temples will be made sacred again through a traditional ritual, in honour of the revered spirit of the late king.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we have been hoping to restore the site of king Gbehanzin since 1985, date of the inscription of the Royal Palaces on the World Heritage List. Twenty years later, this hope materialized and was realized thanks to the efforts of UNESCO, the generosity of the Japanese Government and the devotion of the team of experts who each offered their full support and knowledge through this common effort.

But the palace remains an organic element of a very large site, related to other royal and secondary palaces within the town of Abomey. Thus the conservation and safeguard of the palaces in general can be considered as part of a process of urban development, to which the local governments must be associated.

This restoration was carried out in the respect of local traditions, and it allowed us to understand that culture related concepts, criteria and values influence the conservation and restoration choices made, and that they must be valid at the same time for the scientists, the conservators, the holders of traditions and all the communities to which this heritage belongs.

The entry gate
after restoration





In this regard, we realised that the categories used for the valorisation of the cultural heritage (ancient, original, intact) are not necessarily applicable in our contexts mostly defined by oral traditions, and where it appears obvious that conservation has to be deeply linked to the cultural dimension of the sites.

In our traditions, places and objects are alive. Like creatures, they live and die, because they incarnate a soul. What matters most is the conservation and the transmission of knowledge, traditional construction techniques and especially their significance and symbolism. Indeed, the

techniques of conservation are tools which evolve over time, but the meanings given to the objects and the products of human work express the essence of a culture, and determine the choices made as regards conservation.

If we recognize that there is a cultural diversity, we must also recognize the existence of a diversity of criteria and values applicable to the conservation of cultural heritage.

NOTE: ¹ Giovanna Antongini et Tito Spini in "Royaume du Danxomè : Objets, signes, espaces du Pouvoir", septembre 1997, Actes de la conférence internationale : « Passé, présent et futur des Palais royaux d'Abomey ».

The difficulties of conservation

Giovanna ANTONGINI, Anthropologist
and **Giovanni Tito SPINI**, Architect



THE MAIN DIFFICULTY OF CONSERVATION, and the priority of a historic site, is to safeguard its “soul”, its essence. This is especially true in Africa where the importance of the content is more important than that of the container; the content being the summation of the historic, religious and symbolic values which make up a building, a space or even a natural element, a place consecrated by popular consensus.

With specific regard to the palace of King Gbehanzin, which was the object of an exemplary restoration project realised thanks to Japanese Funds, the challenge was to detect its “ideal drawing” whose materialisation was never achieved because of a host of factors: the war against France (which led to the abolition of the monarchy), conflicts within the royal families (encouraged by the colonial administration) and, finally, the lack of means due to socio-political upheavals.

From the 1970s, our research on the kingdom of Dahomey encountered a network of silence, ambiguities and cover-ups which intentionally recreated a censored history in order to erase all shadow of the incontestable glory which must have surrounded each king.

Supporting a lintel
during the restoration works
© A Gonçalves



In 1995, the goal of our UNESCO mission, as defined by the World Heritage Centre, included, in addition to keeping the site on the World Heritage List in Danger, “to analyse the material and anthropological dimension over the 44 hectares of the site, and to include this dimension in the conservation plan, while outlining its importance within the management plan” (G. Saouma-Forero, 1995).

This mandate allowed us to go beyond the limits of the material dimension: the condition of the buildings, murals etc. in order to incorporate the fourth dimension of space – the cultural dimension – which, while it had not been sufficiently measured, is nevertheless measurable. The organisation of space is a classical language that uses signs, symbols and materials; the operation of decoding is then passed along by an ensemble of elements: orientation, construction techniques, form, decoration, rapport with the surroundings and the beings with which man has populated his supernatural universe.

In addition, decoding is also done by assigning meanings to a multitude of signs, visible or invisible, often recollected by memory only but which constitute many of the chapters in the history of Abomey. One example of this is the experience we had going through the museum site, accompanied by 34 dignitaries from different royal families: this exchange that made it possible to identify 184 points which would have otherwise been unidentifiable.

The rehabilitation project at the palace of King Gbehanzin was thus preceded by a faithful survey of the material aspects of the site: existing buildings or ruins, large enclosure wall portions or their traces, trees and the meandering paths through the site. Above all, interviews were made with a number of elders who had participated or assisted in its construction and who gave detailed accounts of the materials and traditional techniques employed, which have almost been completely abandoned today. A key determining factor, and also an evidence of the historic and cultural importance of this palace as a last bastion of the circularity of space



**Libations made by
two new princesses at
the entry gate**

of the palace at the
occasion of their
enthronisation

and time, was a song which recounted the orientation of its *ajalala*: towards the direction of Tado, the place of origin of the dynasty.

The complex cultural and factual operation achieved by the restoration and rehabilitation of the site of King Gbehanzin represents a bridge for the re-evaluation of research techniques, and the re-examination of research activities in the field of construction techniques. It must also be stressed that within this geographic zone, Abomey remains the only example of a group of palaces that resisted the violence of colonial wars. In 1833, in the north, the Fulbe *Jihād* annihilated the Yoruba empire and destroyed the royal palace of Oyo; in 1874, in the south-west, the English army removed every trace of the residence of the Ashanti king at Kumasi.

We would like to propose that the site of King Gbehanzin's palace become a research centre where there would be a concentration on research and analysis of territorial management systems resulting from different spatial strategies; it would also focus on the topological framework, the vestiges of memory as revealed from archaeological survey, and this could ultimately result in a deepening and control of restoration and conservation techniques through annual technical courses and encounters with other experiences, from different cultural and historic contexts.



Aerial view showing the palace located at the southern end of the overall 47 ha site



Restoration of the Palace

Aimé GONCALVES

Conservation Architect

THE STATE OF DEGRADATION OF DOWOME (palace of King Gbehanzin) and the threat of disappearance of certain of its original components did not go unnoticed by the management council of the site and the politico-administrative authorities, who decided to take the initiative of seeking for the necessary funds to restore its value and glory.

The objectives of this restoration programme can be categorised as follows:

- To awaken the public, locally and internationally, to a world heritage characterised by the relations between Danxome, Europe and the Americas;
- To emphasise the value of the palace through its various components, namely the Ajalala, where an exhibition about the tangible and intangible elements relative to King Gbehanzin, who features amongst the list of national heroes, will take place;
- To gradually extend visits to the entire site rather than limit them to the museum, which is made up of the palaces of Kings Ghezo and Glele. This action will contribute to the economic and social development of the town of Abomey.

The various interventions on the many components of the palace made it possible to guarantee their physical continuity based on the principles of conservation and the restitution of the image of the site; an approach shared by the stakeholders of the project (local communities, site managers, local representatives and staff of the Ministry of Culture, experts from UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICOM...).

The restoration of the palace was based on historic documentation and training – theoretical and practical – on the techniques of conservation. Work started at the beginning of January 2002 and ended in April 2004, over six favourable periods of the dry season, according to the following phases:

- Documentation and studies
- Restoration of the courtyards
- Restoration of the built components (enclosure, walls, huts, temple, tomb and bas-reliefs)
- Training



Plan of the Dowome Palace (Gbehanzin)

- 1 Honnouwa
- 2 Tassinonho
- 3 Logodo
- 4 Adjalala
- 5 Ahofo
- 6 Djeho
- 7 Guard house
- 8 Amazon's courtyard
- A Baobab
- M Mango tree



DOCUMENTATION AND STUDIES

The documentation was initially carried out through the collection of historic data from institutions and resource persons in Benin and Europe, on the royal palaces of Abomey in general.

Particular attention was paid to the palace of King Gbehanzin and its built components.

Within this framework, important iconographic documents were mainly obtained from Italian researchers (Giovana Antongini and Tito Spini). These documents were used to locate the traces of murals and huts.

In addition, the traditional construction techniques usually practised in Abomey and in the surrounding communities were inventoried.

An inventory of the site, comprising of systematic surveys of each component of the palace, as well as planimetric and altimetric topographical surveys were used as a basis for the restoration studies.

Descriptive notes and regulations on each component of the palace were worked out to facilitate the realization of the project.

RESTORATION WORKS

The worrying state of degradation of the site necessitated carrying out specific preliminary tasks (clearing of undergrowth, cleaning and drainage of the courtyards).

In order to guarantee minimum safety during the execution of the work, priority was granted to the restoration of the walls and the interior walls.

Walls and interior walls

The original walls of the palace were set up to 1,152m in width. They existed as ruins on the eastern portions. The other portions of the wall had only traces of the foundation before the restoration was carried out.


The interior walls were visible in certain places as ruins. In spite of this fact, their condition made it possible to have a good understanding of the various spaces on the site.

The restoration of the walls took place over a ten-month period, spread out over two dry seasons.

The earth used was kneaded according to traditional techniques (kneading/puddling with feet) before being used in the form of moulded balls.

The walls were built up in successive layers identical in height to the existing walls in order to obtain a structure similar to those of the royal palaces of Ghezo and Glele.

The interior walls were restored in an identical manner to the external walls before being capped with painted sheets assembled on logs of teak or neem wood, which had been treated with carbonyl.



The low partition wall between the first and second courtyard, both sides of the first large entry gate, the honnuwa.

The huts

Within the enclosure of the palace, there are five huts: honnuwa, Tassinonho, Logodo, Adjalala, Dehoxo. They were built from unbaked earth or earth bricks mixed with cement and capped with iron sheets. The huts were in a rather advanced state of degradation.

Their restoration was carried out over an eight-month period, using traditional construction techniques. The work involved the consolidation of the foundations, the treatment of cracks, the repair of joineries, floors, roof structure and covering.



The Djexo

The temple and tomb

The Djexo (temple) and Adoxo (tomb) are located in the third courtyard; each one of them is surrounded by a circular earthen wall.

The entire complex was attacked in certain spots by termites and no longer preserved its original beauty as a result of the multiple awkward restorations undergone over the past ten years.

The intervention option selected made it possible to restore the original beauty of the ensemble as a result of the use of traditional materials (earth, wood, vegetable elements, straw, etc.) and through the correction of the roof slopes.



**Bas relief showing an amazon
cutting the head of one of her enemy**

right, before the intervention;
hereunder, after stabilisation.



Adjalala,

The bas-reliefs after
stabilisation

The bas-reliefs

The meticulous study of the condition of the sixty-seven bas-reliefs which adorn the Adjalala of the palace made it possible to observe that the majority of them had dust, earth drips, gaps on the bottom of the niche and traces of insect attacks on the relief. It was also observed that certain portions were missing from the painted parts.

It was also noted that the most degraded bas-reliefs were those located at the base of the wall of the main elevation, particularly the bas-reliefs shaped in the form of a shark. Restoration work was completed with the support of about fifteen craftsmen trained on the site under the supervision of a technician trained by the Getty Conservation Institute.

After the documentation of each bas-relief through a summarization of its identification and description, specific treatments were applied depending on their state of degradation.

**Stabilisation
of bas-relief**

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Generally, the following treatments were carried out:

- An emergency treatment of each bas-relief by pre-consolidation of the degraded zones of the pictorial layer with an adhesive which removed dust from the bas-relief and niche,
- The filling of the gaps with a mixture of earth and water;
- The cleaning of spots with water and alcohol;
- The removal of salts;
- The fixing of the scales with adhesive solution;
- The retouching, using fine earth, kaolin and pigments to harmonize the colour of the niche.

Among the restored bas-reliefs, those located at the base of the walls of the Adjalala and which were damaged underwent special protection treatments in addition to the measures already carried out on the coverings.

At the level of the principal entry, two columns of bas-reliefs received colour washes obtained from plants and traditional mixtures. This was carried out as a demonstration of the use of traditional paints - a know-how in the process of disappearance that needs to be preserved at all costs.



Training

Three types of theoretical and practical training on conservation techniques were organized during the project, along the following themes:

- Training on the built structures and the bas-reliefs;
- Training on the roof frames and roof coverings;
- Training on the drainage and maintenance.

Taking into account the interest generated by the programmed themes, sensitization meetings were held with about sixty young craftsmen from the localities of Abomey, Bohicon, and Huwawe, resulting in effective and massive participation.

The training had the following aims:

- To prevent the progressive disappearance of traditional know-how in the field of construction;
- To train more craftsmen in the traditional techniques of

construction and preventive conservation techniques in order to ensure the maintenance of the buildings of the royal palaces and their associated sites.

The training sessions were delivered by a conservation architect, Aimé Gonçalves, a maintenance technician in charge of the museum buildings, Dorothé Mizéhoun, and a research architect, Gaël Kpotogbé Amoussou.

The anticipated results were reached taking into account the nature of the services carried out by the participants on the various components of the palace.

Documentation

The various stages of restoration were enriched by a collection of photographs of each of the components of the palace.

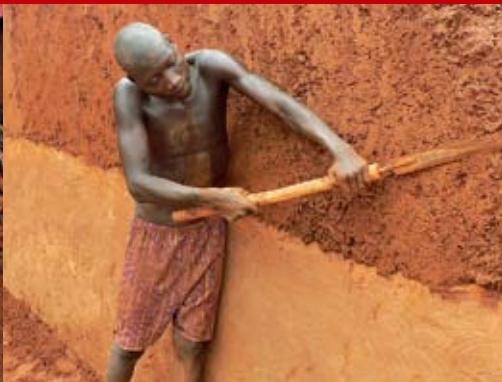


Photos © A Gonçalves



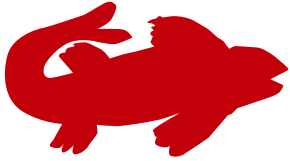


The adjalala of
King Gbehanzin,
before restoration,
1997



after restoration,
2006

Historical context of **the life of King Gbehanzin**



HOW TO SITUATE LIFE OF KING GBEHANZIN in the history of the kingdom of Dahomey, or in that of Western Africa and the intercontinental relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas? Since his palace was restored as a Heritage of Humanity, and visited by as many Beninese citizens as it was by other visitors from Africa and other continents, the image of this last king of independent Dahomey must be outlined under this triple perspective: national, continental and worldwide. Thus, we will be able to evaluate his historical role with clarity and relevance.

Let us start by saying that the life of Gbehanzin is in itself an example of the historical contradiction of the kingdom of Dahomey, and this is why it is deeply tragic. Like other kingdoms - Ashanti (Ghana), Benin (Nigeria), to name a few - that developed on the West African coasts during the same period, Dahomey increased its power and developed its culture while benefiting from the slave trade organized by Europeans, in particular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Capitulation of King Gbehanzin in front of General Dodds



Junzo KAWADA
Anthropologist

On these coasts, many fortresses still stand today, generally in a state of ruin, sometimes restored; these served at the same time as residences to the white traders and as “warehouses” for the slaves in waiting of the arrival, always uncertain, of a ship of the company. Let us notice with interest that all the canons protecting the enclosures are pointing at the sea : the true enemies, for the guardians of these structures, were the armed vessels coming from the rival European countries. The majority of these fortresses were taken and taken again by various European powers: Portugal, England, France, Holland, Denmark or Brandenburg.

The ships of “ebony wood” merchants (an expression in French to refer to the slave traders), left the European ports charged with glass beads, copper “manilles” (bracelets), brandy, cotton fabrics, tobacco... to barter with their African partners. But they especially carried fire weapons, including guns towards the later periods of the Slave Trade, which were given to the African chiefs to facilitate the capture of prisoners when the raids took place. Full of these “living goods”, branded with hot metal irons, then chained and crammed into the dark hold, the ships crossed the Atlantic, and then their “cargo” was sold on the slave-markets in America. After having embarked products of the New World (cotton, tobacco, sugar, vanilla), they crossed the Ocean again, towards the North-East, reaching Europe (in the eighteenth century, other boats, designed for this purpose, often made this connection) thus tracing the infamous transatlantic Slave Trade triangle, a very dangerous but also a very profitable venture.

Thanks to these profits and to the imported raw goods coming from America, Europe developed its industry and accumulated wealth, preparing a favourable ground for the development of the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century: the bloom of sugar refining and biscuit production in Nantes, the French point of entry which drew its prosperity from the transatlantic triangular trade, is an example of this. Across the ocean, after having failed to force the autochtones into slavery, the countries of the New World would exploit their natural resources while benefiting from



quality labour, transferred from Africa in great numbers and under inhuman conditions by the white. The total number of slaves brought to the Americas is still a subject of debate and controversy, and perhaps a satisfactory estimate will never be obtained. The numbers given by P.E.Lovejoy¹ are currently regarded as being the most accurate. For the eighteenth century only, Lovejoy estimates that 2.530.000 slaves were dispatched to the Americas by the English, 1.800.000 by the Portuguese, 1.180.000 by the French, 350.000 by the Dutch and 70.000 by the Danes; if one adds to this the “loadings” of other European ships, the total rises to 6.130.000 people having made their way into the American continent, after having endured a terrible journey, which, on average, cost the life of 20% of the embarked African prisoners.

These approximate numbers attest to the lack of clarity that surrounded such a lucrative business. The same author gives the estimate of 3.330.000 people for the nineteenth century, during which the majority of countries involved put an end to the trade, which did not prove advantageous anymore after the full bloom of the industrial revolution.

If the slave trade was an excellent business opportunity for France during the eighteenth century, this was also the case for Dahomey. According to traditional history, king Akaba (1685-1708), who introduced the rifle, was the first to come into contact with the white men. His successor Agaja (1708-1732) extended his domination to the coast, including Ouidah, as a means to secure his involvement in the trade of the slaves on a large scale. The foundation of the French and Portuguese forts in 1712 and in 1721, both in Ouidah, corresponds to this period of ambitious expansion. Twenty directors on the French port succeeded one another, from the first, named Du Coulombier (1712-1716), to the last, named Gourg (1786-1789); three died of illness and one was killed.

Thus, the eighteenth century, often qualified as the “Century of Lights” by Europeans, represented, for a great number of African people, an era of “darkness”, during which one of the most shameful pages of the history of humanity were written.

This page turned, when Western Europe entered, during the following century, into a phase of industrial capitalism. From then on, the African countries, up until then suppliers of slaves, were to be converted into markets for the European industrial articles and into suppliers of raw materials: it was thus deemed necessary by the Europeans to colonize by force the territories of the local chiefs, their former partners in the triangular commerce, so that their subjects would offer local labour and generate new opportunities for trade.

Some philanthropic movements, such as the Quakers in Europe, which started to develop in the 1760’s in England, undeniably contributed to the halt of slave holding practices. However, with slavery being practiced in the United States of America until 1865, and beyond in many countries of what is known today as Latin America, gives us an insight onto the true motivations which pushed the European countries to shift from slave trade activities to the colonization of Africa as being of purely economic nature.

The American Civil War (1861~1865) is often seen as a representative example (rather simplistically of course) of the abolition of slavery in general. Whereas the states of the south maintained an agricultural system based on large plantations requiring the labour provided by the slaves, the states of the north, already industrialized, needed consumers

Elmina Fort, Ghana, with its guns facing the ocean

© J. Kawada



Benin city, Nigeria, 1897: the palace is looted by the British army

© Musée des Armées

for their production, as well as workers for their factories. The liberation of the slaves of the south would not only generate job opportunities in the south, but also make workers available for the industries of the north. At the cost of great sacrifice, which extended over five long years, the United States solved thus, at least in theory, the fundamental problem of industrialization at that time, in the context of a reunited nation; during the same period, though the economies of many of the countries of Latin America continued to depend on slavery.

The case of Brazil is quite symptomatic of this tendency. It is in this country that slavery practices lasted the longest, until 1888. This is why, even in the nineteenth century, and sometimes clandestinely, the Portuguese merchants continued, on the Portuguese territories of Africa and abroad, Benin for example, to sell slaves in Brazil, a nation historically related to Portugal.

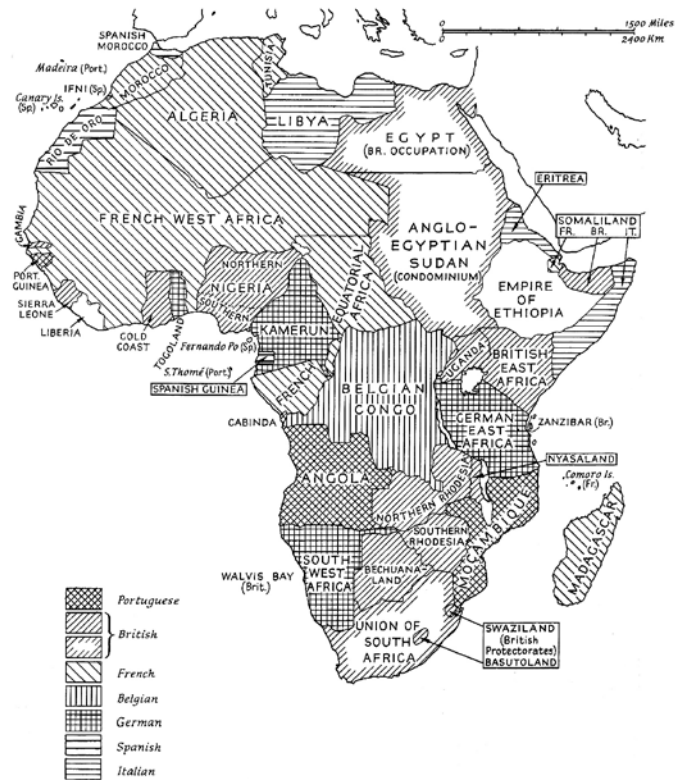
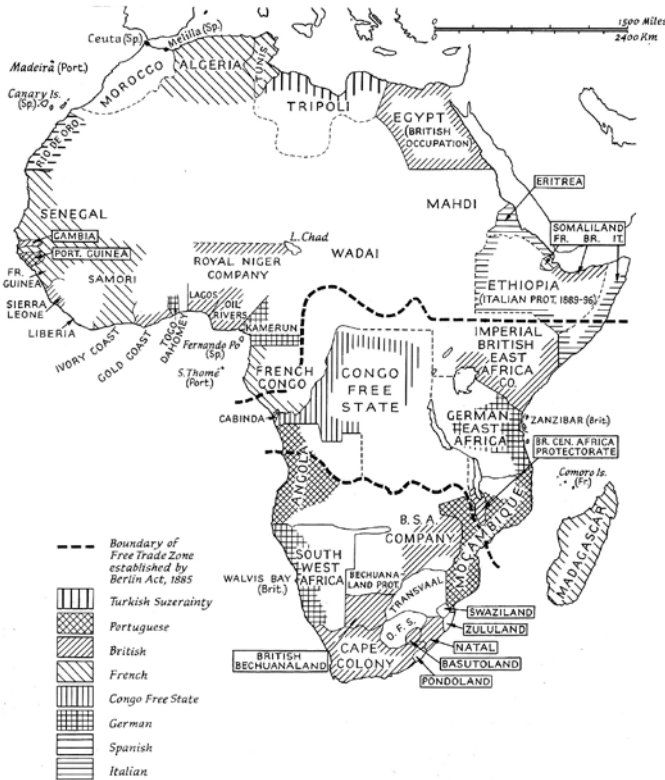
England, which, among the European countries, had made the most profit out of the Slave Trade, and which was also the first to enter the industrial revolution, abolished the trade in 1808, after Denmark (1802), but before Holland (1814) or France (1815).

After having contributed to the independence of imperial Brazil at the beginning of the nineteenth century, using its naval forces. England forced Brazil to put an end to the slave trade and to release its slaves: once freed, this immense portion of the Brazilian population would indeed become a target for the export of English products, especially textile products. At the same time, the colonization of the Asian and African continents by England, France and of some other European countries was in full bloom.

These facts also coincide with the advent of nationalism in Europe. England, a constitutional monarchy, and France, with the republican and then imperial systems, each became a nation-state, followed soon by Belgium, Italy and Germany. These countries entered then into competition to draw the benefits from the colonial division of the African continent. Thus, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Africa became a scene where the rivalry existing between European countries was projected and amplified.

During a conference which took place in Berlin in 1884-1885, the fourteen world powers, England, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Italy, Austria, the United States of America, Russia and the Ottoman Empire debated for a hundred days about their rights and interests in the African continent, before concluding an agreement on its division, without ever consulting or informing the Africans at all.

After these arrangements were made, the European countries started to eagerly send explorers and armed groups to Africa, to get in contact with local chiefs and establish "protectorate" or "trade" treaties, but the true goal of these expeditions was to start the process of colonization of the African territories, in accordance with the Berlin agreements; By the eve of World War I, almost the entire African continent had been disputed over and then divided by the Western powers, in total disrespect of the will of the local populations.



**Maps of Africa
left : in 1891, after the
Berlin conference
right : in 1914**

illustrating the proposed share of the continent between the European countries
(In *An Atlas of African History*, Second Edition, revised by J. D. Fage, maps drawn by Maureen Verity, Edward Arnold, London, 1978, cartes 55 et 56, p.25, 41)

The situation in Dahomey before the reign of Gbehanzin was thus a local repercussion of what was going on at an international level, of these appetites which, like a tidal wave, sprang with fury over the African continent. The French, formerly partners in the slave draft and having provided weapons to the kings of Dahomey in exchange of prisoners, had now the intention to invade the dahomean territory, to colonize it and to use it to produce palm oil for the French industries.

hopeless battles, had to surrender and was deported. At the same period, in this West African coastal area, the kings of Ashanti and Benin, both Supreme Chiefs of kingdoms that had been prosperous during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries thanks to the trade of gold (Ashanti) and ivory (Benin), but especially thanks to the draft of slaves, suffered the same fate. The English army invaded both kingdoms, as relentlessly as Dahomey was invaded by the French Army.

Having refused the invasion of his territory by the French soldiers, king Gbehanzin, after long, courageous but

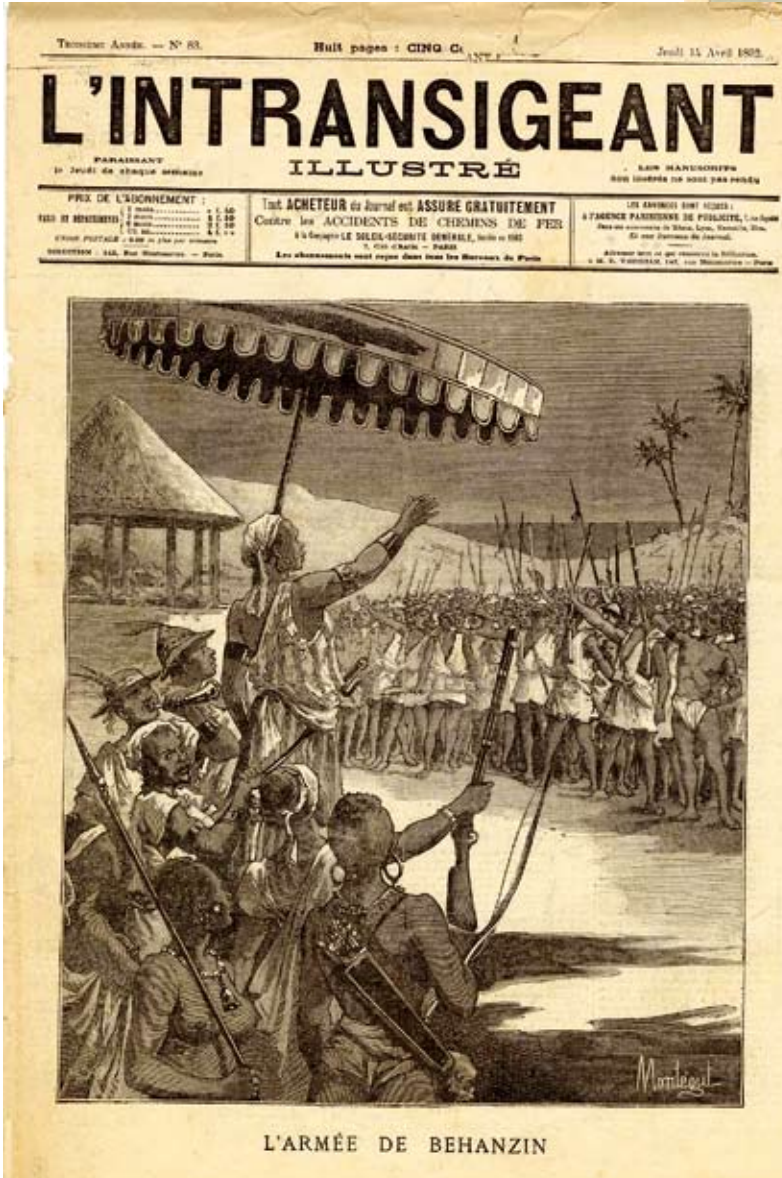
In sum, the territorial expansion and the blooming of the royal culture of Dahomey were largely dependent on the

Cover page of the French Newspaper "l'intransigeant"

showing the army of King Gbehanzin and his amazons.

Cover and internal page of the French newspaper "le petit journal"

with illustrations showing some scenes of the battle against King Gbehanzin



wealth obtained through the slave trade, in particular during the eighteenth century, a trade with Europeans in which a great number of Africans from small neighbouring groups were victims.

With the circumstances and exchanges created between Africa, Europe and the Americas, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Europeans, formerly trade partners, returned, but this time as colonizers. Gbehanzin, last king of independent Dahomey, resisted this military invasion valiantly, but had to surrender to put an end to the unbearable demise of his army, and died in deportation in Algeria, without ever returning to Abomey.

NOTE:
¹ Lovejoy, P. E., "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis", *Slavery and Abolition*, 4 (2), 1983.

Challenges for the future

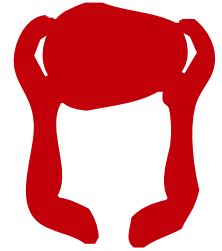
Junzo KAWADA
Anthropologist

THE PALACE OF KING GBEHANZIN was restored, with the assistance of UNESCO, as part of the World Heritage of mankind as a whole; the exhibitions installed in various rooms shall thus be aimed at visitors from all over the world. Moreover, the significance of the deeply tragic life of the last independent king of Dahomey could only be understood through the historical context of the time, and in particular through the intercontinental links that existed between Africa, the Americas and Europe.

In accordance with the committee for the restoration project of the palace, an exhibition scenario to present the historical context, assorted with iconographic documents, had been prepared by the UNESCO Japanese expert and was later given to the persons in charge of the completion of the installation works. In spite of that, we noticed that the exhibition had been installed in complete disregard of the prepared scenario. The current presentation, which only

depicts the personal life of king Gbehanzin, only features a number of documents drawn from French newspapers dealing with the battles that took place between the armies of France and Dahome, photographs of the king taken when he was deported in Martinique and Algeria, and some of his personal belongings, like his pipe and his sandals. However, in the restored palace, the presentation of such a brief overview on the personal life of king Gbehanzin will arouse much less interest among the visitors, especially those coming from other African countries and other continents.

We thus express the wish that improvements are made on the exhibitions presented in the restored palace of king Gbehanzin, so that this heritage can be fully understood and appreciated, attracting visitors from the whole world, and so that the true meaning of the tragedy lived by king Gbehanzin, this sovereign of great dignity and exceptional independent spirit, can be clearly perceived through the eyes of men.



One of the emblems of King Gbehanzin
is a large egg held by two hands

This canon, used by King Gbehanzin against the french,
is part of the exhibition presented at the palace.



Royal hat and "recade"
with the emblem of King Gbehanzin
collection Musée historique d'Abomey

The throne of King Gbehanzin
collection Musée historique d'Abomey



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