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TAILORING BENIN:
MATERIAL CULTURE AND ARTISAN PRODUCTION IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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LIST OF TERMS

*Most of these terms are in the Fon language. Their spellings are those that are officially sanctioned by the Republic of Benin's programs in literacy in the Fon language. Other terms are French-origin words with meanings that may or may not map onto their usage in France.

acouta: "used," a term for secondhand clothing

adjalabou: boubou consisting of a floor-length shirt with matching pants, "Hausa style"

agbada: style of men's clothing consisting of trousers, a long-sleeved shift, and a wide, floor-length gown worn over the other two pieces, from Yorubaland

ahosi: wife of the king in the Kingdom of Dahomey

anago: alternative name for bounba as well as "Yoruba" in general

année blanche: a school strike (either by teachers or students) that is so long that it forces a "cleared year" where country-wide no students progress to the next class

apprentis: apprentice

artisanat (l'artisanat): artisanship, or the economic sector and social identity of artisans

avo: *pagne*, or wrapper in Fon

bas d'éléph: short for "elephant bottoms," bellbottoms

bazin: brocade, popular fabric for adjalabou

botoyi: coarsely woven cotton cloth, widespread in 1940s

bounba: tunic and trousers (men) or tunic and *pagne* (women) made from matching fabric, often from waxes or prints

boutique: neighborhood store

chef de canton: African appointed by French colonial administration to collect taxes, find laborers, and enforce customary law over a given territory

chokoto: short pants

comin: collar or neckline

cours de perfectionnement: “refresher course,” or course in apprentice’s shop or through a non-profit in which master tailors learn new techniques and/or management skills

couture dame: women’s tailor shop, staffed by women and making women and children’s clothing

déte: Beninois leisure suit with short sleeves, patch pockets, and matching pants

dévo: raffia cloth

demi-pièce: six meters of cloth

drill: sturdy fabric such as khaki, often cotton

évolué: in the colonial period, an African who had “evolved” or assimilated into French culture and values

Fa: Yoruba-derived divination practice common on Abomey Plateau

Ganhi: covered market, specifically that of Bohicon

godo (go): loincloth

gu (Ogun): vodun of metallurgy, artisans, and craft

haute couture: tailoring shop that caters to both male and female clients, usually with higher prices

Houndjro: Abomey’s main market

hunnukún: literally, “one with his eyes open,” educated person or intellectual

jupe ovale: oval skirt

kanvo: cotton cloth

lio: balls of akassa, or fermented corn fufu

Maison des artisans (Maison): French colonial training center for African artisans, first in the French Soudan, then in Abomey

maman: mother, or older woman

même tissu: same fabric, creating a “uniform” among wearers

métis or *métisse*: mixed-race person

modèle: women’s ensemble of matching shirt and skirt

modèles jeune fille: women’s ensemble of matching shirt and skirt intended for young women, often tighter or more revealing

nid d'abeille: honeycomb smocking

nunupweto: ‘omnipotent’ cloth (according the Sketchly) in Kingdom of Dahomey, created by Guezo for (unrealized) victory over Abeokuta

NuTuTo: gender-neutral term for tailor, literally proprietor of sewing

pagne: wrapper, term used throughout French-speaking West and West Central Africa

pâte: dense maize-based fufu, often poured into molds

patron: master artisan

pièce: twelve meters of cloth, basic unit of imported wax and prints

préfet: person and office of head of (Zou) region, in Abomey

tchanka: short pants with a panel in between the two legs, widely considered Fon “traditional” men’s dress

tenue pique: machine-stitched dress

trois pièces: another name for an agbada

villageois: “countryfolk,” person from a village or in the style of the village

vodun: Fon religion, “god”

vodunsi: priestess (m. or f.) for a particular vodun, “wife of god”

yokpo yokpo xwé: royal artisan’s workshop established by King Agaja of Dahomey

yovo: white person, foreigner

zemidjan: taxi-moto

Zongo: neighborhood in southern Benin (and Togo and Ghana) where Muslim migrants settled

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Introduction:
Tailoring Benin: Material Culture and Artisan Production in Urban Africa

In an oral history, Jules Wimêllo, a retired tailor living in the village of Tinji-Kpozou in central Benin (formerly Dahomey) fondly recalled the day that he bought his first tailored outfit in the 1950s. Having worn wrapped cloth or secondhand clothing his entire life, Wimello needed a new ensemble for special occasions. Early in the morning on a market day, which occurred every fourth day in this part of Benin, Wimêllo walked two hours along a single-track trail to the Bohicon, a bustling market town on central Benin's Abomey Plateau. Once there, Wimêllo went to the covered central market called Ganhi, a commercial center adjacent to the railway that had been built early in the French colonial period. In the Ganhi market, women sold fabric imported from Europe, Asia, and elsewhere in Africa. Next to these market women, male tailors, who numbered about four or five in the 1950s, had set up machines to sew cloth into made-to-order outfits for clients' everyday and ceremonial wear.

Clients, such as Wimêllo, decided what style of outfit to order based on their own preferences as well as the abilities of the tailor. Clients and their tailors discussed possible forms using verbal descriptions, but they also drew inspiration from images and objects, such as fashion catalogues, samples of the tailor's work, or articles of imported secondhand clothing. After selecting a style, the tailor took Wimêllo's measurements, wrote them down, and told him to return in a few hours. This waiting period gave clients like Wimêllo the opportunity to do some shopping, visit transplants from their villages, or simply walk around and experience the growing urban center. When the agreed upon hour arrived, Wimêllo returned to the market for a final fitting and to pick up the outfit. He then continued home with his newly tailored clothing,

which served as a material testament to his recent encounter with modern urban life, and one that he could display on his body for the other people of his village.

A scene such as this might seem mundane, but I argue that tailors and artisan-made tailored clothing helped Beninois make sense of political and social changes. As new independent states emerged in the wake of colonialism and as the region rapidly urbanized in the mid-twentieth century, tailored fitted clothing served as a site where ordinary people worked out what it meant to be part of a new nation and a new city. By producing clothing for clients like Wimêllo, tailors played a key role in leading conversations with their fellow citizens about how men and women should look and act in an independent and modern Benin. Indeed, I argue that by designing, cutting, and sewing fitted clothes, tailors materialized and gave expression to new possibilities of self, city, and nation during this tumultuous period in West African History.

This dissertation traces the history of the objects, craft knowledge, and practices of artisan tailoring on the Abomey Plateau in interior, central Benin (Map 0.1) from the eighteenth century to the present. It begins with a survey of cloth and clothing production and consumption in the slave-trading Kingdom of Dahomey (c.1600-1894) when most men and women wore wrapped or draped fashions and few sported tailored clothes. These local fashions remained the primary mode of dress long into the era of French rule (1894-1960), despite colonial programs to regulate clothing production through controls on artisan labor and the growing popularity of styles such as dresses, skirts, trousers, and suits. My dissertation continues with a sustained inquiry into the rise of tailoring and the increased demand for fitted clothing in the post-WWII era to the recent past. Tailoring fostered new possibilities for men and women and their respective gender roles, while the process of clothes-making in central markets and

neighborhood workshops helped to give form to urban spaces and ideas about city life. At the same time, the advent of tailoring apprenticeships served as an alternative to formal education and opened new professional pathways to both men and women. By revealing this long history of shifting sartorial practices of production and consumption, I show how ordinary Beninois men and women experienced and gave meaning to modernity, urbanization, and political transformation in twentieth century West Africa



Map 0.1: Benin (area of Abomey Plateau in red oval).
Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2007. Courtesy of Regenstein Library.

This project is a history of tailoring, but I also propose that tailoring offers an analytic for understanding how global historical processes became the lived experiences of everyday life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two definitions for the verb “tailor.” This first refers to the work of sewing clothes: “(of a tailor) make (clothes) to fit individual customers.” The second definition is more abstract: “make or adapt for a particular purpose or person.”¹ This dissertation explores the juncture of these two definitions - how designing, cutting, and sewing clothing permitted Beninois to adapt, alter, and re-fashion material forms and their meanings and, in doing so, to craft new understandings and expressions of gender, ethnicity, national identity, and political affiliation. Ultimately, this project sits at the nexus of the local and the global to explore how local, regional, and international markets in cloth and clothing intersected with politics, regimes of taste, and shifting ideas about “modernity” and “tradition” and their place in a new city and nation.

Beninois across differences in gender, generation, ethnicity, class, and education level worked as artisan tailors. Fon-speakers on the Abomey Plateau use the gender-neutral word *NuTuTo* for both men (French: *tailleur* or *couturier*) and women (*couturière*) who design, cut, and sew bespoke clothing. Both old and young people tailored, although age often affected a client's perceptions of the clothing maker's skill. Tailors on the Plateau almost always spoke Fon, but some traced their lineages to non-Fon-speaking peoples elsewhere in Benin and West Africa. Tailors could be well-off or impoverished members of their communities. The craft

¹ “Tailor,” English Oxford Living Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tailor> (accessed July 15, 2018)

encompassed those who owned the *haute couture* shops where they made expensive and intricate outfits. Other tailors could be very poor and forced to rely on borrowed machines to make repairs on secondhand clothing (Fon: *acouta*) for their livelihood. Literate, semi-literate, and non-literate people all made clothes and, although most tailors learned their craft during a multi-year apprenticeship in a private workshop, others acquired their skills at Christian missions or in state technical schools.

This diverse conglomerate of artisans crafted one of Benin's most vibrant forms of material culture - clothing. Scholars from different disciplines have focused on how clothing shapes and is shaped by political, economic, and social processes. Clothing serves as a “second skin,” it becomes an extension of the body and changes how bodies move through space and how they are perceived by others. How one dresses is not only a reflection of his or her relative wealth, political beliefs, or social status, but it also helps create ideas of what it means to be wealthy or a member of a particular political party or social group. In this sense, clothing becomes embedded with political and social meaning, but these meanings are constantly undergoing revision as the uses and forms of clothing change. In Benin, tailored clothing allowed people to embody imaginaries of past, present, and futures and it also provided a means of self-expression and self-identification.

Clothing was incredibly varied during the centuries covered in this dissertation. In the pre-colonial era, most Fon-speakers wrapped fabric (*pagne*) around their waists or chests or, if poor, wore only a loincloth (*godo*). Wealthier members of society wore *pagne*, and imported tailored items. A contingent of artisans made regalia with textiles, including tapestries, umbrellas, and clothing for the king and his entourage. Colonization ushered in new forms of

dress, especially modern urban styles, such as skirts, dresses, trousers, and coats, but colonization also led to the spread of styles popular in other parts of West Africa such as *bounbas* and *agbadas* from Yoruba-speaking areas to the east and the long robes of the Hausa. Tailors designed, cut, sewed, and embellished outfits that incorporated forms and flourishes from the Plateau, elsewhere in West Africa, as well as global fashions. Dress was diverse and dynamic, providing opportunity for experimentation among tailors and self-expression and self-fashioning on the part of consumers.

This project takes an expansive approach to the material culture of tailoring. It considers clothing in addition to other objects such as textiles, catalogues, sewing machines, and diplomas and investigates how they shaped the work of tailors and the forms of tailored clothing.

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I am attentive to the technologies and material qualities of tailoring. I trace change within the uses and meanings of sewing machines and other tools, clothing and sartorial embellishments, and workshop spaces. I also focus on sites of learning and production to show how schools and state workshops, open-air markets, private homes, and independent workshops influenced the content and quality of craft knowledge. In doing so, I argue that as tailors made clothes in central Benin, they also crafted new ideas and experiences of self, city, and nation.

I. Politics and Culture on the Abomey Plateau

A history of artisanal clothes-making and clothing reveals both continuities and ruptures in how Beninois experienced, contested, and enacted power and authority from the precolonial era to the recent past. During the past two centuries, the occupants of the Abomey Plateau have

experimented with or been subject to a number of political systems - centralized, militaristic monarchy (c.1600-1894), French colony (1894-1960), coup-plagued independent state (1960-1972), single party socialist state (1974-1990), and democratic republic (1990 to present). Following the history of tailoring across these shifting regimes of power reveals a number of commonalities. First, monarchy, colonial administration, and post-colonial governments alike prioritized cultural production as a means of consolidating power over subjects and citizens. Second, these states consistently struggled to project their authority over their hinterlands. Third, a history of tailoring reveals the importance of making, displaying, and wearing objects to Beninois political participation and political change.

Benin has long been the focus of scholarly production on West Africa. The first generation of Africanist historians in the 1960s directed their efforts at uncovering a “useable past,” or evidence of Africans ruling states and kingdoms in the precolonial era in order to support contemporary movements for self-rule. The centralized, powerful Kingdom of Dahomey, which was relatively well documented by European visitors and local oral traditions, provided ample evidence of an autonomous African kingdom for these scholars, and the generations that came after them.² At its height in the nineteenth century, the Kingdom of Dahomey encompassed

² I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours: 1708-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, University of VA, 1998); Maurice A. Glélé, *Le Danxome: Du pouvoir aja à la nation fon* (Paris: Nubia, 1974); or J. Cameron Monroe *The Precolonial State in West Africa: Building Power in Dahomey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Economic histories include Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade: An Analysis of an Archaic Economy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For an economic and social history, see Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

the entire Fon-speaking Abomey Plateau with dual capitals at Abomey and Cana and the kingdom's territory extended south to the coast, east to the Yoruba kingdoms, and west to the acephalous societies of Adja-speakers. The kings of Dahomey were powerful monarchs who enriched themselves and their court through warfare and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. However, historians such as Edna Bay have shown how religious authorities and elites within the palace complex, including women, checked the power of the king.³ More recently, archeologist J. Cameron Monroe argued for a spatial approach to understanding the construction of power in precolonial Dahomey. Dahomean kings built monumental palaces and used architecture to expand their power as well as reinforce the distinction between subject and king.⁴ The material approach taken by Monroe informs this dissertation's analysis of the nature of power in precolonial Dahomey. Just as they did with palaces and architecture, Dahomean elites crafted the distinction between subject and royal and solidified the king's authority over his subjects through sartorial law, controls over the circulation of cloth, and through spectacles and rituals that relied on piles of fabric, gifted textiles, and elaborate dress.

The French colonized the Kingdom of Dahomey in 1894, shifting the capital and center of power to the coastal city of Porto-Novo and later to Dakar, the capital of all of French West Africa (AOF). In doing so, they proved unable to achieve profound influence on the interior Plateau region and could not accrue the same measure of authority over daily life as the kings of Dahomey. Indeed, the French depended on precolonial power structures to manage the area;

³ Edna Bay, "Belief, Legitimacy, and the Kpojito: An Institutional History of the 'Queen Mother' in Precolonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* (1995): 1-27 and Bay, 1998.

⁴ Monroe, 2014.

colonial administrators employed descendants of the kings of Dahomey to collect taxes and to force labor. Colonial attempts to manage the economy, by regulating cotton production, the textile trade, and artisan production, for example, did not achieve their intended results. These failures point to the inability of the colonial state to perform tasks of economic governance other than extraction.⁵ Historian Patrick Manning emphasizes the French colonial state's focus on extraction in Dahomey. In one of the most comprehensive histories of the early colonial period, he argues that Dakar's constant demands for Dahomean revenue impoverished the colony and stunted high rates of precolonial growth, setting the foundation for the high levels of poverty that continue into the present.⁶ Although the colonial administration struggled to establish political and economic control on the Plateau, they successfully created a new Dahomean "export" - educated civil servants who staffed offices throughout French West Africa. The fashions of these *hunnukún* (Fon: educated man) influenced style more broadly on the Plateau, revealing how the colonial state indirectly shaped everyday life and new notions of elite status.

These Fon educated men contributed to the rising influence of tailors, who reached an apex of mediating potential after WWII through the first decade of independence. In the postwar era, the French increasingly intervened in the productive activities and social lives of Africans, while the promise of new rights for Africans opened up opportunities for political participation.⁷

Anti-colonial and nationalist movements began to take form both in Benin and elsewhere in

⁵ Marcus Filippello argues that the colonial state also struggled to assert authority over the Holli in the southwestern region of the colony, see Marcus Filippello, "Cementing Identities: Negotiating Independence in a Changing Landscape," chap. 5, in *The Nature of the Path: Reading a West African Road* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

⁶ Manning, 2004.

⁷ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

West Africa.⁸ In Benin, three parties emerged that primarily drew their support from the major regions of the colony: Porto-Novo in the south, Parakou in the north, and Abomey in the center. In 1960, Dahomey became an independent country, but political instability and coup d'états marred the country's first twelve years of self-rule. In fact, historian David Birmingham notes that twelve different post-colonial governments took power in just as many years.⁹ The coups, however, were distinguished by their lack of violence; authority simply shifted around the military and a small group of male elites who drew on regional alliances. But while regionalism certainly played a role in Dahomey's political landscape, it was not as divisive or detrimental as some observers have suggested.¹⁰ For example, despite their plurality in an independent Dahomey, internal divisions among Fon-speakers mostly kept them out of national power. The center's most influential national politician of the 1960s, Justin Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin, never fully received the full support of the former royal families, which split Fon support between himself and Sourou-Migan Apithy, the politician from Porto-Novo.¹¹ In these years of near

⁸ Social historians have studied the nationalist policies of the state as it mobilized the nation from the 'top down' as well as the popular movements of women, youth, urban workers, and peasants who built nations from the 'bottom up,' see Elizabeth Schmidt, "Top Down or Bottom Up? Nationalist Mobilization Reconsidered, with Special Reference to Guinea (French West Africa)" *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 975-1014 and Meredith Teretta, "God of Peace, God of Independence': Village Nationalism in the *Maquis* of Cameroun, 1957-1971," *Journal of African History* (2005): 75-10. On the rise of elite politics in Benin, see Maurice A. Glélé, *Naissance d'un État Noire: L'évolution politique et constitutionnelle du Dahomey, de la colonisation à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1969) and Manning, 2004, 262. On the Beninese literati see, Dov Ronen, "The Colonial Elite in Dahomey," *African Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (April 1974), 55-76.

⁹ Birmingham, *The Decolonization of Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995): 93.

¹⁰ See Martin Staniland, "The Three-Party System in Dahomey: I, 1946-56" *JAH* 2 (1973): 291-312; Samuel Decalo, "Regionalism, Politics, and the Military in Dahomey," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 3 (Apr. 1973), 449-478; and Dov Ronen, *Dahomey: Between Tradition and Modernity*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

¹¹ Justin Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin went from attempting to assassinate Benin's first president, Hubert Maga, in 1961 to trying to form a government with Maga in 1963. Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin also served as prime

constant political turmoil, Beninois tailors involved themselves in, debated, and contested political processes through the production of sartorial forms that permitted ordinary Beninois to articulate their political views and allegiances.

This project follows the periodizations of Africanist historians and political scientists, such as Frederick Cooper and Crawford Young, who delineate the immediate independence era from a later postcolonial period that began in the early 1970s and lasted until the early 1990s.¹² In Benin, a 1972 coup established Mathieu Kérékou as president. In the following three years, he consolidated power into a one-party state and declared Marxism-Leninism as Benin's official “path,” while punishing dissidents with beatings or imprisonment. Kérékou also staged a war against “traditionalism” or the dress, symbols, dances, titles, and religions that he attributed to pre-colonial Dahomey.¹³ Historian Marcus Filipello, through his examination of the Ohori (Holli) and the Pobé-Kétu road, notes the ways that the Kérékou regime pursued policies similar to previous postcolonial leaders, but that it relied much more heavily on force to quell dissent and silence critics.¹⁴ But, severe economic decline and the end of the Cold War helped usher in a

minister and as president for a few days in 1965 and again shared power with Maga in the 'tripartite' government of 1972.

¹² In Cooper's analysis, the 'developmentalist state' of late colonialism and independence gave way to state contraction and economic crises by 1973, see Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Crawford Young traces "the dramatic mood shifts in analytic perspectives" among Africanist scholars and African elites (9). Afro-optimism gave way to Afro-pessimism in the early 1960s, around 1974, and again in the 1990s. See, Young *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

¹³ Jeffrey Kahn, "Policing 'evil': State-sponsored witch-hunting in the People's Republic of Bénin," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41 (2011): 4-34.

¹⁴ Filipello, 2017.

1989 citizen-led council that drafted a new constitution and stalled the “Kérékou Revolution.”¹⁵ After elections in 1991, Benin became the vanguard of Africa's “third wave of democratization” and, as a result, a prime location for intervention and investment by international non-governmental organizations.

Tracing the history of tailors and tailored clothing across Benin's tumultuous political history reveals a commonality - the importance of cultural production to state formation and state authority in West Africa. During the colonial period, in Benin, as in elsewhere in their empire, the French used craft fairs, expositions, and competitions to reinforce the distinction between citizen and subject and to encourage “authentic” African production. For example, in colonial Morocco, as art historian Hamid Irbouh has shown in his compelling survey of “art” education, French administrators designed programs based on assumptions about the alleged inferiority of Moroccan arts and crafts as well as the social organization of Moroccan artisans.¹⁶ Programs such as these helped define the “cultural” distinction between colonizer and colonized, at the same time that they reinforced perceptions of the inferior position of colonized peoples.

Postcolonial states also sought to harness the arts and craftsmanship to serve their own purposes. After independence, African states invested in and promoted national coherence at similar sites to the colonial states that preceded them - national and international festivals, schools of fine arts, and heritage architecture in order to create conceptions of a nation and

¹⁵ Kérékou would return to serve two terms as a democratically elected president from 1996-2006. He had, however, dropped any pretense of Marxism-Leninism and now fashioned himself as an evangelical minister.

¹⁶ Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912-1956* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012).

solidify their power over it. But these programs struggled to overcome the inherent contradiction between retaining the “authenticity” of local forms and practices as well as creating a “national culture” that was representative of its diverse parts.¹⁷ For example, anthropologist Mike McGovern has shown how the Touré regime in Guinea incorporated the mask making and performance of the forest region into a national identity at the same time that it pursued a policy of modernization and “demystification” by enforcing an actual ban on masks, or “fetishes” and mask ceremonies, in the forest region.¹⁸ Colonial and postcolonial states attempted to shape “culture” to meet their state priorities.

But as this dissertation shows, it was not only colonial and postcolonial states that sought to use the crafts and artistry to forge common identities. While most studies place the impetus for postcolonial cultural policy within the legacies of colonialism or the modern desire to create a national identity, this study shows how a pre-colonial kingdom similarly invested in efforts to reshape its subjects by investing in a singular Dahomean “culture.” Through warfare, the kings of Dahomey captured artisans from neighboring kingdoms and incorporated them into a Dahomean artistic heritage. Palace workshops and spectacles such as Annual Customs communicated proper notions of textile production and dress. These were, in a sense, cultural policies that allowed the king to exert and maintain his authority over his subjects. Indeed, the

¹⁷ Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Rosa De Jorio, *Cultural Heritage in Mali in the Neoliberal Era* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Paul R. Davis, "An Institution for Post-Independence Art: US-RDA Cultural Policy and *Encadrement Malien* at the Institut National des Arts" *Critical Interventions* (2014): 96-118.

¹⁸ Mike McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

persistent struggle that elites faced - to control an incredibly diverse group of subjects and then citizens - and the belief that a common material cultural could play a central role in uniting them is a unifying theme that runs through the political life of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Benin.

Continuity within state programs reveals central Benin's long history of authoritarianism, despite various experiences and experimentations with different political systems. From powerful monarchy to colony to dictatorship, states relied on dress, whether *tchankas* and *grande pagne* in the kingdom, school uniforms in the colony, or fatigues under Kérékou, to create vertical ties from subject or citizen to state authority. Historian Leora Auslander argues that, with the shift from authoritarian regime to nation-state, Western states could no longer rely on sartorial law, pageantry, and spectacle to project their authority and, instead, invested in monuments, exhibitions, museums, libraries and schools to convey the cultural prerogatives of the modern nation-state.¹⁹ Benin offers a variation. There, the authoritarian monarchy, colonial state, and postcolonial regimes alike relied on spectacle, whether Annual Customs, Bastille Day, or rallies for postcolonial political leaders, as much as they relied on state workshops and other formal institutions of learning and fairs to project state authority and to communicate proper modes of dress, consumption, and artisanship for citizens and subjects. In effect, styles and fashions may change, but clothing and clothes-making has long worked a mainline through Benin's political institutions and practices.

¹⁹ Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

The history of tailoring also reveals the limitations of state power and authority and the persistent influence and authority of “traditional” seats of power, specifically that of the Kingdom of Dahomey, in colonial and postcolonial Benin. Political scientist Jeffrey Herbst convincingly shows that African states have struggled to “broadcast power” over the periphery of their territories and that state power in Africa should be imagined as a series of concentric circles with authority diminishing the farther one went from the center.²⁰ When the French colonized the kingdom, they moved the capital - the center of power - from the Plateau to the coast and, as a result, colonial and postcolonial states often failed to exert control on the Plateau. Their attempts and failures to intervene in markets in cotton and cloth exemplify their lack of authority. Furthermore, artisans, as cultural producers or much of what postcolonial African states deemed “authentic” national culture, largely operated out of the purview of the state and most artisans continued (and continue) to learn their craft through “informal” means in central markets and private workshops.

Dress practices on the Plateau also underscore how “traditional” Dahomean authorities were able to maintain and deploy their power, despite a political system that distanced them from formal politics. While state-sanctioned mobs have attacked women wearing miniskirts elsewhere in postcolonial Africa, on the Plateau, men who wore the “traditional” garb of the *Dah* - Fon heads of clan - without royal permission opened themselves up to the possibility of public beatings and humiliation by their clansmen. In an oral history, an informant described how an inappropriately dressed man would surely be physically assaulted in Abomey, the historical seat

²⁰ Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

of Fon power. However, if he wore the ensemble in the coastal cities of Cotonou or Porto-Novo, he was less likely to face the wrath of his family.²¹ Returning to Jeffrey Herbst's visualization of power in Africa as a series of concentric circles, one can see how the remnants of traditional authority based in Abomey overlap with the far rings of the national state, which emanate from the coast. Particularly in terms of cultural production and Beninois postcolonial national identity, the authoritarian power of the colonial and postcolonial state never quite reached the interior while, conversely, the practices of “tradition” anchored in Abomey, continued to reverberate and find new applications to the present day.

II. Bridging Clothing and Artisanship in West Africa

The literature on clothing in Africa is relatively robust, but most scholars focus on clothing consumption rather than production. Despite their ubiquitous presence in the cities and villages of West and West Central Africa, there have been few studies of African tailors. Anthropologist Jean Lavé analyzed modes of apprenticeship and knowledge acquisition among tailors in Monrovia, Liberia, although her work makes no attempt to historicize their craft knowledge.²² In his 1982 dissertation, R.J. Pokrant explores the social history of tailors in Kano, Nigeria, focusing on the division of labor and apprenticeship, yet he does little to explore the meanings of the clothing and its material qualities.²³ More recently, art historians have focused

²¹ Interview with Dah Atchassou, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 9, 2014.

²² Jean Lavé, *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²³ R.J. Pokrant. "The survival of indigenous tailoring among the Hausa of Kano City" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1982).

on fashion designers and the fashion systems of African capital cities, as part of a larger effort to reorient the study of fashion from the West to the Global South.²⁴ In contrast to these scarce scholarly accounts of African tailors and clothing designers, this dissertation reveals the long history of tailors and tailored clothing and, in doing so, shows how these men and women served as important historical actors and shaped notions of self, city, and nation through their work making clothing.

Historians have shown how (women's) dress and fashion were important sites for the contestation of power and the production of new political identities in Africa. In her introduction to the volume *Fashioning Africa*, Jean Allman argues, "power is represented, constituted, articulated, and contested through dress" and that dress and fashion served as a "political language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, contesting, and dominating" in colonial and postcolonial Africa.²⁵ For example, in her essay on anti-nudity campaigns in Nkrumah's Ghana, Allman reveals how the southern Ghanaians in power perceived northerners as "nude" in the immediate aftermath of independence. Concerned that the "nudity" of northerners might affect the new country's international prestige, elite southern women led campaigns against the dress practices of women in the north. The Ghanaian nation that emerged dressed as southerners and, in many other ways, privileged the south over the north.²⁶ Other

²⁴ Christopher Richards, "We Have Always Been Fashionable: Embodying Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism Through Fashion in Accra, Ghana" (PhD diss. University of Florida, 2014); Joanna Grabski, "The Visual City: Tailors, Creativity, and Urban Life in Dakar, Senegal," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, ed. Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010)

²⁵ Jean Allman, "Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress," in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Allman, 1-12 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014): 1.

²⁶ Jean Allman, "'Let Your Fashion be in Line with our Ghanaian Costume': Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Cloth-ing in Nkrumah's Ghana," 144-165, in *Fashioning Africa*, ed. Allman.

postcolonial political regimes regulated clothing cultures through sumptuary laws and, in particular, outlawed women from wearing miniskirts that were deemed “inauthentically” African.²⁷ This dissertation focuses on the making of clothing and, in doing so, inserts a new agent - the tailor - into colonial and postcolonial political conversations around dress.

This project also reveals the ways that global capitalism shaped Beninois clothing consumption and dress practices by detailing how the objects obtained through international and regional trade altered the possibilities of tailored clothing. In her groundbreaking study of secondhand clothing, Anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen follows the secondhand (*salaula*) trade from its historical origins in the earliest exchanges between Europeans and Africans to contemporary Zambia. The use and meanings of *salaula* changed over time due to economic shifts that drove up supply and due to the self-fashioning of Zambian consumers. Hansen's 'commodity chain' approach to *salaula* underscores the economic and cultural processes that led to new regimes of consumption. However, her approach frames Zambians as relatively passive recipients of styles designed elsewhere.²⁸ Other scholars study the cultural history of extant articles of clothing through shifting conceptions of 'good taste' or the influence of 'ethnic' and international styles on African sartorial demands.²⁹ In contrast, the material properties of

²⁷ On sumptuary law and miniskirts in Tanzania, see, for example, Karen Tranberg Hansen "Dressing Dangerously: Miniskirts, Gender Relations, and Sexuality in Zambia," 166-187, *Fashioning Africa*, ed. Allman. The debate about miniskirts in Africa remains contentious. For recent articles on the proposed anti-mini legislation in Uganda, see Feraï Sevenzo, "Letter from Africa: Miniskirts and morals," *BBC Online*, May 2, 2013. The law was passed, "Ugandan MPs pass law to ban miniskirts," *BBC Online*, December 19, 2013.

²⁸ Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing in Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

²⁹ On 'good taste' see Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (New York: Cambridge University press, 2002) and Huda Nura Mustafa, "Sartorial ecumenes: African styles in a social and economic context," in *The Art of African Fashion*, ed. A.D. Traoré (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press,

Beninois tailored clothing, not just shifting Beninois valuations, allowed men and women to use clothing to create new notions of gender, generation, ethnicity, and class.

The availability and internal structures of textiles influenced tailors' designs and the meanings of finished outfits. Most studies of African textiles, whether they focus on production, exchange, or consumption, recognize that tailors often sew cloth into completed ensembles, but this step has not been given sustained scholarly attention. Historians of the seventeenth to nineteenth century Upper Guinea Coast argue that coastal African producers and consumers of textiles shaped and were shaped by broader Atlantic World commerce and regimes of taste.³⁰ Other scholars point to how untailored cloth provided a means of self-expression and political participation, particularly for women. African women wrapped and draped cloth either around their waists as *pagne* in West Africa or, as historian Marie Grace Brown explores, as *tobe* that covered entire bodies in Sudan. The ways in which women folded and tucked lengths of cloth permitted them to participate in conversations on taste, beauty, politics, and gender.³¹ Other scholars explore how technology, gender, and intended market affect the production and embedded meanings of particular cloth such as Malian *bogolan* or Nigeria *adire*.³² There has

1998). Two recent edited volumes that take this latter approach are Gott and Loughran, eds., 2010; and Karen Tranberg Hansen and Soyini Madison, eds., *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, and Performance* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). On 'local' dress and ethnicity, see the essays in Joanne B. Eicher, ed., *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time* (New York: Berg, 1995).

³⁰ Jody Benjamin, "The Texture of Change: Cloth, Commerce, and History in Western Africa, 1700-1850" (PhD diss. Harvard, 2016); Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Lanham, MA: AltaMira Press, 2006): 45-46.

³¹ Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016): chapter 1; Marie Grace Brown, *Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

³² Judith Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890-1940* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); Victoria L. Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

been less scholarly attention to Beninois textiles, although Beninois art historian Joseph Adandé concludes that there must have been a long history of cotton and other fiber weaving in southern precolonial Dahomey where artisans dyed fabrics with indigo and later used them in appliqué.³³ The internal structures of particular textiles and the introduction and availability of different textiles, such as locally woven raffia cloth, cotton fabric, and synthetics, permitted tailors to make different types of styles and altered how they made them.

In order to fully understand the relationship between textiles, clothing, and the mediating potential of the tailor, it is important to consider how the political and social status of artisans generated and reproduced craft knowledge. A particularly robust interdisciplinary literature addresses this among the casted artisans and musicians of Mandé speakers, the *nyamakalaw*. In Mandé-speaking areas in present-day Mali, Guinea, and elsewhere, artisans and musicians were casted into endogamous occupational categories. Historian Tal Tamari's argues either to the very early development of caste institutions in West Africa or to three separate innovations. While some castes died out over time and others adopted new professional activities, the proliferation of caste institutions across the Sahel points to vast cross-cultural networks of trade and exchange that stretched across the region during the second millennium.³⁴ Of the *nyamakalaw*, blacksmiths played an especially significant social role.³⁵ Casted blacksmiths maintained their specialized

³³ Joseph Adandé, "Textiles in Southern Benin," 78-86, in *Museums & History in West Africa*, eds. Emmanuel Arinze and Claude Daniel Ardouin, (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

³⁴ She dates the emergence of caste to at least 1300 for the Manding and 1500 for both the Soninke and Wolof. Tal Tamari., 221-250.

³⁵ In the Malinke oral tradition of Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Empire in the 13th century, the Sosso king Soumaoro Kanté, a sorcerer and a blacksmith, fought against Sundiata. D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Essex: Pearson, 1986): 27; Tamari argues that during the time of Sundiata blacksmiths emerged as a casted profession, as the Malinke converted the vanquished Sosso elites into their own society as an endogenous group. Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems," 240.

craft knowledge over sorcery and smithing, but did not have formal access to political power and could not carry and use weapons. Yet, their skill in manufacturing weapons and agricultural tools made blacksmiths some of the most important members of Mandé society. Along with their everyday labor at the forge, blacksmiths also served as soothsayers, rainmakers, sorcerers, healers, and circumcisers. Mandé society both revered and disdained blacksmiths because of their technology and products. Instead of being at the periphery of society in a rigid social structure (as “caste” might suggest), blacksmiths served as mediators between nature and culture, through their mastery of *nyama*, or the power to transform raw material into useful forms.³⁶

The characterization of *nyamakalaw* as 'casted' elides some of the complexity of their multiple social identities. Some scholars have argued that *nyamakalaw* cannot even be characterized as a casted people. As noted above, blacksmiths served as guardians of the driving force behind social transformation, their metal objects and spiritual powers put them at the center of social relations, not as an outsider as suggested by colonial observers. Other Mandé artisan groups such as male leatherworkers (*garankew* or *jeliw*) and female potters (*numuw*) carried less prestige than blacksmiths and their status declined as the importance of ceramic and terra cotta figures diminished with the spread of Islam throughout the Mandé world.³⁷ Other crafts including weaving, dyeing, and masonry were not practiced by *nyamakalaw*.³⁸ David C. Conrad and Barbra E. Frank contend that *nyamakalaw* peoples and identities were fluid and mobile and

³⁶ Patrick R. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³⁷ Barbara E. Frank, *Mande Potters and Leatherworkers: Art and Heritage in West Africa* (Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998).

³⁸ David C. Conrad and Barbra E. Frank, eds. *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 16.

they point out the errors of Mandé scholars who describe the *nyamakalaw* as “low-class.”

Conrad and Frank argue that this characterization of artisans and musicians as marginalized groups repeats and reaffirms the hierarchical constructions of colonial officials and ethnographers who wrote extensively about them.³⁹ Chapter Four illuminates how the social and political status of precolonial Dahomean artisans was mutable, and how discourses on “casted African artisans” shaped a colonial policy that instituted a Dahomean “*artisanat*” as a meaningful category.

Colonial-era accounts interpreted African craft production as timeless and unchanged - except when it was “corrupted” or threatened by capitalism or interactions with the “outside” world. However, scholars have shown how new technologies, either indigenous or imported, have long altered production methods and forms of African crafts. Barbara Frank, in her study of Mandé leatherworkers and potters rejects the notion of a “Mandé style” in form and instead focuses on how the adoption and invention of new tools and techniques led to changes in the forms of artisanal objects. In doing so, Frank shows how regional trade, the introduction of Islam, slavery, and the expansion of Mandé military and political power resulted in different technologies of production.⁴⁰ In *The Bluest Hands*, historian Judith Byfield reveals how colonial-era *adire* dyers in Abeokuta organized collectively to facilitate the use of caustic sodas and synthetic dyes to finish the textile. The incorporation of new production methods, however, led to the breakdown of the industry as untrained women begin to produce *adire*, swamping the

³⁹ Conrad and Frank, *Status and Identity*, 2.

⁴⁰ Frank, 1998.

market and decreasing product quality.⁴¹ Similarly, the adoption of the sewing machine and the measuring tape by Beninois tailors increased production of tailored fitted clothing and shifted the sartorial landscape of the Plateau. Facing an influx of semi-trained tailors into their craft, tailors (and other artisans) developed new technologies of certification to regulate it.

Beninois acquired skills as tailors in colonial and postcolonial formal schools and through “traditional” apprenticeship. Because of this, the history of tailoring underscores the overlaps and divergences in how knowledge was acquired and passed on in the seemingly disparate institutions of (post) colonial schools and workshop apprenticeship. Anthropologists write much of the scholarly literature on apprenticeship in Africa. Lavé studied apprenticeship and the dynamics of knowledge and practice among Vai and Gola tailors in the Happy Corner alley of Monrovia, Liberia. In *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice*, Lavé notes how apprenticeship was structured from less to more participation and apprentices learned the methods of sewing from least difficult to most difficult product.⁴² Beninois tailors acquired their craft knowledge through similar means, although post-independence apprenticeship was much more structured than in the case of Liberian tailors. In *The Masons of Djenné*, anthropologist Trevor Marchand analyzes mud masons' personalized 'knowing-in-practice' - the unique combinations of their skills, forms of knowledge, identity, and personality -that translate into construction methods. For example, masons take measurements in lengths of an individual's body parts and the master mason's own concept of space and personal aesthetics plays a much greater factor in final form than standardized blueprints. His project also reveals how masons

⁴¹ Byfield, 2002.

⁴² Lavé, 2011.

have maintained and developed upon their techniques through social institutions that promote secrecy.⁴³ But both Lave and Marchand's analyses do little to place tailors and masons, respectively, within the larger historical contexts that shape the practice of their craft and the constitution of their craft knowledge.

In contrast to anthropological approaches to apprenticeship, historians write much of the literature on formal education in West Africa. Scholars and others have long interpreted French colonial education as key to the state's efforts to remake society in the AOF. Taking the *mission civilisatrice* and assimilationist rhetoric at face value, colonial commentators often interpreted education in the AOF as an effort to make "Black Frenchmen."⁴⁴ When historians began to study the colonial period in earnest in the 1970s, some showed how the colonial state used schools to create a local elite loyal to the colonizing country and its administrators.⁴⁵ More recently, Kelly Duke Bryant examines education in Senegal prior to the First World War when literacy provided a path to political power for Africans. Focusing on the different priorities of the old versus the young, Bryant shows how colonial education gradually took shape in the nineteenth century and how young men used it initially to upset the authority of African leaders and later to challenge the colonial state itself.⁴⁶ While the vast majority of scholarship on colonial education focuses on

⁴³ Trevor Marchand, *The Masons of Djenné* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ W. Bryant Mumford and Granville St John Orde-Brown, *Africans Learn to Be French: A Review of Educational Activities in the Seven Federated Colonies of French West Africa, Based Upon a Tour of French West Africa Undertaken in 1935* (London: Evans Brothers, 1937), Georges Hardy, *Une conquête morale: l'enseignement en AOF* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2005);

⁴⁵ Denise Bouche, *L'enseignement dans les territoires français de l'Afrique occidentale de 1817 à 1920: mission civilisatrice ou formation d'une élite?* (PhD diss., l'université Paris I, Lille, 1975); Peggy Sabatier, "Educating a Colonial Elite: The William Ponty School and its Graduates" (PhD diss. University of Chicago, 1977).

⁴⁶ Kelly Duke Bryant, *Education as Politics: Colonial Schooling and Political Debate in Senegal, 1850s-1914* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015). Spencer D. Segalla shifts our focus to the

liberal education, another group of scholars interrogate domestic, agricultural, artisan, and art education and the remaking of African society.⁴⁷ In his dissertation, David Berry Nelson points to 1930 as a turning point in French colonial education. Instead of continuing programs to “make Africans French,” the colonial state shifted towards agricultural and artisanal education as way to “ruralize” Africans and promote rural economic development.⁴⁸ Historian Harry Gamble argues that local administrators fears of *déracinés* – “uprooted” Africans - drove their creation of programs in “adapted education,” which attempted to “Africanize” education by focusing on local particularities and a revived focus on agriculture and manual education.⁴⁹ Colonial education, specifically the programs directed at artisans, helped inculcate a set of norms and practices around artisan labor and craft knowledge that defied the division between “traditional” apprenticeship and formal colonial and postcolonial education. Masters in workshops issued diplomas that resembled those that marked graduation and progress in institutions of formal

personal disagreements between the French administrators and African students and teachers and how these shaped colonial anxieties about the 'assimilated' or educated African, see Segalla "The Micropolitics of Colonial Education in French West Africa, 1914-1919" *French Colonial History* (2012): 1-22.

⁴⁷ Gwendolyn Schulman traces how domestic education for girls was part of the curriculum at Catholic missionary and state schools from the advent of the colonial era in the AOF. These programs sought to train "good wives, mothers and housekeepers" according to French standards, but they only became widespread as the colonial era progressed and the state built more institutions for girls, increasing access to them. Gwendolyn Schulman, "Colonial Education for African Girls in Afrique Occidentale Française: A Project for Gender Reconstruction, 1818-1960" (MA thesis, McGill University, 1992): 8; Amanda Gilvin, "Teaching African Artisanry, Seeing African Labor: Persistent Pedagogies in Twentieth-Century Niger" *Critical Interventions* 8 (2014): 74-95; Paul R. Davis, "An Institution for Post-Independence Art: US-RDA Cultural Policy and *Encadrement Malien* at the Institut National des Arts" *Critical Interventions* (2014): 96-118.

⁴⁸ David Berry Nelson, "Emplacing Africans: Ruralization in French Colonial Education in West Africa, 1920-1940" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2008).

⁴⁹ Harry Gamble, "Peasants of Empire: Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s West Africa" *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 49 (2009): 775-803.

education, while mission and state programs hired master artisans out of workshops to teach their students.

III. Gender and Identity in Urban Africa

The Abomey Plateau was densely populated (relative to the rest of West Africa) long before colonization. The walled town of Abomey served as the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey and it had a population of about 24,000 people in the nineteenth century with up to a quarter of its residents living in the royal palace complex at the center of town.⁵⁰ When the French conquered Dahomey, the retreating king and his entourage managed to burn much of the former capital and Abomey's population took decades to recover to precolonial levels. Ten years into French colonial rule, the state built a railway through the region, but the railroad tracks bypassed Abomey, creating a new market center (Bohicon) about 8 km away. Today, in the twenty-first century, these two towns - precolonial Abomey and colonial Bohicon - have grown into a single metropolitan area with approximately 113,000 people in Bohicon and 78,000 in Abomey and a metropolitan population of 250,000.⁵¹ But, it was during the mid-twentieth century that these small towns began to grow into cities.

The Abomey Plateau encompasses two urban forms that scholars have usually treated separately - a precolonial capital and a secondary colonial city. By bringing them into the same frame of analysis, this project shows how ideas about "tradition" and "modernity" manifested

⁵⁰ Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan, *Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1978): 15.

⁵¹ "Villes et mairies du Département de Zou," *Newletter Annuaire de Mairies*, <http://www.annuaire-mairie.fr/departement-zou.html>

themselves in what people choose to wear as they circulated within two urban spaces with different spatial and political logics. Archeologists have used artifacts and architecture to explore the political, economic, and social dynamics of precolonial African cities that developed long before European colonization.⁵² However, most scholars of “African cities” look at cities that emerged during the colonial period, especially colonial capitals. My attention to an interior secondary metropolis shows how distance from the colonial center of power translated into a different type of urban experience on the Plateau, one where the colonial and national state exercised less control over everyday life, which permitted localized urban imaginaries to flourish. By shifting attention from colonial capital to a secondary urban area, representative of the vast majority of urban spaces in Africa, my project also reveals the complex entanglements between rural and urban inhabitants and landscapes.

In its focus on the history of tailoring, this project illuminates how African cities came into being, as both a physical entity and a dense experiential site for ordinary people. This approach draws upon AbdouMaliq Simone's theory of “urban becoming.” In *For The City Yet to Come*, Simone argues that, in the absence of real and meaningful programs in urban planning and local governance, African cities are a “frontier for a wide range of diffuse experimentation with the reconfiguration of bodies, territories, and social arrangements necessary to recalibrate technologies of control.”⁵³ Indeed, the history of tailors and tailored clothing reveals how

⁵² For Abomey, see Monroe, 2004. Other examples include, Roderick McIntosh, *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Thomas N. Huffman, "Snakes and Birds: Expressive Space at Great Zimbabwe," *African Studies* 40:2 (1981): 131-150.

⁵³ AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham: Duke University, 2004): 2.

ordinary men and women gave form to the city and created new networks of social meaning through occupational organization, clothing, and the use of workshops.

Questions on the effects of urbanization on African social practices and identities predated independence and the emergence of African history as an academic discipline. Colonial administrators throughout Africa were concerned with what rural to urban migration meant for their ability to exert authority over colonial subjects. Their uneasiness manifested in the term “detrribalization” - or the idea that Africans in urban areas lost their tribal identities and practices. In doing so, they became unmoored as neither a modern urban subject nor a “native.” Conceptions of detrribalization reflected the colonial state's reliance on indirect rule, since the “detrribalized” African was no longer subject to customary law and the authority of “traditional” chiefs.⁵⁴ However, some colonial-era anthropologists studied cities as places where Africans re-asserted and re-fashioned so-called “tribal” identities. In 1956, anthropologist J. Clyde Mitchell argued that the Kalela Dance on the Northern Rhodesian (Zambian) Copperbelt was a site where Bisa ethnic identity was formed outside the “tribal” structures of rural areas. Mitchell found that clothing played an important role in the dance that Bisa used to fashion and assert their ethnicity. But, the clothing was not “traditional” Bisa garb, instead dancers wore “European” dress to connote difference and rank among participants.⁵⁵ Indeed, cities became important sites where Africans crafted ideas about ethnicity and, linking them to dress, put them on display to other city dwellers as a way to create communities based on ethnic identities.

⁵⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ J. Mitchell Clyde, "The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relationship Among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia" *Rhodes-Livingstone Paper* 27 (1956).

Tailoring shaped notions and experiences of gender on the Abomey Plateau as well as ethnicity. Women tailors in the 1970s and 1980s used control over space - the urban workshop - to establish themselves as respectable women. These women thus invite comparison to the lives and trajectories of other women who made their way in urban centers. This topic is one that feminist historians began to take up in the 1970s by using life histories to reconstruct the economic and political histories of African women. Much of this work considered how urban economies provided new opportunities for women and how rural to urban migration drastically changed the lives of women in colonial and postcolonial Africa.⁵⁶ In historian Luise White's seminal study of prostitutes in colonial Nairobi, *The Comforts of Home*, migration to the city and control over and access to urban property provided new opportunities for women. While some women used their profits from prostitution to invest in kin networks in the countryside, others opted out of rural responsibilities by moving to the cities and establishing themselves as heads of households and, later landlords.⁵⁷ But, unlike the prostitutes in colonial Nairobi, women tailors' new founded positions in the community also relied on building networks of dependents, or apprentices and children.

Another strain of the literature on women in urban Africa considers how urban life nurtured new notions of femininity and sites of debate about gender roles. Anthropologist James Ferguson describes how Zambians internalized the predictions of modernization theory in the

⁵⁶ Claire C. Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl: A Socioeconomic History of Women and Class in Accra, Ghana* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985); Teresa Barnes, *We Women Worked So Hard: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999).

⁵⁷ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

independence-era Copperbelt, including how urbanization would lead to domestic roles for women that resembled the idealized version of Western domesticity - a housewife presiding over a nuclear family living in a single-family home.⁵⁸ A large literature on the “modern woman” considers how the global entrance of women into the formal economy - often as secretaries - took place in urban Africa and how consumption of imported commodities shaped perceptions of women's modern-ness and linked it to their bodies.⁵⁹ Andrew Ivaska argues that the 1960s and 70s popular movement against the miniskirts worn by students and professional women reflected men's uneasiness with their own loss of authority and lack of wealth relative to women in an urbanizing Dar es Salaam.⁶⁰ In Benin, the expansion of women's fashions and the rise of female tailors, which began in the 1970s, created new notions around proper bodily comportment, especially for young unmarried women, who began to wear tight-fitting *modèles jeune filles* as shown in Chapter Five.

Reflecting a recent turn within gender studies to the study of men and masculinity, Africanists have begun to explore what it means to be a man in urban Africa. Often, Africanist scholars take the approach of “multiple masculinities” to understand the gendering of men since colonization brought different gender norms, which mapped onto societies with preexisting notions of masculinity and, therefore, no singular “hegemonic” masculinity dominates.⁶¹

⁵⁸ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ See chapters by Timothy Burke and Lynn M Thomas in Alys Eve Weinbaum, ed. et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Andrew Ivaska, "Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses': Urban Style, Gender and the Politics of National Culture in 1960s Dar es Salaam, Tanzania," *Gender and History* (2002): 585-607.

⁶¹ Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, "Introduction: Men and Masculinities in Modern African History," in *Men and Masculinities in Modern African History*, 1-30, edited by Lindsay and Miescher

Likewise, scholars have shown how consumption and performance created new cosmopolitan masculinities in the urban spaces of postcolonial francophone Africa. Historian Didier Gondola emphasizes how the self-styling of Congolese *sapeurs* relied on expensive luxury labels (*le griffe*) and the performance of their identity through spoken word, and occasionally song and dance. Moving between Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Paris, and Brussels, these poor young men carved out a masculine role for themselves that was based on aspirations and performance of wealth, but was not rooted in material realities.⁶² Anthropologist Sasha Newell finds a similar process in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s and 2000s among the *bluffeurs*, or unemployed youth, who spent their limited means on clothing and clubs. But their performance of modernity is self-consciously a “copy,” unlike the *sapeurs* who pride themselves on originality.⁶³ Gondola's recent work on the *bills* (aspiring cowboys named for Buffalo Bill) in the streets of Kinshasa of the 1950s and 1960s shows how Congolese men constructed strongman personas through violence against women, bodybuilding, and clothing adopted from Hollywood westerns.⁶⁴ But unlike these three figures, the tailoring man was not part of a subculture, counterculture, or youth culture, instead male tailors became leaders within mainstream narratives of modernity and urbanization. Furthermore,

(Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003): 3; Lisa Linday, *Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

⁶² Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth" *African Studies Review* (1999): 23-49. Leora Auslander emphasizes *la sape* as a collective performance, liminal to politics, but inherently political, in "Accommodation, resistance, and Eigensinn: *évolués* and *sapeurs* between Africa and Europe," in *Alltag, Erfahrung, Eigensinn: Historisch-Anthropologische Erkundungen*, ed. Belinda Davis and Michael Wildt, 205-217 (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2008). For photos and video of the *sapeur* see Daniele Tamagni *Gentlemen of Baongo* (London: Trolley Books, 2009) and a series of 2014 Guinness commercials.

⁶³ Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁶⁴ Ch. Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

the male tailor's style did not self-consciously reference the West or Europe, but rather, he sought to emulate the dress and authority of the *évolué*, the educated colonial African elite and, later, that of the elite in an independent Dahomey.

A study of tailors also reveals how men's bodies served as sites for experimentation and articulation of ideas of "tradition" and "modernity." In *Burying S.M.*, David W. Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo interrogate the debates around what constitutes "tradition" and "modernity" in Africa. They do so with a survey of the trial on the burial rights of the deceased Kenyan lawyer, S.M. Otieno, whose family debated where he should be buried according to Luo customary law or Kenyan civil law based on his attributes as traditional and tribal versus modern and urban, respectively. Cohen and Odhiambo describe two expert witnesses for Otieno's Luo clan, an old gravedigger and a young Kenyan academic who specialized in African customs. While the academic had excellent credentials, the gravedigger's testimony was more convincing. The authors conclude the gravedigger's expertise over "traditional life" was embodied; he was old and infirm and he had physically done the work of tradition by digging graves, as opposed to the disembodied knowledge of the academic. Similarly, perceptions of the modern expertise of the tailor were rooted in the material - in his body, his use of machinery, and his movements between and within urban spaces.⁶⁵ Tailors and tailored-clothing played an important role in the making of cities in interior Benin, although the craft presented different opportunities for wealth and self-fashioning to men and women.

⁶⁵ Historian Jennifer Hart argues that mobility and technology additionally create associations between men and modern life in her survey of Ghanaian drivers in the 1950s and 1960s who self-fashioned as respectable, "modern" men. Jennifer Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

IV. Methods and Sources

The familiar problem of obtaining sources to write about the African past manifests itself differently when writing pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial history. As such, this project relies on multiple types of European- and African-produced sources. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European slave traders wrote about the culture and history of Dahomey. They intended their descriptions of rampant human sacrifice and the unchecked power of the Dahomean king to serve as justifications for Europe's continuation of the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, they argued that Africans transported as slaves to the Americas would be “better off” than those living under the constant threat of violence in Dahomey. Although the intentions of the authors make these accounts problematic sources for historians, Robin Law has argued that these anti-abolitionist characterizations of Dahomey as a “militaristic and despotic state” largely replicated the Dahomean regime's own self-representations.⁶⁶ The performative violence of the Dahomean court served to instill fear in neighboring populations, and to reinforce the authority of the king - all of which also, as a consequence, provided fodder for the anti-abolitionist cause. A close read of these accounts in Chapter One shows that it was not just violence that produced and reproduced royal authority, but also exchanges in and ritual displays of cloth as well as royal dress.

Sources for pre-colonial Dahomey shift in content after the passage of the British Slave Trade Act of 1807, which outlawed the transatlantic trade in slaves. European participants in the “illegal slave trade” were less likely to leave written records and there are no written accounts

⁶⁶ Robin Law, "The Slave-Trader as Historian: Robert Norris and the History of Dahomey" *History in Africa* 19 (1989): 219-235: 220.

from the reigns of Adandozan (1797-1818) and the first decades of Guezo's reign (1818-1858). But by the mid-nineteenth century, abolitionist European visitors, most importantly British naval officer Frederick Forbes, explorer Richard Burton, and naturalist J.A. Skertchly visited the interior, leaving important descriptions of Dahomean life. Skertchly's account is especially significant not only because of his vivid descriptions of weaving, cloth, and dress, but also because, as a favored guest, he was given more access to Abomey and surrounding villages. These accounts are not only the most detailed of the precolonial era but they also coincide with the height of the kingdom's wealth.

Colonization introduced new dress practices in interior Dahomey as well as a new a European-produced archive for studying them. Administrators, anthropologists, and other European travelers published observations and accounts, particularly in the first decades of the colonial project. By the 1930s, French colonial administrators began to pursue more interventionist policies in cotton, cloth markets, craft fairs, and artisan education and their records survive in colonial archives in France, Senegal, and Benin. The colonial archives in Porto-Novo, Benin also contained rare copies of apprenticeship contracts and diplomas that tailors and other artisans either had notarized or submitted with applications for employment in state-run artisan schools. These archives provide the bulk of the evidence for Chapters Two and Four.

Materials written by Beninois, including newspapers and ephemera held in private collections, are another important source in this study. The postcolonial state archive remains closed, but newspapers provide information about state programs during this period. They also give insight into the shifting priorities of the postcolonial state, which at times was keenly

interested in both international and local styles. But postcolonial newspapers are also inconsistent, particularly after the Kérékou Revolution, when content shifts from coverage of general news and editorials to almost exclusive reporting on meetings, planning committees, international socialism, and sensational crimes. Other records of more recent times come from individual artisans on the Plateau, some of whom kindly allowed me to photocopy ephemera, such as business cards, pamphlets, certificates and diplomas, calendars and posters, and copies of tailoring exams, which they had stored in their homes and workshops.

However, oral sources form the core of this study of tailoring. Oral traditions of Abomean artisan clans reveal the importance of spinning, weaving, and dyeing to state and society and illuminate how these crafts changed and innovated from the earliest period. The locally sanctioned official history of the kings and their feats also contain rare insight into dress and its meaning. I also collected over eighty oral histories of tailors and their clients during research trips in 2011 and 2014-2015. Interviews were conducted in French and Fon languages in both rural and urban settings. During interviews that took place mostly in Fon, a research assistant, usually Marc Esse, accompanied me to translate responses into French. These interviews were kept as audio files and transcribed into French-language transcripts. All translations into English are my own. I recorded almost all of these oral histories inside or on the terraces of homes and workshops, although I also collected a few in Abomey and Bohicon's central markets. While the majority of my informants lived and worked in the cities of Abomey or Bohicon, I travelled to neighboring villages and towns in the *communes* of Za-Kpota, Zagnanado, and Agbaignzoun in order to develop a sense of the linkages and ruptures between urban and rural communities. As a whole, these oral histories allowed me to reconstruct the

social history of tailoring, but they also provided a window into Dahomeans' own subjective assessments of the styles, fabrics, and meanings of different dress practices.

Textual and oral accounts are enriched by visual and material sources gathered from publications, state archives, as well as the personal collections of my informants. Etchings, photographs, and postcards in archival and published European accounts provide visual evidence of dress practices and sartorial changes for earlier periods of Benin's history. Newspaper images do the same work for a later period. But images produced by Beninois photographers and kept in homes and workshops are some of the most compelling visual sources. It is possible to glean the popular fashions from these staged photographs, but a closer look also reveals the priorities and subjectivities of the tailors who requested expensive photographs be made of events that they deemed especially important. In particular, the genre of “liberation photography” shows how the ceremony that marks the end of apprenticeship was a seminal moment in the lives of artisans.

Objects, including looms and spindles, pieces of fabric, machines and other tools, and sewn outfits kept in personal collections also inform this survey of Beninois tailoring. Analyzing the internal structure of fabrics such as cloth woven in Abomey, shows how the materiality of the cloth lends itself to wrapping as opposed to cutting and fitting. In contrast, sharp scissors neatly cut imported cloth, allowing it to be sewn into an infinite amount of styles, as long as the tailor has the skill to put his designs into production. Tailors and their clients occasionally kept special outfits that they allowed me to touch, inspect, and catalogue. But most Beninois do not keep clothing. Old outfits become house clothes or are given to the poor or children, eventually ending up as rags used for diapering babies or cleaning houses.

Finally, I used ethnographic methods to refine my understanding of tailoring. In 2012, I spent a summer apprenticing in a master seamstresses' shop in Bohicon. This experience helped me formulate my research questions by giving me a better idea of the material inputs to tailoring and how tailors incorporate different stylistic influences into their creations. In 2014-2015, I passed countless hours with tailors, seamstresses, and their clients. I observed and participated in the new state tailoring exams and in a number of private craft-specific ceremonies. These experiences helped me to understand and analyze tailor's descriptions of change within artisan ceremonies as well as written accounts that I found in newspapers and reports. Participant-observation also showed me how written descriptions of these ceremonies tend to place them at the periphery of artisan production, while artisans themselves see them as central to their work. Taken together, texts, oral histories, visual and material sources, as well as ethnographic data allow me to piece together a history of tailoring that state archives elide.

V. Chapter Outline

Chapter One explores the many ways that Dahomeans made and used textiles and textile-based clothing to help facilitate political, economic, and social relations in the Kingdom of Dahomey (c.1600 to 1894). It also lays the foundation for the rest of this dissertation, by demonstrating how Dahomeans have, since the first centuries of the kingdom, practiced innovation and incorporation in matters of cloth production and dress. Chapter Two continues the history of cloth, clothing, and style from the French conquest of Dahomey in 1894 to the years following the Second World War. This chapter traces how multiple colonial actors, including the state, private enterprise, and missionaries, shaped the production, exchange, and

consumption of clothing and how Dahomeans took advantage of these interventions to create their own sartorial possibilities. For the most part, these colonial interventions increased the availability and accessibility of both locally produced and imported cloth until the shortages of the WWII and the immediate postwar era.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five cover the history of tailoring in the decade following the end of the Second World War to the recent past. Chapter Three traces the rise of tailoring and the spread of tailored clothing in late colonial Dahomey and in the first decade after independence. During this period, tailors fashioned themselves as modern and cosmopolitan men and women by using imported machinery, travelling within Benin and elsewhere in West Africa, and wearing modern urban styles, rife with their symbolic association to the colonial and postcolonial elite. These tailors, in turn, used their authoritative expertise over modern urban life - at a time of great political and social transformation - to craft new sartorial meanings and modes of self-expression and self-identification for ordinary Dahomeans. Chapter Four reveals how artisans in the 1960s and 1970s imposed order and uniformity on their crafts by regulating craft knowledge and limiting their ranks with the liberation ceremony (marking the end of apprenticeship) as well as with increasingly complicated and expensive modes of apprenticeship, and later, the creation of craft-specific and pan-craft associations. The objects and practices of Beninois artisanship drew upon colonial programs (education, craft fairs, competitions) that fostered artisan identity and conveyed colonial conceptions of an authentic African taste and craft production. But the ceremonies, diplomas, and contracts of a “traditional” apprenticeship also represented an innovative way for artisans to self-regulate despite the imposed “informality” of the colonial and postcolonial states. The final chapter, Chapter Five, details three concurrent changes in tailoring

that began in the 1970s - the shift from central markets to workshops as the site of production, the development and spread of women's fashions, and the feminization of the profession itself. Urbanization and later globalization reduced the tailor's role as mediator at the same time that they created new opportunities for women to establish themselves as upright and virtuous entrepreneurs - a status that women engaged in more mobile economic activities had difficulty achieving in the growing city. With the workshop, tailors were also able to exert their urban presence and to help shape the landscapes of the two cities of Abomey and Bohicon. However, their vast numbers, which increased rapidly as women tailors took on dozens of apprentices, reduced the prestige and profitability of the craft.

Chapter 1
Fabricating Power:
Cloth, Clothing, and Style in the Kingdom of Dahomey (c.1600-1894)

War is our great friend; without it there is no cloth, no armlets, let us to war, and conquer or die.
- Song of the “Amazons,” recorded by Frederick Forbes, 1850¹

Again we remarked amongst this people [Dahomeans] the inordinate hankering after change, novelty, and originality, even in the most trivial matters, and the failure which results from their poverty of, or rather their deficiency in, invention.

- English explorer, Richard Burton, 1864²

In 1850, British naval officer Frederick Forbes recorded a song sung by the Dahomean “Amazons,” or the elite brigade of female warriors, to their king, Guezo. Although Forbes had travelled to the inland Kingdom of Dahomey (c.1600 to 1894) to convince Guezo to abandon participation in the “illegal” transatlantic slave trade, his account also provided detailed descriptions of Dahomean cloth, clothing, and style. In the song, the Amazons outlined the relationship between politics and cloth in the precolonial kingdom. War led to pillaging of African woven cloth from the Yoruba-speaking kingdoms to the east or other neighbors to the west and north. War also created captives who Dahomeans sold as slaves across the Atlantic, often in exchange for cloth from India and later Europe. The demand for cloth helped drive Dahomey to war and participation in the slave trade, but cloth also solidified relations between

¹ Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans, Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey An Residence at his Capital in the Years 1849 and 1850, Volume II*. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851): 108.

² Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomey, Volume I* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1864): 318.

the monarch and his subjects as it was gifted or otherwise exchanged and through the ritual display of the royal wealth in textiles.

In the decade after Forbes' visit, the explorer Richard Burton, another Briton, critiqued Dahomeans for their interest in "change, novelty, and originality" in "trivial matters," a condemnation of the complex sartorial practices of the kingdom's elite. Burton had received a less than cordial welcome from King Glele during his visit in 1864 and his disparaging tone hints at both his cold reception and the prevailing racial assumptions of the era. But Burton's account also portrays a king and court gripped by matters of style and elegance. The Dahomean elite wore wrapped cloth as well as cloth that had been transformed through cutting and sewing into tailored fitted items. Elite Dahomean dress differentiated social status and inspired loyalty and fear among the masses. But these dress styles also spoke to the ability of the wearer (or one of his servants) to create beautiful ensembles of disparate items. Despite Burton's conclusion that Dahomeans were incapable of "invention," Dahomean textile production and dress underwent constant change during the kingdom period, although this process took place under the strict tutelage of the king and his palace. Royal authority dictated the relationship between dress and conceptions and experiences of self, city, and nation in the Kingdom of Dahomey.

This chapter explores the many ways that Dahomeans made and used textiles and textile-based clothing to help give form to political, economic, and social relations in the kingdom. It also lays the foundation for the rest of this dissertation, by demonstrating how Dahomeans have, since the first centuries of the kingdom, practiced innovation and incorporation in matters of cloth production and dress. Dahomeans produced cloth locally and transformed it into clothing, but they also imported cloth and ready-made items that became part of local sartorial practices.

Led by the king, the Dahomean elite wore cloth wrapped around their bodies as well as tailored items to create statements in dress about status, distinction, and the taste. In contrast, ordinary Dahomeans owned and wore little textile-based clothing. In this chapter, I show that long before French colonization in 1894, Dahomeans had developed a complex sartorial system that linked Dahomean artisan products and international imports to local social relations, enactments of power and prestige, and regimes of taste. But, ultimately, the king directed the uses of cloth and clothing and he served as a centrifugal force of dress and adornment that was sufficiently powerful that it could efface and incorporate ethnic difference and blur social and economic categories.

This chapter follows the “life cycle” of cloth in precolonial Dahomey from its production to its exchange and display. It also examines how Dahomeans transformed cloth into dress that articulated status as well as distinction and taste.³ Dahomean leaders captured or encouraged the emigration of artisans from other West African societies and states and these craftsmen and their skills became part of a local tradition of *pagne* (cloth wrapper) production. The exchange and ritual display of locally made and imported cloth solidified relations between traders, among kin, and between the sovereign and his subjects. When Dahomean men and women wore cloth on the body, differences in the fiber, weave, length, patterning, and cut provided opportunities to embody power and prestige. In the latter part of the kingdom’s history, sartorial laws dictated dress, but the identities of individual Dahomeans could be changed or inverted through the

³ Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff proposed the method of “cultural biography” of objects in Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process,” 64-91, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

adoption of certain styles. These multiple and shifting ways of making and using cloth and clothing show how Dahomean men and women have long been innovating producers and discerning consumers.

The scholarly debates around the political and economic history of the Kingdom of Dahomey are some of the oldest and most developed within the historiography of precolonial Africa. Yet, scholars have not considered how the authoritarian state fostered innovation and integration of different ethnicities and statuses - as made clear in the case of artisans and artisanal production. Dahomey was a highly militaristic, centralized state in which power resided in the person of the king and those close to him, although competing factions within the palace complex often led to internal turmoil. Historians have shown how the Dahomean king ruled by controlling religious life and by instilling fear in his enemies and subjects through human sacrifice and the ritual display of the corpses of defeated enemies.⁴ Other scholars have explored how Dahomean monarchs used imported goods to create vast networks of dependants through patronage. The king ruled through his control over the material wealth of the kingdom, especially the foreign objects exchanged for slaves and, after the mid-nineteenth century, for palm products.⁵ The patronage of Dahomean kings also extended to craft production, although most scholarly accounts have focused on the history and objects of Dahomey craftsmen who worked

⁴ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: Historique Et Essai D'interprétation" *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 19 (1964): 696-716. Robin Law, 'My Head Belongs to the King': On the Political and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre-Colonial Dahomey" *Journal of African History* 30 (1989): 399-415.

⁵ Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, University of VA, 1998).

in metal and wood, as opposed to fiber-based textiles.⁶ This chapter emphasizes how the exchange and display of locally produced and foreign objects did more than just reference the monarch's power. Gifting cloth, tapestries and ritually stacked piles of fabric, and kingly fashion shows constituted royal power and provided a direct link between ordinary people and regal authority.

This chapter also contributes to a significant literature on textiles within the economies and societies of other parts of West Africa. In a number of Sahelian societies, caste people practiced weaving and other artisanal crafts.⁷ But these artisans' marginal social status and proximity to power differed greatly from the Dahomean artisans whose fluid identities facilitated innovation and incorporation in craft production. Trade in cloth and other goods across the Sahara linked Sahelian Africans to the Mediterranean long before the advent of trade on the Atlantic coast.⁸ Demand for cloth among coastal and interior Africans also produced vast commercial networks across much of West Africa and connected specialized local artisanal industries with consumers in other parts of the region.⁹ While the growth of the Atlantic trade after the sixteenth century stifled certain artisan activities like iron smelting and pottery

⁶ Edna Bay Asen, *Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1998): 98-123. An exception is Monn Adams, "Fon Appliquéd Cloths," *African Arts* 2 (1980): 28-41. See also, Monroe, 2014: 203-206.

⁷ Tal Tamari identifies weaver castes among the Fulani, Tukulor, Wolor, Bambara, and Senufo. Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa" *Journal of African History* 32 (1991): 221-250: 225. The status of Sahelian artisans and how this status was transferred to colonial Dahomey will be explored in chapter four.

⁸ Ralph Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

⁹ Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006); Philip James Shea, "The Development of an Export Oriented Dyed Cloth Industry in Kano Emirate in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss. University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1975)

production, Archeologist Ann B. Stahl has shown how weaving and other textile-related crafts continued to be vibrant economic activities well into the colonial period in Ghana.¹⁰ This study inserts the example of Dahomey into this literature, but, by also focusing on dress and style, shows how these greater economic processes and networks of trade shaped and were shaped by local systems of taste and sartorial meaning.

Finally, this chapter shows how political power and clothing and textile practices in the Kingdom of Dahomey operated similarly to other kingdoms and empires in the Atlantic World. In early modern Europe, French and British monarchs reinforced their power over subjects who rarely saw them with pageantry and spectacle such as state funerals, feast days, and festivals.¹¹ Dahomean kings likewise relied on spectacles of sartorial wealth and state power to create vertical ties between the Dahomean sovereign and his subjects.¹² In *The Material Atlantic*, Historian Robert DuPlessis focuses on the port cities of the Atlantic World and the trade in textiles to show how indigenous and enslaved people borrowed cloth and clothing and generated new societies, in part, through the development of clothing culture.¹³ This chapter shows how this process unfolded in the interior, while giving due attention to the networks that linked Dahomey not only to the Atlantic World, but also to the other societies and polities of West Africa. There were certainly corollaries between the political role of cloth and clothing in Dahomey and other absolutist monarchies of the Atlantic World, but it is important to underscore

¹⁰ Ann B. Stahl, "The Archaeology of Global Encounters Viewed from Banda, Ghana," *The African Archaeological Review* 16 (1999): 5-81: 65.

¹¹ Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009): 19-20.

¹² Auslander, 22-23.

¹³ Robert DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

that Atlantic World or "Western" textiles and ready-made clothing were not the only influences on dress in Dahomey. Trade and other types of interactions with neighboring and far-flung West African peoples also shaped the production, exchange, and consumption of cloth and clothing in Dahomey.

I. Fabricating Power: Dahomean Artisans and the Production of *Pagne*

Gangnihessou	c.1600
Dakodonou	1620-1645
Houebadja	1645-1685
Akaba	1685-1708
Agadja	1708-1732
Tegbessou	1732-1774
Kpengla	1774-1789
Agonglo	1789-1797
Adandozan*	1787-1818
Guezo	1818-1858
Glele	1858-1889
Behanzin	1889-1894
Agoli-Agbo	1894-1900

* Not included in the royal record

Chart 1.1: Mythical and Real Kings of Dahomey

Fon-speaking people founded the Kingdom of Dahomey around the turn of the seventeenth century. According to oral tradition, Dakodonou (see Chart 1.1, second on the list), an exiled prince of nearby Allada, and his followers migrated to the Abomey Plateau where they encountered the region's original inhabitants, the Gedevis, and their leader, Dan. After killing Dan, Dakodonou established the kingdom of Dahomey, a term that translates as 'Inside the belly

of Dan,' and began to build royal palaces in Abomey and Cana.¹⁴ Over the next century, the kingdom consolidated power by conquering the neighboring kingdoms of Allada and Ouidah in 1724 and 1727, respectively. The absorption of these kingdoms directly connected the palaces of the Abomey Plateau to the transatlantic trade. Dahomey also periodically waged war against the Yoruba kingdoms to the west and raided the acephalous societies of the Adja to the southeast and the Mahi in the north. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dahomey exported slaves and later palm products in exchange for textiles, cowries, and other products from Asia and Europe. But Dahomeans also produced and finished textiles, often by incorporating tools and methods from elsewhere in West Africa and by capturing textile-producing artisans and establishing them in the capital.

Dahomean artisans, unlike their counterparts in many other parts of West Africa, were not an endogamous caste or a low-status group. Their occupation did not confer a singular social status and these men and women could also be members of the royal family, farmers, traders, or slaves. For example, according to oral tradition, King Agadja (1718-1740), the monarch who firmly established Dahomey's participation in the transatlantic slave trade, also encouraged his many children to learn crafts such as smithing, weaving, pottery, and woodcarving. Agaja created a training center (*yokpo yokpo xwé*) where the young princes could learn crafts. One his great-grandsons who received training in the royal workshop was King Agonglo (1789-1797) who was a weaver and a woodcarver.¹⁵ Some accounts contend that

¹⁴ Interview with Nestor Dako-Wegbe, Houawe Zoungonsa (Bohicon), Benin, December 10, 2014.

¹⁵ Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Abomey, Benin, September 15, 2015; Interview with Ernest Fiogbe, Abomey, Benin, September 4, 2015.

Agonglo even carved his own wooden throne.¹⁶ As these examples show, Dahomean artisans were not considered ‘inferior’ at all; in fact, they often occupied important positions of power within the court.

The fluidity of artisan identity in Dahomey, especially among those crafts that received direct patronage from the king, arguably allowed for more innovation in form and methods of craft production than in other parts of West Africa. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dahomey raided neighboring acephalous societies and fought wars with nearby kingdoms. In part, these wars were instigated to meet the demand for slaves on the coast. But Dahomean kings also profited from this warfare by integrating captured artisans from these communities and polities into their palaces, and the newly arrived artisans and their methods became part of the kingdom’s artistic heritage. Many lineages, including those who worked *pagne* such as palace weavers and tailors, traced their ancestors to foreign, non-Dahomean origins.¹⁷ A talented male artisan could be incorporated into the kingdom as an *ahosi* or ‘wife of the king.’ Through the idiom of marriage, the artisan would become a subordinate of the king and his children came under royal control. Though male artisans gained an exalted position as an *ahosi*, they also lost power over their own families, since they were unable to move as wanted or contract marriages for their children.¹⁸ In sum, innovation in Dahomean craft production often resulted from the incorporation of the actual artisans and their craft knowledge, as opposed to Dahomean artisans adapting forms from objects acquired from other groups.

¹⁶ Suzanne Preston Blier, "Melville J. Herskovitz and the Arts of Ancient Dahomey" *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16 (1988): 125-142, 133.

¹⁷ Interview with Ernest Fiogbe, Abomey, Benin, September 4, 2015

¹⁸ Bay, 1998: 20.

The completion of a single *pagne* required the labor of multiple artisans, each trained in a particular aspect of production, but artisans were not entirely responsible for the first step in producing *pagne* - growing and harvesting fibers - although the flexibility of artisan identity meant that many craftsmen also worked fields. The most abundant fiber in regional cloth production was raffia. Dahomeans stripped the fibers from the surface of the oil palm tree, leaving the rest of the tree intact.¹⁹ Weaver traditions maintain that their ancestors sourced the fibers from the area just north of the palaces of Guezo and Glele in central Abomey.²⁰ Oil palms were common in the region and Dahomeans cultivated them to make cooking oil, alcohol, and for raffia. By the mid-nineteenth century, King Guezo began to establish plantations as the exterior demand for slaves declined and demand for palm oil increased because of the European need for industrial lubricant. Guezo outlawed cutting down the trees for palm wine production, but Dahomeans could collect raffia fibers without harming the trees. Given that the fiber came from a protected tree, it must have been particularly plentiful for textile production.

Alongside raffia, cotton was also an important fiber for local weaves, although its cultivation fluctuated over the course of the kingdom. Farmers on the Plateau grew cotton intercropped with yams or maize.²¹ In the late eighteenth century, slave trader Robert Norris pointed out “cotton is not only cultivated, but manufactured into cloth for the use of the natives.”²² A century later, British naturalist J.A. Skertchly who spent eight months in the kingdom, claimed, “cotton is not cultivated at all, the supply being obtained from the wild

¹⁹ Kriger, 2006: 24.

²⁰ Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

²¹ Manning, 68-69.

²² Robert Norris, *Memoirs of Bossa Ahádee* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968 [1789]): 146.

growth.”²³ Skertchly may have misunderstood the intercropped fields that he saw as “wild” growth overrunning cultivated fields, but he also describes at length cotton harvesting and hand ginning.²⁴ If both Norris and Skertchly correctly conveyed the situation, cotton cultivation decreased between the 1780s and the 1870s, which one might expect given the abundance of raffia fibers on palm plantations as well as the influx of inexpensive imports of both raw thread and machine-woven textiles.

Cotton was an especially labor-intensive fiber for *pagne* production because, unlike raffia, it needed to be ginned and spun. Dahomeans hand ginned cotton until well into the colonial period and female spinners used hand tools to transform cotton fibers into yarn.²⁵ Skertchly described the tools and production process of these women:

The instrument for this purpose is a thin slip of 'bamboo' about a foot long, stuck through a heavy round piece of clay which acts as a fly, and the whole is then twisted by the fingers, the weight of the fly generating sufficient momentum to keep it in motion for a considerable time. The end of the thread twisted from the bundle of cotton on the distaff is attached to this, and as it twirls round the cotton is disengaged with the right hand, and when a thread of sufficient length to allow the spinner to touch the ground has been spun, it is wound round the spindle-stick hitched over its top, and the operation continued. A small quantity of wood ashes is placed near the operator, who from time to time takes a little on her fingers to prevent them adhering to the cotton fibers. The thread is very uneven, and as thick as crochet cotton.²⁶

²³ J.A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is; Being a Narrative of Eight Month's Residence in the Country* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874): 323-324, 494.

²⁴ Skertchly, 494.

²⁵ Melville Herskovits who conducted fieldwork in the 1930s observed both sexes spinning cotton and described spinning as a "widespread industry," although oral tradition and other European accounts maintain that spinning was women's work. Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom, Volume I* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1938): 45.

²⁶ Skertchly, 494.

The slow process of spinning meant that generating enough yarn for a single *pagne* took roughly twice the time of weaving it. Marion Johnson, in her work on West African textile productions, argues that the slow pace of spinning created a bottleneck in textile production that was from earliest times complemented by textile imports from other African societies and later, from Atlantic trade.²⁷ Dahomean spinners created a yarn, or thread, that Skertchly describes as “thick as crochet cotton,” and some weavers preferred to use thinner thread to make malleable, thin cloth.

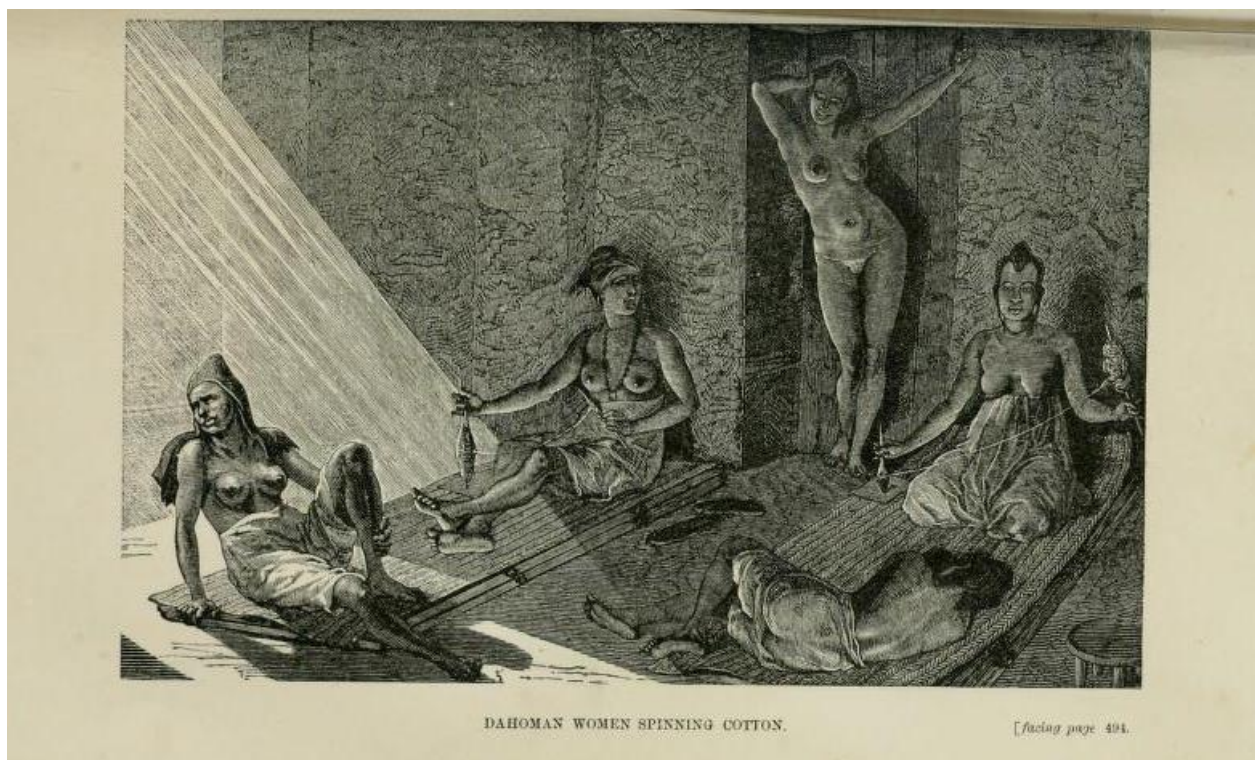


Figure 1.1: Dahomean Women Spinning Cotton, from Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is* (1874)

²⁷ Marion Johnson, "Technology, Competition, and African Crafts," in *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India*, edited by Clive Dewey and A.G. Hopkins (London: The Athlone Press, 1978): 259-269: 260.

Spinning was not a full-time craft and the women who spun engaged in other forms of labor as well. Figure 1.1, also from Skertchly's account, depicts two women spinning cotton. The spindle, or "thin slip of bamboo about a foot long" is shown attached to a circular clay "fly" or spindle whorl that weights the tool and increases its speed and efficiency. The spinner at the right of the image holds a distaff of unspun cotton in her left hand. The image shows spinners practicing their craft in the home as opposed to an official workshop. The presence of three other women, none of whom seem to be engaged in labor, emphasizes that women may have spun cotton during pauses from farm work, other crafts, and domestic labor.²⁸

The next step in cloth production - weaving - provides additional evidence of the Dahomean tendency towards incorporation in craft production. Weavers transformed raffia fibers and cotton yarn into textiles using two different types of wooden looms - vertical looms like Yoruba-speakers to the west and horizontal looms similar to Akan-speakers to the east. Weavers made cotton cloth (*kanvo*) or raffia cloth (*dévo*) on vertical looms. But only cotton was woven on horizontal looms, since raffia fibers were too short for this type of loom. According to Alphonse Ahouado, the official spokesman for Dahomean weavers, the Guedevis, the original inhabitants of the Plateau, used vertical looms like the various groups of Yoruba-speakers. But when the Gbe-speaking ancestors of the Fon arrived from the west (present-day Ghana and Togo), they brought the horizontal loom, a complex machine operated by foot and relying on a system of pulleys and

²⁸ This method of spinning is still practiced today. However, the thread created by these present-day spinners is not usually woven into cloth, since cheaper imports have priced them out of the market. Instead, this locally spun thread is highly valued in the production of wicks for kerosene lamps, which are ubiquitous in the night markets of southern Benin.

counterweights to weave textiles.²⁹ This type of loom is perhaps most well known as the primary tool in the production of Akan-speaker's Kente cloth. European visitors to pre-colonial Dahomey dismissed horizontal looms as dubious tools; Skertchly described them as "extremely rude," Burton called them "artless," while slave trader Archibald Dalzel maintained that they were "the most awkward machines imaginable."³⁰ Both types of West African looms produce strips of cloth, which are then sewn together to make a large enough wrapper for wear.

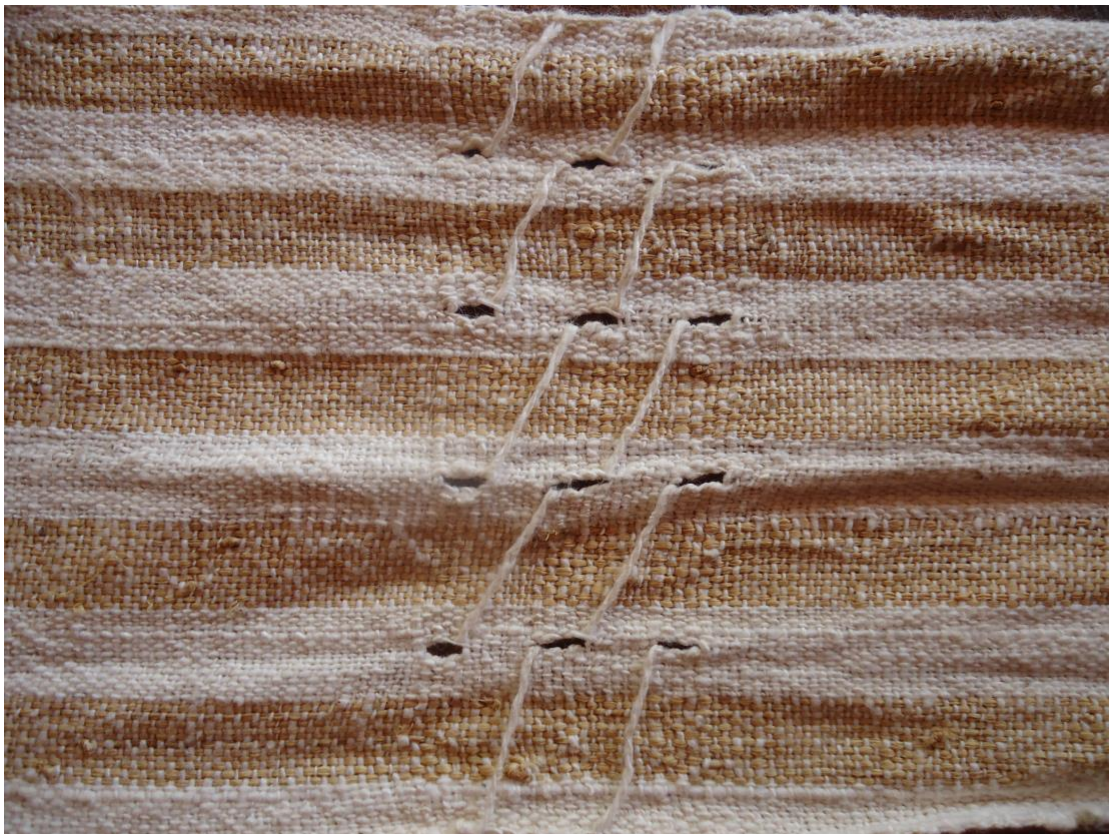


Figure 1.2: Raffia and Cotton Cloth. From the personal collection of master weaver Alphonse Ahouado. Photo by author.

²⁹ Historian Colleen E. Kriger also attributes vertical looms to the forest belt of the Bights of Benin and Biafra and horizontal looms to the interior, see Kriger, 21,70. Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

³⁰ Burton, *Volume II*, 260; Skertchly, 495; Archibald Dalzel, "Introduction," in *The History of Dahomey: An Inland Kingdom of Africa* (London, 1793): xxiv-xxv.

Both men and women wove in precolonial Dahomey, although they used different tools and their products were destined for separate markets. Men and women used vertical looms for cotton and raffia cloth production. While Europeans often referred to raffia cloth as “dirty” or of lesser quality than imported cloth or cotton weaves, Dahomeans highly valued particular types of raffia cloth and these textiles served an especially important role in the Fon religion of *vodun*. Other weavers made *pagne* that used both raffia and cotton fibers. The cloth in Figure 1.2 is a more recent production, but fabric like this – in which raffia and cotton were intricately woven together - served as one of the highest valued locally sewn cloths.³¹ In contrast to the case of vertical looms, only men used horizontal looms to weave cotton cloth, often in royal workshops. A few families, housed at Gbèkon-Houégbo in the royal palace of Agonglo, the weaver-king, made cloth for the kings and their entourages.³² Despite their disparaging descriptions of the looms found in royal workshops, European visitors acknowledged that these weavers made high quality textiles, which Europeans occasionally purchased at “a high price” for “counterpanes [bedspreads].”³³

Much of the natural colored cloth that weavers produced went directly to the market or clients, although dyers, appliqué makers, and tailors occasionally worked *pagne* into a finished product. Dahomean dyers dyed cotton and raffia *pagne*, using natural or imported dyes, making

³¹ Herskovits, *Volume I*, 1938, 46. Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

³² Skertchly, 323-324; Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

³³ Dalzel, "Introduction," xxiv-xxv.

it more valuable to the people who purchased and wore it. Dyers might also dye yarn, which weavers occasionally used to create patterns or images in cloth. An example of cloth woven from dyed yarn is the nineteenth century “Royal War Tunic” held in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, France.³⁴ Natural dyes such as indigo grew locally and Burton noted “the wild indigo is sold in cakes, and is the common cloth-dye of the country; its colour is excellent, but no amount of demand would produce a regular supply here.”³⁵ Dahomeans and Europeans alike appreciated indigo-dyed cloth as it could “stand washing very well.”³⁶ But indigo was not the only color available to Dahomeans and cloth was also dyed into shades of red, yellow and pink.³⁷

Other artisans decorated cloth through appliqué, or by sewing different colored cloths onto a single *pagne*, which resulted in designs such as royal symbols. According to oral tradition, unlike spinners, dyers, or even weavers, appliqué was a specialized craft practiced by a single lineage, the Yemandjè. This lineage of artisans arrived during the eighteenth-century reign of Agonglo when their ancestors were “made to come” to Abomey to serve the king. Appliqué makers, who were almost always men, decorated *pagne*, hats, parasols and banners with images of animals and inanimate objects. By cutting out shapes from an assortment of different colored fabrics and then sewing these shapes onto a single piece of fabric, these artisans layered cloth in order to make forms of pineapples, boats, and guns, for example, which signified particular royal lineages.³⁸ Craftsmen of the Yemandjè lineage gained a relatively exalted position within

³⁴ Blier, *Royal Arts*, 1998: 109.

³⁵ Burton, *Volume II*, 245.

³⁶ Dalzel, "Introduction," xxiv-xxv.

³⁷ According to Johnson, red and green dyes are not well known in the region and weavers acquired these colors by taking apart imported cloth and later, buying imported dyed yarn. Johnson, "Technology," 261.

³⁸ Interview with Ernest Fiogbe, Abomey, Benin, September 4, 2015

the court of Dahomey through their work in creating regalia and embellished textiles for the court and *vodun* practitioners.

As explored in the final section of this chapter, Dahomeans during the kingdom period usually wore *pagne* as wrappers, but occasionally artisan tailors sewed the fabric into tunics, robes, and other voluminous clothing. Many of these tailors were also weavers and they hand-stitched clothing using imported needles.³⁹ Yemandjè also clothed the king and translated their needleworking skills in appliqué to garment making. Along with making new articles of clothing from lengths of cloth, tailors also repaired ready-to-wear imported from Europe as new or secondhand. These tailors did not use tapes or string to take measurements and determined cuts through lengths such as their elbow to the end of their index finger or they just looked at a person's body in order to estimate size since voluminous tunics and trousers did not require precise measurements.⁴⁰

Along with African tailors who traced their origins to Yorubaland, at least one mixed-race tailor also served the king and his court during the reign of Agadja. Bulfinch Lambe, a slave trader and the first European to record his observations of the court, described this tailor as living in Abomey in the 1720s. According to Lambe, there was:

An old mulatto Portuguese, which he [King Agadja] bought of the Popoe people... and though this white man is his slave, yet he keeps him like a great caboceroe [state-sponsored slave trader], and has given him two houses, and a heap of wives and servants... once in two or three months, he mends... some trifle or other for his majesty.⁴¹

³⁹ Interview with Barthélmy Adjahouinou, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), Benin, May 27, 2015

⁴⁰ Interview with Alladassi Tavi, Tanta (Agbaignzoun), August 25, 2015

⁴¹ Bulfinch Lambe, Letter "From the great King Trudo Audati's Palace of Abomey, in the Kingdom of Dahomey," November 27, 1724, 181-195, in Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans, Being the*

This old tailor led Lambe to conclude that “if any tailor, carpenter, smith, or any sort of white man that is free, be willing to come here, he will find very good encouragement, and be much caressed, and get money if he can be contented with this life for a time, his majesty paying every body extravagantly that works for him.”⁴² Similar to the African artisans incorporated into the palace complex as *kposi*, Agadja showered this tailor in wealth and wives and this craftsman enjoyed a relatively exalted status. Clearly, Agadja highly valued the labor of this tailor and his ability to transform *pagne* and repair ready-wear clothing.

Some artisans could also imbue yarn and locally woven cloth with religious and spiritual meaning during the production process. When artisans came from elsewhere, they also brought their *vodun*, or gods.⁴³ While many women might spin cotton in the evenings, only “priestesses,” or *vodunsi*, spun “the sacred yarn that is used to thread the beads which encircle the various fetiche deities.”⁴⁴ In the traditional workshop of Gbèkon-Houégbo, weavers crafted certain cloths according to local notions of purity and secrecy - in the nude in the dead of night – and weavers intended this cloth for the royal body or those of *vodun* practitioners participating in ceremonies.⁴⁵ These textiles did not attain their religious qualities as finished products, but had to

Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey An Residence at his Capital in the Years 1849 and 1850, Volume I. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851): 184-185.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ In the twentieth century, only post-menopausal women can make and fire pottery for use in vodun shrines. Neil Norman, "Powerful Pots, Humbling Holes, and Regional Ritual Processes: Towards and Archaeology of Huedan Vodun, ca. 1650-1727," *African Archaeological Review* 26 (2009): 187-218.

⁴⁴ Skertchly, 188.

⁴⁵ Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

be worked by appropriate artisan hands during each step of the production process in order to attain their spiritual significance.

II. Cloth Exchange and Display in Social and Political Relations

In 1727, the Kingdom of Dahomey conquered the port city of Ouidah, giving the interior kingdom direct access to the transatlantic trade in slaves as well as cloth, clothing, and other adornments. By the late seventeenth century, the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French had established trading forts in Ouidah. From the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Ouidah was the third largest port by volume in the transatlantic slaves trade and one of the most exchanged items for slaves was, of course, cloth. But textile importation remained strong even after demand for slaves declined and the Kingdom of Dahomey successfully shifted to “legitimate commerce,” in the form of palm products during the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the history of cloth and clothing reveals an underlying continuity that the slave trade shared with legitimate commerce, in that cloth persisted through both periods as a means of creating and sustaining political and social ties under royal authority.

The transatlantic cloth trade was complex, linking markets from multiple continents with local desires for practical and luxury items. Some of the most popular types of cloth traded to Africans included calicos, chintz, and ‘Guinea cloth’ from India as well as linens, silesias, silks, and velvets from Europe.⁴⁶ Generally, imports favored Indian cloth during the early part of the

⁴⁶ Stanley B. Alpern provides an exhaustive list of types of cloth imported into the region from coastal Liberia to Nigeria during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, see Alpern, "What Africans Got for their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods," *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 5-43: 6-10.

trade and European fabrics after the Industrial Revolution.⁴⁷ Alongside the more common importation of cloth into Africa, Europeans occasionally bought African cloth (often Yoruba-made) to trade farther west in the Gold Coast.⁴⁸ The European forts also traded in tailored clothing items such as gowns, shirts, jackets and most commonly, ‘kerchiefs’ or hemmed, usually small, square pieces of cloth that Africans used as head coverings, neckerchiefs, or loincloths.⁴⁹ Imported hats, caps, beads, and jewelry of all sorts were also exchanged for slaves and palm products in Ouidah and other points of coastal trade.

Dahomeans also obtained cloth from elsewhere in West Africa, especially from the Yoruba-speaking kingdoms in the east and the Hausa-speakers in the northeast. In the seventeenth century, traders brought expensive “Ardra cloth” from the Fon kingdom of Allada, which predated Dahomey, from the Bight of Benin to the Gold Coast.⁵⁰ When Dahomey conquered “Ardra” or Allada in the 1720s, the kingdom absorbed this valued fabric into their repertoire of textiles. Eighteenth century descriptions refer to the presence of “Eyo” cloth from Oyo. *Adire*, an indigo resist dyed cloth from Yorubaland also circulated in the kingdom often on the bodies of captives. In the mid-nineteenth century, Burton described “a group of fifty Nago or captive Egba women in dark indigo dresses.”⁵¹ There was also a significant Muslim population in Abomey. By all accounts, these migrants forwent raffia cloth and only wore cotton fabrics.⁵² The Hausa traders who exported black shiny cloth from Kano probably sold their textile to

⁴⁷ Manning (1982): 14.

⁴⁸ Law, *Ouidah*, 28.

⁴⁹ Alpern, 10.

⁵⁰ Johnson, "Technology," 263.

⁵¹ Burton 38

⁵² Skertchly, 323-324.

Muslims in Dahomey. This cloth achieved its color and sheen through a specialized process of indigo dyeing and beating and was valued in communities throughout West Africa.⁵³ Clearly, Dahomey was well integrated into West African trading networks in African-produced textiles.

Ordinary people could purchase locally made and imported cloth in the regional markets of southern Dahomey, although proximity to Abomey and the coast often determined availability. In Ouidah, European traders sold directly to Africans. In one of the two extant accounts by African women of pre-colonial Dahomey, a Yoruba captive described “Europeans in a shop selling cloth” in Ouidah.⁵⁴ Skertchly characterized the “drapery department” of the Ouidah market as incredibly varied. In it, he saw “country cloths, either of cotton woven in narrow strips and sewn side by side, or of twisted grass, dyed in various colours; prints, the more gaudy the pattern the more saleable.”⁵⁵ Alongside these lengths of cloth, market traders sold accessories and necessities for finishing cloth into clothing, such as “grass hats, tapes of all colours, fringes, ribbons, thread and cotton, bundles of cotton yarn and other articles in native use.”⁵⁶ In Abomey, traders sold cloth in Houndjro, the main market. While cloth was abundantly available within the markets of southern Dahomey, Skertchly also pointed out that the farther one travelled north of Abomey, “there were fewer cloths of European manufacture, the grass-woven produce of the country being substituted.”⁵⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the farther one

⁵³ Philip James Shea, "The Developement of an Export Oriented Dyed Cloth Industry in Kano Emirate in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss. University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1975)

⁵⁴ Peter Morton-Williams, "A Yoruba Woman Remembers Servitude in a Palace of Dahomey, in the Reigns of Kings Gelele and Behanzin," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 63 (1993): 102-117: 105.

⁵⁵ Skertchly, 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 314.

travelled inland, the more raffia cloth replaced imported fabrics and labor-intensive local cotton weaves.

Cloth was not just purchased in the market, but it also played an important role in mediating economic relations. Historian Marion Johnson has shown how the divisibility of strip cloth led it to be a primary form of currency in the Sahel and Hausaland before the arrival of cowries.⁵⁸ By the eighteenth century, Dahomey was a fully monetized economy with cowries as its currency, but cloth still circulated as a means of paying taxes and tribute alongside cowries.⁵⁹ Forbes reported that, in the 1850s, canoemen in Ouidah received tobacco, dollars, per diem, and rum during their employment as well as ten pieces of cloth at the end of two years of service.⁶⁰ Cloth also served as a way to communicate purpose while traveling. Skertchly told how when traveling from Ouidah to the court of Abomey, “our passage beneath the *joji* [entrance to a village or town] was secured by my stick, which, being wrapped in a white cloth, indicated our being upon state business.”⁶¹ The white cloth showed passersby and local authorities that the travelers were on an official mission for the king and should not be harassed.

Gifting and possessing cloth were also necessary for certain rites of passage and for constructing kinship. A respectable burial required an expensive funeral shroud. Skertchly described how Dahomeans buried their dead with cowries, rum, and small rolls of cloth “to pay toll on crossing the Dahoman Styx.”⁶² Marriages that linked lineages and expanded kin networks

⁵⁸ Marion Johnson, "Cloth as Money: The Cloth Strip Currencies of Africa," *Textile History* 11 (1980): 193-202.

⁵⁹ Bay, 1998: 122-123.

⁶⁰ Forbes, *Volume I*, 122.

⁶¹ Elsewhere, Skertchly describes a *joji* as "gallows" adorned with fetishes (32). Skertchly, 73.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 498, 501.

also required exchanges of cloth. At all levels of society, the family of the groom-to-be gifted cloth to the family of the bride-to-be. According to an early colonial observer, the quality and amount of cloth determined the type of marriage as well as whether the lineage of the bride or the groom held rights over children born from the marriage.⁶³ As one of the most important and widespread consumer goods in the kingdom, textiles served important function mediating in economic and social relations.

But, cloth was also foundational to the actual power of the Dahomean monarch as it was gifted, received, and put on display during public ceremonies, in particular the festival of 'Annual Customs.' This month-long ceremony served as a tribute to the ancestors as well as a way to showcase Dahomean military and material might and the absolute power of the king. Tradition holds that Customs, as an annual festival, dated only from the reign of Agadja (around 1710). Dahomean kings continued the ceremonies until French colonization in 1884.⁶⁴ European visitors to Abomey tended to focus on the more gruesome aspects of Customs, such as the human sacrifice of dozens to thousands of men, women, and children and the ritual display of skulls of enemy combatants.⁶⁵ During the transatlantic slave trade, Europeans used these accounts to argue that those destined for sacrifice were better served by being sold into slavery and transported to the Americas. Later, in the nineteenth century, Europeans wrote about these

⁶³ Auguste Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey: Mœurs, religion, histoire* (Paris: Emile Larosè, 1911)

⁶⁴ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: Historique Et Essai D'interprétation" *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 19 (1964): 696-716.

⁶⁵ It is important to distinguish "Annual Customs" from "Grand Customs," or the weeks-long ceremony that took place two years after the death of a king. Coquery-Vidrovitch argues that only in Grand Customs did human sacrifices exceed 500 people, while about one-tenth the number might be sacrificed on an annual basis. Coquery-Vidrovitch, "La fête des coutumes," 703.

sacrifices in order to foster interest in occupying the continent. But these accounts also reveal how the exchange and distribution of cloth provided an opportunity for the monarch to exercise his patronage over Africans and Europeans alike.

Cloth flowed from the king's subjects to the monarch and from the king back to his subjects, solidifying the relationship between the two. The quality of the cloth reflected the rank of the subject and his proximity to kingly power. The slave trader Robert Norris, an observer of the 1772 Customs during the reign of Tegbessou (1740-1774), provided one of the most detailed descriptions of the ritual. The king demanded attendance from the governors of the French, British, and Portuguese trading forts at Ouidah. The king expected governors to "make a present [to the king] on the occasion; which should consist of at least one piece of Indian damask, or some other handsome silk," while African merchants paid their tribute in cowries.⁶⁶ Other attendees included "the vice-roy [*sic*] of Whydah, and the governors of the different towns and provinces," and each of these local administrators came with presents and "an account of their conduct, and of every circumstance which the king wishes to be informed of."⁶⁷ Norris wrote that local administrators "who acquit themselves to [the king's] satisfaction, have the honor to receive some mark of his appropriation; which is generally a large cotton cloth, manufactured in the Eyo country, of excellent workmanship, which they afterwards wear for an upper garment."⁶⁸ The finely made cloth from Yorubaland signified the king's approval of the administrator and

⁶⁶ Norris, 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

when the administrator wrapped the Eyo fabric around his body, he made his royal endorsement public.



Figure 1.3: Francis Chesham, "Last day of the Annual Customs for Watering the Graves of the King's Ancestors." From Archibald Dalzels' *The History of Dahomey* (1793)

The king also gifted cloth to ordinary people to show his authority over and benevolence to his subjects. According to Norris, on the final day of customs, the king “distributes a profusion

of presents among his people.”⁶⁹ Francis Chesham’s portrays this scene in his engraving “Last day of the Annual Customs for Watering the Graves of the King’s Ancestors” (Figure 1.3), which was included in slave trader Archibald Dalzel’s 1793 account.⁷⁰ In the far left of the engraving, there is a large pile of fabric stacked on the platform. A man underneath it seems to be inspecting his newly acquired *pagne*. In the right of the image, a piece of cloth, thrown from the platform, is seen whizzing through the air towards the masses. Although Chesham did not witness Customs, his interpretation reflected eighteenth century descriptions of the platform from which the king tossed goods to his subjects. For example, Norris characterized the platform as covered with “piled heaps of silesias, checks, calicoes, and a variety of other European and Indian goods; a great many fine cotton cloths that are manufactured in the Eyo country; and a prodigious quantity of cowries.”⁷¹ He continued by describing how the king distributed the goods, with the highest-ranking person getting first choice of the “Eyo cloth” or rich silks.⁷² While human sacrifice may have been important in instilling fear in Europeans, Dahomean subjects, and neighboring enemy kingdoms, the gifting of cloth and other goods served to foster loyalty to the monarch.

The Dahomean king and his court also used the ritual display of lengths of cloth to convey the monarch’s power and prestige. Attendants held up fabric around the king to protect him from the popular gaze when he ate or drank.⁷³ Lengths of cloth also served to literally

⁶⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁰ Dalzel, *The history of Dahomy, an inland kingdom of Africa; compiled from authentic memoirs by Archibald Dalzel* (London: Cass, 1967 [1793])

⁷¹ Norris, 125.

⁷² Ibid., 112.

⁷³ Forbes, *Volume II*, 40; Skertchly, 205.

separate the king's procession from the masses during Customs, with the king staying behind a "higher enclosure of finer cloth," while lesser quality cloth created a barrier between other members of the court and the public.⁷⁴ The king's subjects prostrated themselves before him on "crimson velvet cloth" placed in front of the throne.⁷⁵ In the nineteenth century, Skertchly described the "Nun-u-pwe-to, or 'omnipotent' cloth, formed of samples of every kind of textile fabric that is imported into the kingdom."⁷⁶ This giant cloth of "an enormous length of four hundred yards and a breadth of about ten feet" consisted of various sized pieces of "denhams, chintzes, silks, vento-pullams, velvets, &c," which were sewn together, although "arranged haphazard, and [were] of every hue and design that can be imagined."⁷⁷ Attendants hoisted the unwrapped cloth over the heads of the crowd by attaching it to long poles and the crowd cheered. Guezo instituted the tradition of the *Nunupweto* and Glele intended to wrap himself in the massive cloth after a victorious campaign against Abeokuta (Glele's armies lost, however). Not long after the hosting of the *Nunupweto*, servants of the court piled cloth into great heaps, "until the accumulation formed a wall of gorgeous-coloured fabrics nearly six feet high, the grandest silks being selected as the uppermost cloths."⁷⁸ Finally, much of Dahomean regalia, at least in the nineteenth century, involved appliqué textiles, including banners, flags, and umbrellas, sewn by the Yemadjé clan. Cloth was unwrapped and pulled taut, piled in heaps, or sewn to other lengths of cloth before being displayed. In all of its uses, cloth served as more than a symbol of

⁷⁴ Norris, 110.

⁷⁵ Forbes, *Volume II*, 75.

⁷⁶ Skertchly, 215.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 216-217.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 217-218.

prestige. The rights to own this fabric and control its circulation and distribution directly constituted the wealth and power of the monarch.

III. Cloth Transformed: Dress and Style among the Elite

Dahomeans gave cloth new meaning as it was wrapped or cut and sewn into clothing. Dress became a premier site where the king displayed the power and prestige of the kingdom. But cloth also permitted men and women to put their individual good taste on display and the king served as the ultimate tastemaker for his subjects. Observers described kingly dress as including wrapped cloth of domestic and foreign origin as well as articles of clothing tailored locally or imported as ready made from Europe. At the 1727 Customs, “King [Agadja] had a Gown on, flowered with Gold, which reached as low as his Ancles; an European embroidered Hat on his Head; with Sandals on his Feet.”⁷⁹ A hundred years later, Forbes described Guezo wearing “a white silk flowing robe, flowered in blue, and a gold-laced hat” for the procession of the king’s wealth, but “dressed in an old black waistcoat, a white night-cap, and a cloth round his loins” while seated on the royal platform where he distributed gifts and witnessed offerings.⁸⁰ At another point, Forbes described him as “plainly dressed, in a loose robe of yellow silk slashed with satin stars and half-moons, Mandingo sandals, and a Spanish hat trimmed with gold lace; the only ornament being a small gold chain of European manufacture.”⁸¹ Lacking any sort of

⁷⁹ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London: Cass, 1732): 79-80.

⁸⁰ Forbes, *Volume I*, 36, 45.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

official courtly dress, Dahomean kings from at least Agadja to Béhanzin wore what pleased them, creating outfits that were a bricolage of foreign and domestic items.

The willingness and even preference to incorporate different styles into Dahomean dress is best explained through the story of Tegnibessou's 1732 accession to the throne and his royal symbol, the tunic-wearing buffalo. According to oral tradition, King Agaja sent one of his young sons, Tegnibessou, as tribute to the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo. Eventually, Tegnibessou returned to Dahomey and took the throne, but his years abroad had left him with a taste for Oyo style, including clothing, hats, and sandals. The official history of the kingdom explains Tegnibessou's royal symbol, the buffalo wearing the tunic, as representative of his struggles to ascend the throne. After Agaja's death, while the new king was being chosen, Tegnibessou had to wear Agaja's tunic for a full day, but a plotter, hoping to appoint a different member of the royal family to king, had filled the shirt with nettles. Dahomeans use the tale to emphasize Tegnibessou's perseverance and strength as he wore the uncomfortable shift and eventually became king, but the account also hints to the role of clothing in forming ideas about the right of Tegnibessou to become the King of Dahomey. Perhaps clad in his Yoruba wear, the king had to prove his ability to lead Dahomey by literally wearing the shirt of the previous king. But, once he was king, Tegnibessou successfully incorporated Yoruba styles into Dahomean courtly dress. He brought Yoruba artisans into the Dahomean palace and encouraged Fon-speaking Dahomean artisans to replicate Yoruba-made objects.⁸² Tegnibessou's reign approaches an early revolution in Dahomean style, at least within the confines of the palace.

⁸² Interview with Dah Atchassou, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 10, 2014.

The Dahomean king rarely circulated in public and Annual Customs became the moment where the king conveyed to his subjects and others what types of clothing and accessories he deemed desirable. Skertchly described a sort of kingly fashion show (*Avo-use-gbe*) wherein Glele, aided by his wives, changed into numerous different robes, some in the style worn in enemy kingdoms or in neighboring acephalous communities. In each outfit, he danced before the crowds with servants holding a different umbrella over him.⁸³ This display of the clothed body of the king served a similar ritual purpose to the *Nunupweto*, or omnipotent cloth. Both were a tribute to the ancestors and done in order to ensure victory in the forthcoming march against Abeokuta. During the *Avo-use-gbe*, the Amazons sang “Gelelé has changed his cloth for his father and has danced many times for Gézu;/ Gézu will therefore remember his son and will prosper his arms against Abeokeuta.”⁸⁴ While this ritual changing of clothes was intended to show respect to the ancestors and ensure victory in the upcoming war, it also made an impression on the living as they saw the king’s wealth through his clothing and, in doing so, learned what constituted valued cloth, clothing, and accessories as well as the dress of the enemy others.

Dahomean elite men, such as ministers of the court, local administrators, and “caboceers,” or slave traders, dressed in expensive wrapped cloth in order to express their social position. But European descriptions of these elite men also reveal a complex system of distinction that relied on differences in color, fabric, and ornamentation. A longer length of *pagne* indicated a higher status man, with greater value placed on certain fabrics such as silks, velvets, and brocades. Dalzel described Dahomean men’s dress:

⁸³ Skertchly, 218.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 221.

The dress of the men, in *Dahomey*, consists of a pair of striped or white cotton drawers, of the manufactory of the country, over which they wear a large square cloth of the same, or of European manufacture. This cloath [sic] is about the size of a common counterpane, for the middling class; but much larger for the Grandees. It is wrapped about the loins, and tied on the left side by two of the corners, the others hanging down, and sometimes trailing on the ground. A piece of silk or velvet, of fifteen or eighteen yards, makes a cloth for a *Caboceer*... The arms and upper part of the body remain naked, except when the party travels or performs some piece of work, when the large cloth is laid aside, and the body is covered with a sort of frock or tunic, without sleeves.⁸⁵

While a Caboceer might wrap his torso in “silk” or “velvet” up to fifteen or eighteen yards, most men wore cloth that was “about three yards long.”⁸⁶ They wrapped the cloth in a certain way, leaving the right arm free to permit movement, although, as Dalzel points out, wrapping required a certain bodily comportment that was not conducive to rapid movement or certain forms of labor. If needed, these elite men would remove their *pagne* to sport a tunic made from a folded over piece of cloth that was sewn together on the sides. At the fold, there was a hole for the wearer’s head.⁸⁷

Elite men who wore a *grand pagne* over their upper body, wore either another wrapper around their waist or a pair of tailored baggy shorts on the lower part of their body. Often, the wearer selected a *pagne* of a different fabric for the lower part of the body, creating a contrast with the wrapper covering the torso. In a postcard image (Figure 1.4) of the final independent King of Dahomey, Béhanzin, and his family, the former king (seated in the center) dresses in

⁸⁵ Dalzel, "Introduction," xvi.

⁸⁶ Norris, ix.

⁸⁷ Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

different wrapped *pagne* on both the upper and lower parts of the body. Both pieces of fabric were local weaves, with the seams of the strip cloth visible on the solid upper wrapper, while the under wrapper is stripped, probably woven of white and indigo yarn, although the black and white image makes it impossible to tell. Although some elite men wore this style of over and under wrappers, others wore fabric tailored into a pair of baggy shorts, called *chokoto*. Dalzel called them “a pair of striped or white cotton drawers of the manufactory of the country,” while Norris characterizes “country dress” as “a pair of wide drawers.”⁸⁸ According to oral tradition, this short pant with a panel in between the two legs, also called the *tchanka*, is original to Dahomey, unlike most tailored styles, which are admittedly based on European and other African garments.



Figure 1.4: Béhanzin Family. Late 19th Century. Postcard 4F1-1398. Colonial Postcard Collection, National Archives of Senegal.

⁸⁸ Dalzel, "Introduction," xvi; Norris, ix.

Apart from wrapped and tailored cloth, accessories and other adornments constituted the dress of the king and other elite men in Dahomey. The king wore fancy European- and Yoruba-style hats and he also held exclusive rights over wearing sandals.⁸⁹ Artisans produced these sandals during a secretive ritual and they attribute the footwear to Oyo and Teggessou's reign.⁹⁰ Elite men wore necklaces made of coral or other local and imported beads.⁹¹ These high-ranking men often carried clubs and staffs, with the lower-ranking "Caboccers" carrying ornamental blunt sabers.⁹² Local artisans made these objects or they were imported from elsewhere in Africa or through Atlantic trade and their use was but one aspect of a complex culture of male adornment where rank and status materialized on the body.

Elite women's clothing was, in general, less complex than that of elite men, but, similar to men, the *pagne* was its basic unit of dress. In 1724, Lamb in his letter from Abomey, described the wives of the king as wearing uniforms of wrapped *pagne*. The King:

having at least 2,000 wives... when 160 or 200 of them go with small pots for water, they one day wear rich silk waist cloths, called **** [sic]; another day they all wear scarlet clothes, with three or four large strings of coral round their necks, and their leaders sometimes in crimson, sometimes in green, and sometimes blue velvet clothes, with silver gilt staffs in their hands, like golden canes.⁹³

⁸⁹ The king permitted foreigners to wear their shoes while in the kingdom. Dalzel, "Introduction," xvi. This practice is still observed today when in the presence of the current ceremonial King of Dahomey, all others are required to remove their shoes.

⁹⁰ Interview with Dah Atchassou, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 10, 2014.

⁹¹ Forbes, *Volume II*, 25-26.

⁹² These clubs remain an important display of male authority into the present. Forbes, *Volume II*, 25-26; Dalzel, "Introduction," xvii.

⁹³ Lambe, 190-191.

The women wrapped their “rich silk waist cloths” differently than men. Instead of throwing one end of the upper cloth over their shoulder like men, women “simply wound round their persons above the breasts.”⁹⁴ Younger women might wear two wrappers, with one covering the waist to the mid-calf and a second from above the breasts to above the knee. Married women might cover these wrappers with a third *pagne*, wrapped about the waist that could then be used to strap a baby on their backs. This style of wrapping is especially prominent among the women in Figure 1.5, the colonial-era postcard image of Béhanzin and his family. The elite women in the photograph wear multiple wrappers attesting to their relative wealth.

Wrapped clothes were not fixed, women moved their *pagnes* throughout the day, covering and revealing certain parts of their bodies. As Dalzel wrote, “the dress of the women, though simple, consists of a greater number of articles than that of the men. They use several cloths and handkerchiefs, some to wrap round the loins, and other to cover occasionally their breasts and upper part of the body.”⁹⁵ Women’s regular adjustments of fabric meant that they did not always cover their breasts, although they might from time to time. Forbes found this especially displeasing and described wrapped cloth as “reaching to the knee, fastened under their breasts, and leaving them exposed; as they advance in years their breasts hang as much as two feet long, and are truly disgusting to European.”⁹⁶ While the description of drooping breasts is undoubtedly an exaggeration, his description does convey how the lack of binding clothing did not mold women’s bodies into specific forms. Indeed, in wrapper-wearing societies it was the

⁹⁴ Skertchly, 487-488.

⁹⁵ Dalzel, “Introduction,” xvii.

⁹⁶ Forbes, *Volume I*, 28.

individual woman who was responsible for managing her bodily coverings and how much she exposed or bound her own body.

As the kingdom became more integrated into Atlantic trade, the king's wives (*kposi*) also wore tailored items, including elaborate dresses imported from Europe. Chesham's engraving (Figure 1.4) of Customs portrays *kposi* wearing fancy fitted costumes. Customs was one of the few times when the wives of the king made public appearances. A Yoruba woman who served as a servant to a *kposi* and who was interviewed by anthropologists in 1950 recalled how "on the day of the sacrifice, the wives of the king dressed in very fine clothes, because it was a celebration; and the servants in fine clothes."⁹⁷ While Chesham undoubtedly incorporates his own understanding what entails "fine clothes" in his interpretation of Customs, his rendering is closely aligned with the accounts of European observers. Forbes characterized *kposi*'s gowns as in the style of "Charles II."⁹⁸ Skertchly recalled Glele's wives as being dressed à la polonaise: "The leopardesses were dressed in white waistcoats, bound with scarlet velvet, and a long petticoat of violet and green figured silk descended to the ankles. Above this a 'polonaise' of dark blue velvet reached half way down the petticoat."⁹⁹ This multiple layering of fabrics, heavy blue velvet overskirts with silk underskirts was an extremely expensive garment most likely imported as secondhand from Europe and then altered in Abomey.

Elite women also used accessories to amplify their wrapped and fitted fashions, often repurposing European accessories designed for male wearers and creating them as uniquely

⁹⁷ Morton-Williams, 108.

⁹⁸ Forbes, *Volume II*, 64.

⁹⁹ Skertchly, 204.

Dahomean feminine dress. Forbes described the fine dress of six matching “*Pausee*” or “principal wives” as:

Dressed most magnificently in scarlet and gold tunics, slashed with green silk and satin, with sashes and handkerchiefs of silk, satin, and velvet of every colour; coral and bead necklaces, silver ornaments, and wristbands: one wore a Charles II. ’s hat, covered with gold lace and milk-white plumes; the other five wore gilt helmets, with green and red plumes. Each carried a high cane, surmounted with large gold or silver beads.¹⁰⁰

Their outfits, consisting of imported fabrics and finished items, also included accessories designed specifically for European men such as “Charles II’s hat” and “gilt helmets.” Amazons, the female military force, similarly wore clothing and accessories designed for European men. In the 1850 procession of the king’s wealth, twenty amazons wore “blue tunics, red trousers, and red and silver caps.”¹⁰¹ Male and female soldiers and amazons alike dressed in “a tunic, short trousers, [*sic*] and skull-cap.”¹⁰² Dahomeans created new styles from old forms, incorporating them into their dress, adding flourishes, and often altering the gendered meanings of outfits from their original form.

The shifting forms of Amazon’s dress provide additional evidence to the contention that Dahomean dress became more complex and varied over time, especially during the nineteenth century. By the arrival of Skertchly, Amazons wore different dress depending on their rank and roll within the Dahomean military. He identified a number of regiments by their uniforms, “Life-guards, or Agbaraya troop” wore “blue tunics, with grey petticoats showing beneath and

¹⁰⁰ Forbes, *Volume II*, 238.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁰² Forbes, *Volume I*, 27.

reaching to the knee... the Gbeto, the elephant hunters... were dressed in brown waistcoats, with pink underskirts, with a profuse girdle of leather thongs, which hung down below the skirts... the Tower Gun company, whose insignia were scarlet tassels to their agbaja.”¹⁰³ Each regiment wore completely different styles of uniforms that displayed their rank and status within the military. Art historian Suzanne Preston Blier identifies another way of identifying the status of Dahomean military in her analysis of the Royal War Tunic. She argues that the number of rings around the collar of the tunic indicated the military rank of the wearer.¹⁰⁴ The military dress of these women warriors underscores the complexity of dress in the kingdom.

Another group of women afforded special status in Dahomean society were women who served as vodun priestesses (*vodunsi*) who, according to Burton, did not have to follow sartorial law. Burton wrote, “these fetishers have many privileges. Both sexes, for instance, may wear dresses forbidden to the commonalty, and personal vanity in Africa emphatically knows no sore.”¹⁰⁵ The exceptional status of these women and their male counterparts permitted them to pursue styles according to their “personal vanity.” Skertchly described a ‘fetish-woman’ called “The Eahweh, or English landlady. She appeared dressed in profusion of cloths, as though her whole wardrobe was on her back.”¹⁰⁶ *Vodunsi* also wore raffia cloth, or *dévo*. Burton described, “fourteen fetish women [*vodunsi*], who perform rites for the last sovereign’s ghost, in white caps

¹⁰³ Skertchly translates “agbadja” as “black leather cartridge-boxes.” Skertchly, 166.

¹⁰⁴ Blier, 1998: 109.

¹⁰⁵ Burton, *Volume II*, 153-154.

¹⁰⁶ Skertchly, 263.

and tunics of bright yellow grasscloth.”¹⁰⁷ Like the wives of the king and Amazons, the dress of the *vodunsi* indicated their superior status within Dahomean society.

High status permitted Dahomean men and women to experiment in dress, but there were also instances where Dahomeans used clothing and foreign styles to upset social hierarchies and identities. In Cana at the opening of Customs, Guezo had people destined for sacrifice “made to personate in dress and avocation Oyos.”¹⁰⁸ While perhaps not from Oyo, victims of sacrifice dressed like the kingdom’s former enemy and overlord before their ritual deaths. In the 1850 “Procession of the King’s Wealth,” Forbes noted “16 malams (Mohomedan priests from Haussa),” but he argued “I much doubt, except in dress and some outward show, that these priests are Mahomedans; the very fact of their prostrating to the king would go far to prove them not.”¹⁰⁹ The sixteen men may or may not have been Muslim Hausa religious leaders, but dressing as such, they conveyed the monarch’s authority over even the Muslim fringes of the kingdom.

Multiple accounts also recall the presence of African men who adopt European fitted styles and, in doing so, a European identity. In the same procession, Forbes saw “14 liberated ‘Bahia’ Africans, in the European costume” or slaves from Brazil “freed” or recaptured and forced to serve the king.¹¹⁰ In the following decade, Burton saw “two ‘black white men,’ natives of the country, dressed in trowsers [*sic*] and blouses, but shoeless, walking under ragged parasols.”¹¹¹ European-style clothes were not only symbolic of the foreignness of these

¹⁰⁷ Burton, *Volume II*, 50.

¹⁰⁸ Burton, *Volume I*, 199.

¹⁰⁹ Forbes, *Volume II*, 214.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Burton, *Volume II*, 52-53.

individual, but these styles could make a Dahomean into a foreigner. Elsewhere, Forbes claims “any native who leaves his country, even as a slave, and returns, if he wears the dress of a foreigner, is termed *ee a voo* [*yovo*], a white man.”¹¹² John M’Leod noted that “the king occasionally confers the title of white man on some of his subjects, which authorizes them to assume the European dress, to carry an English umbrella, wear shoes, and in short to play the parts of white men in all respects.”¹¹³ By becoming a “white man,” Dahomeans gained a different set of rights, such as the right to wear shoes. On the Plateau, the adoption of different dress could change the identity of the wearer as long as the king or his representatives sanctioned these new usages of clothing.

IV. The “Naked Mob:” Non-elite Dahomeans and French Colonization

In contrast to the elite, the vast majority of ordinary Dahomeans lacked the wealth and status to have extensive wardrobes of *grand pagne*, *chokoto*, and imported fitted items. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most men and women most did not have the resources to wear cotton or raffia wrappers on a daily basis. Instead, their everyday wear consisted of a *godo*, *go*, or loincloth, similar to that of the colonial-era hunter in Figure 1.5.¹¹⁴ Like loincloths elsewhere in the world, the *godo* consisted of a smallish piece of cotton or raffia cloth covering the genitalia, draped between the legs, and attached at the waist with a cord or belt.¹¹⁵ Skertchly

¹¹² Forbes, *Volume I*, 219.

¹¹³ John M’Leod, *A Voyage to Africa with Some Account of the Manners and Customs of the Dahomian People* (London: John Murray, 1820): 106.

¹¹⁴ Le Herissé, 43.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 172 (footnote 1).

claimed, "All use the languti T bandage [loincloth], here called a Godo, and, above this, the better class wear a very short petticoat or nun-pwe, and, if they can afford it, the peculiar drawers called Chokoto; but, if poor, the Godo is the only article of clothing worn by the male sex."¹¹⁶

The relative absence of textile-based clothing and adornment led Forbes to characterize

Dahomean warriors and other men as a "naked mob."¹¹⁷

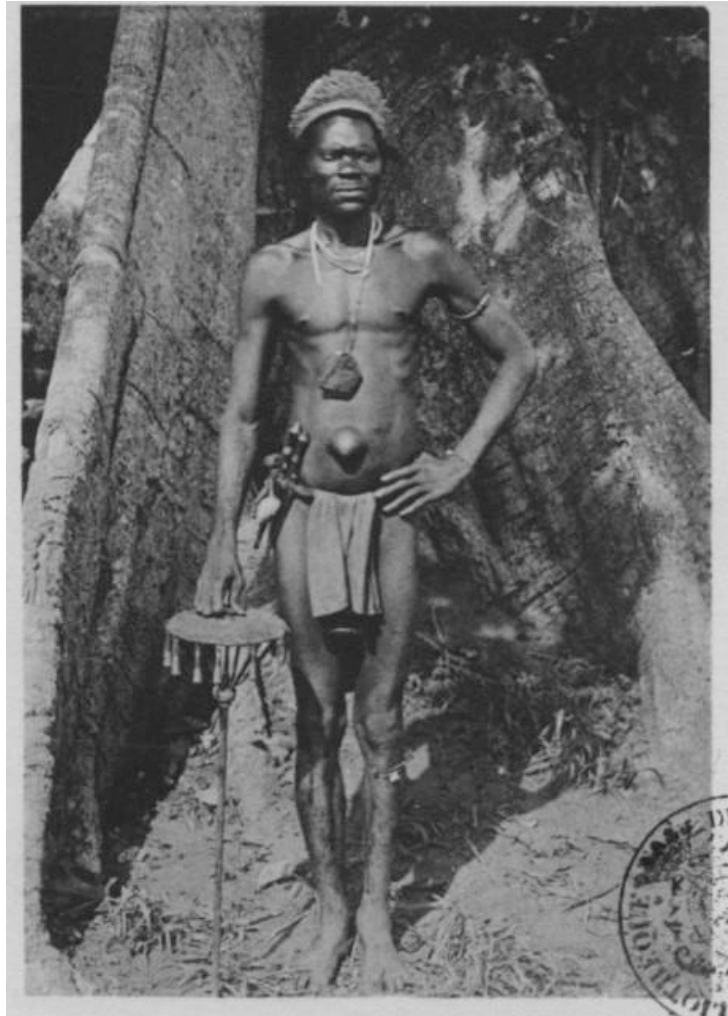


Figure 1.5: "Warrior." From August Le Herissé's *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey* (1911)

¹¹⁶ Skertchly, 487-488.

¹¹⁷ "The naked mob consisted of the soldiers of the king, his brothers and sons, the ministers and higher cabooceers: each carried a grass cloth bag round his waist." Forbes, *Volume II*, 45.

European visitors repeatedly focused on the “nudity” of the masses, however they also described forms of dress and ornamentation beyond textile-based clothes. Le Herissé’s photograph of the hunter dates from early in the colonial period, but Dalzel described similar ensembles more than a century before.¹¹⁸ He wrote that male hunters wore “grass cloth... tinged with various dirty dyes, and wrapped round the loins.”¹¹⁹ Other than their *godo*, these men also sported tools, worn as accessories on their bodies, included “a cartouch-box of their own manufacture, a power-flask of callabash, with many grotesque ornaments and fetishes.”¹²⁰ To Dalzel, the combination of raffia cloth, facial markings, and other bodily ornaments gave these men “a very fiend-like appearance.”¹²¹ The profusion of non-textile articles of clothing and ornaments worn by these men shows that they were not a “naked” mob.

Similar to non-elite men, ordinary women rarely wore tailored pieces and *pagne*. The amount of fabric covering a woman’s body was related to her wealth and age. Dalzel also described how pre-pubescent girls sported “nothing but a string of beads or shells round the loins.”¹²² Like ordinary men, many grown women wore only a *godo*. Dalzel identified how differences in status and wealth affected women’s clothing: “their dress is a zone of beads, supporting a bandage beneath the do’vo, or scanty loin-cloth, which suffices for the poor and for young girls; the upper classes add an aga-vo, or over cloth, two fathoms long, passed under the

¹¹⁸ Le Herissé, 43.

¹¹⁹ Dalzel, “Introduction,” xvii.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

arms, and covering all from the bosom to the ancles.”¹²³ In contrast to elites who needed to carefully move and constantly adjust their multiple *pagne* or remove them for more strenuous labor, poor Dahomean men and women wore *godo* while farming and during other forms of work and rarely wrapped and draped lengths of cloth.

However, over time, as the economy shifted from slave to palm product exports, more men and women began to wrap *pagne*. Historian Patrick Manning has argued that palm production, especially after the opening of the market for palm kernels, favored small producers over centrally run enterprises.¹²⁴ During the Atlantic slave trade, the state and slave traders (caboceers) controlled much of the wealth gained from exporting other humans. Indeed, the complex sartorial practices of the Dahomean palace, administrators, and private slave traders explored in the previous section are ample evidence that they controlled much of the wealth of the kingdom. But Manning argues that for small producers, or peasant farmers, the shift from the export of slaves to palm products created a more regular income stream and supplemented income from domestic palm product sales.¹²⁵ Although elites maintained their wealth amid the switch to palm exports, ordinary Dahomeans still gained greater purchasing power in the second half of the nineteenth century and, given that textile imports remained strong, a greater number of ordinary Dahomeans were able to purchase and wrap *pagne*.

¹²³ Ibid, 251.

¹²⁴ Despite this, the Dahomean state did launch palm plantations that relied on slave labor. Manning, 54.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

The abundant variety of cloth and clothing in the Kingdom of Dahomey led to complex regimes of style that were unique to the kingdom. But only the court and other elites could fully participate in notions of dressing well. Whether by sartorial law or their poverty, the vast majority of Dahomeans lacked access to most types of cloth and clothing, limiting their sartorial possibilities. Multiple accounts attest that fine weaves from Yoruba-speaking peoples were the most valued cloths, while Dahomeans also wrapped luxurious European textiles such as silks and velvets for ceremonial purposes. Depending on the quality of the weave as well as whether it was imbued with spiritual value, raffia and local cotton cloths also served as markers of status. Elite Dahomean men and women wore imported cottons of various sorts and sewn articles of clothing to create styles unique to the interior kingdom. Clothes could also help people invert social identities, making black locals into white foreigners and Dahomean victims of sacrifice into Oyo enemies.

Despite the intricate sartorial practices of elites in the Kingdom of Dahomey, the vast majority of the king's subjects wore a *godo*, perhaps with the occasional raffia or cotton wrapper. It was this "naked mob" that captured the imagination of late nineteenth century Europeans. As historians of empire have shown, nineteenth century Western fantasies about Africa often focused on the "nakedness" of Africans as evidence of their uncivilized and savage nature.¹²⁶ Missionaries and other parties interested in formal colonization used the trope of "African nakedness" to promote the *mission civilisatrice*, or the civilizing mission. The desire to "clothe" Africans, or to civilize them, was part of a larger colonial impulse to control, regulate, and

¹²⁶ Phippa Levine, "States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination," *Victorian Studies* 50 (2008):

literally refashion colonial societies. The following chapter takes the history of cloth, clothing, and style into the period of French colonization of Dahomey (1894-1960) to show how colonization did more (and occasionally less) than clothe the “naked mob.” Under French colonial rule, the Dahomean precolonial elite lost much of their ability to assert control over the meanings behind dress. Yet, colonization presented opportunities for other groups. Women entered into sectors in textile and clothing production that were originally the domain of men. A new elite and, eventually, ordinary Dahomeans acquired access to different types of cloth and regimes of style. Despite these changes, however, colonization did little to change the foundation of style in Dahomey, nor did it alter practices of innovation and incorporation that had long been a feature of dress production and consumption.

Chapter 2:
From Conquest to *Botoyi*:
Colonization, Craft Production, and the Spread of Urban Style

This chapter continues the history of cloth, clothing, and style from the French conquest of Dahomey in 1894 to the years following the Second World War. It shows how multiple colonial actors, including the state, private enterprise, and missionaries, shaped the production, exchange, and consumption of clothing and how Dahomeans took advantage of these interventions to create their own sartorial possibilities. For the most part, colonial interventions increased the availability and accessibility of both locally produced and imported cloth. Schools, missions, and orphanages trained new groups, including women, and introduced additional technologies for transforming cloth into clothing. While the precolonial elite lost the resources to sustain their leading role in managing the creativity and innovation in matters of style, new groups of Africans began to wear fitted styles that referenced urban life and the colonial state. This urban style also relied on conceptions of a “traditional” counterpart that Dahomeans increasingly used to invoke pre-colonial political and religious authority. But the gradual shift to greater complexity in Dahomean dress practices and to increased access to different modes of dress was cut short by the shortages in cloth and clothing during the Second World War.

This chapter argues that colonization de-centered the history of cloth and clothing from the realm of formal political authority and created new opportunities for elite Dahomeans to shape notions of dressing well. In the first half of the twentieth century, town life and more clothing options altered clothing hierarchies, providing opportunities for Dahomeans to assert control over styles and their meanings. This chapter also traces the efforts by the colonial state to

impose new norms and practices, and the factors that limited the colonial state's ability to shape notions of self, city, and nation through dress.

In the decade following France's 1894 conquest of the kingdom, the colonial state attempted to exert its authority over the peoples and landscapes of the interior. As shown in the previous chapter, textile production in pre-colonial Dahomey was a vibrant industry. By bringing in artisans from elsewhere, Dahomeans incorporated their craft knowledge and the palace controlled much of the kingdom's textile production, although ordinary people also spun thread and wove cloth in their own homes. After colonization, the French did not attempt to directly regulate artisanal textile production, but the state, along with other colonial actors such as missionaries and private enterprise, pursued a set of policies that nevertheless influenced Dahomean cloth- and clothing-making. This chapter explores colonial interventions in clothing production under two broad categories. First, the colonial state and private enterprise attempted to intervene in the cultivation and exchange of cotton, which manipulated production and created a secondary supply for local spinners and weavers. Second, missionary and state education programs also altered techniques of clothing production by promoting new methods and mechanization as well as by manipulating the gendered division of labor in cloth and clothing production. By intervening in fiber production and the reproduction of craft knowledge, colonial interventions disrupted preexisting systems of production and exchange, but these interventions did not completely eclipse precolonial methods of textile production.

Colonial actors were better able to wield their influence over Dahomean consumption of textiles and clothing. Style and dress changed significantly from the eve of colonization to the post-WWII era. Dahomey had long been incorporated into international markets for cloth and

clothing and, as shown in the previous chapter, the kingdom's elites were familiar with multiple regimes of style. A complex sense of fashion predated colonialism on the Plateau, even if it was the privilege of the well-connected and most ordinary Dahomeans wore minimal clothing and ornamentation. But the early colonial state did generate some significant changes by effectively ending the kingdom's sartorial laws, reducing the purchasing capacity of the precolonial elite, and helping to create new meanings and associations around specific styles. The emergence of colonial cities such as Cotonou and later Bohicon, shifted power away from the precolonial capital of Abomey and led to the emergence of an urban style closely associated with the power of the Dahomean elites who worked for or were otherwise associated with the colonial state. These men (and occasionally women) adopted an international style of suits, trousers, collared shirts, dresses, and skirts that was similar to what educated urbanites wore in the metropole and elsewhere in the colonized world. But *pagne* consumption also increased as wrapping became more commonplace among the masses as more people entered the cash economy. *Pagne* began to acquire new meanings, as Dahomeans used it to reference pre-colonial systems of social, religious, and political power. The creation of a colonial style within the urban centers of Dahomey cultivated the concurrent creation of an "authentic" Dahomean style - the *pagne* - that was both "traditional" and rural.

However, the Second World War slowed colonial interventions in textile and clothing production and consumption. Wartime and postwar shortages limited the ability of Dahomeans to follow new notions of dressing well, whether in urban styles or *pagne*. Faced with scarcities in cloth and clothing, Dahomeans turned to local artisanal weavers to meet their sartorial needs. The cloth created during this period - *botoyi* - was a coarse weave of locally spun cotton yarn,

which was often produced from the very cotton that the state and private enterprise promoted to textile manufacturers in Europe. Unlike *kanvo* and *dévo* described in the previous chapter, *botoyi* was acknowledged as an inferior textile and lacked the other weaves' aesthetic and spiritual significance. The low quality and cost of *botoyi* materialized the severe shortages of the particular historical moment of the war and postwar period. In terms of the history of the sartorial practice on the Abomey Plateau, colonization instituted gradual changes in textile and clothing production and consumption. But the material constraints of the war and postwar periods created a rupture in this gradual change. In the wake of *botoyi* in the late 1940s and 1950s, ordinary Dahomeans embraced tailored fitted clothing and mass tailoring emerged as an important mediator of social, political, and economic change.

I. Urban Style and Colonization

This chapter introduces the concept of “urban style” as a way to analyze how world fashions such as business suits, dress shirts, trousers, and women’s dresses became popular on the Abomey Plateau. Fashion theorists Joanne B. Eicher and Barbara Sumner argue that “Western dress” is a misnomer for suits and other tailored fitted clothing. Instead, “world fashion” or “cosmopolitan dress” better explains them as a global phenomenon of the twentieth century and decenters their history from Europe.¹ Scholars have shown how specific types of dress evolved and changed meaning over time. For example men’s three-piece suits originated among the English male bourgeoisie, but they became a symbol for the equality, industriousness,

¹ Joanne B. Eicher and Barbara Sumner, "World Fashion, Ethnic, and National Dress," in *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*, ed. J. B. Eicher (New York: Berg Publishers, 1995): 295-306.

and rationality of middle-class men.² Over time, business suits emerged as the standard of European men's dress and, although its basic form remained constant, fashion dictated changes in their color, cut, and embellishment.³ Historian C.A. Bayly calls the global spread of clothing like men's business suits, trousers, and certain styles of women's dresses as a trend towards "uniformity," or the standardization of bodily practice that accompanied imperial and commercial expansion.⁴ These global styles symbolized urban life and modern living for populations around the world during much of the twentieth century.⁵

In Dahomey, global or urban style has a history that pre-dates formal colonization. Coastal communities of "Afro-Brazilians," had long been wearing "proper" dress that drew upon European dress norms of matching fabrics, cuts, and accessories. Significant populations of Brazilians and liberated slaves settled on the coast during the nineteenth century and created urban centers, such as Ouidah and Agoué. As in elsewhere on the Bight of Benin, these Afro-Brazilian communities adopted Catholicism and other aspects of European town culture, including dress.⁶ In 1889, a French administrator in Dahomey described these communities to the Governor of Senegal as a "population of about 500 persons composed in large part of Negroes returning from Brazil and in lesser proportion of blacks from Lagos, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast." He added further that they "dress as Europeans."⁷ Unlike Dahomean elites in

² David Kutcha, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England: 1550-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³ Philippe Perot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 14.

⁵ Eicher and Sumberg.

⁶ "No 1396/E Objet: Organisation de l'Enseignement manuel." Rapport au Dahomey. Enseignement Technique et Artisanal - Renseignements. Archives Nationales du Bénin (hereafter ANB), 1G/3/6.

⁷ quoted in Dov Ronen, "The Colonial Elite in Dahomey," *African Studies Review* 17 (1974): 56-57.

the interior, the small communities of Afro-Brazilians wore clothing that accorded with the dictates of world or uniform style. Their matching trousers, jackets, and hats stood in contrast to sartorial practices on the Plateau where the king might sport of suit jacket with a *pagne* and Yourba hat, for example.

With the formal colonization of Dahomey, world fashions achieved new meanings and prominence as they did elsewhere in Africa. Scholars have shown that colonial influences on dress were built into the framework of the colonial project itself. Colonial officials, missionaries, and others promoted their clothing practices as the dress of the “civilized,” a discourse rooted in European associations of Africans and African with nudity and barbarism as well as in ideas about the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission). As scholars have importantly showed, this discourse on clothing changed how African perceived themselves and others. Historian Phyllis Martin found that in Brazzaville, Congo, the first generations of urban African living under French colonial rule “wanted to dress as much like a European as possible, for this was the mark of an *évolué*.”⁸ The men’s business suit became the symbol for male elites and, as historian Leora Auslander argued for the Belgian Congo “the suit was the uniform of the ‘civilized’ and the ‘respectable,’ it enabled its wearer to take his place in the ranks of the *évolués*.”⁹

Other scholars have shown how colonial actors promoted world fashions as a way to create African consumers of various commodities, including imported clothing, machines, and

⁸ Phyllis M. Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville" *Journal of African History* 35 (1994): 408.

⁹ Leora Auslander, "Accommodation, resistance, and Eigensinn: *évolués* and *sapeurs* between Africa and Europe," in *Alltag, Erfahrung, Eigensinn: Historisch-Anthropologische Erkundungen*, ed. B. Davis and M. Wildt, 205-217 (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2008).

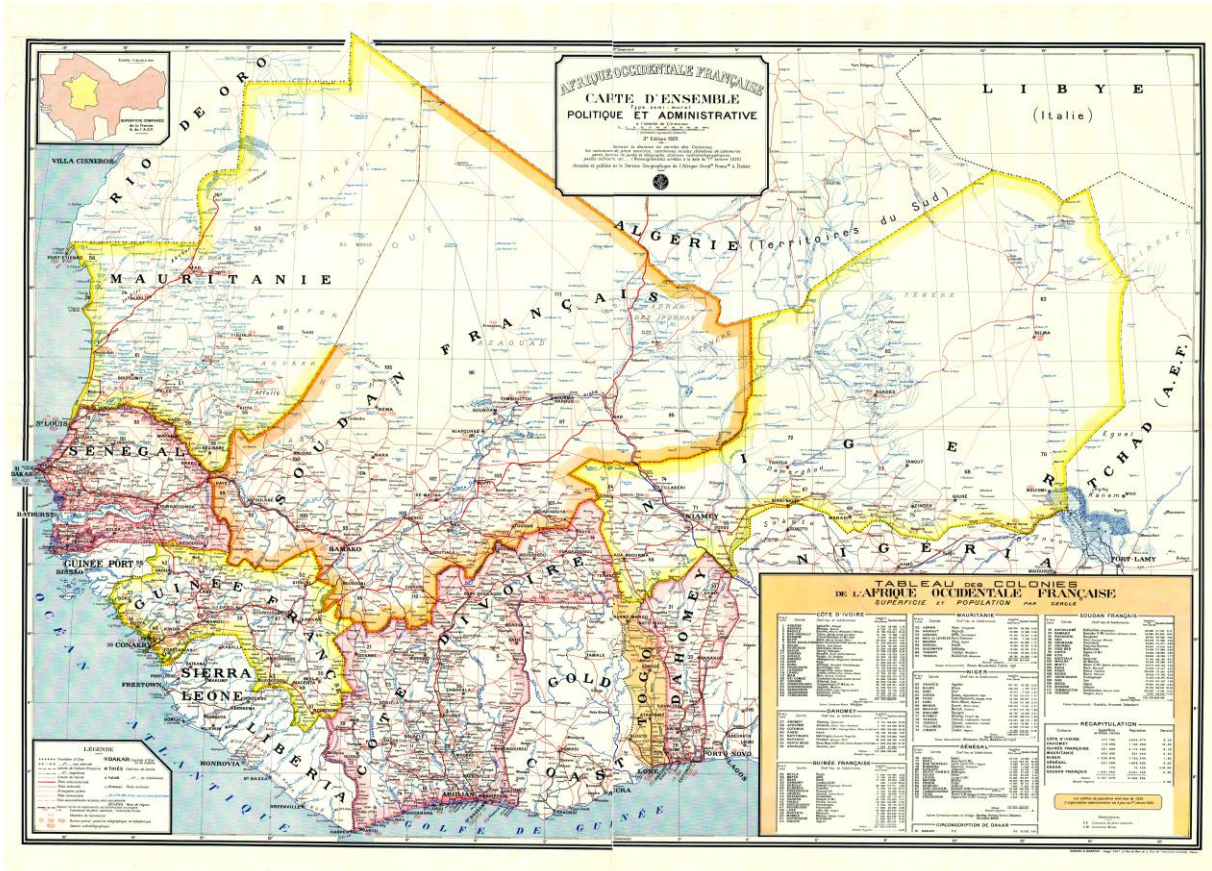
cloth. Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff argue that Nonconformist missionaries in southern Africa promoted European fashions as a way to create class distinction in Tswana society through dress. Although they conclude that Tswana creatively repurposed European articles of clothing and accessories and, in doing so, changed their meanings or even turning them into aspects of “ethnic dress,” the Tswana ultimately became consumers of imported articles of clothing.¹⁰ Similarly, historian Timothy Burke shows how British distributors and advertisers sought to foster desire for soap and other cosmetics among Shona-speakers in Zimbabwe and how the Shona used these imported goods in surprising ways, such as for smearing and medicinal purposes.¹¹ More recently, historian Bianca Murillo reveals that the British colonial state had difficulty in identifying African “consumers” due to the instability of the category and the multiple hands through which imported goods passed. For Africans in Ghana, she argues, “consumer” served as an aspirational status.¹² Whether rooted in ideas about civilization or desires to foster local markets, colonial administrators were keenly interested in promoting world fashions in Dahomey. However, this project approaches these styles – world fashions or uniform style – as “urban style,” a distinction that arises because Dahomeans on the Plateau associated this dress with the coastal cities and their populations of Europeans and elite Africans.

¹⁰ Jean and John Comaroff, "Fashioning the Colonial Subject: The Empire's Old Clothes," chap. 5 in *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume II*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997)

¹¹ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996)

¹² Bianca Murillo, *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017)

II. Colonizing Fiber and Textile Production on the Plateau



**Map 2.1: French West Africa. (*Afrique occidentale française*).
Dakar: Service géographique, 1935. Courtesy of Regenstein Library.**

In November 1894, the French army marched into the walled town of Abomey, occupying the capital and effectively conquering the Kingdom of Dahomey. Years of skirmishes and failed compromises between the French and the Dahomeans preceded this final engagement in the outskirts of the capital. As the French occupation of Abomey loomed, King Béhanzin (1889-1894) ordered the burning of the palaces and the rest of the town before he fled north with only a few members of his immediate family. Months later, Béhanzin surrendered and the French

exiled him to Martinique and later Algeria. The colonial state placed his brother, Agoli-Agbo, on the throne and allowed him to “rule” until 1900, but he was effectively a figurehead. The capital of the Colony of Dahomey and Dependencies was in Porto-Novo, and the colony formed a part of the French Empire administered from Dakar, the capital of French West Africa (Map 2.1).

Less than a decade after colonization, French colonial actors began to promote cotton cultivation, inadvertently intervening in the first step in Dahomean *pagne* production - the cultivation of the cotton fibers used to spin the yarn that was later woven into cloth. By the nineteenth century, cotton had become the most important fiber in global textile production and it linked factories in Europe with growers in the Americas, Asia, and later Africa.¹³ But France’s textile industry lagged behind other European countries such as Britain and Holland. Historian Marion Johnson first made the argument that, in the late nineteenth century, colonial states and businesses hoped to turn certain West African colonies into cotton exporters to supply textile manufacturers in the metropole, which would reduce their costs and make a product that was more competitive on the world market. The African peasant farmers who sold the cotton would then have the cash to buy it back in the form of cloth produced by European industry. Johnson refers to this program for colonial and metropolitan industrial development as “cotton imperialism,” a strategy pursued by both the British and French.¹⁴

In Dahomey, the French planned to promote cotton cultivation through preexisting structures of power in order to reduce costs associated with forcing peasant labor. Colonial administrator Auguste Le Herissé outlined how precolonial officeholders might be co-opted into

¹³ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2015)

¹⁴ Marion Johnson, "Cotton Imperialism in West Africa," *African Affairs* 73 (1974): 178-187.

aiding cotton cultivation. He suggested reviving the precolonial position of the “Topo.. a bona fide minister of agriculture” who, under colonialism, “would order the intensive cultivation of cotton, maize, groundnut, as we desire.”¹⁵ Despite Le Herissé’s proposal to use “traditional” institutions to meet colonial goals, the promotion of cotton cultivation began in earnest when a colonial field agent hired by the French Cotton Association arrived in Dahomey in 1905. This representative of metropolitan cotton interests distributed seeds to local chiefs in the central and southern regions of the colony and these chiefs, in turn, hired laborers to work state fields. During the harvest, the field agent returned to offer the best price he could to the chiefs. The French Cotton Association also built cotton gins in Savalou, Bohicon, and Cotonou to separate out the seeds and prepare the crop for export.¹⁶ As a result, cotton exports more than tripled from less than 50 tons in 1905 to over 160 in 1913.¹⁷

Despite these gains, the program to export cotton never reached the levels that French administrators and business interests had hoped. They had imagined the Abomey Plateau and the rest of central Dahomey as a particularly productive area for West African cotton cultivation. The Plateau is located in an ecological zone called the Dahomey Gap where the dry savannah from interior Africa stretches all the way to the coast, creating a break in the coastal rainforests to the east and west of present-day Benin and Togo. Alongside the cotton-producing areas in the interior Sahelian colonies, such as the French Soudan (present-day Mali), the relative dryness of

¹⁵ Auguste Le Herissé, *L'ancien royaume du Dahomey: Mœurs, religion, histoire* (Paris: Emile Larosè, 1911): 43.

¹⁶ Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge University Press, 1982): 176-177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

the Dahomean Gap made it well-suited for cotton cultivation. Indeed, an administrator promoted Dahomey over the Sahelian colonies as a prime location for cotton because of its coastline and the ease of exporting the crop directly to France from the port of Cotonou as opposed to transporting Sahelian cotton overland.¹⁸ To the colonial state, Dahomey was an ideal cotton colony and the Abomey Plateau would be the heart of it.

French efforts to create the Abomey Plateau as a major cotton-producing region failed in part because of the actions of Dahomean producers who could sell their cotton for greater returns outside the official framework for purchasing. Occasionally, growers hoarded their crops, as in Abomey in 1928, when farmers attempted to wait out low prices until the state raised the official purchase price.¹⁹ Cotton was also trafficked to other colonies where growers hoped to make larger profits. For example, administrators determined that producers were trafficking cotton to Togo in 1930 because transport and port fees were fifty percent lower in Lomé than in Cotonou.²⁰ Historian Richard Roberts' work on the "two worlds of cotton" in the French Soudan provides another hypothesis for why cotton cultivation may have not succeeded in central Dahomey. Roberts argues that price differences in the "two worlds of cotton" - that of the French textile industry and that of Soudanais handicraft cloth production - led growers to sell to local

¹⁸ "Rapport: Prix du coton Allen sélectionne FOB Abidjan." Paris, November 3, 1941. Mise en application de la convention du 26 décembre, 1941. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (hereafter ANOM), 1 AFF-ECO/282.

¹⁹ Bulletins commerciales des cercles. Abomey, 1^{er} trimestre 1928. ANB, 1Q/003/00023.

²⁰ Lettre du Gouverneur Reste au Gouverneur Général d'AOF, Porto-Novo, February 5, 1930. Correspondance relatifs à l'exposition coloniale (1931). ANB, 1Q/002/00014.

spinners and weavers at higher prices than those offered by official export firms.²¹ Growers sold their cotton in the market for craft cloth production, instead of to colonial exporters.

But even if colonial cotton was not directly sold to spinners and weavers, these artisans benefited from the externalities of the export trade. Traders occasionally deemed a cotton harvest unfit for exportation, usually because the fibers were too short for mechanized textile production. Undoubtedly, growers did not burn or otherwise dispose of these harvests and they sold them to spinners, who were used to working with short fibers of local varieties. Abomean spinner Juliette Kanlihanò described a parallel market in Houndjro, Abomey's central market, for what she called "waste" cotton from the export trade where local spinners purchased cotton to make yarn or thread.²² Finally, even cotton that was exported created a byproduct used in local production. After harvests, women and children combed fields to gather cotton that farmers had missed. Similarly, as cotton was baled and transported by train and later truck, pieces of cotton tended to become detached and fly off onto the ground.²³ These pieces of cotton could be spun into thread for weaving, although on a very small-scale.

Local spinners and weavers continued to spin and weave cotton into fabric because Dahomeans continued to buy and wear these textiles, even as industrially produced fabric became more accessible to ordinary people. Historian Patrick Manning has shown how multiple qualities of local weaves were available in Dahomey from the 1890s to 1914. Some local weaves were of low quality and had corresponding low prices, but other locally-woven textiles were

²¹ Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800-1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996)

²² Interview with Juliette A. Kanlihanò, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 11, 2015

²³ Interview with Michel Agounkpléto, Adagamé, Lissezounme, Bohicon, September 2, 2015.

some of the most expensive fabrics on the market, with prices that rivaled imported luxury fabrics such as velvet.²⁴ The existence of both low and high cost local weaves underscores that, similar to the pre-colonial period, Dahomeans across the social spectrum consumed these artisanal products. Multiple types of cloth also reflected the important role of weavers and other craftsmen in creating sartorial culture in colonial Dahomey. The persistence of spinning and weaving provide evidence that the French failed to completely capture the market for cotton during these first few decades after colonization, although these colonial programs established an important precedent for promoting cotton cultivation for later colonial and postcolonial governments.²⁵ Furthermore, colonial cotton markets would fuel local textile production (*botoyi*) during the imported cloth shortages of the Second World War and its aftermath.

III. Education, Technology, and Gender in Clothing Production

Apart from fiber cultivation, colonial actors intervened in cloth production by promoting sewing among new groups of Dahomeans, particularly among women, and by encouraging the adoption of new technologies. As shown in Chapter One, in the pre-colonial era, both men and women cultivated fibers and wove. But only men worked as appliqué makers and tailors and only women spun cotton and served as dyers. These gendered dynamics of production shifted as state and missionary education encouraged competencies in sewing as an integral part of girl's education. Colonial educators trained women in sewing and needlework as part of domestic

²⁴ Manning, 126.

²⁵ Cotton is Dahomey's primary export today.

education, while they also opened other institutions to teach men tailoring and weaving under the auspices of promoting a “local” form of economic development in the colony.

The first schools in Dahomey to include sewing in their curriculum were institutions built to educate mixed-race girls (*métisse*) in the coastal cities of Ouidah and Porto-Novo. These institutions, though small in number, altered gendered modes of production by introducing girls and women to sewing and other needlework. Historian Hilary Jones has described how, in the nineteenth century, mission and state schools in urban Senegal taught young *métisse* music, dance, sewing and other needlework, or the skills of a middle-class French women. Colonial educators hoped that this curriculum would lay the foundation for a mixed-race community with middle-class values whose members would serve as useful allies to the colonial civilizing mission.²⁶ In Dahomey, boarding schools or “orphanages” for *métis* taught similar skills to young girls. By 1912, there was a small school in Ouidah where young mixed-race girls learned sewing as well as reading, writing, and domestic skills. The students included ten “abandoned” mixed-race girls in two classes and the students spent a single hour one afternoon a week learning basic sewing.²⁷ Later, colonial officials opened an additional orphanage in Porto-Novo. In 1922, instructors at the Porto-Novo orphanage that housed mixed-race children taught girls sewing, mending, ironing, and other housework on Thursdays from 8am to 11am and 2pm to

²⁶ Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013): 99-102.

²⁷ Lettre de la Directrice de l'École ménagère à Monsieur l'Administrateur du cercle de Ouidah, Ouidah, May 28, 1912. ANB, 1G/20/1.

4pm.²⁸ Administrators at these institutions, some of the first involved in educating young girls in Dahomey, made sewing, and other domestic duties, a necessary part of girls' education.

In the decades between the two world wars, girl's education became more common in Dahomey, introducing even more young women to sewing and other needlework skills. Over time, domestic education became part of the colonial and Catholic curriculum at schools geared towards non-mixed-race girls. By 1931, there were 845 girls enrolled in secular schools in Dahomey, including 54 in Abomey and 27 in nearby Zagnanado. That same year, there were 1287 girls in Catholic schools in Porto-Novo, Cotonou, Ouidah, Agoué, and Calavi.²⁹ Mixed-race women who had received their education at the Porto-Novo orphanage were often sent to teach at Catholic institutions throughout the colony.³⁰ The numbers of female students enrolled in state-run schools remained small relative to mission schools until the Second World War because of a lack of female personnel in Dahomey.³¹

Although these domestic education programs focused on training wives and mothers based on Western middle-class values, they unintentionally created a skilled group of women who became master artisans, set up workshops outside the home, and took on young girls as apprentices. When a girl's school opened in Abomey in 1935, an unnamed administrator

²⁸ Mougnt, Directrice, Internat des métis, Règlement interieur, Porto-Novo, 11 janvier, 1922. ANB, 1G/12/8.

²⁹ Agoué is a coastal town near Grand Popo, while Calavi is about ten kilometers inland from Cotonou - today it is essentially a suburb of Cotonou. L'inspecteur des écoles, No. 1450 E., Object: envoi de documents en Vue Conseil gouvernement, Porto-Novo, November 3, 1931, ANB, 1G/6/8.

³⁰ No 372E - Décision plaçant en qualité d'externes les métisses dans les établissements d'enseignement privé, March 15, 1936, Porto-Novo, clipping from *Journal officiel du Dahomey*. Archives nationales du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), K/154/26.

³¹ L'inspecteur des écoles, Rapport No. 145 E, Porto-Novo, 13 November 1931. ANB, 1G/6/8. The first public school devoted to girl's domestic education in the AOF opened in 1955 in Côte d'Ivoire, see ANS, 2G/57/80.

remarked that while the school would teach sewing, “the school will not and should not be a workshop offering apprenticeship for lucrative industry.”³² Colonial administrators lamented the tendency of girls and young women to use their needleworking skills for profit as opposed to household projects. For example, in 1939, an administrator wrote despairingly of the messy dress of female students at the Abomey School who were using their “sewing hour” to work on the clothing of others, instead of repairing their own outfits.³³ Evidence from oral histories also supports the contention that girls and women who followed colonial and mission courses in sewing would later open up private workshops and train apprentices. Over the course of my interviews, women tailors who had followed an apprenticeship under a woman could almost always directly trace the origin of their craft knowledge to religious or colonial-era formal education. By listing their master, their master’s master, and so on, women showed the important role of colonial-era schooling in creating a cadre of women tailors who would translate their “domestic” skills in tailoring into profit-generating ventures.

While colonial education policy dictated that all female students learn “domestic” sewing, only one institution offered formal course in tailoring for boys. Administrators designed this program to train young men in how to meet the sartorial needs of African employees and students at colonial institutions. This program fell under the umbrella of technical education, which, in Dahomey, included a series of short-lived institutions designed to teach trades and crafts to Africans for service to the colonial state and enterprises. In 1913, the first state-operated

³² Untitled document, Abomey, 1935, ANB, 1G/20/9.

³³ A. Annet, "Enquête sur la formation de la femme indigène comme ménagère et comme mère de famille. Enseignement ménager, 1939," July 24, 1939. ANS, O/307(31).

Apprenticeship School opened in Porto-Novo and by the next year, male African students could follow courses in cabinetmaking and smithing. But the small program suffered from mismanagement; its French director described the African teachers, or “master craftsmen” as “a little too spoiled” since they often demanded longer breaks and refused to work five days a week.³⁴ The first school closed but another institution opened a few years later as an annex to Victor Ballot School, the *École primaire supérieure* of Dahomey and, there, young men could follow courses in tailoring. Administrators planned for the annex to focus on “training workers to meet local needs,” including positions with the colonial state and in “commerce and industry,” or businesses owned by the French.³⁵ The program in tailoring remained small. In 1929-30, student tailors made “white canvas or khaki” uniforms for the *métis* at the Porto-Novo orphanage, the students at Victor Ballot School, and the “native” employees of the Post Office.³⁶ A 1935 photograph from the Dahomean newspaper *Le Phare du Dahomey* (Figure 2.1) showed the uniforms of the students in the colony’s final iteration of technical education, the François J. Reste Professional School in Cotonou. The boys and men in the photograph each wear a cap and a long-sleeved shirt with a small collar. Some wear shorts, but presumably the upperclassmen wear a light-colored sturdy fabric, probably a cotton percale or khaki. Although taken a few years later, after the technical program had changed campuses, the photograph depicts styles that the student tailors at the Ballot campus may have sewn.

³⁴ Lettre de le directeur de l'école d'apprentissage à Monsieur le Lieutenant gouverneur du Dahomey, 8 January 1914. ANB, 1G/6/13.

³⁵ Arrêt no 965, September 1924. ANB, 1G/12/8.

³⁶ École professionnelle de Cotonou, Rapport d'ensemble sur le service de l'enseignement pendant l'année, 1929-1930. ANB, 1G/17/8.



Figure 2.1: Students at the Professional School in Cotonou, *Le Phare du Dahomey*, September - October 1935.

However, the administration soon stopped investing in Dahomean technical competencies in tailoring and shoemaking. By 1930, the technical school had moved from the Ballot campus in to the Reste Professional School in Cotonou where during the 1931-32 academic year, there were 115 apprentices enrolled, including 40 metal workers, 28 cabinetmakers, and 39 masons. During the move, the sections in tailoring and shoemaking remained in Porto-Novo as an annex to the

Ballot school where only four shoemakers and four tailors studied.³⁷ The following academic year, the annex did not reopen and the administration sent home the two remaining apprentice shoemakers who had not yet completed the program.³⁸ Apparently, colonial administrators decided that they did not need state-trained tailors and shoemakers to make the shirts, trousers, and dresses of Africans affiliated with the state. Perhaps they recognized that tailors and shoemakers trained in private workshops or mission schools could meet the colony's clothing demands. While the colony continued to invest in technical schools right up until Dahomean independence in 1960, it never again offered programs for male students in designing, cutting, and sewing clothing.

Alongside the centers built to train girls and boys in sewing within the urban centers of southern Dahomey, the colonial state hoped to promote "rural" weaving and needle crafts through a parallel set of institutions under the guise of "artisan education."³⁹ On the Abomey Plateau, the state opened the *Maison des artisans d'Abomey* in the mid-1930s, a center focusing on the "traditional" crafts of the Kingdom of Dahomey. It was based on a similar institution in Bamako, French Soudan and it was "at the same time, a workshop, school, conservatory, [and] craft fair."⁴⁰ In 1935, Jules Brévié, Governor of the AOF, wrote to the Governor of Dahomey to request that an Abomey *Maison* be built according to the model of the Bamako one. Brévié

³⁷ L'inspecteur des écoles, Rapport No. 145 E, Porto-Novo, 13 November 1931. ANB, 1G/6/8. The programs in shoemaking and tailoring would be closed the following academic year when the school was moved to Cotonou. ANB, 1G/10/8.

³⁸ Arrêt no 1132, Licenciement Sections Tailleurs et Cordonniers École professionnelle, July 18, 1932. ANB, 1G/10/8.

³⁹ Chapter 4 provides additional context for the development of the Abomey *maison* and how it, along with other colonial programs, inculcated the idea of *l'artisanat* in colonial Dahomey.

⁴⁰ Instructions du Lieutenant-Gouverneur du 1er Septembre 1934. ANB, 1G/14/9.

justified building the school in Abomey as opposed to one of the coastal cities because of the town's "history and the existence of the Museum [at the Abomey royal palaces]." ⁴¹ Built within the museum complex, the *Maison* served as a center of production and learning, focusing on the royal arts of the pre-colonial kingdom. It was also an art market where tourists and other colonial travelers could acquire African objects.

But the Abomey *Maison* did not teach all pre-colonial Dahomean craft traditions and colonial administrators selected the crafts that they deemed worthy of promotion and protection. Perhaps a reflection of European art interests in general, commentators tended to prefer plastic arts in wood and metal as opposed to textiles. The 1936 judgment that created the *Maison* interpreted *l'artisanat* broadly and, while it listed the crafts that might be taught at the *Maison*, it did not specify exactly which crafts ought to be chosen. ⁴² In 1939, the Governor of Dahomey requested a report on Dahomean artisans from the President of the 'Artistic Society of Dahomey,' M. Cosson, a local French administrator in Cotonou who had taken an interest in local arts and artisanal objects. The report concentrated on artisans in the southern and central regions of the colony in order to identify the crafts worthy of 'encouragement.' Cosson's aesthetic assessment determined the merits of the objects and whether the artisans behind them ought to receive colonial support and protection. For example, he deemed the carved calabashes and "poor quality" appliqués of Abomey as well as the basket weaving of Porto-Novo as three

⁴¹ Lettre du Brévié au Gouverneur Général du Dahomey. No 192/E, Objet: Maison des métiers au Dahomey. ANB, 2G/3/9.

⁴² The extensive list includes "blacksmiths, jewelers, carvers and engravers, sculptors and modelers, dyers, potters, basket makers, shoemakers, etc..." Desanti, "Arrêt portant création d'une "Maison des Artisans dahoméens" à Abomey," 10 Mai, 1936, Porto-Novo. ANS, O/45/31.

crafts not worthy of encouragement. But, he argued, Abomean sculpture, hatmaking (done by appliquémakers), and shoemaking deserved the colonial state's protection and financial support.⁴³

Administrators working in artisan education also became interested in Dahomean weaving, especially the techniques and methods of the palace weavers described in the previous chapter. In 1939, Jean Le Gall, the creator of the Bamako *Maison* and now the Inspector of Technical and Artisanal Education of the AOF, also contributed to the colonial assessment of Dahomean crafts. Similar to European observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Le Gall was unimpressed with Dahomean weaving, especially the use of the horizontal loom. He recommended that Dahomean artisans go to the Bamako *Maison* to learn Soudanais techniques of weaving and carpet making.⁴⁴ In Figure 2.2, a Soudanais weaver at the Bamako *Maison* uses a vertical loom to make textiles to be marketed to foreign visitors. Le Gall hoped that the introduction of Soudanais techniques, including this type of loom, would revolutionize Dahomean weaving, by making it more efficient and by resulting in a product that was more desirable for foreign consumers. While his plan may have influenced designs and techniques, Dahomean weavers continued to use both Akan-style horizontal looms and Yoruba-style vertical looms to make cloth, showing the limitations of colonial intervention in artisanal production methods.

⁴³ Lettre du gouverneur du Dahomey aux commandants de cercle, "No 3813, Artisanat dahoméen," 19 juillet, 1938. ANB, 2G/3/6.

⁴⁴ Rapport de tournée au Dahomey (Tournée du 10 Décembre au 28 Février 1939). Lettre de l'Inspecteur de l'enseignement technique et artisanal à le Gouverneur général de l'A.O.F., Dakar, 18 July 1939. ANB, 2G/3/6.



Figure 2.2: Weaver at Maison des artisans de Bamako (clipping from P.C.G. François and M.R. Valtaud, “L’artisanat en Afrique Occidentale Française,” *Les Annales Coloniales*, undated, 11), ANOM/GUERNET/50.

The sewing machine was another tool that the colonial state hoped would revolutionize Dahomean sartorial practice and society in general. Metropolitan and colonial discourses on sewing machines associated them with civilization and modernity. Sewing machine companies, such as Singer, used imagery of the civilizing effects of sewing machines to sell their products to

a nineteenth century French public interested in empire. For example, one advertisement “showed two African men carrying a white sewing machine salesman into the jungle above the caption: ‘Singer, harbinger of civilization.’”⁴⁵ In French West Africa, colonial administrators also saw the potential civilizing effects of the sewing machine. The few pre-colonial tailors on the Abomey Plateau used imported needles, but they did not own or operate sewing machines.⁴⁶ Albert Charton, Inspector General of Education of the AOF and a supporter of artisan education, argued that African artisans, who he interpreted as unable to “evolve” because of their attachment to traditional methods of production, were beginning to “open themselves to progress, be attentive to change.”⁴⁷ For Charton, one of the clearest examples of this was the shift from hand sewing to the sewing machine in urban centers. Charton claimed, “instead of seeing the disintegration of the *artisanat* as we thought, an evolution is beginning. The sewing machine, in all the shops in Senegal, in most of the markets of Dahomey and Soudan, is becoming a new tool of indigenous tailors.”⁴⁸ Tailoring was one of the first African crafts to become mechanized and for colonial administrators who doubted the capacity of Africans to engage in industry, the adoption of sewing machines showed them that African artisans were capable of modernization.

Importation schedules offer further evidence of how the French perceived the importance and the “modernizing” qualities of sewing machines in French West Africa. The 1948

⁴⁵ Robert Bruce Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920* (Arno Press, 1976) described in Judith G. Coffin, "Credit, Consumption, and Images of Women's Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Nineteenth Century France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1994): 749-783: 750.

⁴⁶ Interview with Barthélemy Adjahouinoi, Tindji-Zecko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

⁴⁷ A. Charton, "L'artisanat indigène en AOF." *Congres de la Société Indigène*, 1931. ANS, O/349/31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

importation schedule listed two reasons for importing sewing machines: “domestic and artisanal needs” and “African social evolution.”⁴⁹ The schedule lists other small machines, such as typewriters, record players, and cameras, to be imported for “private needs,” “various needs,” or as “objects in high demand by *évolués*.” But, among the items on the schedule, only the sewing machine could bring about “social evolution,” since it was a necessary tool for clothing civilized bodies. Furthermore, after the Second World War, the state requested large amounts of currency in order to import lightweight sewing machines from Britain.⁵⁰ During this period, foreign exchange was scarce and the willingness of the colonial state to allot a significant amount of sterling to buy sewing machines reflects how administrators believed in their importance relative to other imported goods.

Singer sewing machines were, by far, the most desirable brand of machine in Dahomey and elsewhere in Africa because of local perceptions of their higher quality, efficiency, and portability compared to other brands.⁵¹ African tailors usually did not use industrial models and instead used models that Singer and other companies had designed for “household use.” Colonial administrators asserted that “household” machines were better suited to artisan tailoring and colonial sewing, in general, because of the use of “lightweight fabrics” in the warm weather

⁴⁹ "AOF - Programme général des importation pour l'année 1948 en provenance de l'étranger et l'union français." ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/333.

⁵⁰ Most sewing machine factories in the US and Europe shifted to producing armaments, although some continued to produce at reduced levels. See, The Singer Manufacturing Company, *Singer in World War II, 1939-1945* (New York: The Singer Manufacturing Company): 33.

⁵¹ For the Zambian case, see Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Fabricating Dreams: Sewing Machines, Tailors, and Urban Entrepreneurship in Zambia," in *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840-1980*, edited by R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar, and I. Pesa, (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

areas of the colonies.⁵² In order to meet the mass demand in metropolitan France as well as the colonies for small portable sewing machines, the US-owned Singer Company opened a factory in Bonnières, France in 1935. By the late 1940s, the French state estimated that 95% of Singer machines in its overseas territories were “household” models.⁵³

Women and men used different models of sewing machines and, in some instances, this distinction was enforced through laws intended to guard the reproductive capabilities of African women from the perceived harm of foot-operated treadle models. Women in colonial schools and missions used hand crank machines, while men had access to more efficient treadle models. A 1937 law in Guinea made it illegal to employ pregnant women and children under fifteen to operate pedal sewing machines even in “familial work,” a term that administrators used to describe African-owned artisan industries.⁵⁴ A proposed law in the French Soudan specifically prohibited girls under sixteen from using pedal operated machines, although it made no mention of their use by pregnant women and boys.⁵⁵ Oral histories also attest that women masters told their girl apprentices to avoid pedal operated machines because their operation caused infertility. Pregnant women were seen especially at risk and anecdotes linked treadle machines to miscarriage.⁵⁶ But when women chose hand crank machines over their foot operated counterpart, they also selected a less efficient model that reduced their competitiveness with male tailors, who

⁵² "Programme d'importation supplémentaire dans le but d'enrayer le hausse des prix." Département des affaires économique et du plan, 12 October 1950. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/649/1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Arrêt No. 1812 I.T., Conakry August 4, 1937. ANS, K/154/26.

⁵⁵ Office du travail. Procès-verbal de la réunion du 15 février 1935. ANS, K/154/26.

⁵⁶ This discourse on treadle machines causing miscarriage is found elsewhere in the early twentieth century. See, for example, Mary Lillain Read, *The Mothercraft Manual* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company: 1919): 70.

faced no such buying pressure. The promotion of specific machinery for men and women users and the colonial education policies that re-gendered craft knowledge allowed for new groups to become tailors and for new methods of tailoring.

IV. The Educated African Elite, Urban Style, and Making Tradition

As the number of Dahomeans capable of sewing tailored fitted clothing increased, so too did the number of Dahomeans who wore these items. The *évolué* were men who had “assimilated” into French civilization through education and the adoption of Christianity and French culture. In Dahomey, the majority of the *évolué* lived in the coastal cities of Porto-Novo, Cotonou, and Ouidah. Schools in the coastal cities and later in Abomey produced civil servants who staffed post offices and served as secretaries and other intermediaries in colonies such as Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire. Colonial commentators (and present-day Beninois) frequently referred to Dahomey as the AOF’s “Latin Quarter” because of the relatively high numbers of literate African men. Indeed, these “intellectuals” came to be seen as Dahomey’s primary export during the colonial period.⁵⁷ As civil servants, these men received regular salaries and their wages set them apart from the majority of the population.⁵⁸ In this sense, Dahomey was not different from much of the rest of Africa, although its unique history as the “Latin Quarter”

⁵⁷ In an interview with Gabin Akouêdenoudjè, a former clerk in the AOF, he described how one attained education. He went to a private Catholic school for his primary school certificate and as he described it "I only have a CEPE but I have worked like university graduate." Later, he took a correspondence course in accounting from the private Parisian technical school Pigiet. Interview with Akouêdenoudjè, Adandokpodji, Abomey, September 4, 2015.

⁵⁸ Independence did little to change the status of civil servants throughout Africa, although structural adjustment would severely reduce the appeal of the public sector. Arguably, working in "sustainable development" has become the new goal for many educated Beninois.

probably heightened ordinary Dahomean's associations between formal education and relative wealth.

On the Abomey Plateau, associations between education, wealth, and wearing world fashion converged within the phrase of “dressing literate,” which some Dahomeans used to describe men who wore suits and others urban styles of educated civil servants. To “dress literate” or “*comme les grands*” (“like big men”) was to wear business suits, ties, and dress shoes like a *hunnukún* (Fon: eyes (*nukún*) open (*hun*)), or an educated civil servant and invoke the wealth and authority of these state employees. Men wore urban styles to represent their participation in global flows of wealth and information, which Dahomeans attained through literacy. Néstor Dako-Wegbe, a traditional healer and the spokesman for the Dakodonnou lineage, described seeing African men wearing suits in the 1950s:

When we saw someone, a Beninois dressed like Europeans, we realized that this man really was ‘evolved’ in order to imitate the Europeans like that. These men who barely had their CEPE [primary school certificate]! They just finished primary school and they became like the Europeans, we saw that they now were intellectuals. When we saw them dressed like that, they were happy that we considered them like someone who came from Europe even though they were a Beninois.⁵⁹

His interpretation of the besuited Dahomeans as “intellectuals” who proudly wore their suits as symbols of their education and their intimate knowledge of European culture the convergence of literacy, business suits, and material success within the colonial Dahomean imaginary.

⁵⁹ Interview with Néstor Dako-Wegbe, Houawe Zoungonsa (Bohicon), December 10, 2014.



Figure 2.3: Quinsou and Nicoué, *Phare du Dahomey*, No. 144, May 13, 1937

But adopting colonial urban style was not necessarily a political act that signaled the wearer's approval of the colonial state. In a 1937 photograph (Figure 2.3) printed in the weekly newspaper *Phare du Dahomey*, Porto-Novo évolué Augustin Nicoué, the editor of the paper,

wore a nearly identical suit to the French colonial administrator who stands on the right.⁶⁰ At times, a vocal critic of colonial policy and individual administrators, Nicoué nevertheless adopted “their” dress. Indeed, unlike the precolonial era when dress signified one’s position relative to the king and whether the wearer was in the king’s favor, colonial dress did not necessarily coincide with political affiliation, although it did suggest literacy and familiarity with colonial institutions. The urban Dahomean men and women who adopted “French dress” might not completely agree with the colonial project. Outfits like Nicoué’s were either imported from Europe as ready-to-wear to be altered locally or sewn by tailors within the coastal cities. Urban tailors, such as the ones trained in the Porto-Novo school, used fabrics such as drill, a durable cotton-fiber fabric from Europe, khaki or poplin to make the shirts, trousers, and other clothes of the *évolué*.

Groups other than the *évolué*, but associated with the colonial state, also wore tailored fitted clothing. One colonial administrator referred to students and wage laborers as the “*demi-évolué*” and members of this social sector also wore urban style.⁶¹ A retired civil servant from Abomey, Gabin Akouêdenoudjè dressed in a *pagne* wrapped around his body with the two ends tied behind his neck when he attended primary school in the 1930s and 1940s as. In order to take the exam at the end of primary school (CEP), Akouêdenoudjè’s family had to buy cloth and have it tailored into his first shirt and pair of shorts. He justified his family’s outlay for cloth and its tailoring as an investment in his education, explaining that “the whites came to administer the

⁶⁰ Photograph, *Phare du Dahomey*, No 144, May 13, 1937. ANOM.

⁶¹ A. Annet, Rapport politique, 1939. Porto-Novo, March 23, 1940. ANS, 2G/39/5.

exam... you could not wear a *pagne* around your neck to go to the exam.”⁶² Wage laborers, employed for the colonial railroad or other construction projects, also wore fitted clothing. Although they had to make purchases out of their own pockets, laborers on the railway and other colonial construction projects report wearing shorts and tunics during work.⁶³

When new groups within Dahomean society began to wear articles of tailored clothing, the meanings of particular types of garments changed even when forms remained the same. For example, the symbolic role of short pants altered drastically from the precolonial era to the 1930s. As shown in chapter one, elite men in the kingdom often wore the *tchanka*, or *chokoto* (short baggy pants) with a *grand pagne* covering their torso. Under colonialism, short pants became the uniform of the primary school student and the wage laborer, and a material representation of the wearer’s subservient status to the wearers of long pants - the French, the upper-class student, and the *évolué*. As this example shows, urban style was not an introduction of new sartorial forms, since jackets, trousers, shorts, and dresses already circulated in pre-colonial Dahomey. Instead, urban style was a way of wearing these forms based on new notions of proper dress and the meanings associated with it.

Urban style came from the coastal cities to the interior of the colony on the bodies of French administrators and Dahomean colonial intermediaries. In the 1930s, one of the most powerful men and intriguing figures on the Plateau was Justin Aho, *chef de canton* of Abomey

⁶² Children and young women wrapped themselves in a single *pagne* by starting with the *pagne* placed behind, and wrapping the two sides over the front of the body and tying the ends behind the neck. Interview with Gabin Akouêdenoudjè, Adandokpodji, Abomey, September 4, 2015.

⁶³ Interview with Cyprien Fa, Détohou (Abomey), May 3, 2015. Interview with Amadou Adamou, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

and a grandson of King Glele. Aho also served as the curator of the Musée Historique d'Abomey from 1932 until a number of scandals, including accusations of sacrificing a local servant girl, forced his resignation in 1938.⁶⁴ Unlike many *chef de cantons* in French West Africa, Aho had attended secondary school, was fully literate, and had travelled extensively before being appointed chief in 1929 or 1930. A French colonial administrator wrote that Justin Aho and other chiefs on the Plateau “come closer and closer to our civilization, [and] are even literate.”⁶⁵ Part of being “close” to French civilization included wearing European-style clothing. One retired cabinetmaker, Pascal Adouhouncla remembered Aho as an early wearer of urban style on the Plateau.⁶⁶ Aho wore items of fitted clothing such as pants, button-down shirts, and perhaps sports coats, full suits or formal dress to occasions like a cocktail party that he threw in 1935 when he sent engraved invitations to French administrators.⁶⁷ Men like Aho who circulated both within colonial circles and local communities brought ideas about what types of menswear represented wealth and respectability in the colonial political order.

However, Aho's case also shows how “traditional” clothing gained new meaning when Dahomeans wore it amid the spread of urban style and colonial institutions, in general. The *pagne* suggested precolonial sources of power, whether political or religious. Adouhouncla equally remembers Aho wrapped in *pagne* and dancing during public festivals since, as a *chef de canton*, he “wore local” as well.⁶⁸ Aho used his position as a “traditional” leader to amass large

⁶⁴ Aho and his brother René were also one of the primary informants in Herskovits research during the 1930s. “Autour du Musée historique d'Abomey,” *Le Messager du Bénin*, December 1938.

⁶⁵ A. Annet, Rapport politique, 1939. Porto-Novo, March 23, 1940. ANS, 2G/39/5.

⁶⁶ Interview with Pascal Adouhouncla, Adandokpodji, Abomey, May 7, 2015.

⁶⁷ Invitation vin d'honneur, October 13, 1935. Abomey, 1935. ANB, 1G/20/9.

⁶⁸ Interview with Pascal Adouhouncla, Adandokpodji, Abomey, May 7, 2015.

tracts of land that the French had acquired during the conquest. There, he grew oil palms and became relatively wealthy.⁶⁹ Aho even claimed to be the legitimate heir to the Dahomean throne and wearing appliqué hats sporting a lion, the symbol of Glele, as well as *grande pagne*, and *tchanka* which made material claims on the vastly diminished power of the kingdom.⁷⁰ On the Plateau, Aho successfully drew upon colonial and traditional sources of local power to enrich himself and increase his influence on the Plateau, and he exchanged his clothing to fit the occasion – wearing suits in a colonial capacity and *pagne* when performing his “traditional” role as a community leader, which he was able to maintain even after the French state ended the system of *chef de canton* after the Second World War.

Other groups also drew upon traditional notions of power through dress, particularly *pagne*. Female *vodunsi* and male Fa diviners continued to wrap cloth and to wear other adornments associated with their power. As one Fa priest explained “you can wear pants underneath, or shorts underneath... [but] one must always use a *pagne* as a wrapper.”⁷¹ “Traditional” dress deployed the symbols of the precolonial dynasty and spirituality to legitimate authority that was rooted outside the institutions of the colonial state.

Another sartorial change in the first three decades after colonization was the increased circulation of imported cloth. Both urban style and traditional dress relied on imported cloth, the circulation of which increased steadily during the first three decades after colonization. Manning

⁶⁹ Aho (and other Dahomean canton chiefs) seizures of land for their own personal profit led to fifty-one suits against Aho and others by 1937. Aho escaped unscathed from the scandals, although other canton chiefs were forced to resign. Manning, 274.

⁷⁰ Manning and others cite how Aho convinced I.A. Akinjogbin that he ought to be recognized as the legitimate king of Dahomey in Paris sometime in 1962. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbors, 1708-1818* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1967): 6.

⁷¹ Interview with Cyprien Fa, Détohou (Abomey), 3 May 2015.

found a hierarchy of cost and preference in Dahomean demand for textiles in the first part of this era, from 1890 to 1914. Unbleached cottons were the least desirable, followed by cotton prints, bleached cottons, and velvet, the most expensive and highest valued imported textile.⁷²

Dahomeans often used cotton prints for wrapping and wrapped fashions probably became more widespread since these were the fabrics most in demand. Manning also found that bleached cottons served as a substitute for cotton print, while unbleached cottons complemented cotton prints.”⁷³ In particular, *vodunsi* wore vibrant, white bleached cottons, which they often wrapped for participation in ceremonies.⁷⁴ At other times, Dahomeans dyed bleached cottons. Abomean resident Amadou Adamou remembered community members dying imported bleached cottons with indigo in the 1930s.⁷⁵ Dahomeans also purchased wax prints that were imported to Lomé where market women purchased the cloth directly from European companies and, after the 1930s, began to influence their design.⁷⁶ Cloth was abundant and relatively inexpensive during this period, which allowed more and more ordinary Dahomeans to abandon the *godo*, or loincloth, for a wrapper or two. At the same time, new groups, mostly considered the colonial African elite, began to wear urban styles created by tailors in the coastal cities. But the gradual expansion of both wrapping and urban style would cease with economic crises in the 1930s and wartime and recovery shortages in the 1940s.

⁷² Manning, 125-26.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁴ Le Herissé, 43.

⁷⁵ Interview with Amadou Adamou, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

⁷⁶ Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016)

V. Wartime Shortages and the Adoption of *Botoyi*

The Second World War severely disrupted commodity markets in almost every part of the world. In Dahomey, the lack of imported cloth, and secondhand clothing led to the widespread spinning and weaving of *botoyi*, a coarse cotton cloth that people on the Plateau remember as inferior.

Demographic changes and protectionist policies against imports during the period preceding the war set the stage for wartime shortages. Manning points out that although the population of Dahomey doubled from 1910 to 1950, “the volume of [imported] textiles showed no growth” from the mid-twenties to the early fifties.⁷⁷ Depression in the metropole during the 1930s led French politicians to pursue protectionist economic policies for industry and workers in mainland France, but these same policies often made it more difficult for consumers in the colonies to access goods. For example, in 1936, the French reneged on an 1898 convention that granted most-favored nation status to Britain, which raised import duties on British textiles destined for Dahomey and the rest of the AOF.⁷⁸ Although British cloth consequently became very expensive, French textiles did not meet the needs and tastes of African consumers. Administrators recognized that importations of cloth had not kept up with Dahomey’s increasing population and, along with the disruptions to markets caused by the war, the lack of imports led to severe textile shortages throughout the colony during the 1940s.⁷⁹ Numbers attest to the lack of imported cloth in Dahomey and elsewhere in the AOF. For example, cotton fabric imported to

⁷⁷ Manning, 236.

⁷⁸ Manning, 236.

⁷⁹ Rapport Politique, 1943, May 17, 1944, 2. ANS, 2G/43/21.

all of the African colonies decreased from 42,485 tons in 1938 to 28,081 tons in 1948, with the AOF receiving about half of these imported textiles.⁸⁰ The problem was especially acute in the interior. Administrators recognized that high prices and hoarding led to a rural-urban divide with urban dwellers have much more access to fabric than people in the countryside.⁸¹

Dahomeans gained access to imported cloth by purchasing it on the black market, which had long frustrated colonial administrators. Traders acquired British textiles and other cloth by travelling to the nearby British colonies of Gold Coast and Nigeria where they purchased fabric that they illegally imported to Dahomey to resell. Colonial administrators had recognized the problem created by fluid borders and lower prices in the British colonies as early as 1904.⁸² By the mid-1930s, border controls limited the amount of fabric that Dahomeans could legally bring into the colony to ten kilometers per person.⁸³ But Dahomeans found ways to evade these quotas because Dahomey's long borders and the Abomey Plateau proximity to ports in British colonies made it relatively easy to illegally import cloth. Abomean resident Amadou Adamou remembers how traders walked the over two hundred miles to Accra, Gold Coast in order to trade goats for fabric. The journey was difficult and travelers took special care to evade colonial officials who tried to capture returnees, impound their cloth, and send them to prison.⁸⁴ The shortages of the

⁸⁰ Lettre de la Direction des Affaires Économiques et du Plan Accords Commerciaux et Douanes to Président of la Chambre de Commerce de Tarare, 9243/AE/4, October 9 1950. Tissus: cotonnades I, 1948-1950. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO 649.

⁸¹ Rapport Politique, 1944, 1-2. ANS, 2G/44/25.

⁸² Lettre de Witt & Büsch et al. à Monsieur le Lieutenant Gouverneur du Dahomey et Dépendences, Porto-Novo, October 28, 1904, ANB, 1Q/017/00187.

⁸³ Télégramme Lettre Officiel de Lieutenant-Gouverneur à Cercles, March 20, 1936. Cercle de Porto-Novo, Emigration saisonniere des travailleurs vers le Nigeria. ANB, S/6/1/2.

⁸⁴ Interview with Amadou Adamou, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

1940s only exacerbated the disequilibrium of supply and demand for British textiles and the problem of illegal importations and the black market became especially acute.

Shortages in cloth and the draw of the black market concerned colonial administrators because of their effects on the overall Dahomean economy. Cloth shortages led to problems in recruiting laborers for the state. Administrators contended that Dahomeans were unwilling to work for wages if the items that they wished to purchase, namely cloth and petrol, were unavailable.⁸⁵ The black market in textiles also upset the circulation of cash as more and more francs crossed borders into British territories. Bankers in Dahomey considered the black market as augmenting a preexisting shortage of cash in the colony since Dahomeans were alleged to “hoard” metal currency.⁸⁶ Dahomean desire for cloth and the French inability to meet their sartorial needs disrupted the entire economic and financial system of the colony.

These shortages and the high price of cloth on the black market led poorer, rural Dahomeans, like on the Abomey Plateau, to pursue other means of acquiring textiles. Weavers began to make *botoyi*, a cloth produced with thick locally handspun cotton thread. In a 1943 letter to the Governor of the AOF, a colonial administrator noted that Dahomean artisans overcame “the problem of native clothing” by using primary materials to make “basic but usable clothing.”⁸⁷ In Dahomey, spinners gathered cotton from harvested fields, but also purchased the cotton directly from growers in order to make it into yarn.⁸⁸ Indeed, the production of *botoyi*

⁸⁵ Rapport Annuel sur le Travail et Main d'œuvre, 1943, Porto-Novo, March 23, 1943. ANS, 2G/43/27.

⁸⁶ Lettre de la Banque de l'AOF à Président de Chambre de Commerce de Cotonou, June 24, 1933. ANB, 1Q/1/00009.

⁸⁷ Lettre de le secrétaire à la production à Monsieur le Gouverneur général de l'AOF, February 20, 1943. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO 221.

⁸⁸ Interview with Alphonse Ahouado, Musée d'Abomey, Abomey, September 15, 2015.

further complicated France's plans for cotton extraction from Dahomey and elsewhere in the AOF and, in 1944-45, exportable cotton was one-third of what was expected. While pests and drought contributed to reduced production, colonial administrations also attributed the shortage to "the insufficient quantity and high prices of imported fabric: cotton is reserved for familial spinning and weaving; or it is the object of illicit transactions between natives, the actual price on the 'lateral market' is five times higher on average than that approved for export."⁸⁹ Growers sold to spinners because they offered higher prices than French purchasers. Unlike the market for textiles illegally imported from the British colonies, the local cotton market was not a "black market." AOF-wide regulations prohibited peasant producers from selling their cotton to commercial enterprises outside of official markets, but the law made an exception for "transactions [in cotton] between natives for the sole use of the local *artisanat*."⁹⁰ Buying cotton to spin into thread for local weaving was legal and *botoyi* flourished, in part, because of the colonial investment and promotion of cotton cultivation.

People highly valued many locally produced textiles in precolonial and colonial Dahomey and paid hefty prices for *kanvo*, *dévo*, and other artisanal weaves. But informants did not remember *botoyi* in the 1940s as a particularly desirable or high quality cloth. Artisan weavers wove the thick yarn into a coarse, heavy fabric that they sold to consumers or to local sellers who sold it in the regional markets.⁹¹ Indeed, it might be better framed as "homespun"

⁸⁹ Lettre de le Gouverneur générale de l'AOF à Monsieur le ministre des colonies, Dakar, June 27, 1945. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO 221.

⁹⁰ Arrêt no 1062, SE/P, Réglementant la culture du coton en Afrique Française, Dakar, March 18, 1942. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO 282.

⁹¹ Interview with Dah Martin Ayikpé, Avogbannan (Bohicon), May 25, 2015.

rather than the product of master weavers, although some trained weavers undoubtedly produced it during the shortages. Despite perceptions of the low quality of *botoyi*, informants did acknowledge it as more durable than imported cloth or finer weaves and some informants thought that the thicker fabric was better suited to the cold season.

But the thickness and internal structure of *botoyi*, and even better regarded weaves such as *kanvo* and *dévo*, make them poor fabrics for tailoring into fitted styles. At the debut of WWII, the colonial office in France suggested using West African strip cloth for wartime bandages, but the Governor of the AOF rightly pointed out that it was about four times the price of French cotton textiles and that it is was difficult to cut.⁹² Cutting strip cloth led to fraying and the cloth needed an additional seam before it could be sewn into clothing. This unraveling made West African strip cloth a poor choice for fitted styles. Strip cloth was also thicker than its industrial counterparts and its lack of flexibility restricted the movement of the wearer if sewn into a garment that hugged the body. In sum, *botoyi* was a material manifestation of the shortages, the global economic downturn, and the poor policies of the French colonial state for Dahomean consumers. Most tailors and domestic sewers could not sew *botoyi* into fitted clothing and imported cloth was too expensive, so the expansion of tailoring and the spread of urban styles slowed during the 1940s.

The shortage of sewing machines during this decade must have also contributed to the sluggish expansion of tailoring. As shown earlier in this chapter, administrator Albert Charton noted that sewing machines were widely available before the Second World War, but wartime

⁹² Lettre du Gouverneur général de l'AOF à Monsieur le ministre des colonies, no. 3442 SSM/5, Dakar, November 3, 1939. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/222.

shortages stopped their importation. Most sewing machine factories in the US and Europe shifted to producing armaments, although some continued to produce at reduced levels. However, as the Singer Company pointed out “the sewing machine [was] a critical item urgently required in large quantities in time of war” to repair uniforms, gas masks, parachutes, and the like.”⁹³ Indeed, with some factories shifting their production and the remaining machines being sold for war purposes, almost no machines were imported to the AOF during the Second World War.⁹⁴ These wartime shortages created a lag that continued for a number of years until importations gradually increased to meet unmet and new demand. Indeed, the markets in cloth, clothing, and machinery needed to recover in order to set the stage for mass tailoring on the Abomey Plateau.

The French conquest and colonization of interior Dahomey altered how Dahomeans produced, exchanged, and consumed textiles and clothing, although colonial interventions never led to a complete overhaul of pre-colonial sartorial systems. Rather, these interventions increased the availability of all types of cloth and introduced new groups into needlework. Promotion of cotton production inadvertently created a supply for local spinners. Colonial assumptions about the domestic roles of African women and their attempts to replicate Western middle-class domesticity in the colonies, especially in mixed-race communities, led to a state and missionary curriculum that emphasized sewing as women’s work at the same time that it laid the foundation

⁹³ The Singer Manufacturing Company, *Singer in World War II, 1939-1945* (New York: The Singer Manufacturing Company): 33.

⁹⁴ "programme d'importation supplémentaire."

for women to translate their new skills into profit-making ventures. The colonial state also attempted to change Dahomean weaving techniques, although their efforts made little impact.

The colonial state and missionaries also created new markets for tailored fitted clothing through their influence on taste and the spread of urban style. New groups such as the *évoulé* or *hunnukun* began to adopt the styles of middle-class Europeans. Students and wage laborers also wore shorts and tunics sewn by tailors in the coastal cities. The gradual spread of urban style from the coast to the interior also contributed to new concepts of “traditional” style, which on the Fon-speaking Plateau, took the form of wrapped *pagne* and *tchanka*. These items worn on the bodies of traditional authorities communicated notions of local dress to the colonial state as well as ordinary Dahomeans. While the wrapper would remain the primary garment for women and the ceremonial and household wear of men, fitted styles became prominent among the masses beginning in the early 1950s and tailoring flourished on the Abomey Plateau.

Chapter 3
Tailoring Dahomey:
Mediating Modernity and Urbanization in the Mid-Twentieth Century



Figure 3.1: Dansi Donatien, retired tailor and traditional healer, Adame-Adato, Gnidgezou, Bohicon, December 9, 2014. Photo by author.

In December 2014, my research assistant Marc and I travelled to a small village two kilometers down a single-track moto path from the main highway connecting Abomey and

Bohicon in central Benin. Our goal that day was to collect an oral history from a retired tailor and practicing traditional healer named Donatien Dansi.¹ Dansi had left full-time tailoring a few decades before to become a specialist in prostate diseases. That day, Dansi met us dressed in a wrapper and a long tunic (Figure 3.1). Advanced in age and proud to do the same work as his father before him, Dansi reveled in the authority he gained from being a master of “tradition.” But as a young man in the early 1970s, it was his career as a tailor and his authority over style that defined him as a master of the “modern.” Using imported machinery, travelling within Benin and elsewhere in West Africa, and wearing suits, rife with their symbolic association to the colonial and postcolonial elite, tailors fashioned themselves as modern and cosmopolitan men and women from the 1950s to the 1970s. These tailors, in turn, used their authoritative expertise over modern urban life - at a time of great political and social transformation - to craft new sartorial meanings and modes of self-expression and self-identification for ordinary Dahomeans.

Dansi lived surrounded by the material evidence of his two careers - first, the power objects, covered in a rich patina, of his current work as a traditional healer and second, the machines, photos, and stacks of receipts and other documentation from his earlier career as a tailor. On the wall of his house’s main room, someone had written in chalk the entire receipt for Dansi’s sewing machine - its price, the retailer, and the exact day he bought it, June 4, 1976. Also on his wall was a large photo of Dansi, wearing a sedate business suit that contrasted sharply with the bright yellow, red and blue print he wore the day that we met him. He showed us his collection of personal papers where copies of the same photo, in passport size, were

¹ Interview with Donatien Dansi, Adame-Adate (Bohicon), December 9, 2014.

affixed to the card that identified him as a member of the local tailor's association as well as to the certificate that attested to his successful completion of an apprenticeship with a master tailor.

In our interview, Dansi insisted that the suit he wore in the photo was not just an instance of "dressing up" for a picture, but that he regularly wore suits when practicing his craft during the 1970s. Like many of the other tailors I interviewed, Dansi emphasized modern urban styles - such as the suit - and the sewing machine as key to the tailor's persona and his success. Dansi claimed that wearing a suit "marked the difference between farmers and tailors." By putting it on and "dressing literate," a semi-literate or illiterate male tailor adorned himself in the manner of the colonial and postcolonial educated African elite.² Such fashions attracted a rural clientele interested in incorporating the fitted clothes of urban Dahomey into their daily sartorial practice. Dansi also relayed how when travelling to villages for short-term sewing work, he brought his foot-operated, or treadle sewing machine on his head or on the back of a bike. This machine, he argued, was still capable of enchanting and exciting the *villageois*, even into the 1970s. Other tailors took their machines farther afield, to Dahomey's coastal cities and to regional African capitals, where these craftspeople acquired expertise in modern urban styles, or "world fashions" as well as the "ethnic dress" of other African groups.

This chapter focuses on the objects and places of tailoring as well as the bodies of tailors to show how the design and production of clothing mediated modernity and urbanization for ordinary Dahomeans after the mass adoption of tailored fitted clothes in the 1950s to the 1970s. Like Dansi, the first and second generation of tailors on central Benin's Abomey Plateau

² Ibid.

fashioned themselves as modern and cosmopolitan. The embodied modernity, or at least a served as representative of modernity for the rural and semi-urban populations of central Benin, because they used mechanized imported tools and because they wore world fashions such as suits, trousers, button-down shirts, skirts, and dresses, similar to colonial and postcolonial African elites. These tailors were cosmopolitan because of their movements among the urban centers of West Africa and because of their knowledge of the multiple registers of style and fashion. Indeed, tailors were practiced negotiators of the changes of the mid twentieth century and they became leaders in articulating how Dahomeans should look and act in the years after the Second World War. Their modern personas and cosmopolitan knowledge positioned them as local experts in defining proper comportment in a rapidly urbanizing society and a newly independent nation.

The influence of the tailors of the Abomey Plateau reached its apex from the 1950s to the 1970s for a number of reasons. First, during this period, markets for cloth, clothing, machinery, and catalogues brought new ideas and opportunities for fresh styles to the Plateau. Importations increased after the shortages of the Second World War, and local clothing markets thrived through the 1970s, only to then contract with the 1970s global economic downturn and political instability in a postcolonial Dahomey. Second, this period saw the shift from wrapping the *pagne* to the mass adoption of fitted clothing in interior Dahomey, particularly among men, as new groups brought urban styles to the interior. Finally, the late colonial and the early postcolonial periods were a historical moment of possibility for Africans. The end of empire and the creation of new nation-states fostered experimentation and new imaginaries of self, city, and nation

within much of Africa.³ Tailors worked at the nexus of these social, economic, and political changes and these men and women helped to translate and localize these transformations for ordinary Dahomeans. Indeed, while clothing and consumption has been a well-trodden topic in African history, much less attention has been paid to how the particular historical and material circumstances of the post-World War Two era that generated a “heyday” of tailoring. These processes placed the craftsmanship of tailors at the center of a range of far-reaching debates about the past, present, and future of the country - and the place of “tradition” and “modernity” within it.

I. Desiring the Fitted: Postwar Recovery and Shifting Tastes towards the Fitted

The economic shortages that led to the widespread consumption and production of *botoyi*, as explored in the previous chapter, eased by the late 1940s. But instead of returning to prewar sartorial practices, ordinary people began to adopt new forms of dress in the 1950s. The increased demand for fitted clothing stemmed from two separate, but concurrent, changes in markets and tastes. First, following the shortages of the war, there were increased importations of

³ Scholars from across the disciplines have shown how the 1950s and 1960s served as a “moment of possibility” for Africans. James Ferguson argues that modernization theory trickled down into everyday life and that ordinary Zambians expected that their lives and cities would come to resemble those in the “developed” world, see Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). Historian Frederick Cooper shows how African leaders experimented with different political forms during this period to argue against the inevitability of the nation-state, see Cooper, “Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective” *JAH* (2008): 167-196. Political scientist Crawford Young calls the early 1960s an era of ‘Afro-optimism’ that would turn to Afro-pessimism by the late 1960s due to multiple coup d’etats and increasing authoritarianism across the continent as well as the Biafran War, see Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

sewing machines, secondhand clothing, and cloth, including new synthetic fabrics, which helped facilitate a revolution in dress. Second, urbanization led to more exposure to other styles through new forms of media. The clothing of WWII veterans, a new cadre of businessman, and their families similarly inspired new fitted styles, helping to create a demand for tailored clothing among the masses.

The recovery of the market in cloth and the introduction of new types of cloth proved one of the most important impetuses to the spread of tailoring and tailored clothing. The postwar colonial state sought to liberalize the Dahomean cloth market in order to increase the supply of legally imported cloth. As opposed to earlier periods where French fabrics received preferential treatment in colonial markets, by 1949, “all fabric except for drills” (durable cotton fabrics such as khaki) could be sold on the free market.⁴ Increased quotas meant more goods such as textiles, “enamels,” and bicycles could enter the colony through the port at Cotonou instead of being bought in Nigeria and trafficked into Dahomey.⁵ Although, the colonial state’s reduction of Popular Front-era and wartime protections on French industries did increase the direct importations through the port of Cotonou, most of this increase came from textiles produced by non-French companies.⁶ Furthermore, prices tended to remain lower in British colonies and

⁴ Rapport Politique, 1949. ANS, 2G/49/36.

⁵ Rapport sur l'activité des services présenté par M. Le Gouverneur Bonfils à l'Assemblée Territoriale, session budgétaire 1954, 45. ANS, 2G/54/107.

⁶ Lettre de la Direction des Affaires Economiques et du Plan Accords Commerciaux et Douanes to President of la Chambre de Commerce de Tarare, 9243/AE/4, 4, October 9 1950. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO 649.

traders continued to buy fabric in Lagos and Accra and traffic it to Dahomey for sale on the black market.⁷

The poor performance of French textiles in Dahomey and other parts of Africa led the metropolitan textile industry to launch a program to study African tastes in fabric. Struggling French textile manufacturers blamed their weak performance in Africa on lack of protection and high cotton prices, but colonial administrators pointed out that these manufacturers did not make the types of cloth that Africans wanted to purchase.⁸ In response, the French textile producers, the General Union of the French Cotton Industry (*Syndicat Général de l'Industrie Cotonnière Française*), led an overland exposition of their products in the AOF and the AEF (Figure 3.2). Unlike English companies, prewar French businesses rarely conducted consumer research studies in the colonies and the 1951 program was the first French-led study of West and West Central African consumer preferences.⁹ Textile manufacturer designed the exposition to foster interest in French fabrics among African consumers through films and product samples. The trip was also planned as an opportunity for industry members to see firsthand the clothing practice of consumers to better comprehend their tastes. In Abomey and other “centers deprived of a cinema,” promoters set up portable screens to show a documentary, *The Beautiful Fabrics of France* (*Les Beaux Tissus de France*). Dahomean viewers saw the mechanical production of the fabric in the film and, based on the observations of French observers, its showing was a “real

⁷ For example, in 1952, an Ecu with a value of 80 francs was subject to a 15% tariff if French or 30% if foreign upon entering the AOF, while the same fabric in the Gold Coast or Nigeria had a 10% whether it was British or not.” Lettre de Ministre de la France d'outre-mer à Monsieur le président du Syndicat général de l'Industrie cotonnière Française, July 24, 1952. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/651.

⁸ Rapport Politique, 1950. Porto-Novo, July 9, 1951. ANS, 2G/50/31.

⁹ Lettre de Gouverneur des colonies à Monsieur le ministre de la France d'outre mer, December 17, 1948. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/649.

triumph.”¹⁰ The Syndicat also displayed fabric samples to be viewed by African consumers. Later, a French commentator noted that “the Africans could not touch the cloth” giving the exposition “a spirit more artistic than commercial.”¹¹ The inability of consumer to feel and compare the fabrics probably made the exposition less effective in fostering Dahomean demand for French textiles than the manufacturers had hoped.



Figure 3.2: Map of Overland Exposition in French West Africa, Syndicat Général de l'Industrie Cotonnière Française, ANOM.

¹⁰ "Le livre de bord de l'exposition organisée par le Syndicat général de l'Industrie cotonnière française en Afrique noire." 'Textiles' Editions Dotec, Paris. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/651.

¹¹ J. Binet. "Consommation des articles textiles au Cameroun." ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/652.

Although the promotion of French cotton textiles was unsuccessful in Dahomey, Dahomean embraced wholeheartedly new synthetic fabrics. Some administrators linked the rising demand for synthetic fabrics to the diminishing market for their cotton counterparts. In French Cameroon, an administrator noted how cotton drill was less popular in the final decade of colonialism.¹² Presumably, Cameroonians, like Dahomeans, began to buy textiles, such as poplins, made with synthetic fibers. Synthetic fabrics offered certain benefits for consumers. Historian Phyllis Martin found that Congolese consumers preferred polyester for its durability and ease in washing.¹³ Similarly, Dahomean consumers might prefer outfits sewn from synthetic fibers because they lasted longer than cotton and they kept their color despite repeated washings. Finally, part of the appeal of synthetics was that they could be easily tailored into outfits such as uniforms, shirts, and trousers.

Second-hand clothing (*acouta*) imported from Europe and the United States also helped to foster the taste for fittedness. During the precolonial and early colonial eras, Europeans traded in second-hand clothing in Dahomey and missionaries distributed items to converts as they had done in other parts of Africa. But wartime shortages dried up this flow of goods. After the war, old military uniforms constituted much of the first wave of imports, with women's clothing following. Anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen points out that beginning in the 1940s, charitable organizations in Europe and United States began to receive more donations. Westerners were able to afford more clothing and niche markets, such as leisure wear or teenage

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Phyllis M. Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville" *Journal of African History* 35 (1994): 401-426: 419.

clothes, created a wearable surplus of used clothing.¹⁴ In Dahomey, women bought *acouta* in Cotonou and resold it in the markets of the Abomey Plateau.¹⁵

Second-hand clothing cultivated consumer preferences for fitted styles and encouraged experimentation with new forms among the makers of locally crafted clothes. Dahomeans bought *acouta* for both work and leisure and they often altered the clothing to fit the individual. But articles of secondhand also inspired new styles among local tailors. Bohicon tailor Lekolihoui Djibidisse was one of a handful of tailors in the Bohicon market in the 1950s. In an oral history, he recalled how he learned new styles as an apprentice and later a master tailor in 1950s Bohicon. Djibidisse bought *acouta*, which he carefully took apart the seams. He then used the disassembled pieces to create a pattern to sew similar forms.¹⁶ Secondhand clothing did not replace tailored items during this era: instead they helped make fitted styles everyday wear and they provided inspiration for new locally-produced articles of clothing.

The increased availability of sewing machines within Dahomean markets on the coast and the Plateau also helped to facilitate the rise in mass tailoring. As shown in the previous chapter, the colonial state promoted importations of sewing machines because they were perceived as a necessity of “modern” life. But, in the early 1950s, Dahomeans in Abomey and Bohicon seeking to purchase a machine had to travel to Cotonou to find a model. A colonial study on prices found that in January 1952, companies imported French treadle machines at

¹⁴ Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)

¹⁵ Interview with Célestine Agassounon, Soglogon, Bohicon, June 14, 2015.

¹⁶ Interview with Lékoli Houi Djibidisse, Zakpo Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, December 9, 2014.

24.000f and English machines at 20.000f.¹⁷ Later, machines would be sold directly to consumers on the Abomey Plateau. According to a master tailor in Bohicon, by the late 1950s, a *yovo* (white person, probably French or Lebanese) opened up a shop next to the Bohicon market that sold sewing machines directly imported from Europe.¹⁸ This shop eventually closed, but Davakan, a Dahomean-owned company replaced it and sold Singers and other brands to most of the tailors and seamstresses on the Plateau who purchased in the decades following independence.

While changes within the markets in cloth, secondhand clothing, and sewing machines created the material possibilities for new regimes of styles, urbanization and political transformations drove a shifting taste for the fitted. The Abomey Plateau began to undergo significant changes as urbanization created new city spaces in the mid-twentieth century. The railroad early in the colonial period had led to the construction of an important market in Bohicon, but it was only later that Bohicon became the urban center of the region.¹⁹ As Bohicon grew from a goat market to a colonial crossroads to the largest city on the Plateau, Abomey's political and economic power declined. Attempts to make Bohicon a municipality in the 1950s and 60s oftentimes floundered, perhaps a result of pushback from the Abomey elite.²⁰ But Bohicon nonetheless became the undisputed economic capital of the region and a center for urban style, while Abomey retained its position as the center of Fon "traditional" culture.

¹⁷ "Etude sur l'évolution comparée des prix français et étrangers en 1952." Département des affaires économique et du plan, 12 October 1950. ANOM, 1 AFF-ECO/652.

¹⁸ Interview with Trankilin Alladanon, Bohicon centre, August 17, 2011.

¹⁹ For example, a new police station opened in Bohicon in 1949. Rapport Politique, 1949. ANS, 2G/49/36.

²⁰ See chapter 5.

Urban life facilitated exposure to media and images that helped to drive interest in new forms of clothing. These images came in the form of film, newspapers, as well as fashion catalogues. Historian Odile Goerg argues that films (and the censorship of film) only became widespread in francophone West Africa in the 1940s and 1950s.²¹ As they had for viewers in the West, these films inspired new regimes of style among African viewers. For example, Westerns led to a robust cowboy style in many African cities during the 1950s and 1960s.²² Dahomean newspapers such as *France-Dahomey*, *Eglegba*, *Aziza*, *Le Dahoméen*, and *L'étoile du Dahomey* began to include more and more images, mostly of politicians dressed in suits, but also of workers, students, and women wearing new fashions.²³ Historian Phyllis Martin found that white women in the colonies received fashion catalogues that, once discarded, circulated among Africans.²⁴ While the circulation of images, moving and static, must have been more robust in the coastal cities, their depictions of dress also became important within the urban spaces of the Plateau.

Finally, emerging groups – particularly a new class of businessman and WWII veterans – adopted fitted styles and, in doing so, helped spread their appeal among the masses of ordinary Dahomeans. Postwar changes in colonial policy restructured the Dahomean economy and created opportunities for a new commercial class of men in the interior. In 1944, the Dahomean textile traders who had operated before the war petitioned the state to curtail the activities of these

²¹ Odile Goerg, "The Cinema, a Place of Tension in Colonial Africa: Film Censorship in French West Africa" *Afrika Zamani* (2007-2008): 27-43.

²² Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016)

²³ Newspapers held in ANOM.

²⁴ Martin, 405.

emergent businessmen.²⁵ The family names of the signatories on the petition attest that the prewar traders of the early colonial commercial class came, for the most part, from coastal Afro-Brazilian communities. In the interior, small-scale commerce was traditionally the domain of women, but Fon-speaking Dahomean businessmen began to make significant profits engaging in trade during and after the war. With the restructuring of the colonial order and the decline of the power of former *chefs de canton* like Justin Aho, colonial administrators described a “new aristocracy of Tradespeople.”²⁶ For example, Frederic Sodokpa, an Abomean native, opened a number of small retail stores in the area around Cotonou in the 1940s, but he frequently returned to the Plateau where his wives and children lived. In Abomey and elsewhere, Sodokpa passed out his business card (Figure 3.3). On the card, alongside his name and contact, there was an image of Sodokpa wearing a suit jacket and tie. He represented a new type of Dahomean man; Sodokpa made significant profits as a shopkeeper, tapping into a trade that was formerly the domain of women.²⁷ As a man embodying change, these transformations reflected on the surface of his body in his adoption of the style of the colonial African elite.

²⁵ Lettre de la Groupement des Traitants de Porto-Novo à le Gouverneur de Dahomey, Porto-Novo, October 4, 1944. ANB, 1Q/1/0002.

²⁶ Rapport Politique, 1947, April 15, 1948, 4. ANS, 2G/47/25.

²⁷ Interview with Elisabeth Sodokpa, Dota-Sogbadji, Abomey, June 15, 2015



Figure 3.3: Frederick Sodokpa's business card. Courtesy of Elisabeth Sodokpa.

Alongside businessman, veterans of the Second World War also became important influences on ordinary people's sartorial desires. Often conscripted from non-elite families, soldiers returned to the interior from the war with a new sense of global fashions and stylistic meanings. Retired tailor and businessman Lazare Agbotounso described how his father, a farmer and a veteran of the French army, wore shorts and a shirt, occasionally a long-sleeve button-down.²⁸ He had traded in the short *pagne* of agricultural labor for a fitted outfit equally suited to hoeing and planting under the hot sun. Retired tailor and *chef du village*, Lêgbânon Bênoit

²⁸ Interview with Lazare Agbotounso, Tindji-Assalin (Za-Kpota), August 1, 2015.

Djezandé was more explicit in drawing the relationship between veteran status and sartorial choice when he stated, “because my father was a veteran, he liked to always wear shorts or pants.”²⁹ These non-elite men usually lacked the resources of the new business class, but their experiences and perspectives in a world beyond Dahomey nonetheless found expression in fitted clothes.

Dahomean veterans’ preferences for fitted styles stemmed from years spent wearing the items as well as military dress’s symbolic association with power.³⁰ But their ability to enact these preferences was also rooted in their service. A few Dahomean men learned tailoring in the French military. For example, Djezandé’s father became a tailor in the army after he was injured and unable to serve in other ways.³¹ Veterans also created a direct line between the rural interior and urban coastal cities since they travelled to Cotonou to pick up their pensions every three months. Often, they spent their newly acquired cash on fabric and commissioned a Cotonou tailor to sew it into the newest styles.³² Returning back to the Plateau, they circulated these designs among ordinary men and helped foster a taste for the fitted.

As this dynamic suggests, the spread of urban style to non-elite segments of society during this period took place primarily along the axis of men’s dress. Most women continued to wear one or more wrapped *pagne*, which likely reflected their lack of purchasing power relative to men who had greater access to wage labor and profits from cash crops. Indeed, there were

²⁹ Interview with Lègbânon Bénéit Djezandé, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

³⁰ Historian Gregory Mann argues that demobilized veterans used parts of their uniforms to both make claims on the colonial state and to upset local African social organization, in particular the power dynamics between generations and elder-younger siblings. Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 93-95.

³¹ Interview with Lègbânon Bénéit Djezandé, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

³² Interview with Lègbânon Bénéit Djezandé.

probably fewer women on the Abomey Plateau wearing fitted pieces in the 1950s than during the height of the Kingdom of Dahomey when Amazons, *voudunsi*, and *ahosi* had regular access to tailored clothing and imported accessories. In contrast to his father who regularly wore fitted clothing, Lazare Agbotounso recounted that his mother, a farmer and the wife of a WWII veteran, “used a *pagne* to wrap herself, I never saw her in a dress, she never had a skirt, she used a *pagne* to wrap herself.”³³ Other oral histories confirm that most female farmers and traders on the Plateau wore wrappers during this period, occasionally with a shirt bought secondhand or tailored out of matching fabric.

In contrast, the few middle-class Dahomean women on the Plateau, such as the wives of colonial intermediaries and missionaries, wore tailored skirts, blouses, and dresses like urban middle-class women elsewhere in the colonial world. They either sewed their clothes themselves or bought them in the coastal cities. Middle-class women who made their own clothing had usually learned how to make these outfits in their colonial or missionary schools. Also, unlike farmers and traders, these women were often “homemakers” and dependents of their husbands. Part of their dependent status meant that these women had varying degrees of access to their husband’s wages and also that husbands were obligated to “clothe” their wives according to societal norms.³⁴ Overall, however, middle-class women were few in number on the Plateau and most women adopted urban style much more slowly than men in both urban and rural regions,

³³ Interview with Lazare Agbotounso, Tindji-Assalin (Za-Kpota), August 1, 2015.

³⁴ In contrast to the trader or farmer, the homemaker wife better fits the classic understanding of fashion proposed in Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Routledge, 2017 [1899])

who, by the 1950s and 1960s, had almost completely abandoned *pagne* in favor of tailored fitted styles.

II. The Suit and the Sewing Machine: Technology, Self-Fashioning and the Modern Tailor

In the 1950s, there were only a few tailors operating on the Plateau. One man recalled that by the time of independence, there were about four tailors working in Bohicon's market and about a half dozen more in the Abomey market.³⁵ These men sewed to meet the clothing demands of students, civil servants, businessmen, and veterans. However, many potential clients still ordered clothing during trips to coastal cities as opposed to having clothing made locally. In particular, men on the Plateau often ordered their business suits from tailors in the capitals of Porto-Novo and Cotonou and some of these tailors had trained in Europe or Senegal. Business suits required expensive fabrics and hours of labor to produce and only a very few tailors on the Plateau had the skill to make them. A Bohicon tailor who was an apprentice during the 1950s stated, "It was not just anybody who sewed suits at this time. Only the good people, the rich people ordered them."³⁶ These "good" and "rich" besuited men were few in number, since most teachers and lower-level civil servants wore "*la tenue pique*" (machine-stitched dress) or the style of tucking a long-sleeve shirt into a pair of trousers.³⁷ But, by the middle of the decade, new tailors, who could make business suits and who often wore suits, began to open up shop and their

³⁵ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Ganhi Market of Bohicon, April, 24 2015.

³⁶ Interview with Lékolihoui Djibidisse, Zakpo Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, December 9, 2014.

³⁷ Interview with Akouêdenoudjè, Adandokpodji, Abomey, September 4, 2015.

image as purveyors of modernity set them apart from both the tailors that preceded and followed them.

The technologies of tailoring helped tailors to fashion themselves as modern men. Sewing machines were of the few realms of mechanization in the daily life of ordinary Dahomeans, and their use led to associations between the men who tailored and the modern qualities of their machines. Elsewhere in the world during the twentieth century, the treadle sewing machine no longer served as a “modern” machine, but it remained central to narratives of progress, civilization, and modernity in Dahomey and other parts of Africa.³⁸ As show in Chapter Two, while tailors circulated with treadle machines in the interior since the early 1930s machines were still relatively new in the semi-urban and rural Abomey Plateau. Along with bikes and portable flourmills, sewing machines provided a rare opportunity for rural inhabitants to encounter mechanized technologies. Many tailors described their experiences travelling from the semi-urban centers of the Abomey and Bohicon to the surrounding villages in the post war era, and how the rapidly moving needle of their machines still surprised and delighted the *villageois*. The tailors who used these machines consequently became part of a spectacle of modernity, firmly connected to the modern qualities of their tools.

The measuring tape also played a role in this process. The adoption and use of measuring tapes changed the menu of available styles, but their use also drove tailors to acquire new skills - numeracy and basic literacy. Tailors who made voluminous tunics and *tchanka* on the Plateau during the precolonial and early colonial eras either estimated sizes by sight or by using parts of

³⁸ Hansen, 2013.

their bodies like lengths of hands or arms. While these methods worked well for generous outfits, they did not allow tailors to make the precise cuts necessary to sew modern urban styles. In order to make the clothes now in demand, a tailor needed to use a string or measuring tape to record the exact size of the client's body. Furthermore, measuring tapes and basic numeracy and literacy also increased tailors' efficiency and productivity. Tailors recorded their clients' measurements in a notebook, which allowed them to work on multiple projects at the same time and to easily delegate tasks to apprentices. But most boys and men interested in becoming a tailor had not attended school and needed to seek out alternative paths to learning how to read and write. In some cases, family members who had attended primary school informally taught basic literacy to apprentice tailors.³⁹ The growing importance of measuring tapes to the trade compelled tailors to learn new skills if they wanted to be successful and these competencies occasionally permitted these men to take part in other forms of literacy.

³⁹ Interview with Jules Wimêllo, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015.



**Figure 3.4: Celestin Godou Kpodo at his “liberation,” 1970s.
Courtesy of Celestin Godou Kpodo.**

The transformative power of the measuring tape made it a powerful symbol for tailors. Many tailors and seamstresses chose to be photographed with their measuring tape draped from their neck on the day of their “liberation,” the celebration at the end of an apprenticeship. Figure 3.4 is a photograph of an Abomean tailor, Celestin Godou Kpodo, receiving his measuring tape on the day of his liberation in the early 1970s. While the ceremony itself will be explored in fuller detail in the following chapter, it is important to note how the master hung the tape around Godou Kpodo’s neck to acknowledge his former apprentice’s entrance into the profession as a full member. The tape also suggested Godou Kpodo’s numeracy and computational skills, which made it easier for him to plan, accumulate a roster of clients, and increase his efficiency and profits. However, Godou Kpodo had never attended school and his ability to write numbers and letters as well as the few phrases that he knew in French were all learned as a tailor. This tape

and other imported tools, namely imported fabric shears and sewing machines, permitted the development of tailoring as a viable economic sector. But they also facilitated the emergence of tailors as men with “modern” competencies such as reading, writing, and using machinery.

Tailors reinforced their personas as men with an intimate knowledge of modern urban life through self-fashioning. Many tailors wore the modern urban styles of the educated men (*hunnukún*), or “dressing literate,” especially the business suit, as a way to promote their abilities and designs to a clientele aspiring to the wealth of the colonial African elite. The body of a tailor served as his most effective means of marketing. In my interviews with tailors, I always asked how they found clients beyond their families and friends. Unsurprisingly, most tailors answered something along the lines of “my work is the best,” but a few others gave more nuanced responses on the importance of dressing well as a marketing strategy. For example:

Clotaire Blenon: I am a fashion designer, right? I have to wear [suits], it is my work... two Sundays ago, I wore an all-white [suit]. The priest saw me and said ‘Monseieur Clotaire, you know that we are in Bohicon here?’ I said ‘Yes, I am in Bohicon, but I have to wear this...’

Me: So, when you go to church dressed well like that...

Blenon: People look at us... you become the mannequin... that is why us fashion designers, normally we cannot dress messy, we cannot dress in ‘thuggery’ (*la voyoucratie*) even at home...⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015.



Figure 3.5: Some Bohicon and Abomean tailors, 1950s-1970s. Photos courtesy of the individual tailors.

Although Blenon, a particularly successful tailor, described a recent instance of self-fashioning, photographs kept in the personal archives of tailors show the prevalence of this practice. Figure 3.5 is a series of passport-sized photographs of tailors from Abomey and Bohicon. Tailors affixed these snapshots to their certificates (to be explored at length in the following chapter), or the documents that masters gave to apprentices on the day of their liberation, and displayed them in their shops. The jackets are all slightly different because the

photographs date from the 1950s to the 1970s, but the basic form - the suit - remains the same. Tailors wore suits in order to promote their skills, their bodies serving the same function as a mannequin. In adopting the dress of the educated elite (*hunnukin*), tailors associated themselves with their relative wealth and social capital.



Figure 3.6: Elisabeth Sodokpo and her apprentices, 1971. Abomey. Courtesy of Sodokpa.

Women tailors, although very few in number during this period, also wore the latest urban styles as a way to promote their goods and to craft modern personas. For example, in this 1971 photograph, Elisabeth Sodokpa's apprentices wear the latest fashions, square-necked sleeveless minidresses. The three graduating apprentices are distinguished by a different

ensemble, a three-quarter sleeved dress with a round neck, as well as by their similar perfectly coiffed hairstyles or wigs. The graduates' outfits used more fabric. and were more expensive. The sleeves of their dresses also created an extra opportunity for the young women to put their skill on display. Sodokpa, seated next to the table, wears a women's *bounba* and holds a large purse. Next to her, at the center of the photograph, there is a sewing machine and a vase of flowers placed on a table. The photographer, probably more accustomed to studio work like most West African photographers, hung an untailored length of cloth behind the women in order to create a continuous background (Figure 6).⁴¹ The master tailor, Sodokpo, was one of the few women tailors working in Abomey at the time. She had turned to tailoring a few years before independence when she became pregnant and had to drop out of her final year of primary school. The photograph attests to how Sodokpa used the clothed bodies of her apprentices to promote her shop as one of the most cutting-edge in the Abomey area. Sodokpa, at the time a matron in her forties, herself wears a *bounba*, a testament to the generational limitations of the modern persona, particularly for women.

Although, tailors also displayed recent creations on the walls and in front of their shops and stalls as a form of marketing, their bodies remained the most important place to display their creations, because only through movement could clients discern the quality of their work. Bohicon tailor Blenon explained, "when you get out of a vehicle, you have to get out and walk a little so people can see you, your pants, your shirt, and how when you are walking how it gives. We call that a pose. He is going to say 'look at that gentleman there, his pants sure are a

⁴¹ Interview with Elisabeth Sodokpa, Dota-Sogbadji, Abomey, June 15, 2015

success.’ Because there are people who sew pants and it does that [not lay correctly] it is a defect.”⁴² A poorly tailored trouser might wrinkle in odd places during movement, but a well-tailored piece continued to lay correctly. Part of the tailor’s work demanded that he dress well and present himself in public, in places like churches, bars, ceremonies, and rituals in order to put his skill on display.

The dress of tailors and the associations of this look with middle class prosperity attracted ambitious young men who were keenly interested in social mobility. The vast majority of this first generation of male tailors never went to school, or at most they attended the first year or two of primary school. Many were the sons of peasant farmers and these young men saw tailoring as an opportunity to escape fieldwork. Tailoring proved attractive because this profession generated both real wealth and/or the appearance of wealth, as expressed through their besuited bodies. Abomey tailor Maurice Béhanzin described his reason for pursuing the craft: “I had an uncle who was a teacher and the way he dressed led me to sewing.”⁴³ Blenon recalled the moment that led him to choose tailoring: “I wanted to sew something so I went to the tailor’s, I saw that he was clean, he made money, when I saw these things, it started, I saw that this craft was a little good, and that was when I made my choice.”⁴⁴ Béhanzin, Blenon, and many other tailors characterized their choice of tailoring as one that they hoped would lead them to relative riches or at least to grasp the wealth of the African middle-class.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Béhanzin's uncle ended up arranging an apprenticeship with his own tailor for his nephew. Interview with Maurice Béhanzin, Hountondji, Abomey, July 14, 2015.

⁴⁴ Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015.

But the business suit was not the only form of “dressing literate” in West Africa. West Africans named waxes, a status fabric imported from Europe and consumed throughout the region, and used them to communicate and commemorate specific events. Wax prints tailored into local fashions could also be used to express wealth and literacy, as well as their wearer’s participation in global economies of style and fashion. For example, in Figure 3.4, Godou Kpodo, uses a different celebration of literacy - the Dutch company Vlisco’s wax print commonly called “ABC.”⁴⁵ That Godou Kpodo chose “ABC” fabric to make his liberation outfit was no coincidence. Often worn by students or their parents to celebrate educational achievements, Sebastien’s use of Vlisco’s “ABC” fabric conveys an equivalency between himself, the new master tailor, and the students who upon finishing school entered into lucrative jobs as suit-wearing civil servants. Both business suits and “ABC” fabric communicated that their wearer was “literate” in the sense that they had access to wealth and mobility not usually afforded to peasants.

Tailors’ bodies also resembled those of elites because they remained “clean” during work. Sitting at machines in the shade or indoors, tailors at work stayed “clean,” just like office workers, teachers, and administrators. Colonial institutions, including schools, missions, and advertising, had spent decades emphasizing the civilizing quality of clean bodies in Africa.⁴⁶ As a fifteen-year old boy, Anago Yobode choose tailoring over other artisan trades because, as he said, tailors “live cleanly.” Yobode contrasted the tailor’s body with that of other artisans:

⁴⁵ Roger Gerards and Suze May Sho, *Vlisco fabrics* (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2014)

⁴⁶ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996)

“When you see mechanics, they are always dirty.”⁴⁷ Mechanics, another one of the few mechanized crafts, became covered by grease and grime over the course of a day’s work. The majority of Dahomeans worked in fields and returned home sweaty and dusty. Similar to a *grand* or a *hunnukún* in his office, a tailor simply avoided sweating by removing his jacket and artfully draping it on the back of his chair.

Tailoring facilitated clean working bodies and also presented little harm to these same bodies. After the death of his father, Agbaignzoun tailor Pierrot Akpakpo’s mother proposed that he choose a profession. Akpakpo wavered between bush taxi driver or tailor, but his mother ended up selecting tailoring since she feared the possibility of a car accident.⁴⁸ Bohicon Tailor Alain Baba’s uncle prevented him from becoming a mechanic for similar reasons, he associated repairing cars with car accidents.⁴⁹ Master mason Marc Agbandjaï changed careers and began an apprenticeship in tailoring after an on-the-job accident when he fell and “broke his kidneys” at a construction site.⁵⁰ Many Dahomeans considered tailoring as the only clean and safe profession available to young men who had not attended school.

Along with the more practical aspects of real or perceived social mobility, and clean and safe bodies, tailoring ultimately attracted men and women interested in beauty and aesthetics. Their creativity stemmed from a craft knowledge honed through apprenticeship and other forms of training, as well as from the stylistic expertise that they acquired by perusing catalogues or by keenly observing daily life. The best tailors were not only “modern,” but also “cosmopolitans”

⁴⁷ Interview with Anago Yobode, Dota, Abomey, April 28, 2015.

⁴⁸ Interview with Pierrot Akpakpo, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

⁵⁰ Interview with Marc Agbandjaï, Dota, Abomey, April 28, 2015.

who developed their taste by consuming images and objects from elsewhere and also by their physically moving in search of new styles, opportunity, and experiences.

III. Migrancy and Cosmopolitan Craft Knowledge

Tailoring was an especially mobile craft and many of the well-dressed young tailors of the Abomey Plateau travelled regularly. Tailors were not burdened by the heavy machinery, as were mechanics and masons, nor were their work sites constrained by the confines of developed urban areas, like plumbers and electricians. Tailors had a portable infrastructure - they could work in any well-lit area, simply by tying their machine on the back of bicycle or carrying it on their head. Moving between villages and cities shaped their abilities as designers when they learned new styles and observed dress practices beyond the Plateau. The migrancy of tailors created networks that linked the open-air markets of the Abomey Plateau to rural villages, to the large cities on the coast, and to other colonies, countries, and even continents. Tailors returned home to the Abomey Plateau, with a cosmopolitan expertise in urban styles and the local dress of other groups of Africans. These competencies helped tailors to create and interpret Dahomean urban life and to shape the encounter among city folk, rural dwellers, and the new urban spaces of Abomey and Bohicon.

The central markets of Abomey and Bohicon served as the nexus of these networks of tailors. Like all open-air markets on the Abomey Plateau (Map 1), Abomey's market, Houndjro, occurred every fourth day.⁵¹ Located just south of the palatial ruins and on the road to Adja and

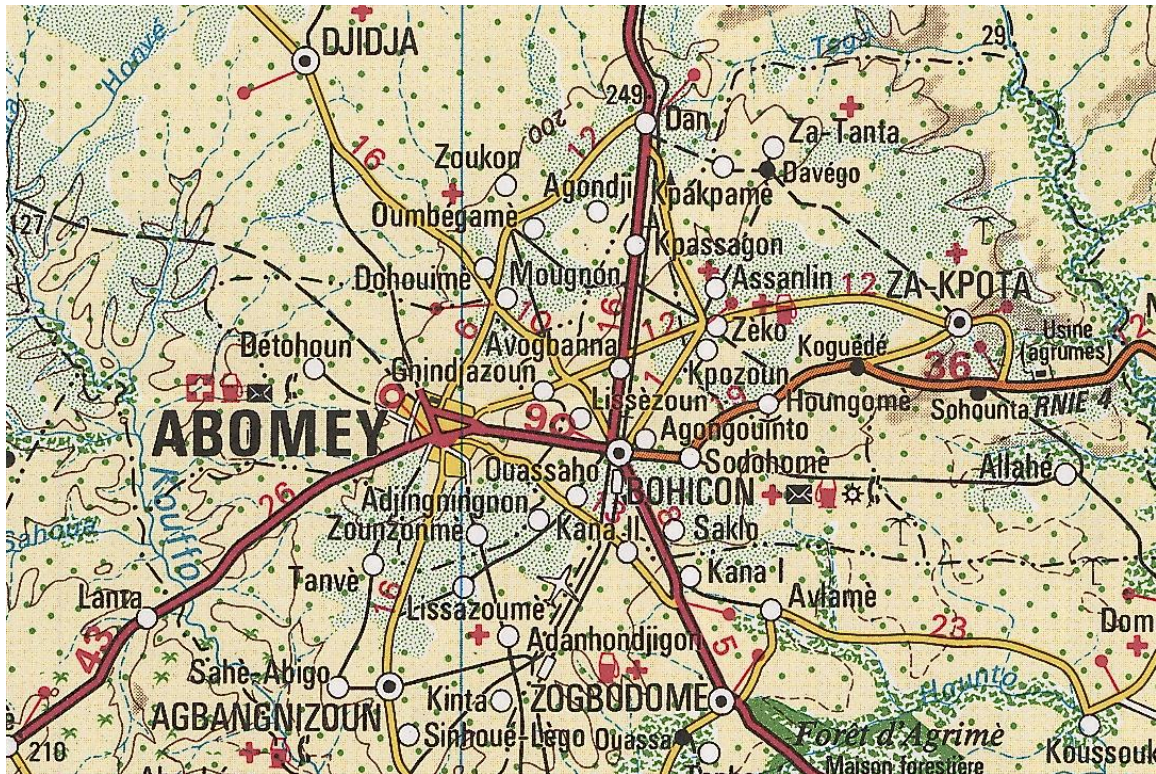
⁵¹ Beninois count it as every fifth day, since market day is both the first and fifth day of a cycle.

to the cloth markets of Lomé, Houndjro was Abomey's main fabric market and the site of most tailoring.⁵² Tailors worked in stalls within the market and a few rented shops on the northern road to the colonial neighborhood where the colonial state had built the primary school, prison, hospital, and other administrative buildings. In contrast, the Bohicon market, which grew to be significantly larger than its Abomean counterpart in the mid-twentieth century, actually consisted of two nominally separate markets, Ganhi and Sèhi. The tailors and fabric sellers occupied the French-constructed covered market (Ganhi), which was adjacent to the market where women sold produce (Sèhi).⁵³ By the time of independence in 1960, there were about four tailors working in Bohicon's Ganhi market, but this number would expand rapidly as men learned the craft and brought styles that they learned elsewhere back to the markets.⁵⁴

⁵² Interview with Emilienne Agbo, Adandokpdji Daxo, Abomey, June 8, 2015.

⁵³ Interview with Donatien Dansi. Interview with Néstor Dako-Wegbe, Houawe Zoungonsa (Bohicon), December 10, 2014.

⁵⁴ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Ganhi Market of Bohicon, April, 24 2015.



Map 3.1: Close-up of the cities and villages of the Abomey Plateau from *République Populaire du Bénin, Carte Générale*, Institut Géographique National France. Courtesy of Regenstein Library.

Tailors opened up shop next to where other Dahomeans sold cloth and tailors occasionally facilitated client's purchases of cloth either locally or through the mail, which gave them even more influence over the final outfit. Men and women bought fabric from traders in the market and then commissioned one of the tailors in Houndjro and Ganhi to sew their outfits. Both men and women sold fabric, although men often specialized in drills and kaki, while women focused on prints and waxes. To make expensive suits, tailors ordered fabric directly from France. At the post office, the postman would fill out order forms for a small fee. Along with the fabric, foreign companies sent catalogues that greatly influenced the designs of tailors

who used the images within to discuss styles with their clients.⁵⁵ The mail order system provided a direct linkage between Dahomean tailors and European markets and regimes of taste.

Tailored clothing, which by the mid-twentieth century was only readily available within the urbanizing centers of the Plateau, shaped the encounter between rural inhabitants and the towns. In the 1960s, the decade following independence, more artisans and farmers began to demand tailored fitted clothing and to order from the tailors in the Houndjro and Ganhi markets. A tailor in Tindji-Kponzou, a village a few kilometers north of Bohicon, described how his family and friends acquired sewn clothing when he was a child in the 1950s and 60s. They walked two hours along a single-track trail into Bohicon to visit a Ganhi tailor and order a shirt or pants. The tailor might tell them to return in two to twenty-four hours, giving the client the opportunity to walk around town, do some shopping, or visit transplants from the village. Then the client returned to the market to pick up their outfits, make any alterations, and continue back to their home area.⁵⁶ The waiting period gave rural inhabitants the opportunity to circulate within the growing town and experience urban life. Once the client acquired his outfit, he continued home with his newly tailored clothing, the material remnants of his recent encounter with modern urban life, and one that he could display on his body for the other people in the village

Rural demand also pushed tailors to transport their modern tools and bodies to villages. Many urban tailors moved between town and countryside on a regular basis. Bohicon tailor Antoine Zohou described how he would tie his machine to the back of his bike and ride out into villages where he might stay for a few hours to a few days. For Zohou, these short stints were

⁵⁵ Interview with René Allaga, Bohicon market, April 27, 2015.

⁵⁶ Interview with Jules Wimêllo, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015, 5

more profitable than opening a shop in the central market.⁵⁷ A marriage celebration might be particularly profitable, since brideprice almost always included cloth. After receiving the cloth, the bride's family might send someone into town to find a tailor who returned to pass three or four days and sew the bride's trousseau and any other clothing needed for the marriage ceremony.⁵⁸ The Fon's elaborate funerals also required an abundance of clothing for both men and women. Instead of requiring three *pagnes* for the various parts of the ceremony, funerals now required three sewn outfits. This extra cost for consumers translated into profits for those tailors willing to undertake short-term travel to neighboring villages.

Although tailors began to open up stalls in village markets, the allure of urban tailoring continued to attract young apprentices from villages to the central markets, because people perceived urban tailors as more qualified. One Abomean tailor told how he had twenty-seven apprentices over the course of his career and all but four came from the surrounding villages.⁵⁹ These young transplants often lived with their masters or another family member and only occasionally returned to village.⁶⁰ If an apprentice came from a nearby village and if his family were relatively well-off peasant farmers, he might bicycle from his family compound to the market on a daily or weekly basis.⁶¹ Za-Kpota tailor Lêgbânnon Bénédict Djezandé chose to apprentice as a tailor in the 1970s. By this time, there were already a few tailors in the village of Za-Kpota, but his father insisted that he move to Bohicon for his apprenticeship. Djezandé's

⁵⁷ Interview with Antoine Zohou, Adame-Adate (Bohicon), April 20, 2015.

⁵⁸ Interview with Donatien Dansi, Adame-Adate (Bohicon), December 9, 2014.

⁵⁹ Interview with Rigobert Ahissou-Avosse, Dota, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

⁶⁰ Interview with Sébastien Djokpè, Marché Ganhi de Bohicon, April 22, 2015.

⁶¹ Interview with Appolinaire Lanteffo, Kpozoun-Zadanou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015.

father considered himself an expert in clothing and style, since he was a tailor who had learned his craft in Indochina during the Second World War. Djezandé's father selected for his son a master tailor who had trained in Cotonou. Djezandé summed up his master's claim on expertise as "the tailors here [in the village] did not understand the work like him, the gentlemen learned tailoring in Cotonou... the way that he made clothes [was] different than the tailors here."⁶² The Cotonou apprenticeship of Djezandé's master meant that he was perceived as more skilled than his counterparts in Abomey and Bohicon and much more skilled than those in rural Za-Kpota.

The coastal cities of Ouidah, Porto-Novo, and Cotonou loomed large in the urban imaginaries of the residents of the Plateau and consumers and proximity to these cities affected perceptions of an individual tailor's skills. If they could afford it or were well connected, parents often preferred to send their children one of these cities for their apprenticeships. The parents of Abomean tailor Dah Ganmanssô-Ahéko sent him to Cotonou for his six-year apprenticeship and he returned to the historical city claiming to have a sartorial know-how unrivaled by his Abomean-trained counterparts. He explained his expertise: "the [tailors] who learned their craft in Cotonou, they work better than those who learned in Abomey, for example. That said, there is also a difference between those who studied in Paris, for example, and those who studied here in Africa."⁶³ Ganmanssô-Ahéko describes a hierarchy of craft knowledge that reflects proximity to the métropole and then the coastal cities. The best tailors, or the ones who clients perceived as the most skilled were the tailors who had trained in the biggest urban centers

⁶² Interview with Lêgbânon Bénéot Djezandé, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

⁶³ Interview with Dah Ganmanssô-Ahéko, Lissazoumé (Agbaignzoun), July 22, 2015.



**Figure 3.7: Agabaignzoun tailor Pierrot Akpako and his coats. August 25, 2015.
Photo by author.**

Tailors enhanced their cosmopolitan profiles by travelling to the coastal cities to follow short “improvement courses” (*cours de perfectionnement*) with other master tailors to learn the “new” styles. Tailor Pierrot Akpakpo worked for six months in his village after finishing his Abomean apprenticeship in 1964, but he was eager to broaden his repertoire. Trained only in women’s styles and men’s tunics and shorts, he negotiated with an uncle to let him go to Cotonou for an additional year of *perfectionnement*. There, he learned how to embroider and to

make suit jackets and pants.⁶⁴ In Figure 3.7, Akpakpo holds up two of his creations, jackets that he learned how to make in Cotonou. The three-button lighter blue coat on the left, which Akpakpo pulled out from a dusty trunk, dates from the late 1970s, while the one on the right is only a few years old.⁶⁵ Akpakpo reported that, “I wear them, but since I have become older, I do not wear them as much.”⁶⁶ Now an old man and a retired tailor, there was much less incentive to “dressing literate” and cultivating a cosmopolitan persona.

⁶⁴ Interview with Pierrot Akpakpo, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015. Also spent time in Cotonou specifically to learn how to make suits, Interview with Lêgbânnon Benoît Djezandé, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

⁶⁵ The newer coat shows a clear deterioration of skill. The notched collar is not as well done as the first, with the "notches" awkwardly low on the lapel.

⁶⁶ Interview with Pierrot Akpakpo, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.



Figure 3.8: Fidel Ouedjo's father-in-law and his friends, c.1990s. In photo: far left and far right (Ouedjo's father-in-law) wear *tchanka* and *avo*; second from left wears an *agbada*, and second from right wears a *dètè*. Photo courtesy of Ouedjo.

The cosmopolitanism of tailors stemmed not only from their knowledge of modern urban style, but also the African styles - the “ethnic” or “traditional” dress - that they encountered in

their travels. Porto-Novo, unlike Ouidah, Cotonou, and the Abomey Plateau, was not a Fon-majority area and the Gun and Yoruba-speakers who lived there had their own “ethnic” styles. Fon tailors acquired skill in making the region’s “traditional” dress, commonly known as the *agbada*, or “*trois pièces*” (three piece). The *agbada* was a type of boubou that consists of pants, a long tunic, and overshirt. In Figure 3.8, the man second from the left wears an *agbada* in a blue-toned wax print with off-white embroidery around the neck. The sleeves of his overshirt are pushed up to his shoulders, revealing the long sleeves of the tunic underneath. *Agbada* was strongly associated with Yoruba (Nago) identity in Dahomey. President Sourou-Migan Apithy (1964-65), a Gun-speaker from Porto-Novo, wore the *agbada* as he did in most official photographs and during political activities. Apithy’s political base was in the southeast of the country and his dress underscored his powerful position among the Gun- and Yoruba- speakers in the region. *Agbadas* were particularly expensive because they required a significant outlay of fabric, often locally woven, and were often intricately embroidered. Fon tailors who pursued apprenticeship or *perfectionnement* in Porto-Novo became experts in the urban style of the (post)colonial elite as well as the *agbada*.

Tailoring also brought young men from the Abomey Plateau to parts of West Africa farther afield than the coastal cities, including Ghana, Nigeria, and other Francophone West African countries. Similar to the way Fon tailors learned new styles such as the *agbada* in Porto-Novo, tailors there picked up new methods and forms in other parts of West Africa. During the ten years that Goudou Kpodo spent working in Côte d’Ivoire, he was able to learn a number of Ivorian styles, especially in women’s wear. He explained, “ethnicities are different there, there are Djoula, there are Bété, there are Moni [Burkinabe immigrants]. Moni wears different styles

than the others, that is how it is, that is the difference.”⁶⁷ When he returned to Abomey, Godou Kpodo He incorporated these “ethnic”-inspired flourishes into his craft and these, he felt, differentiated him among the other tailors on the Plateau.

Other tailors specialized in an “ethnic” dress that they called Muslim or Hausa dress.⁶⁸ Certain Muslim and non-Muslim tailors alike sewed boubous (Fon: *adjalabou*), made with solid color cotton or a brocade (*bazin*) and often embroidered. Itinerant traders resold *bazin* purchased in Cotonou or Lagos. In Abomey, a tailor specializing in *adjalabou* opened a shop next to all the other tailors in Houndjro and he taught these styles to both Muslim Hausa-speaking and non-Muslim Fon-speaking apprentices. The Muslim clients were Hausa and Yoruba migrants mostly settled in Abomey and Bohicon’s Zongo neighborhoods.⁶⁹ When asked why Muslims wore different dress, one tailor explained that the style originated in the Sahel where their ancestors came from and arrived in central Dahomey on the bodies of Muslim traders.⁷⁰ Abomean Zongo resident Amadou Adamou offered a more practical reason, claiming that the long robes of the *adjalabou* prevented people from seeing your bottom while praying.⁷¹ The tailors who sewed these robes also specialized in embroidery, which became popular as an adornment on local outfits other than the *adjalabou*. Other tailors brought outfits for their clients to these tailors who specialized in embroidery.

⁶⁷ Interview with Celestin Godou Kpodo, Adandokpodji, Abomey, June 1, 2015.

⁶⁸ Many Hausa had lived in and/or traded on the Abomey Plateau since the precolonial era.

⁶⁹ Interview with Abdou Ibrahim Bah, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015. In the non-Muslim areas from southern Ghana to Nigeria, “Zongo” is the name for Muslim neighborhoods, which are usually adjacent to the central mosque and home to Hausa traders and their descendants.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Interview with Amadou Adamou, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

Many tailors moved abroad or to coastal cities in search of profit or to hone their craft, but they often returned to the Abomey Plateau after spending months or years abroad. Sometimes they came back for personal reasons. For example, Goudou Kpodo returned to Abomey from Côte d'Ivoire after receiving a pleading letter from his mother. His younger brother had moved to Canada, leaving her without any nearby sons.⁷² More often, tailors returned to the Abomey Plateau because of political changes. One woman described the career of her father, a master tailor for the French military in Niamey, Niger. A native of Porto-Novo, her father moved the family to Niamey when he received a contract sewing uniforms for the colonial military. Independence forced the family to move back to Dahomey, since the newly minted Nigerien army wanted to hire its own Nigerien craftsmen as tailors.⁷³ Post-colonial instability elsewhere in West and Central Africa often resulted in the repatriation of foreign workers, forcing tailors to pack up and flee on a moment's notice. These abrupt moves could result in painful losses, for they sometimes departed with such haste that they had to leave behind their machines, diplomas, and caches of photos and catalogues.⁷⁴ Repatriations from places like Gabon, Nigeria, and Ghana limited the cosmopolitanism of tailors when it restricted their movement. Unable to observe other clothing practices, they had to rely on the importation of

⁷² Interview with Celestin Godou Kpodo, Adandokpodji, Abomey, June 1, 2015.

⁷³ Interview with Jeanne Hanou, Ahouamé, Bohicon, July 17, 2015. A significant number of Dahomeans worked in the other colonies of the AOF and these civil servants were forced to return to Dahomey at independence. These men, now "foreigners" in countries where many had worked for years and established families, often had to abandon investments and families. Interview with Gabin Akouêdenoudjè, Ahouaja, Abomey, September 4, 2015

⁷⁴ Thelesphore Ahossi was repatriated from Gabon, Interview with Ahossi, Lissazoumé (Agbaignzoun), July 21, 2015. The Nigerian expulsions of the early 1980s affected a number of my male and female informants. For example, interview with Maurice Béhanzin, Hountondji, Abomey, July 14, 2015 and interview with Lègbânon Bénéto Djezané, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015.

images and secondhand clothing for inspiration and innovation, which overwhelmingly provided images of urban style and rarely gave any insight in the “ethnic” dress of other Africans.

Whether for apprenticeship, for *perfectionnement* or for the search of profit, tailor’s migrations created men knowledgeable about the modern urban fashions of the coastal cities and other African capitals. Mobility also brought tailors into contact with the “ethnic dress” of other Africans. These cosmopolitan men translated their expertise into craft knowledge to make outfits that met local demands for new and exciting clothing. But tailors also contributed to more local processes of differentiation. They brought ideas about the proper bodily comportment of modern urban subjects into the rural villages of the Abomey Plateau. Tailoring permitted rural inhabitants to experience the city when tailors arrived with their machines and business suits. Rural dwellers also came in to contact with urban life while they waited for orders placed in Houndjro and Ganhi. The modern and cosmopolitan tailor used his real expertise in world fashion and ethnic dress to create new meanings around clothing in the late colonial and early postcolonial eras, and tailors helped to bridge the divide between rural and urban.

IV. Translating Cosmopolitan Expertise into Men’s Fashions: Dahomean National Style

A 1962 article in the state-run newspaper, *L’aube nouvelle*, brought the fashions of Paris runways to Dahomeans.⁷⁵ Although the article presented multiple images of women’s fashion, only one photograph offered an example of men’s fashion (*la mode masculine*). The “*tenue française*” or French dress in the photograph was a safari suit. This style, with its belted coat and

⁷⁵ "La mode: le voile se leve sur les collections printemps - été 1962 de la haute couture," *L’aube nouvelle*, No. 69, March 10, 1962, ANB.

cuff-free pants, offered male consumers a casual look that, combined with light colored fabric, prepared them for the intense heat of the tropics. The state-sanctioned promotion of the safari suit was a rare official commentary on men's fashion. Indeed, there was very little discourse on men's fashions and a "national style" during the first few years after independence.

That situation changed, however, in 1965, when General Christophe Soglo took power through another military coup and the new government took specific aim at menswear.⁷⁶ The Soglo regime attempted to change notions of elite dress by requiring ministers to wear a new national costume. Although it bore more than a passing resemblance to the safari suit, the new national outfit was promoted as a "military style," complete with long pants and a long sleeve shirt sewn from a tough kaki (Figure 3.9). Commentators defended the costume as a move towards equality and democratization -- instead of "dressing literate" in fancy suits, ministers wore the same clothes as laborers and peasants. General Soglo also required ministers to work the fields, at least in front of photographers. Figure 3.9 shows the ministers, Soglo, and other important government and military officials taking a break from agricultural work to drink from a calabash much like poor Dahomean farmers would. Commentators imagined that the costume might even quell poor Dahomeans' aspirations to the life of a minister: "the citizen of Karimama or Segbana [both poor and very remote northern villages] will take notice of the fact that the "grands" are dressed as they also can be."⁷⁷ A regular editorial writer throughout the 1960s, E. Cayode, defended the new national dress for practical reasons. He interpreted European suits as

⁷⁶ Unlike General Soglo's 1963 coup, he did not transfer power to a civilian regime. This time, he decided to declare himself president and ruled for about two years until he was also deposed through a military coup d'état.

⁷⁷ E. Cayode, "Eloquence du vêtement," *L'aube nouvelle*, April 24, 1966.

unfit for the climate; in his estimation, business suits had no place in the tropics.⁷⁸ While the 1966 national costume was as short-lived as the regime that promoted it (General Soglo was overthrown by a younger group of military officers in 1967), the attempt to create a form of dress that embodied the values of an independent Dahomey nonetheless persisted. But instead of within the pages of the national newspaper or in the halls of the legislature, the birth of a national costume was a project that took place in tailor's market stalls.



Figure 3.9: The President and his cabinet in the national costume, *L'aube nouvelle*, June 5, 1966.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Original caption: "They have gone to the field for Dahomey's renaissance. We see in the photo from left to right the préfet of the North-West, M. Amoussou-Ouenou; High Commissioner of Information, M. Stanislas Adotevi; General Soglo; Director of Economic Affairs M. Menou-Loko; Minister of Rural Development, M. Moise Mensah; and Commandant Alphonse Alley, Chief of State, Major General of F.A.D. "We worked hard with the peasants and we drank from their calabasses," declared General Soglo at the end of the agricultural campaign.

Tailors characterized themselves as experts in either *tenue française* (literally, “French dress,” but a signifier for modern urban styles) or *tenue locale* (local dress). Those tailors, of the former category, that sewed urban styles and were skilled in the production of suits, trousers, and jackets began to make, in the 1960s and 1970s, the *dètè*. A localized form of “French dress,” the *dètè* drew inspiration from the Parisian safari suit and the Congolese *abacost*. At the same time, the outfit was part of a worldwide trend for leisure suits that took place during the 1960s and 1970s. But, the fad never faded in Benin and the *dètè* remained one of the most popular Beninois men’s styles worn by men of all social classes.⁸⁰

The *dètè* (from the French *chemise d’été*, or a short-sleeve button-down) consisted of pants and a matching short sleeve jacket, usually worn with no undershirt or at most a thin T-shirt. In Figure 3.8, the man second from the right wear a typical *dètè*, although its boxiness, or lack of fittedness, reflect the preferences of the decade – the 1990s – when the photograph was taken. The lack of layers and short sleeves made the outfit better suited to the high humidity and intense heat of the Plateau. Beninois also called the *dètè* the “three pocket” because of two large patch pockets at waist level and a third at chest level. The pockets provided an ideal place for men to store their pens, identification cards and other documents -- the stuff of modern urban life.

Tailors sewed *dètè* to meet the large demand for urban style among Beninois men. To sew a *dètè* was more profitable than many other outfits since it required more hours of work and

⁸⁰ The *dètè* was not just a Beninois style and it remains popular there and with Togolese and, according to one informant, among the “Igbo” of Nigeria. Interview with Lègbânon Bénéit Djezandé, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015. Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015.

more could be charged for the complete ensemble.⁸¹ But the *dètè* was also a localization of the three-piece business suit; it was the business suit made accessible and useful to ordinary Beninois men. Tailors sewed these outfits from tergal, a type of polyester imported from France or ordered through the mail. Although still a significant outlay for fabric, Bohicon tailor Rene Allaga argued that its price was still within reach for most Beninois, unlike the expensive wool of a proper three-piece suit. Allaga explained “even farmers who sell their harvest, they order [tergal], those who are workers who find a little money order too and those who are civil servants and are permanent state employees, they order too.”⁸² If the cost of dressing literate barred certain Beninois from purchasing fabric and the labor required to sew a three-piece business suit, the *dètè* was well within reach for most ordinary Beninois and was still associated with the national elite.

V. Translating Cosmopolitan Expertise into Men’s Fashions: Fon “Traditional” Dress

But the establishment and spread of modern urban style on the Plateau also accompanied an expansion and reinterpretation of “local” dress among Fon-speakers. In the editorial where he defends the 1966 national costume, the writer, E. Cayode, also interpreted “African dress” as not suited to the demands of modern life. Cayode wrote, “I cannot imagine that a nurse, a driver, a schoolteacher or a worker could juggle all these skirts and overhanging parts. How can a man drowning in ten meters of cloth happen to do something serious...”⁸³ His assessment reveals a

⁸¹ Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015.

⁸² Interview with René Allaga, Bohicon market, April 27, 2015.

⁸³ E. Cayode, “Eloquence du vêtement,” *L’aube nouvelle*, April 24, 1966.

very specific understanding of “African dress” as *agbadas*, the Yoruba style worn by Apithy and popular in Porto-Novo. But how did Fon-speaking men on the Abomey Plateau imagine their local or ethnic dress as different from “French dress”?

As shown in Chapter One, precolonial Fon dress was a bricolage of style that constantly evolved through innovation and incorporation. But, in the early colonial period, traditional authorities, including *chef de canton* Justin Aho helped establish the “Fon dress” of *avo (grande pagne)* with *tchanka*. In Figure 3.8, the men on both the far left and far right wear *grande pagne* and *tchanka* and hold the ceremonial canes of their clan. However, only local traditional authorities, in other words, the king and the heads of clan (*Dah*) that he appointed could wear *tchanka* and *pagne*. Clans enforced these restrictions on dress within their ranks by punishing offenders, even if seen wearing the ensemble beyond the Plateau, with beatings and public humiliation.⁸⁴ These restrictions on dress meant that very few men had access to Fon “traditional” dress. For example, in contrast to Apithy who regularly wore *agbada*, President Justin Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin (prime minister, 1964-65; president 1972) wore suits, trousers, and button-down shirts on the national and international stage. Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin was not an enthroned *Dah* and had only married into a Dahomean royal family and thus did not have the traditional right to wear *tchanka*.⁸⁵ Presumably, he deemed simply wrapping a *pagne* as unacceptable, because photographs and informants attest that Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin always

⁸⁴ Interview with Dah Atchassou, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 10, 2014.

⁸⁵ His disagreements with the Fon royal families manifested in a split among Fon voters on the national platform. The squabbles between Fon royal and non-royal families is also present in the archival record. For example, see, for example, Lettre de Germain Dègan to Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin. October 19, 1950. ANB, 1G/19.

wore a business suit or casual fitted styles. As his case suggests, ordinary Fon men were a group without an “ethnic dress” at the same time that African ethnic markers were becoming increasingly important within national and international politics.

By the end of the twentieth century, Fon-speakers widely considered men’s *bounba* (Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.10) as a form of “local” or “traditional” dress on the Abomey Plateau, although many of these same men openly acknowledged the outfit’s foreign origins. Alain Baba, the former head of the Bohicon tailor’s association, claimed that the bounba gained popularity in the 1930s.⁸⁶ Consisting of a shirt and long drawstring pants, the bounba style originated among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. Today, it is a style especially popular among Togolese, Beninois, and Nigerians. Indeed, when Godou Kpodou opened a workshop in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, he specialized in sewing the bounba, which Ivoirians called “*anago*,” also their term for Yoruba-speakers.⁸⁷ While men might still wear the *pagne* at a ceremony, the bounba became *the* local dress on the Abomey Plateau over the course of the twentieth century.

⁸⁶ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

⁸⁷ Interview with Celestin Godou Kpodo, Adandokpodji, Abomey, June 1, 2015.



**Figure 3.10: Marc Esse and Pascal Adouhouncla wearing *bounbas*, Abomey. July 15, 2015.
Photo by author.**

The general form of the bounba has changed little since the mid-twentieth century, although necklines, embellishments, fittedness, and fabric underwent modification. Originally, the neck was wide enough to be pulled over the head, but necklines became tighter by adding

buttons, snaps, or short zippers down the front.⁸⁸ The neckline could also have additional embellishments, such as embroidery or piping. In Figure 3.10, my research assistant Marc and his former *patron* wear bounbas with tight necklines that include two buttons to permit the removal of the garment over the head. The photograph provides evidence on how the hem of the shirt often changed, hitting anywhere from the upper thigh to right above the kneecap. The bounba could, at times, be roomy or tight. For example, at the time of this research in 2014 to 2015, men's bounbas were incredibly tight, while just a decade earlier they were boxy. Finally, fabrics changed over time. In the 1960s, Dahomeans made bounbas with inexpensive percale or poplins and occasionally more expensive local fabrics that they heavily embroidered.⁸⁹ But bounbas made from wax prints, such as those worn by Marc and his *patron*, are a more recent trend, which date from the 1970s. Bounbas can be made very cheaply or require significant investment, depending on the modifications made to the basic form.

These slight changes in bounbas resulted from the creativity and style expertise of tailors. Tailors incorporated flourishes learned in other cities, colonies, and countries into their creations. They culled knowledge gained from catalogues and disassembled secondhand clothing to add flourishes and embellishments that attracted clients in search of the new and exciting. Instead of being a “Yoruba style” that had a fleeting popularity during late colonialism, the bounba became Dahomean and Beninois local dress because tailors kept it fresh and new with their cosmopolitan expertise. In crafting the bounba as a local tradition, tailors also showed ordinary men what it

⁸⁸ Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015. Today, only “old men” wear bounbas that can be pulled over the head.

⁸⁹ Interview with Lékoli Houi Djibidisse, Zakpo Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, December 9, 2014.

meant to be an African and how to incorporate non-African and other ethnic markers into one's own self-fashioning.

The popularity of the bounba and the *dètè* can be understood as the result of similar desires among Dahomeans. The bounba was local and African, but not quite Fon or even Dahomean. In contrast, the *dètè* was a version of modern urban style, but localized. As Blenon explained when asked why Dahomeans (now Beninois) still like the *dètè*, “when you wear *dètè*, you are wearing French dress and regular dress (*tenue ordinaire*), the two, you are wearing the two.”⁹⁰ To wear the *dètè* allowed Dahomean men to perform their multiple identities as members of the modern world and as locally grounded in Dahomean particularities. To wear the bounba reflected a sense of pride in being Dahomean or “African” as well as in the ability of Dahomeans to incorporate from the outside.

The cosmopolitanism of tailors allowed them to design, sew, and promote both bounbas and *dètès*. An individual tailor might claim expertise in one or the other and this expertise could change over the course of a single career. But their abilities were grounded in their trainings in French dress and local dress. As an expert in one or the other, they helped to define these outfits as either “modern” world dress or its “traditional” local counterpart. Their creativity and expertise sustained these two styles for much of the twentieth century as they remade and added flourishes to stable forms.

⁹⁰ Interview with Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015.

“An overcrowded profession: SEWING” read a 1968 headline in *L’aube nouvelle*.⁹¹ The author, C. Elegbede, described the state of tailoring in Porto-Novo and argued that tailoring was in decline. In his estimation, it had become “a place of refuge for schoolboys flunked out of school who cannot find another future and who think that petty commerce equals belittling oneself to the rank of peasant. Without any vocation, without any taste for the trade, they start tailoring.”⁹² Elegbede guessed that there were over 500 tailors, seamstresses, and apprentices in Porto-Novo. He concluded that this bloated number meant that few apprentices would be able to establish workshops and also that prices were being driven down to unsustainable levels. While Elegbede wrote about Porto-Novo in the late 1960s, his article foreshadows the state of tailoring on the Abomey Plateau in the 1970s and 1980s. As the craft became saturated, tailors’ roles in shaping Beninois notions of self, city, and nation declined.

The tailors of the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s often became relatively wealthy. Many tailors translated their wealth into bettering their children’s prospects at formal employment. While many tailors were not well educated, the majority of tailors that I interviewed sent their children to school and some on to university. For example, Akpakpo declared “I live in poverty now but my children are intellectuals... one is a doctor... a teacher... construction engineer.”⁹³ If tailors performed literacy and modernity, many invested the profits of this performance in their children’s education and future financial stability. Another group of tailors used their knowledge of local and regional networks and profits from tailoring to invest in transportation. Some bought

⁹¹ C. Elegbede, “Un profession surchargée: LA COUTURE,” *L’aube nouvelle*, April 21, 1968.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Interview with Pierrot Akpakpo, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

cars and then used these cars to work in other parts of West Africa.⁹⁴ Others' wanderings led them to become full time bush taxi drivers.⁹⁵ Za-Kpota tailor Jules Wimêllo purchased flourmills and vehicles in order to transport his mills between villages, where his employees ground the grain produced by locals for a small fee. A few years into the business, he had eight cars. Later, he bought a truck to do long-haul transport. By the time he was in his 70s, he had five wives and a sprawling compound that served as a home to his many children and grandchildren.⁹⁶ Buying cars and trucks and investing in dependents became a way for tailors to store and augment their wealth and also reinforced their image as successful.

But many of the tailors who found success in the 1950s and 1960s faced increasing obstacles in the 1970s. Young people perceived them as "no longer in style" and sought out men of their own age to sew their clothes.⁹⁷ Moreover, older, established clients with whom tailors had long-standing relationships tended to order less as the years passed. As the older male clientele left the workforce, they also had less disposable income to spend on clothing than younger or middle-aged men who preferred to order from younger tailors.⁹⁸ The sense of possibility and prosperity that they embodied in their younger years seemed at odds with the aged body of an older man and some ceased although to support themselves as tailors. A few of

⁹⁴ Celestin Goudou Kpodo worked at the jute sack factory and saved enough money to buy two cars, one of which he drove to Cote d'Ivoire to work there. Interview with Celestin Godou Kpodo, Adandokpodji, Abomey, June 1, 2015. (8-9)

⁹⁵ Nestor Djèha, the current head of the Bohicon taxi station and head of the driver's union was originally a tailor. Interview with Donatien Dansi, Adame-Adate (Bohicon), December 9, 2014. Interview with Lékolihoui Djibidisse, Zakpo Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, December 9, 2014.

⁹⁶ Interview with Jules Wimêllo, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015, 5

⁹⁷ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Ganhi Market of Bohicon, April 24, 2015. Interview with Sébastien Djokpè, Marché Ganhi de Bohicon, April 22, 2015.

⁹⁸ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Ganhi Market of Bohicon, April 24, 2015.

these older tailors, like Dansi Donatien in this chapter's opening vignette, adopted new modes of self-fashioning and became experts of tradition as healers or heads of clan (*Dah*).

The generations that replaced these tailors could not generate the profits necessary for “dressing well” and they were unable to maintain the same measure of control over matters of style as the men that came before them. While in earlier years, tailors helped establish the popularity of styles like the bounba and the détè, tailors of the late 1970s and afterwards no longer held the authoritative expertise of modern and cosmopolitan men and women to shape the form and meaning of clothing. Their “modern” tools no longer seemed so modern and most tailors now lacked the income to invest in dressing literate. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan tailor's command of style meant less and less in a globalizing world, since many clients now had direct access to images of world fashion and they did not need the interpretive lens of the tailor. Although tailors were only able to sustain their mediating roles for a few short decades in the mid-twentieth century, their objects, bodies, and expertise played a pivotal role in interpreting modernity and urbanization for ordinary Beninois.

Chapter 4
Disciplining the Craft:
Colonial Artisan Identity and Beninois Control Over Craft Knowledge



Figure 4.1: “Mme Aplogan, between Misses Lucienne GLIN (left) and Claire DASSI,”
Daho Express, August 28, 1971.

A 1971 article, “Under the Sign of the Tape Measure,” in the women’s section of a Dahomean daily newspaper, *Daho Express*, introduced readers to the “liberation ceremony.”¹ This Saturday celebration was the rite of passage that marked the “release” of an apprentice from their apprenticeship and their acceptance into the community of master artisans. The anonymous writer of the article began “If you hear someone say, ‘I am going to assist in a liberation,’ you would be wrong to conclude that they are going to be at the release of a prisoner or the return home of a soldier. In fact, a ‘liberation’ is a symbolic and pleasant ceremony that marks the end of an apprenticeship... [for] tailors and seamstresses, cabinetmakers, jewelers, etc.”² The article continued by describing the various aspects of the “traditional celebration,” which often included “timed technical tests and mock corporal punishment (in which spectators rush to ‘buy’ to save the apprentice), but always speeches, handing out diplomas, advice, sketches, [and] more recently, but no less traditional, a reception with dancing.”³ Two photographs accompanied the article, including one of master seamstress Madame Aplogan, flanked by her two apprentices who each had a tape measure draped around their necks and held a newly acquired diploma, attesting to their acquisition of the skills of a master seamstress (Figure 4.1). Exchanging gifts was also a part of the ceremony. Another master seamstress mentioned in the article, Madame Lebrun, gave her six liberated apprentices “the tools symbolic of the perfect seamstress: the tape measure and the scissors.”⁴ Most of the liberation ceremony took place in front of an audience that included family and friends of the apprentices as well as other master artisans. The

¹ “Sous le signe du centimètre,” *Daho Express*, No 621, August 28, 1971.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

ceremony, as described in the pages of the newspaper, took hours and was undoubtedly costly for the apprentices and their families.

Although the author described the liberation ceremony as a “traditional celebration,” her account also revealed that it was a “tradition” undergoing invention by artisans themselves. Indeed, the purpose of the article was to provide information about liberation ceremonies to a public that knew little about them. Other aspects of the “traditional” ceremony were firmly rooted in the twentieth century, such as the exchange of diplomas modeled off those handed out in colonial and postcolonial schools, “timed” tests, the gifting of imported tools, the consumption of beer, soft drinks, and imported whisky, and, later, sound systems and DJs. Furthermore, oral histories revealed that artisans on the Abomey Plateau who finished apprenticeships before the 1960s and the 1970s did not go through liberation or receive diplomas. In this chapter, I argue that the liberation ceremony, along with increasingly complicated and expensive modes of apprenticeship, and later, the creation of craft-specific associations were innovative efforts on the part of artisans to impose order and uniformity in their crafts by regulating craft knowledge and limiting their ranks. The objects and practices of artisanship allowed individuals and groups of craftsmen to re-imagine the relationship between occupation and self, city, and nation.

But this chapter begins by returning to an earlier period - the era between the two World Wars - to explore the development of colonial knowledge about African artisans and of colonial policies and programs directed at artisans. As shown in chapter one, artisans flourished in the Kingdom of Dahomey, but their handwork did not define their political and social status - the category of artisan was not “fixed.” In the Interwar period, the French colonial state institutionalized *l’artisanat* as a social category throughout French West Africa with policies that

drew upon their knowledge and interpretations of artisans in the French Soudan, or the area of present-day Mali. There, they conceived of a rural, endogamous “traditional” *l’artisanat* constantly in need of colonial guidance in order to maintain its “authenticity.” This approach - that African artisans operated somehow outside the capitalist global economy and needed protection from it - led colonial administrators to pursue two sets of “cultural” policies towards Dahomean craftsmen as opposed to a singular regulatory approach that would formalize craft production as a part of the economy. First, colonial administrators created a system of technical and artisan education, based on models developed in the French Soudan. Second, administrators replicated colonial expositions and France’s “Best Craftsman” program within the colony of Dahomey. These two concurrent sets of programs served to foster artisan identity among Dahomeans and to convey colonial conceptions of an authentic African taste and craft production.

Colonial fairs, expositions, and competitions introduced a series of objects and practices that artisans later adapted and incorporated to create their own traditions of apprenticeship, liberation, and associations. Copies of contracts and diplomas found in state and personal archives confirm that Dahomean craftspeople began to use them in the context of “traditional” or “informal” craft apprenticeship by the mid-twentieth century. Although not mentioned in the article from *Daho Express*, liberation ceremonies also began to include sacrifices to the *Gu*, the god of metallurgy in Fon *vodun* religion [*Ogun* in orisha]. Sacrifices to the *Gu* illustrate how artisans also used indigenous systems of knowledge to reinforce and localize colonial artisan identity. Finally, artisans attempted to further exert control over their craft knowledge by organizing themselves into cooperatives and associations, additional social formations without

pre-colonial corollaries. These groups rarely functioned for long periods of time, hinting at the weakness of *l'artisanat* as an identity and the lack of common experience among artisans. In the absence of colonial and postcolonial state regulations of artisanship, tailors and other artisans used apprenticeship, liberation, and associations to impose order on their sector and regulate craft knowledge.

I. A Model of African Artisanship: Colonial Knowledge and the French Soudan

French colonial administrators developed programs directed at Dahomean artisans based on their narrow understandings of the “African artisan” as a particular rural, endogamous, and low-status “caste.” This approach was rooted in colonial knowledge about the French Soudan (see Map 2.1). Endogamous groups of craftsmen and musicians did indeed live in many areas of pre-colonial West Africa from present-day Mauritania and the Senegambia inland to Mali and parts of Niger. Metalworkers, woodworkers, leatherworkers, and musicians and entertainers were also casted in present-day Guinea to parts of eastern Ghana and as far afield as northern Cameroon and amongst the nomadic peoples of the Sahara. Historian Tal Tamari has shown how, in these societies, artisan and musician occupations were hereditary with marriage and sexual relations only permitted between individuals from families practicing the same craft. Casted artisans ranked between nobility and slaves, although in many of these societies, nobility could be captured and turned into slaves, while artisans and musicians could never, in principle, be reduced to slaves.⁵ Relative to the overall populations of these areas, casted peoples

⁵ Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *Journal of African History* (1991); 224.

constituted a small but influential minority. European adventurers and explorers, ethnologists, missionaries, and low-level colonial officials wrote extensively about caste artisans, particularly in the French Soudan, creating a body of work that shaped how colonial officials throughout the AOF understood *l'artisanat africain*.

Their writings of this diverse group of colonial commentators focused on the rigidity of artisan identity in West Africa and how occupation was intrinsically linked to social and political status. An example of this genre is colonial ethnologist Maurice Delafosse, who developed an influential theory on a tripartite social division within West Africa. Delafosse published a number of studies on African languages and “tribes” around the turn of the twentieth century. Sahelian society, he showed, was organized into three groups: the ruling class, the artisans and professionals, and the slaves at the bottom of the social hierarchy.⁶ In his 1912 three-volume tome, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, Delafosse delineated the different “tribes” of the interior of the AOF and their languages, histories, and cultures. His account was rife with references to rigid social organization. For example, among the Bambara, he identified the *Somono* (fishermen and boatmen), *Noumou* (blacksmiths and potters), *Lorho* (copper jewelers), *Koulè* (wood craftsmen), *Dièli* (griots), *Faunè* or *Founée* (religious griots and magicians), and *Donso* or *Lonzo* (hunters). He argued that one found similar castes among all Mandé speakers, and “under other names, among most of the peoples of the Soudan.”⁷

⁶ Douglas William Leonard, "Networks of Knowledge: Ethnology and Civilization in French North and West Africa, 1844-1961" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2012): 292.

⁷ Maurice Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Paris: Émile Larose, 1912): 139.

Another influential colonial ethnologist and administrator, Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba, shared Delafosse's approach to Sahelian artisans as low-status and caste. Dupuis-Yakouba was a French missionary with the White Fathers in Timbuktu in the 1890s, but he left the Church in 1904 to marry a local woman. He stayed in the region and became a Songhai interpreter and moved up through the colonial ranks, even serving as a *commandant de cercle* in a nearby region. His unique story and integration into Timbuktu society made him somewhat of a celebrity, first throughout French Soudan, and then in the métropole itself.⁸ Dupuis-Yakouba published multiple accounts of the region, including many writings that focused on caste artisans. In a 1910 article, he divided Timbuktu society into three groups: *Alfa*, *Arma*, and *Gabibi*. According to Dupuis-Yakouba, the first two groups were noble classes. The *Alfa* were the literate class and served as Islamic scribes, or *qadis*. Dupuis-Yakouba also noted that *Alfa* learned tailoring as children, with the most talented of them setting up shops and apprenticing other *Alfa* children. The *Arma* constituted the warrior class and also worked as shoemakers. Finally, the *Gabibi*, or the "descendants of slaves" served as "masons, silversmiths, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, butchers, donkey-drivers, etc."⁹ Dupuis-Yakouba expounded upon his ideas in a book-length study, in which he described the production methods, common material forms, and social status of each of these caste occupations in Timbuktu.¹⁰ Although Dupuis-Yakouba

⁸ Owen White, "The Decivilizing Mission: August Dupuis-Yakouba and French Timbuktu" *French Historical Studies* (2004): 541-568.

⁹ Dupuis-Yakouba asserts that the nineteenth century led to the decline of the *Alfa* and the rise of the *Gabibi* as they participated more in the regional commerce fostered by Fulani and Tuareg domination. A. Dupuis-Yakouba, "Notes sur la population de Tombouctou (castes et associations)" *Revue d'ethnographie et de sociologie* (1910): 233-236.

¹⁰ Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba, *Industries et principales professions des habitants de la région de Tombouctou* (Paris: Émile Larose, 1921)

identified specific craft traditions among the Timbuktu elite, the vast majority of craftsmen in his account were low-status descendants of slaves. Taken together, both colonial ethnologists shared a similar interpretation of the rigidity of West African social organization and the particular low status of craftspeople.

By the 1920s and 30s, French colonial administrators destined for Africa began to study African societies through the writings of Delafosse, Dupuis-Yakouba, and others at the Colonial School (*l'École Coloniale*) in Paris. Administrators in education were particularly interested in the study of African social practices in order to create an educational system better suited to local “cultures.” Historian Gary Wilder described the interwar cadre of colonial administrators educated in the Colonial School as “colonial humanists” who planned to reform African societies based on a scientific knowledge of them. The ‘administrator-ethnographers’ that constituted Wilder’s “reformers,” attempted to create new colonial policies rooted in the particularities of African society.¹¹ The push for a colonial policy informed by scientific knowledge of local conditions was part of a larger shift from “assimilation” to “association” as the state reduced its emphasis on creating “black Frenchmen” and began to concentrate on developing African societies through African institutions. Instead of a colonial school system focused solely on educating elite *assimlés* or forming literate intermediaries, the interwar colonial humanists explored the possibilities of artisanal, manual, and technical education as a new approach to colonial education.

¹¹ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 55.

RURAL CENTERS	URBAN CENTERS
Weavers Manufacturers of fishing gear Potters (cooking utensils and small bricks, various pipes) Carpenters (<i>connaissant le soiage de long</i>) Carpenters (boat builders) Shoemakers Saddlemakers - Saddlers Tanners leathersmiths of small animals Basketmakers (manufacturers of rattan furniture and containers) Stonecutter Carpenter (simple cabinetmaker) Turner Chairmaker, knows canework and mulching Blacksmith - <i>Taillandier</i> Jeweler	Blacksmith (<i>Maréchal Ferrant</i>) Wheelwright Coppersmith Brassmaker Plumber Electrician (for small jobs) Mechanics of small items (maintenance and repair of sewing machines, bicycles, etc.) Upholster Cement mason Building painter (glazier decorator) Locksmith Tinsmith Cooper Tailor (cuts clothes) Bookbinder

Chart 4.1: "Proposed Artisans: Among the artisans that we need to recruit, you must imagine that some activities are particularly rural -- and others are destined for urban centers." "Recrutement des artisans métropolitans," ANS, O/537/31.

Informed by ethnographers' accounts of Soudanais artisanship, which they studied in Colonial School, administrators in the AOF began to develop a system of "artisanal education" under the larger umbrella of technical education. Technical education, or vocational education, trained Africans in practical skills for employment in colonial enterprise and the state. Special schools in the colonial capitals taught skills such as carpentry, masonry, mechanics, and later electrical and plumbing. These trades, imagined as "modern" and urban by the colonial administration, were contrasted with the so-called "traditional" and rural African crafts such as pottery, weaving, basketmaking, and leatherworking. For example, an administrator in 1930 proposed a list delineating which artisans the state should recruit for rural-based education versus

urban-based education (Chart 4.1).¹² While technical education was partially modelled after similar workshops and schools in France, administrators - the colonial humanists - sought to create a new system of institutions of artisanal education geared towards locally oriented development and based on local social formations. Administrators designed these programs to revive “traditional” production techniques and forms, and to protect “traditional” artisans and their handmade objects from the corrupting influences of modernity and capitalism. In a sense, these colonial education programs aimed at artisans sought to protect artisans from the larger economic demands of colonialism itself.

One administrator who was particularly invested in the project of artisan education was Albert Charton, Inspector General of Education of the AOF from 1929 to 1939. Charton argued that Africans lacked a culture capable of becoming a “civilization,” but that education could help Africans in the “‘creation of a native culture’... through the ‘grafting of indigenous institutions upon a superior civilization.’”¹³ In his effort to understand these “indigenous institutions,” Charton drafted a report on *l’artisanat* for the Congress on Native Society (*Congres de la Société Indigène*) in 1931. His assessment of the situation of artisans in the entire AOF drew directly upon the portrayals of casted artisans in the French Soudan:

Indigenous society, as we still observe it in most peoples of the AOF, is a closed and complete organism, providing the essential elements necessary for its traditional life. The artisan, rural or urban, has a marked place and places an important role within it... In every village, an *artisanat* develops, particularly vivacious, firmly rooted in traditions and indigenous mentality, an integral part of the social structure. The ‘blacksmith,’

¹² “Recrutement d’artisans métropolitains.” Soudan, education artisanale. ANS, O/537/31.

¹³ Bob White, “Talk about School: Education and the Colonial Project in French and British Africa, (1860-1960) *Comparative Education* 32 (1996): 9-25.

locked in his hereditary caste, is the technician of this uncomplicated world. The blacksmith works iron and wood and his wife is often a potter. He knows the secrets and mysteries and has the know-how of a sort of magician. He makes the '*dabas*' (hoes) and polishes jewelry. This is one of the most vivid characters in indigenous villages.¹⁴

Charton's description of West African artisanship generalized 'most peoples of the AOF' as casted, repeating earlier ethnographers' emphasis on a strict social hierarchy. But, the passage inadvertently reveals how figures such as the Soudanais blacksmith upset colonial assumptions of the low status of artisans. As someone who holds the "secrets and mysteries" of society, his political and social capital exceeded what the French perceived as low status.¹⁵

Along with Europeans, Africans also contributed to this colonial corpus on the "African artisan" and took important roles in shaping the colonial approach towards artisans. In 1932, Bouyagui Fadiga, an *assimilé* and the head of education in Koutiala, a Senufo town outside of Sikassa in southern French Soudan, submitted a plan for artisanal education to Dakar. He urged the administration to incorporate education in crafts into the overall colonial education policy. According to Fadiga, the need for cash to pay taxes and other expenses led to the corruption of indigenous production techniques as unqualified Soudanais entered into the 'easier' professions like weaving, sandalmaking, and saddlery.¹⁶ Fadiga proposed incorporating artisanal education into regional schools, but he specified that those programs only recruit students from "the sons of

¹⁴ A. Charton, "L'artisanat indigène en AOF," 1, Congrès de la Société Indigène, 1931. ANS, O/349/31.

¹⁵ Patrick R. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

¹⁶ According to Fadiga, the artisanal traditions of certain groups such as the 'Maures' of Timbuktu and Djenné remained uncorrupted.

artisans or from volunteers.”¹⁷ In Fadiga’s estimation, the colonial state could repair the damage it had inflicted on the *artisanat* by reaffirming the status of casted peoples through recruiting students from their ranks.

Ultimately, colonial knowledge on African artisans informed an educational program focused on preserving “traditional” forms, techniques, and artisan status as well as keeping craftsmanship largely within the realm of the informal economy. Fadiga’s proposal for artisanal education may have influenced the Superior Council on Education in Dakar, which, in 1933, enacted programs of artisan and manual education that incorporated many of his recommendations. Fadiga suggested that artisanal education focus on design, on refining tools to be lighter and smaller in order to make finer objects, and on improving primary materials, especially in the case of weaving and basketry. He also called on the colonial administration to collect objects in order to compare them and set standards for quality. But other aspects of Fadiga’s proposal were ignored; he proposed that schools offer training in crafts particular to their locality; that artisanal education be designed and receive funding similar to that of manual education; that graduates have access to placement services in administration and commerce; and that they receive a work permit analogous to that of other workers.¹⁸ The colonial state designed artisan education with few opportunities for formalizing artisanship through permits and placement services as suggested by Fadiga.

Administrators designed artisan education to parallel other subjects, by integrating it in primary education and by creating an upper-level school devoted to craft - the *Maison des*

¹⁷ Bouyagui Fadiga, "Education de l'artisanat indigène," 25, September 1932. ANS, O/349/31.

¹⁸ Fadiga, "Education de l'artisanat indigène," 3-5.

artisans. In primary schools, boys followed courses in manual education, which aimed to “improve agriculture and the domestic life of the native.”¹⁹ Administrators envisioned manual education as a sort of “pre-apprenticeship,” with the most talented students moving on to institutions that taught crafts. These institutions would include “workshops of applied arts and craft schools, for the conservation and the reform of traditional native crafts.”²⁰ The highest level of artisan education was the *Maisons des artisans* and designers initially planned to build a *Maison* in each colony in the AOF.

Similar to colonial knowledge about African artisans in general, the *Maisons des artisans*, grew out of an initiative designed by local administrators in Bamako, the capital of the French Soudan and its internal design reproduced assumptions of caste. The Director of Education in the French Soudan, Frédérick Assomption commissioned Jean Le Gall to design, build, and implement the first *Maison* in Bamako. Le Gall was an educator as well as an ex-apprentice cabinetmaker in faubourg Saint-Antoine, a school of furniture making that the French state had built in a former artisan and working-class suburb of Paris.²¹ The flagship *Maison des artisans* in Bamako opened in 1932 and admitted artisans and apprentices for training as “weavers, embroiders, drapers, jewelers, copperware manufacturers, shoemakers, etc...” and sought to admit “apprentices, as much as possible the sons of artisans wanting to learn the

¹⁹ Girls followed courses in “domestic education,” such as sewing and cooking (See chapter 2). A. Charton, l'Inspecteur général de l'enseignement, “L'artisanat indigène - 1935,” 1, O/349/31, ANS.

²⁰ A. Charton, “L'artisanat indigène – 1935”

²¹ Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (University of California Press, 1996): 359-360.

profession of their parents.”²² Apprentices seeking admission had to provide an official document stating that they came from a family that practiced the craft that they hoped to study.

LeGall and others imagined the Bamako *Maison* as not only training craftsmen, but also fostering “authentic” tastes among Africans by reviving “local artistic themes and local materials.”²³ Robert Delavignette, who had been the director of the Colonial School’s successor the National School of Overseas France (*l’École nationale de la France d’outre-mer*), described Le Gall’s impulses in creating the *Maison* as, “attempting to return taste to his Africa. Without literature. By manual labor and in a country where artisan castes are despised.”²⁴ In order to do this, European craftsmen taught African production methods and forms to male African master craftsmen who, in turn, transferred this knowledge to students. Historian John Warne Monroe argues that the *Maisons des artisans* “reflected the fundamental assumptions of French connoisseurs of *art nègre*.”²⁵ Rooted in their belief that “authentic” pre-colonial statues and masks were true *objets d’art* and colonial-era objects were merely “inauthentic” copies, the goal of the *Maisons* was to teach Africans “authentic” techniques and aesthetic principles that had been “forgotten” with the colonial occupation. Ideally, the artisans in the *Maison* would create

²² “Arrêt: Règlementant l’organisation et le fonctionnement de la Maison des Artisan Soudanais de Bamako.” 25 September 1934, Koulouba. ANS, O/45/31.

²³ Gouverneur général de l’Afrique Occidentale Française to monsieur le ministre des colonies, 6 August 1934, O/309/31, ANS.

²⁴ R. Delavignette, *Soudan, Paris, Bourgogne* (Editions Bernard Grasset, 1935): 57.

²⁵ While Monroe rejects ‘artisan’ as merely a colonial category, he fails to acknowledge its resonance within the project of the *maison des artisans* itself. He recounts the case of a Dahomean ‘artist,’ Jean Dado, who was sent on scholarship to the Bamako center, only to quickly fail at learning ‘authentic’ production methods since he favored to make objects geared towards the lucrative tourist markets. By eliding the difference in status between Soudanais and Dahomean artisans, Monroe may have missed a significant contributing factor that led Dado to quickly abandon the Bamako center. John Warne Monroe, “Surface Tensions: Empire, Parisian Modernism and ‘Authenticity’ in African Sculpture, 1917-1939,” *The American Historical Review* (2012): 445-475.

objects with a high enough quality to be exported to France.²⁶ The *Maison* also had an attached open-air market in order to sell objects directly to European tourists and to foster taste for locally made products among African consumers.²⁷

Colonial administrators imagined the authentic African artisan as rural and colonial educational policy reinforced a rural/urban divide within crafts. On the one hand, there was artisanal education, which was to take place in rural areas, first as manual education at primary schools and then in workshops attached to non-educational colonial institutions. Le Gall, pushed to increase access to artisanal education within rural schools and to “indigenize” education. He imagined a system of African “master artisans,” who learned their craft at one of the various *Maisons* and, afterwards, worked with local “village artisans” to train young men in African crafts. In his plan, workshops would be associated with the *Sociétés de prévoyance* in rural areas.²⁸ These colonial institutions were local credit and cooperative associations that became sites for a whole range of local colonial initiatives focused on poverty relief.²⁹ Indeed, had the entirety of Le Gall’s plan been implemented, artisanal education would have become a general artisan policy where the state trained and helped finance rural Africans to meet local economic goals.

²⁶ A. Charton, “L’artisanat indigène – 1935.”

²⁷ Delavignette, *Soudan, Paris, Bourgogne*, 57.

²⁸ “Organisation de l’Artisanat en Afrique Occidentale Française,” clipping from *Bulletin de l’AOF* of 24-5-37, ANOM, GUERNUT/50.

²⁹ Gregory Mann and Jane I. Guyer, “Imposing a Guide on the *Indigène*: The Fifty Year Experience of the *Sociétés de Prévoyance* in French West and Equatorial Africa,” in Endre Stiansen and Jane I. Guyer, eds. *Credit, Currencies and Culture: African Financial Institutions in Historical Perspective*, 124-151 (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999)

On the other hand, there was technical education, or education within the urban crafts - carpentry, masonry, mechanics, and later electrical and plumbing, which were taught in *collèges*, in capitals not in primary schools by *Maison*-trained artisans. Le Gall interpreted urban Africa as already lost to modernization. He argued, “our way of life, customs, have modified local habits.”³⁰ In his estimation, artisanal education, at the primary level and in workshops, was out of place in the cities of French West Africa. Instead, the state expected that students of urban crafts study French, basic accounting, and mathematics, unlike their counterparts in the system of artisanal education. The administration trained these modern craftsmen to be future employees for the state and for private enterprise.

One colonial critic of artisanal education programs and *Maison*-trained craftsmen teaching in primary schools pointed out two flaws. First, the state built the *Maisons* in urban areas and overwhelmingly trained new artisans instead of attempting to “restore the vigor and inspiration of old artisans who are stagnate and who no longer take on students because manufactured productions have killed off a great number of local products.”³¹ Second, the author suggested creating demand for African artisanal products by encouraging all types of innovation, in direct contrast to the principles of the *Maisons*, which stressed perfecting African techniques. He used the example of weavers: “Crafts [in fabric] remain outdated, it is certain that weavers cannot compete with foreign *pagnes*. But a new material, very simple and strong and made locally, could be put in their hands that would permit putting together different colors on wider

³⁰ "Organisation de l'Artisanat en Afrique Occidentale Française."

³¹ "Artisanat indigène en Afrique occidentale française," clipping from *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 138, 5 April 1937. ANOM, GUERNUT/50.

cloth than the traditional cotton band, and the client will return.”³² These two problems with the *Maisons*, that they trained new students in urban areas and that they did not incorporate innovation from outside the continent, undermined the effectiveness of the programs.

French colonial administrators designed the *Maisons* based on their assumptions about the caste, rural, and male artisan of the French Soudan, yet administrators in Dakar hoped to replicate the model of the *Maison des artisans* in the other colonies of French West Africa. By 1935, three years into the program, the Bamako *Maison* operated and another *Maison* was already built, but remained unopened in Kindia, Guinea. Administrators had also drafted a plan to build ‘l’Atelier Africain’ in Dakar, Senegal, and were designing *Maisons* for Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire and Abomey, Dahomey.³³ The *Maison* in Bamako served as a site where the colonial administration produced knowledge about *l’artisanat africain* and put it into the service of the state. Building these institutions elsewhere in the AOF reproduced the assumptions of the caste artisan and the importance of artisan identity in colonies, such as Dahomey, with very different histories of craft production.

II. Fostering *l’artisanat* in Colonial Dahomey: Artisan and Technical Education

As shown in the case of *pagne* workers in the first chapter, occupation in pre-colonial Dahomey was not a major signifier of social or political status and craftsmen did not constitute a rigid caste category. Both kings and slaves could learn and practice a craft and status derived

³² Weaving in West Africa produced strips of cloth that were sewn together; imported cloth was especially in demand because it was wider and more useful. Ibid.

³³ Charton, "L'artisanat indigène - 1935," 1.

from proximity to the palace and wealth. This fluidity of artisan identity and the incorporation of new artisans, methods, and forms into Dahomean crafts continued well into the colonial period. In his 1938 ethnography, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, anthropologist Melville Herskovits noted, with surprise, that craft production in Dahomey was not hereditary. He spoke with “the son of a petty chief, who, by trade, was an iron-worker.”³⁴ While Herskovits throughout his text refers to “guild” membership as open to sons of guild members, he also implies that craftsmen were organized spatially instead of by blood: “Iron-workers are organized into ‘forges,’ each group operating in a separate quarter of the city, or in a separate village, where their houses are found near the long, low, rectangular, open-sided shelters where the forges are erected.”³⁵ While children of ironworking fathers may have learned the craft, they did not have an exclusive right to practice ironworking and other dependents may have taken it up.

Herskovits also sought to establish a hierarchy of craft status in Dahomey. Undoubtedly, he sought to find an approximation to the hierarchies of caste peoples described by ethnologists of the French Soudan. Instead, he found multiple social models of artisan status, each of which came from a different informant or group of informants. The first example that he cited came from an “upper-class Dahomean” who contended that weavers ranked the highest as “their labor supplies the shrouds in which the dead are buried.”³⁶ Following weavers, he listed smiths (specifically *asen* makers), ‘cloth-sewers,’ calabash carvers, and finally palm-oil pressers as the most important craftsmen. The elite Dahomean’s list reflected his purchasing power and

³⁴ Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom, Volume I* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1938): 49.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

preference for luxury and ceremonial goods. A second of Herskovits's informants posited that gravediggers were the highest status craftsmen, while a third informant positioned woodworkers as the most respected and important craftsmen, since they made stools for sitting and figures for shrines. Herskovits pointed out that among "the women" there was disagreement whether potters held "first rank" or if spinners were the most valued since they made the primary input for marriage and death shrouds.³⁷ Herskovits supplied a final list recorded from an ironworker who naturally felt that ironworkers held the highest status since they made the tools necessary for the other craftsmen to practice their trades.³⁸ Even into the 1930s, Herskovits was able to identify fluidity and a lack of hierarchy and inherited status among Dahomean artisans in the interior.

The French colonial state built a system of artisanal education in Dahomey that relied on notions of heritable, endogamous occupational groups that stood in stark contrast to the realities of Dahomean craftsmanship and the situation described by Herskovits. First, they built an Abomean *Maison des artisans* that invoked assumptions of Soudanais caste in its internal design. Like the Bamako *Maison*, the Abomey center required that admitted artisans and apprentices come from craft lineages and families, even though not all crafts had not been hereditary in the region. In Jean Le Gall's 1930 report on artisans in Dahomey, he acknowledged the differences between artisanship in the colony versus the rest of French West Africa. He noted, "Dahomey is one of the rare regions of the AOF where the artisan is not considered as belonging to an inferior caste."³⁹ Despite his recognition of divergence from the Soudanais model, he still interpreted

³⁷ Ibid, 49.

³⁸ Ibid, 49-50.

³⁹ "Arrêt no 145 Arrête regulating the conditions of admission to the Professional School of Dahomey." 29 January 1930. ANB, 1G/12/8.

certain crafts as linked to specific clans. Part of his plans for the expansion of the Abomey *Maison* included allowing local families to set up booths to sell their crafts.⁴⁰ Instead of trying to place the most talented or promising artisans in the craft market, booths were promised to families who ultimately determined which of their members had access.

Second, ideas on the heritable nature of craft also inspired a new approach to technical education in Dahomey. As in elsewhere in the AOF, technical education predated artisan education in Dahomey. The technical schools that operated before the mid-1930s, such as the Victor Ballot school and annex and the François J. Reste Professional School in Cotonou (both briefly mentioned in chapter two) did not tie admission to whether the incoming student came from a family of artisans, although the programs did require admitted students to be younger than seventeen and to know basic math and how to speak, read, and write French.⁴¹ In 1930, there were no requirements on the status of families of incoming students, except that the student's father's occupation and address be included in their admission paperwork.⁴² However, requirements for incoming students changed as technical education began to operate like artisan education programs by only admitting students from craft-producing backgrounds or those who had already begun apprenticeships with African master craftsmen. For example, applicants to the 1956 incoming class of carpenters, masons, and auto mechanics at the Center of Industrial Apprenticeship at the Technical School in Cotonou had to be "sons of artisans or apprentices

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Arrêt no 965 Arrête reorganizing the Superior Primary and Professional School of Dahomey." September 1924. ANB, 1G/12/8.

⁴² "Arrêt no 145."

presented by an employer.”⁴³ This change reflected a larger shift in colonial policy as the administration generalized its perceptions of the caste nature of Soudanais artisanship into an AOF wide policy.

Colonial technical schools issued diplomas to students who had completed a program, which introduced a system of certification for craft producers. The Professional and Primary School in Porto-Novo (*L'Ecole Primaire Supérieur et Professionnelle in Porto-Novo* - later the Victor Ballot School) gave out diplomas in 1929 and 1930, and these documents were probably some of the first that Dahomans received for technical or artisanal competencies. In 1931, the colonial School Inspector reported the official creation of “a diploma for finishing an apprenticeship.”⁴⁴ A few decades later, the state conducted a survey of primary school manual education instructors in order to check their credentials, which created an archive of these documents. For example, Cohoundé Adoula submitted a notarized copy of his certificate, which he received on September 2, 1929 when he was awarded a grade of *assez bien* at the completion of his apprenticeship in masonry.⁴⁵ A master carpenter Valentin Gbaguidi, submitted his original certificate of apprenticeship, signed in 1930 by Governor Reste and the School Inspector of Dahomey (Figure 4.2).⁴⁶ The certificate contains an abundance of information on Gbaguidi - that he was an exceptional student who received excellent marks, that he was born in Savalou in

⁴³ Lettre de H. Diot à la commandant de cercle de Porto-Novo. No. 3923/IAD/3E. 11 August 1956. ANB, 1G/5/3.

⁴⁴ Inspecteur d'Écoles, No. 1450 E. Objet: envoi de documents en Vue Conseil gouvernement et cons sup ens., Porto-Novo, November 3, 1931. ANB, 1G/6/8; “Arrête année 1932, no 847. Aommaire : diplôme fin apprentissage 'section maçonnerie' de l'école professionnelle. ANB, 1G/10/8.

⁴⁵ Copie de certificat d'apprentissage de Adoula. Dossier intégration cadre Chefs d'atelier - enseignement pratique, 1949-1951. ANB, 1G/4/2.

⁴⁶ Copie de certificat d'apprentissage de Gbaguidi. Dossier intégration cadre Chefs d'atelier - enseignement pratique, 1949-1951. ANB, 1G/4/2.

1911, and that he formally finished his apprenticeship on September 7, 1930. The certificate also bears information about the state, including the laws that established the apprenticeship programs and the certificate's official registration number. Gbaguidi obviously carefully guarded his diploma for the next two decades until he submitted it to the state, perhaps displaying it for others to see as later artisans would do.



Figure 4.2: Victor Gbaguidi's 1930 Apprenticeship Certificate, 1G/6/8, Archives Nationales du Bénin.

Along with creating new forms of documentation for master artisans, technical schools institutionalized practices for assessing skill. Students graduated from technical schools after a set number of years as an apprentice and after passing exams. The School Inspector in 1931 described how apprenticeships were lengthened for particularly complex trades, such as adjuster. The results of exams were given to apprentices creating the opportunity for “a serious consultation for apprentices and their employers.”⁴⁷ The diplomas, exams, and structured apprenticeships of colonial technical schools provided a set of practices to artisans outside the context of state and missionary education, which will be addressed later in this chapter.

Despite their efforts to standardize urban artisanship, colonial administrators often fell back on their assumptions of the “rural” isolated character of “African artisans.” Administrators in the 1950s repeatedly proposed to build craft schools far away from urban centers, so students would not become “too urbanized.”⁴⁸ In 1956, the administration planned to build a workshop for cabinetmakers by placing it in a village where “the distance from [the northern city of] Parakou is sufficient that the apprentices are not subjected to the influence of the urban environment, but it is not so much as to prohibit easy communication with Parakou for resupplying.”⁴⁹ While the center was only 6 km away from the largest city in northern Dahomey, this short distance appeased colonial fears that students would become overly urbanized and

⁴⁷ Inspecteur d'Écoles, No. 1450 E.

⁴⁸ *Compte Rendu d'activités*, septembre-décembre, 1953, AOF. Inspection generale du travail, mission d'études psychotechniques. ANS, 2G/53/113.

⁴⁹ L'inspecteur d'academie du Dahomey, Porto-Novo. 9 October, 1956. ANB, 1G/19/22.

would resist returning to the rural areas where they came from. This state approach to artisanal education as rural would continue after independence.⁵⁰

Although artisan and technical education provided a set of objects and practices that would help African artisans to organize their craft knowledge, colonial education often failed to meet the actual goals of the state. The administration struggled to find trained instructors, like Valentin Gbaguidi, to teach manual studies in rural schools, because graduates of the Cotonou professional school often refused to return to rural areas to teach at the regional primary schools. The lack of qualified teachers led students to drop out of rural programs, perhaps to pursue apprenticeships with African master craftsmen. For example, after a teacher left the Djougou school in 1948, six students were so “discouraged” that they left their state school apprenticeship, leaving only four students in the program.⁵¹ At the same time, the artisans trained in the technical schools of Dakar and Cotonou experienced chronic unemployment.⁵² These state programs only focused on production techniques and forms and were designed to create skilled waged laborers for employment with the state and European-owned businesses. State apprenticeships did not train students in other aspects of artisanship such as business and personnel management. Unable to find employment with the state or private enterprise and relatively unprepared to open their own businesses, many of these state-trained craftsmen eventually became self-employed artisans, opened their own workshops, and trained apprentices.

⁵⁰ Oke Assogba, Minister of National Education, Center of Apprenticeship of INA. Porto-Novo, 24 October 1960. ANB, 1G/26/3.

⁵¹ Lettre de J.B. Kiesgen, Commandant le cercle de Djougou à Gouverneur de Dahomey. 31 mars 1952. ANB, 1G/4/1.

⁵² Lettre de directeur d’éducation technique à chef de cercle de Bopa, Ref 719 AM/SM. Porto-Novo, 28 juillet 1959. ANB, 1G/6/10.

III. Fostering *l'artisanat* in Colonial Dahomey: Craft Fairs and Competitions

Artisanal and technical education represent only one aspect of the French colonial approach to African craftsmen. At the same time that administrators were developing a corpus of colonial writing on *l'artisanat africain* and were using it to inform an AOF-wide education policy, another branch of the colonial state was pursuing a separate “cultural” policy directed at African craftsmen. International, national, and local expositions, craft fairs, and competitions served as additional sites where the French colonial state attempted to communicate notions of authentic African taste to an inchoate *artisanat*. Like state schools and workshops, these events also provided a set of practices such as awards and public exposition that artisans would use to manage their craft knowledge and their identity. Dahomean artisans first participated in expositions in mainland France, but these events would later be replicated at the colonial level and then in regional towns. The independent Dahomean state continued this colonial approach to artisans by encouraging participation in international exhibitions and competitions. Similar to French efforts to promote particular colonies, the independent Dahomean state likewise used these events to advance the notion of a Dahomean nation to foreigners and Dahomeans alike.

Europeans used some of the largest of these events, colonial fairs and expositions, to justify the colonial project to European publics, but these fairs and expositions also served as sites where identities were negotiated and put on display. Historians and other scholars have noted the role of colonial expositions in mainland France in shaping Western perceptions of race, gender, and the colonized “other.”⁵³ But these events must have also impacted the perspectives

⁵³ Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Catherine Hodeir, *L'Exposition coloniale de 1931* (Bruxelles: A. Versaille, 2011)

of the colonized or “native” participants who travelled to France and elsewhere to take part in the fairs as well as the artisans who contributed remotely by submitting their objects for sale and competition. Organizers of these exhibitions required colonial subjects on display to repetitively perform “traditional” tasks such as cooking, smithing, and fishing for Western audiences.⁵⁴ Local colonial administrators selected who would be sent to participate in these events in Europe in order to highlight the productive capabilities and cultural particularities of individual colonies. For example, at the 1922 Marseille exhibition, administrators in Dahomey struggled with who and what to put on display, since the major export of the colony, palm oil, would have been logistically difficult to replicate and administrators determined that *vodun* “priests” would have been “missed” in their communities. Ultimately, administrators choose to send chiefs.⁵⁵ This example underscores how local colonial administrators shaped participation in these events and notions of the character of individual colonies.

The colonial state imposed notions of “authenticity” in material forms and production methods on the Dahomeans who travelled to Europe for expositions. For the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, local administrators in Dahomey selected eighteen men and three women from Abomey, among others, to travel to France for inclusion in the display on Dahomean fishing and artisanal activities. In Abomey, local officials debated the objects, including the clothing, that these individuals would bring and wear during their sojourn in Paris.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Catherine Hodeir, "Decentering the Gaze at French Colonial Exhibitions," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, edited by Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002)

⁵⁵ Direction des affaires économiques, a.s. envoi d'indigènes à l'Exposition Coloniale de Marseille. ANB, 1Q/015/00170.

⁵⁶ Correspondances relative à l'exposition coloniale (1931), recrutement d'indigènes, objets à exposer, artisans et figurants, 1930-31. ANB, 1Q/2/00013.

Administrators ordered one pair of pants and one shirt for each man, presumably for travel, as well as “Dahomean worker outfits,” which the “natives” would wear as they replicated fishing and other production methods.⁵⁷ “Notables” such as Justin Aho and Paul Hazoumé (a writer from Porto-Novo), travelled with the artisans and fisherman, presumably to interpret the exhibit for the French attendees.⁵⁸ In this way, perhaps wearing clothes chosen by administrators and performing activities deemed authentically “African” shaped participants perspectives of themselves and the “other” (in this case, the European spectators).⁵⁹

While African colonies like Dahomey sent chiefs and fishermen to put on display at earlier colonial expositions, artisans from the AOF increasingly took center stage at these expositions as the 1930s progressed. Archival evidence suggests that their participation was far from a positive experience for the individual Africans sent to Europe. The organizers of the 1937 International Exhibition (*Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris*) argued that earlier colonial exhibitions marginalized the integral role of artisans in the colonies and they planned to prioritize artisan production and the selling of “authentic” African goods.⁶⁰ Organizers invited thirty-two artisans from the AOF, including at least one artisan from Dahomey, Abomean *fondeur* Zokpe Hountondji.⁶¹ Hountondji and the other artisans from the AOF stayed in Paris for four month and organizers managed every aspect of their stay, even

⁵⁷ Correspondances relative à l'exposition coloniale.

⁵⁸ Correspondances relative à l'exposition coloniale.

⁵⁹ Unlike the Europeans who visited the exposition, African subjects on display left no written accounts.

⁶⁰ Lettre de la Ministère du commerce et de l'industrie à Monsieur le commissaire de l'AOF. October 7, 1935. L'artisanat à l'exposition. Les artisans indigènes à l'exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//614/931.

⁶¹ Inventaire des objets des diverses colonies, l'Afrique occidentale Française. ANOM, AGEFOM//628/1077.

designing diets for them based on their colony of origin.⁶² But the stress of the exhibition must have taken its toll, as three artisans from the AOF fell ill. Of the three, Hountondji was hospitalized at the end of the exhibition, while a blacksmith from Côte d'Ivoire suffered a *crise de folie* (attack of insanity) and was eventually institutionalized in France – his fate remains unknown. The other artisans returned home by way of steamship, in third class, and the gendarmes who policed their presence at the exposition were sent home in slightly better conditions.⁶³

Instead of travelling to France for a long stay, artisans could also participate in expositions in Europe by sending their objects for sale. Artisans who participated in the expositions sold the objects that they made on site. They also sold other goods that they brought as stock. As part of the shift to “authentic” African goods at the 1937 International Exhibition, organizers restricted the goods that “native shopkeepers,” or vendors, could sell and forced them to sell only products originating from their own colonies. The organizers of the exhibition argued that at previous expositions vendors had sold “objects of European fabrication and of very low quality,” which “gravely harm[ed] the good name of our local [colonial] industries.”⁶⁴ Instead of recognizing the profits that a diverse set of objects might bring to a vendor, organizers insisted that vendors sold inferior goods because they failed to understand the purpose of the exposition.

⁶² Marche de gre à gre. Exposition internationale paris, 1937, commissariat de l'AOF, artisans Et gendarmes indigènes: nourriture rapatriement. ANOM, AGEFOM//590/510.

⁶³ Lettre de le Directeur de l'agence économique du gouvernement Général de l'AOF à Monsieur le gouverneur Général de l'AOF. Sujet: embarquement artisans expositions 1937. ANOM, AGEFOM//590/510.

⁶⁴ Lettre de (illegible signature), Exposition Internationale à Paris 1937 à Monsieur le Commissaire, October 2, 1935. L'artisanat à l'exposition. Les artisans indigènes à l'exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//614/931.

At the International Exhibition, most of the Dahomean objects destined for sale came from Abomey and they included *pagnes* woven by Abomean weavers as well as embroidered “chief’s clothes.”⁶⁵ However, these objects did not sell well to French attendees and the vendors at the International Exhibition suffered losses. Organizers considered reimbursing the vendors who were left with substantial stocks of goods.⁶⁶ Attending exhibitions was occasionally (perhaps often) not profitable for artisans from the colonies.

Dahomean artisans also participated indirectly in exhibitions in France by sending their objects for entrance in competitions. At the 1937 International Exhibition, submissions came from individual craftsmen as well as colonial educational institutions, such as missions and state workshops. For example, the *Maison des Artisans de Dahomey* sent objects for display at the 1937 exhibition and their participation earned them a “commemorative diploma.”⁶⁷ Along with colonial expositions, artisans in Dahomey and elsewhere in the colonies also participated in industrial expositions and craft fairs in France. The most significant of these was the National Exhibition of Work (*l'exposition nationale du travail*). The first exhibition was held in 1924 and the centerpiece of the event was the awarding of the title “One of the Best Craftsmen in France” (*un des Meilleurs ouvriers en France - MOF*) to the makers of winning objects submitted for competition.⁶⁸ The title permitted awardees to be a member of the Society of Best Craftsmen and

⁶⁵ Objets d'art et d'artisanat indigènes desti is à être vendus aux visit euros de l'exposition 1937, Dahomey. ANOM, AGEFOM//594/566.

⁶⁶ Lettre de le gouverneur General AOF à Monsieur le commissaire de l'AOF to l'exposition internationale, No 505/E. Liquidation matériel AOF. ANOM, AGEFOM//628/1079.

⁶⁷ Agence exposition Paris 1937 AOF. ANOM, AGEFOM//613/922.

⁶⁸ Nathalie Montargot, "Les Meilleurs Ouvriers de France: Des professionnels en perpétuelle quête d'excellence" *Humanisme et Entreprise* 311 (2013): 61-72. According to their website, today, the fine for improperly adopting the title of "meilleurs ouvriers de France" is punishable by imprisonment and a 15.000 euro fine. <http://meilleoursouvriersdefrance.pro>

also came with a diploma and a cash prize. French artisans submitted their objects for competition in a number of categories such as cabinetmaking, pastrymaking, and clothing design. By the time of the Third National Exposition in 1933, artisans in the AOF were invited to submit their works through a 1932 *circulaire*.⁶⁹ But participation of colonial subjects in the AOF and Indochina (administrators in the AEF refused to participate) created an unsettling situation for administrators and the French public alike when artisans from Indochina and the AOF won in the “Best Craftsmen” competition.⁷⁰ Administrators recognized that when colonial subjects won awards in the same categories as white Frenchmen and beat them to win the title “One of France’s Best Craftsmen,” this upset the very foundation of the colonial project and the civilizing mission.

Following the backlash against colonial subjects becoming one of the “Best Craftsmen in France,” organizers of the exhibition created new categories for subjects. For the Fourth Exposition in 1936, organizers sought to make the program more “inclusive” to colonial artisans, by introducing the new category of “regional small industries” (*petites industries régionales*). African artisans could, however, still compete in the “French” categories if they felt that their objects were on par with those of their French counterparts. For example, a number of Soudanais submitted local weaves for competition in regular categories of textiles and clothing.⁷¹ That same year, four Dahomean artisans from “Abomey Zagnanado” received the title “one of France’s

⁶⁹ Circulaire a/s de la participation des colonies à la 3e exposition National du Travail à Paris, 1932. ANB, 1Q/029/0043.

⁷⁰ Reunion de MM. Les directeurs des agences Economiques des colonies, pays de protectorate et territoires sous mandat français. Expo nationale du travail, 1936. ANOM, AGEFOM//508/155.

⁷¹ File: 4e, distribution des récompenses palmarès. ANOM, AGEFOM//629/1081.

Best Craftsmen.” They included sculptors Akéminou Donvidé and Saké Ghéto as well as metalworkers Dihoun Nicolas and Hountondji Jean whose objects picked up prizes for their makers in this new category.⁷² By the fifth competition in 1939, there was an entirely separate category of “*oultre-mer*” and African artisans could receive the title “Best Craftsmen in Overseas France” although colonial subjects could still submit works for European style categories.⁷³ Participation of Dahomean craftspeople in metropolitan fairs and expositions was undoubtedly small, but these events provided a series of conceptual categories and notions of beauty that trickled down into their local counterparts.

Administrators replicated colonial and industrial expositions at the local level, providing a site where artisans could take on more of a role in contesting what it meant to be an artisan in Dahomey and how to measure skill. At the four-day 1930 Exposition-Fair in Porto-Novo, particularly good pieces received accolades and organizers awarded winners a certificate of achievement and a cash prize. For example, Valentin Gbanouidi won “honorable mention” in “European furniture.” Gbanouidi kept his diploma, which was signed by Governor Reste, and had an official copy made over twenty years later when he submitted a dossier for the position of master teacher at a state school.⁷⁴ An original blank diploma from the Porto-Novo Craft Exposition of 1936 (*Exposition de l'artisanat de Porto-Novo in 1936*) provides evidence on how these awards were mass printed in Porto-Novo and later filled in the with the name of the winner,

⁷² File: Expo nationale du travail, 1936. ANOM, AGEFOM//508/155.

⁷³ Groupe France Outre-mer, File: 1939 exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//629/1082.

⁷⁴ Copie de diplôme de Gbanouidi, Dossier intégration cadre Chefs d'atelier - enseignement pratique, 1949-1951. ANB 1G4/2.

their residence, the prize, and signed by notables (Figure 4.3).⁷⁵ These certificates attested to the skill of the individual artisan, but they also provided examples to artisans on how to create systems of certification for measuring aptitude.

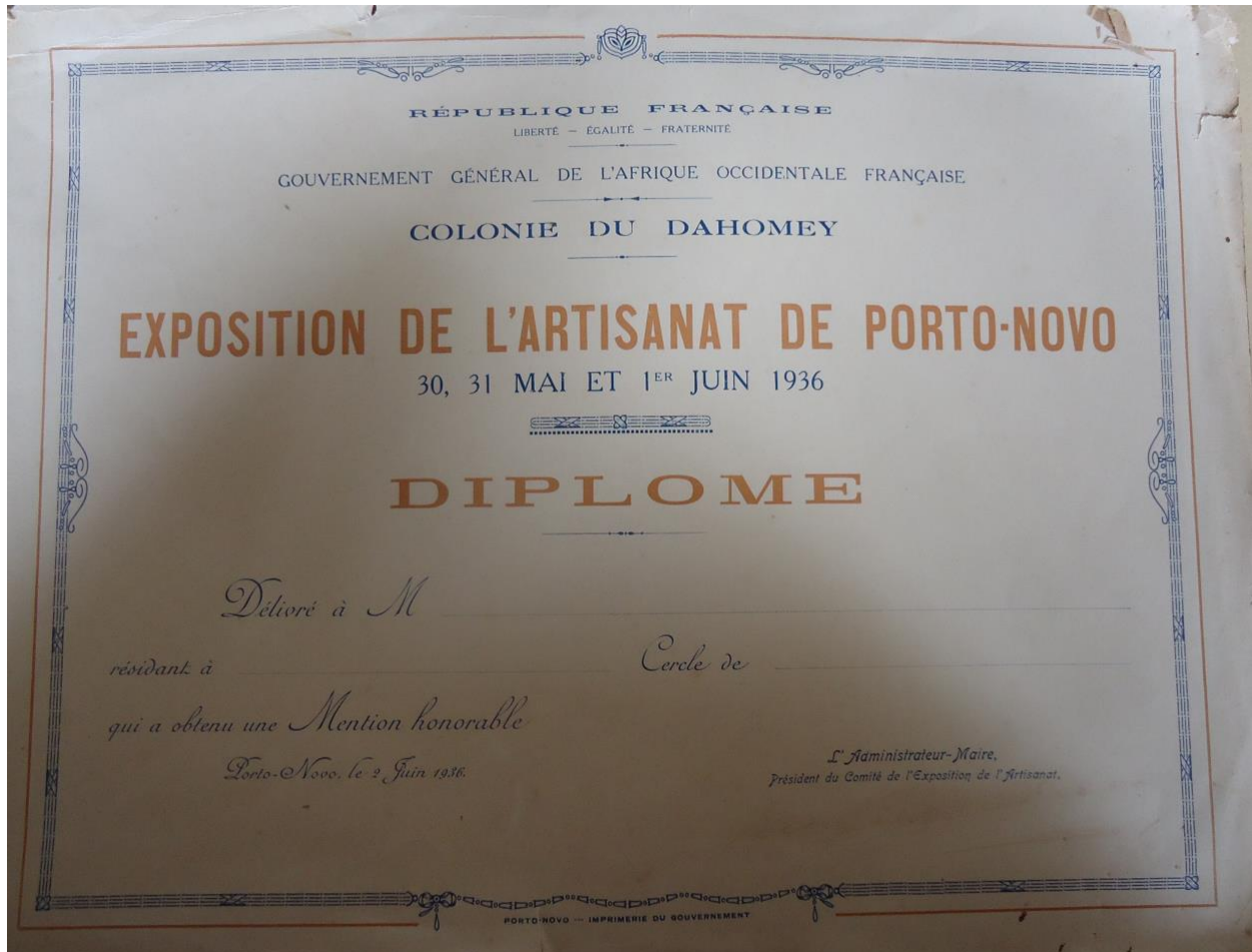


Figure 4.3: Blank Diploma for the Porto-Novo Craft Exhibition of 1936, 1Q/021/00219, Archives Nationales du Bénin.

Fairs and expositions also served as sites where men and women worked out who would be included in a Dahomean *l'artisanat*. The names of winners at the 1930 Exposition-Fair in

⁷⁵ Diplôme de l'Exposition de l'artisanat de Porto-Novo, 1936. ANB, 1Q/021/00219.

Porto-Novo suggest that professional artisans had not, in this early period, asserted their singular control over craft production since some craftsmen still competed with home producers, or the men and women who made goods for domestic household consumption as opposed to those who manufactured objects for sale to clients. In the section of “Couture,” Mrs. Marcellin Jacob of Porto-Novo won first prize, Ekouédjin “tailor, Porto-Novo” won second, and Elisabeth Sacramento, Mrs. Hazoumé of Cotonou, Agboton Daniel of Porto-Novo, and Elisabeth Dawson also won smaller cash prizes.⁷⁶ The names suggest that winners were both professional tailors and “domestic” producers, since only Ekouédjin is identified as a “tailor.” The names also suggest that both individuals of Dahomean and European descent participated in the same competition. Notions of authentic production and exactly who constituted *l’artisanat* were still fluid and undergoing debate in this early period.

Occasionally these exhibitions were organized as a first round of competition before objects were sent to the main competitions in the metropole. Submissions to the “Best Craftsman in France” competition had to go through a colony-level competition before the winner’s objects were sent to France.⁷⁷ In 1948, the governor of Dahomey solicited submissions for the 1949 “Best Craftsmen” competition, which was the first since the outbreak of the Second World War. He contacted the *commandants de cercle* in Dahomey to find entries into the category of “Best Craftsman in Overseas France.” The governor also explained the purpose of the contest to the *commandants*. The competition was designed “to stimulate the professional zeal and

⁷⁶ Foire exposition de Porto-Novo (Porto-Novo: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1930). ANB, 1Q/3/00024.

⁷⁷ Attachment to Letter from Governor J. Chambon to Commandants de cercle, April 29, 1948. ANB, 1Q/7/00067.

consciousness of workers and artisans, to encourage their craft taste through affirmation of their personality and their spirit of initiative, and, finally, to give them a fair reward.”⁷⁸ While the overall program was intended to shape French national tastes and promote manual labor, local iterations did this on a smaller scale. Local colonial administrators played a significant role in articulating good tastes in their respective colonies.

Exhibitions also provided an opportunity for a nascent *artisanat* to assert collective grievances. After the 1949 National Exposition of Work, Dahomean artisans asserted themselves to local administrators after what they perceived to be unfair policies. Abomean artisans submitted four items to the competition, including cotton tablecloths and a raffia “rug”.⁷⁹ None of these submissions received a cash prize, which created discontent among the artisans who had sent the objects, since they received no form of reimbursement for their labors. Although the rules of the competition stated that artisans would not receive cash unless they won and would receive their objects back, artisans in the colonies often received neither.⁸⁰ Indeed, a number of objects made by African artisans were “lost” following the 1949 Exposition and their efforts to seek reimbursement led Abomean administrators to contact their counterparts in the capital.⁸¹ Apparently, Abomean craftsmen had recognized their common interests and approached the local administrators as a collective to demand payment for their creations.

⁷⁸ Lettre de Governor J. Chambon aux Commandants de cercle, April 29, 1948. ANB, 1Q/7/00067.

⁷⁹ Assurance, l'AOF dahomey. File: Exposition nationale du travail, 1949; Préparation de l'exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//561/241.

⁸⁰ Lettre de le directeur du contrôle financier à Monsieur le Ministre de la France d'outre-mer. April 25, 1950. File: exposition Nationale du travail, 1949; préparation de l'Exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//561/241.

⁸¹ See, for example, File: Exposition nationale du travail, Togo. ANOM, AGEFOM//561/244 and File: exposition Nationale du travail, 1949; liquidation de l'Exposition. ANOM, AGEFOM//561/247.

By the 1950s, administrators recreated the National Exposition of Work as a stand-alone competition at the colony level and gave awards to the “Best Craftsmen in Dahomey.” Unlike the exhibitions of the 1930s, these local fairs explicitly restricted home producers from entering their works into the competition, except in the category of the “Textiles” where they allowed home producers to submit their goods alongside professional tailors. The 1953 exposition was held at the campus of the technical college in Cotonou over Easter break and local French administrators judged the goods up for competition for “Best Craftsmen.”⁸² The contest was were organized around specific categories with “Textiles” having a number of sub-categories including Dressmaking, Clothing, Embroidery, Umbrellas and Parasols, and Weaves.”⁸³ For example, a tailor from Porto-Novo sent in a one-button suit coat, while another tailor submitted shirts, ties, and “Canadian jackets” for competition in clothing.⁸⁴ Unlike in other categories such as Building, Furniture, etc., the sector of Textile was open to “not only workers and professional workers, but equally all people wanting to show their personal works... to make known the qualities and aptitudes of Dahomean labor.”⁸⁵ In other words, in sewing, unlike in other crafts, “professionals” and homemaker competed with each other, a reflection of colonial beliefs that sewing was a proper form of domestic labor.

Although there were a few submissions from the interior, administrators lamented the strong presence of coastal Dahomeans in fairs, expositions, and competitions. Their efforts to

⁸² G. Vermot-Gauchy, Inspection territoriale du Travail du Dahomey-Niger, Rapport Annuel, 1952, 113, ANS, 2G/52/40.

⁸³ F. Neveu, Note to Commandants de Cercles et Chefs de Subdivisions, a/s: Exposition territoriale du Travail, Porto-Novo, No 22/SG. January 9, 1953. ANB, 2G/3/2.

⁸⁴ Concours du meilleure ouvrier du Dahomey: fiche de candidature, 1953, ANB, 2G/3/1.

⁸⁵ F. Neveu, Note to Commandants de Cercles.

include these artisans spread notions of *l'artisanat* and ideas on “authentic” tastes to the interior. For example, in preparation for the 1936 Porto-Novo Craft Exposition, an administrator argued that the submissions from the interior were lacking at the exposition the year before and he wanted to particularly incorporate works from Abomey and Zagnanado.⁸⁶ Later, the colonial state would try to overcome this coastal bias by staging expositions outside of the capitals. In 1957, a fair in Bohicon allowed farmers and artisans to rent booths to display their wares.⁸⁷ At the Bohicon fair, artisan’s objects were displayed according to a system the “distinguished the modern *artisanat* and the customary *artisanat*, either functional or decorative.”⁸⁸ Along with displays by artisans and industry, the electrified fair included folkloric presentations, film screenings, drumming, soccer matches, and bars.⁸⁹ The spectacle of the 1957 Bohicon fair, when Bohicon was still a small market town, must have sparked local young people’s interest in the possibilities of apprenticeship.

Independence in 1960 did little to change the relationship between artisans and the state and the roles of expositions and crafts fairs as sites for the articulation of *l'artisanat* as well as authentic African taste. The postcolonial state continued to stage and to promote participation in fairs and expositions at both the national and international level. Artisans also continued to send their objects to international exhibitions in Europe and elsewhere in Africa.⁹⁰ Individual schools

⁸⁶ Note pour monsieur le Gouverneur Preparation de la foire-exposition de 1937. ANB, 1Q/021/00219.

⁸⁷ H. Daunic, Circulaire à Messieurs les participants de la Foire de Bohicon. Cotonou, December 27, 1956. ANB, 1Q/011/00137.

⁸⁸ "Que comportera la Foire de Bohicon?" *France Dahomey*, January 5, 1957.

⁸⁹ "Bientôt la Foire de Bohicon," 2, *France Dahomey*, January 12, 1957.

⁹⁰ "Le Dahomey a la Foire de Milan," *Daho Express*, June 23, 1962; "Le Dahomey a la Foire du Proche-Orient a Tel-Aviv," *Daho Express*, July 7, 1962; "Artisanat le Dahomey a la foire Internationale de Munich," *Daho Express*, August 1, 1973.

and workshops often hosted small exhibitions of their student's works.⁹¹ The postcolonial state organized the two-week long 1970 Cotonou Fair (*Foire de Cotonou*), where artisans in wood, metal, weaves, art pottery, wicker, and leather displayed and sold their objects. A color poster (Figure 4.4) promoted the event and was circulated as an insert within the state newspaper. On the poster, a boat and a fish hover over an image of the earth flanked by two Dahomean flags. The boat and the fish are modelled after the royal symbols of Kings Agadja and Behanzin, respectively, and these symbols regularly appeared in artisan-produced applique as well as the bas-relief of the Royal Palaces of Abomey. The flags jutting out of the sides of the earth suggest a Dahomean domination, if only in cultural production. Organizers of the Cotonou fair encouraged artisans to submit their objects for competition and gave out a 25.000 franc cash prize to the winner of each category, as well as 15.000f, 10.000f, and 5.000f given to second, third, and fourth places, respectively.⁹² The 1970 Foire was an occasion where the state promoted Dahomean national unity and industrial and artistic achievement to its own population. But, the state also used the event to project a national image outward; diplomats and heads of state from other African countries toured the fair and were photographed viewing the artisanal products.⁹³

⁹¹ "Exposition des oeuvres du centre cooperatif artisanal a Porto-Novo," *Daho Express*, January 23, 1970; "Exposition d'artisanat de l'Agenecce de Cooperation Technique et Culturelle," *Daho Express*, December 18, 1970.

⁹² "Foire de Cotonou," *Daho Express*, July 3, 1970.

⁹³ "Foire de Cotonou," *Daho Express*, August 3, 1970.



Figure 4.4: Promotional Poster for the 1970 Cotonou Fair, *Daho Express*, July 3, 1970.

Expositions, craft fairs, and competitions provided sites where artisans solidified their identity and also propagated notions of good taste. But only a small segment of Dahomean artisans participated both internationally and locally. More importantly for artisans throughout Dahomey, fairs, expositions, and competitions introduced specific practices to *l'artisanat* that would allow them to exert control over their own their craft. Similar to colonial education, the issuing of diplomas to participants and winners in fairs and competitions offered a means for

artisans to control their own ranks and develop systems of accreditation. Finally, fairs and expositions introduced the notion that public viewings and judgements of works contributed to the prestige of artisans. Both of these would be very influential in the development and spread of the liberation ceremony.

III. Dahomean “Traditional” Apprenticeship: Contracts, Diplomas, and Liberation

Learning a craft in pre-colonial and early colonial Dahomey was not a particularly formalized process. Children with an interest and an aptitude for a craft might spend time learning it from a relative or a neighbor. When they became sufficiently proficient, their *patron* [master] would begin to pay them or otherwise reimburse them for their work. Eventually, the young artisan would save up enough to buy the tools of the craft or to build his own forge or loom, for example, or he or she might inherit them. While this newly established artisan might siphon off a few of his old master’s clients, he would also find new clients among his peers or new community members.⁹⁴ But this system began to change by the 1930s. Apprenticeship began to become more formalized through contracts that parents and others bought for their dependents. Artisans also started to mark the end of apprenticeships through “liberation,” a celebration with roots in colonial education as well as craft fairs and competitions.

Before the 1930s, colonial administrators paid little attention to apprenticeship among African artisans and small businesses. However, political changes in France and the rise of the

⁹⁴ Interview with Barthélemy Adjahouinou, Tindji-Zecko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015; Interview with Alladassi Tavi, Tanta (Agbaignzoun), August 25, 2015; and Interview with Ernest Fiogbe, Ahouaja, Abomey, September 4, 2015.

colonial humanists drove an increased interest in the social conditions in the colonies, including the exploitation of women and children and whether apprentices could be considered “exploited” children. Officials in Dakar requested information on the conditions of child apprentices from each of the colonies of the AOF. Local administrators in Dahomey responded that apprentices in their colony were rarely mistreated. One wrote that “[Dahomean] masters do not abuse [apprentices]” even when they began their apprenticeships at ages as young as ten. He continued, “the blacksmiths use [child apprentices] at the bellows, the weavers in the threading of the spools, and the work they do for carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, and jewelers is not very tiring. The masons employ children, but they have adult laborers for the hard tasks.”⁹⁵ The administrator concluded that apprentices were not exploited because of the “ease” of the tasks given to them by their Dahomean *patrons*.

Local administrators in the 1930s also advanced the notion that Dahomean apprenticeship did not rely on child labor because it took place within households through informal agreements and was thus outside the definition of child labor and the realm of colonial control. One official noted, “most apprentices are housed and fed by the masters who teach them. Once taught, the work buys in turn the tools of his trade and sets up his own business, unless he takes over from a master who has become too old.”⁹⁶ Here, he described how the apprentice, whether actually related to the master, was a part of the household, even entitled to inheritance of the “business” should his master die or retire. A 1938 law advanced the characterization of apprenticeship as

⁹⁵ Telegramme-lettre-official, No. 7199, Objet: A/S Reglementation du travail des femmes et des enfants. Porto-Novo, December 24, 1936. ANB, S/2/1.7.

⁹⁶ Carde. Apprentissage, enseignement technique, 1925-1945. ANS, K/49/2.

familial and informal. In this law, the Dahomean administration grouped “artisans of all categories” with other economic activities such as fishing and agriculture, and “family work” such as cooking, gathering wood, transporting water, and cleaning.⁹⁷ By imagining that all apprentices were related to their masters and their work under the realm of “household labor,” the colonial administration could avoid enforcing other child labor laws that banned the employment of children under fourteen. The 1938 law also fixed the minimum age of apprenticeship at twelve and made only one requirement of masters, that they provide sanitary living conditions to all apprentices residing in their homes.⁹⁸ However, it is unclear how the state enforced or attempted to enforce these restrictions.

But as more children began to take up apprenticeship in crafts, Dahomean apprenticeship changed to more resemble an institution of formal education than a form of household labor. Master artisans began to take on young apprenticeships in exchange for cash or other forms of payment. These payments were structured similar to tuition, in which families paid for their children to learn. As one administrator wrote in the 1940s, “these apprentices are not, in principle, paid by those who employ them, it happens that their family must pay a monthly sum to the master. In this way, a tailor asks for 500 francs per year from his student for an apprenticeship that lasts 3 years.”⁹⁹ Forms and types of payments depended on the master who might adjust the price based on his or her perceptions of the skills of the apprentice, with a master willing to take on a particularly promising youth for a lower price. A master might also

⁹⁷ Arrêt No. 191, 1938, Arrêt réglementant le travail des femmes et des enfants dans la colonie du Dahomey. ANB, S/14/3/1.

⁹⁸ Arrêt No. 191, 1938.

⁹⁹ R. Cazal, Rapport Annuel, 1946, Dahomey, 3, Inspection du Travail. ANS, 2G/46/47.

lower his price for a family with fewer resources or allow them to pay a little over time. Finally, older informants also described using non-cash payments to enter into apprenticeships, with their parents and guardians providing a master tailor with maize, palm oil, or liquor.

As these systems of exchange became more formalized after the Second World War, colonial administrators pointed out how cash payments for apprenticeship might lead to abuse. In 1947, the Work Inspector (Inspecteur du Travail) in Dahomey wrote to the AOF-wide Inspector that:

Apprenticeship is widespread enough [in Dahomey], at least among artisans; in general, the apprentice's parents pay a fixed sum to the master... this practice gives rise to a number of abuses from either side. Some artisans see it only as a way to easily make money and taken on many apprentices without giving them any technical training. On the other hand, some apprentices who have only a basic knowledge of their craft open their own shop and are unfair competition to their former master.¹⁰⁰

Artisans might take on more apprentices than they could actually teach because of these cash payments and because they acquired free labor. This, in turn, created a large pool of semi-trained craftsmen who might leave their apprenticeships due to lack of funds and open up shops and drive down prices. The Work Inspector suggested that the colony prevent this situation by creating a tax on apprenticeship, which would limit the number of apprentices that masters were willing to take on.¹⁰¹ Another local administrator suggested solving the problem of exploited apprentices by setting a minimum wage.¹⁰² A few years later, in 1952, the new Inspector

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Pelisson, Inspection du Travail d'AOF Rapport, 1948. ANS, S/7/4.

¹⁰¹ Pierre Pelisson, Inspection du Travail d'AOF Annual Report, 1948.

¹⁰² G. H. Connillière, Dahomey-Niger, Inspection du Travail, Rapport Annuel, 1947. ANS, 2G/47/48.

suggested that this problem be addressed in the next Code du Travail.¹⁰³ The colonial and postcolonial states did, at times, pursue any or all of these strategies, but masters easily evaded taxes and minimum wages by keeping their apprentices home on certain days and through bribery, and states never attained the ability to comprehensively regulate apprenticeship.

Lacking any mechanism for the state regulation of the vast majority of apprenticeships in Dahomey, artisans themselves independently controlled their craft, often by adopting practices, such as written contracts, from state institutions and French private enterprise. There appears to have not been a colony-wide effort to register apprenticeship contracts, yet local administrators took it upon themselves to officiate contracts between apprentices and master artisans in Porto-Novo in 1955 and the notarized copies provide rare examples of the agreements brokered between masters and apprentices. For example, Ousson Fréjus, a woman tailor in the Honuou neighborhood, took on an apprentice, a daughter of Fadaïro Heuri, for five years.¹⁰⁴ On the same day, Fadaïro also placed his son Raymond with another master tailor for a period of five years.¹⁰⁵ While both of these contracts declared that no money was to be exchanged between Fadaïro and the tailors, this was a rarity and other contracts show that apprenticeship could be a pricey option for a family looking to establish their son or daughter in a career. In January 1955, Jacques Montcho, a teacher from Adjohon, signed a five-years contract to apprentice his sister to a woman tailor, Rosaline d'Oliveira, in Porto-Novo. As a part of the contract Montcho agreed to

¹⁰³ R. Berthoumieu, *Inspection du Travail, Dahomey Rapport Annuel*, 1949. ANS, 2G/49/44.

¹⁰⁴ *Contrat d'apprentissage: Fadaïro-Angèle*. January 29, 1955. Fiche: ordre des convocations, certificats de scolarite, certificats d'apprentisange. ANB, 1G/18/1.

¹⁰⁵ *Contrat d'apprentissage: Fadaïro-Jossi*. January 29, 1955. Fiche: ordre des convocations, certificats de scolarite, certificats d'apprentisange. ANB, 1G/18/1.

pay 100 francs per month to d'Oliveira.¹⁰⁶ These contracts show how an apprenticeship was a lengthy commitment and relied on family members to broker deals on behalf of the apprentice.

These contracts are exceptional because they were written and officiated, thus surviving in an archive, but they still provide insight into the concerns of parents and other relatives as they sent their children to work, and often live, in the care of another adult. In apprenticing his sister to d'Oliveira, Montcho also agreed to regularly check on his sister's progress and be ready to "denounce to his parents any observed irregularities" that might "compromise the morality of the apprentice."¹⁰⁷ As an elder brother, Montcho was responsible for ensuring that the master tailor did not suspect the young woman to "immorality" or presumably to let her engage in any immoral relationships that might reflect poorly on her family or her *patronne*. His sister, the apprentice, Jacqueline Montcho, also signed the contract and, in doing so, agreed to "submit to the discipline inside the establishment of her master during the length of the apprenticeship."¹⁰⁸ This clause prevented the young woman from being a disorderly apprentice and kept her from breaking her contract to open her own shop. Other tailors attested that during oral negotiations at the onset of an apprenticeship, masters might discuss which offenses on the part of the apprentice might result in beatings versus being sent home, a condition that arrived when the master nullified the contract due to an apprentice's unruly behavior.¹⁰⁹ Like the colonial state, artisans perceived the difficulties of working with children and the opportunities that it presented for

¹⁰⁶ Contrat d'apprentissage: Montcho-d'Oliveira. January 27, 1955. Fiche: ordre des convocations, certificats de scolarite, certificats d'apprentissage. ANB, 1G/18/1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

abuse on the part of the master. But they also recognized that the situation might lead to bad conduct on the part of the apprentice.

Operating almost exclusively outside the realm of state control, master artisans and young apprentices were thus able to shape apprenticeship to best meet their needs. In contrast to state-run artisan's workshops and technical schools where young students learned only the skills and competencies of their craft, "traditional" apprenticeship also taught the young artisan other necessary skills for running a business and navigating life. Apprentices often lived in the homes of their masters, performing domestic duties such as fetching water, washing clothing and dishes, and cooking both before and after work. Many of the artisans that I spoke with described these experiences as particularly exploitative and a primary reason that young men and women preferred to apprentice themselves to neighbors where they could remain at home with their own families instead of having to stay in their master's home. But, masters also taught apprentices skills on how to manage human relations. For example, one woman tailor recalled how she taught her apprentices to avoid marital conflict by refusing to engage with their husbands when they were angry. She suggested that they instead leave or go to bed without saying anything and return "to wake them up very early in the morning to remind them of the reason that you became angry."¹¹⁰ These types of maternal (or paternal) advice on how to manage personal and professional relations were not ancillary to apprenticeship, but a legacy of earlier times when children learning a craft were family members and neighbors.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

Monetary incentives and the promise of free labor encouraged artisans to take on many apprentices. Yet, individual artisans often chose to limit their apprentices because of the additional work that this paternal or maternal role entailed. Apprentices occasionally stole from their masters or each other and masters were often forced to intervene in the infighting and squabbles that came with multiple teenagers in close proximity. As the contract between d'Oliveira and Montcho illustrates, masters were also responsible for the “morality” of their apprentices. When an unmarried young woman became pregnant or a young man indulged in too much *sodabi* (distilled palm wine), the community might blame the master as much as the parents. Occasionally, the *patron* became directly implicated in the former, if he was the one who impregnated his apprentice and was required to offer to support the mother-apprentice and their child. Additionally, an individual apprenticeship might be a slow learner and more of a burden than help. Although additional apprentices could lead to higher profits as well as heightened prestige, the challenges of having multiple young people in their charge led both male and female artisans to limit their apprentices.

Despite the added responsibility and drawbacks of taking on multiple apprentices, the number of artisans, and tailors especially, steadily increased throughout the mid-twentieth century. According to a survey conducted by the colonial state in 1936 to 1937, there were 149 tailors in the eight *arrondissements* of Porto-Novo.¹¹¹ Nearly thirty years later, in 1964, a survey conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) found 219 tailors in the city of Porto-Novo. Areas close to Porto-Novo, which were perhaps included in the first survey, also had

¹¹¹ File: Recensement des hommes de métiers. ANB, 1Q/032/00365.

relatively large numbers of tailors, including Adjohon (in between Cotonou and Porto-Novo) with 125 tailors; Sakete (north of Porto-Novo) with 94; and Pobe, which was even farther north, where there were 65 tailors.¹¹² The 1964 ILO survey also reported the presence of 44 tailors in the cities of Abomey and Bohicon, although it is unclear if this number includes apprentices and neighboring villages such as Za-Kpota and Agbainzoun.¹¹³ Overall, the survey found 357 artisans in Abomey-Bohicon compared with 895 artisans in Porto-Novo.¹¹⁴ While these numbers are not entirely reliable, they provide a rough estimate of the number of artisans in Dahomey at that time and compared with earlier (and equally unreliable) data, they show a substantial increase in the number of artisans.

Despite the increasing number of artisans, there were usually only two categories within the Dahomean *artisanat* - master and apprentice - with very few (or none in some crafts) waged employees of journeymen status. In the same 1964 study conducted by the ILO, the researcher noted that when apprentices finished their apprenticeship after, on average, four years, master artisans preferred not to keep them and pay them a wage, but rather find a new apprentice who would pay for a contract and provide free labor. The researcher interpreted this to mean that the “new worker becomes an unemployed person.”¹¹⁵ In contrast, Dahomeans did not interpret the

¹¹² Bureau International de Travail, Programme élargi d'assistance technique, "Rapport au Gouvernement de la République du Dahomey sur la situation et l'aide à l'artisanat et aux petites industries," OIT/TAP/Dahomey/R.7 (B.I.T: Genève, 1965): 32.

¹¹³ Although this large number of tailors – 44 – differs from informants reports of 4-5 in the Bohicon market and 6 in the Abomey market, they are not too different. Along with these 10-11 tailors, there were probably another 5 or 6 working out of private workshops or homes. If each tailor had one or two apprentices, and the ILO counted them, then 44 seems more than reasonable. Bureau International de Travail, 1965, 32.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

young person who had just finished an apprenticeship as an “unemployed person,” but rather a new “*patron*” or master artisan. As predicted by a number of colonial administrators and the ILO researcher, this led to the exponential reproduction of craftsmen and intense competition among a large number of master artisans.

Artisans began to use the liberation ceremony and the issuing of diplomas to manage the distinction between *patron* and *apprentis* and to try to exert control of their crafts. As the opening vignette suggests, these practices emerged in the mid-twentieth century, particularly on the interior Abomey Plateau. In the 1950s in Abomey and Bohicon, artisans who completed apprenticeships outside of formal colonial education did not receive diplomas, but by the mid-1960s, most tailors and other artisans received a certificate during small and subdued public ceremonies.

Liberation diplomas of the 1960s resembled the diplomas of formal state education. Agbaignzoun tailor Pierrot Akpakpo (although on the diploma, it is written as Pierrot Dakossi) received a certificate at the end of his apprenticeship in 1964 in Gboli, a village adjacent to Abomey. Over forty years later, he had a photocopy made and notarized at the mayor’s office in Agbaignzoun (Figure 4.5).¹¹⁶ The certificate contained all the same information as a diploma from formal schooling: the names of the master (school) and apprentice (student), the length of apprenticeship, and the qualities of the apprentice (marks or grades). These similarities were not coincidental. Indeed, written at the very bottom of the certificate were the words “Designed at the Center of Technical Education - Abomey” (*Dessiné au centre d’Enseignement Technique -*

¹¹⁶ Interview with Pierrot Akpakpo, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

Abomey). Students at the state technical school designed and drew certificates for the “informal” *artisanat*, in a sense, blurring the lines between the two and providing a mechanism for how practices of formal education trickled into the “informal” *artisanat*. But Akpakpo’s certificate was also unique because it was one of the few that did not have a photograph. Bohicon tailor Alain Baba’s 1967 diploma was much more typical for the period. Baba, or his patron, had attached a photograph of the young man wearing modern urban style to the upper right corner. Baba’s master, Victor Adonon, attested that his former apprentice was “loyal, preserving in all of the work that I gave him, and he gave me complete satisfaction.”¹¹⁷ His master, Adonon, who had trained as a tailor Porto-Novo where diplomas emerged in earlier years, might explain the early date of Baba’s diplomas.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

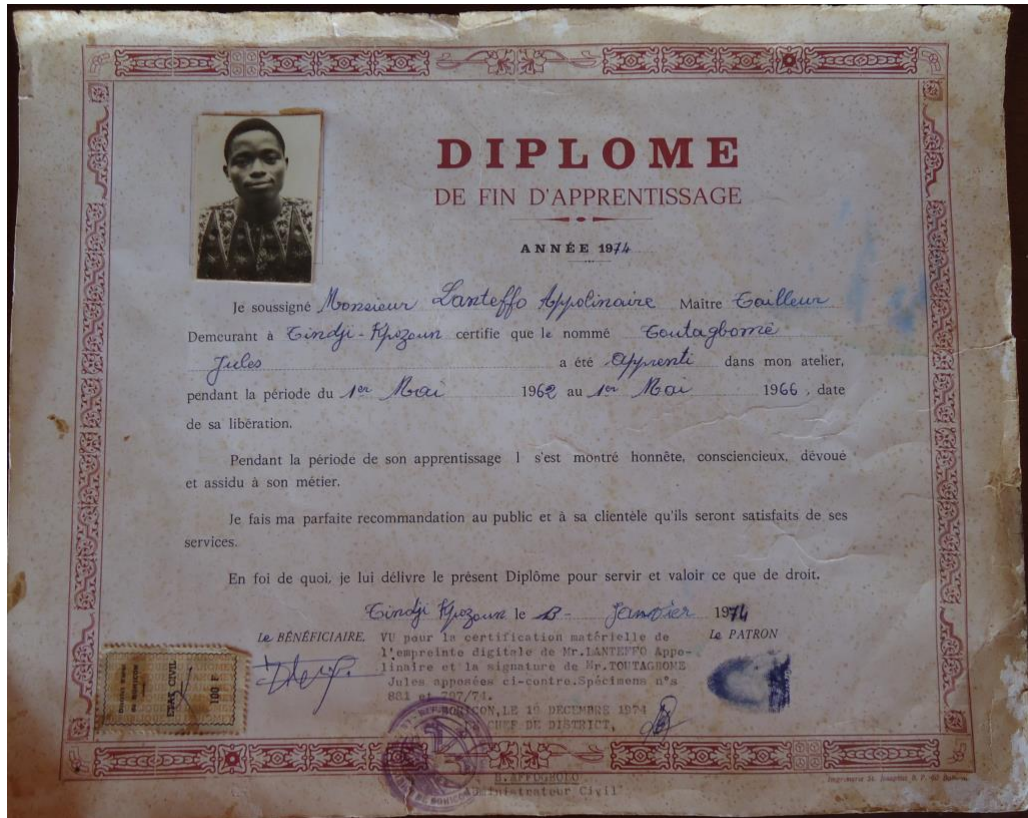


Figure 4.5: Pierrot Dakossi's Diploma in Tailoring, Gboli, 1964, Courtesy of Pierrot Akpakpo.

But it was only in the next decade - the 1970s - the diplomas became a standard practice for artisans on the Plateau. In fact, many tailors who had completed their apprenticeships in earlier decades - the tailors discussed in the previous chapter - retroactively made diplomas in the

1970s, by filling in a date from an earlier period. Like his *patron* Appolinaire Lanteffo, tailor Jules Wimêllo did not receive a diploma when he completed his apprenticeship in 1966.¹¹⁸ Wimêllo opened a shop in Tindji-Kpozoun, a village outside of Bohicon, and quickly became successful. Nearly a decade later, Wimêllo was ready to liberate his first apprentice. But, by this time, diplomas had become a standard practice and his apprentice expected one. In turn, Wimêllo returned to Lanteffo to have a diploma made so that he too could start signing the documents for his apprentices (Figure 4.6). Lanteffo signed the document with his thumb print and the two tailors agreed upon May 1, International Worker's Day, as the date that Wimêllo both started and finished his four-year apprenticeship. This document, dated 1974 for an apprenticeship completed in 1966, gave Wimêllo the power to issue diplomas to his own apprentices.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Jules Wimêllo, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015



**Figure 4.6: Jules Goutagbomê's Diploma in Tailoring, Dated 1974.
Courtesy of Jules Wimêllo.**

Other diplomas attest that it was not just the information written in the document, or its veracity, which made diplomas significant to the management of the craft. Often, the material qualities of the document and its mere presence on the wall of the workshop made it a testament to the tailor's skill. For example, Alladassi Tavi was a tailor who learned to sew from his father and only later in life, acquired the skills of sewing fitted clothing, such as using measuring tapes. Based on the style of the document and its signatories, it is clear that Tavi made his own diploma in the 2000s or 2010s (Figure 4.7). He signed the document with his own thumbprint, since his master was deceased, and dated the diploma 1958. The president of the Agbaignzoun artisan's

association also signed the document, which “legalized” it under the current system. While an outsider might consider this document a forgery, Tavi, nevertheless, used it to prove his status as a master tailor after he had it framed and hung it prominently in his workshop.



Figure 4.7: Alladassi Tavi’s Diploma in Tailoring. Dated 1958. Courtesy of Alladassi Tavi.

As diplomas became more widespread, the event when they were awarded - liberation - became more complex and costlier. Even in its simplest form, liberation required that apprentices put their works on display to the public and that masters give apprentices a diploma, blessed tools, and their advice. But the actual blessing of the tools could take a number of different forms depending on the religion of the master and the apprentice, and it was usually done in a private

ceremony before the main even. Often, Catholics went to church to ask priests to bless the measuring tapes, scissors, and chalk of apprentice tailors or they said a prayer to Saint Joseph, patron saint of workers and woodworkers.¹¹⁹ Muslims, usually the descendants of migrants to the region, said a quick prayer before beginning the liberation.¹²⁰ However, the vast majority of artisans on the Plateau made sacrifices to the *gu* either the night before or the morning of the liberation, before the actual public ceremony. *Gu* is the Fon *vodun* god of metallurgy and, as artisanship expanded, became the *vodun* of technology and craft as well.

By incorporating the *Gu* into liberation, artisans solidified their own pan-craft identity as *l'artisanat* and further limited admission into it by increasing costs. *Gu* or *Ogun* is a mutable and widespread deity that, in various forms, appears in religious and spiritual practices in Yorubaland and the African Diaspora after it travelled with enslaved Africans to the Americas.¹²¹ On the Abomey Plateau, followers of *Gu* kept shrines within compounds and homes. The shrines take the form of holes dug into the ground, and then filled with organic materials as well as metal objects, including *asen*, old car parts, and other pieces of scrap. At other times, the *Gu* took the form of figural sculptures such as the famous iron and wood object held in the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Artisans became adherents of this longstanding deity of metallurgy and warfare and transformed the *Gu* into the *vodun* of metal technologies, such as sewing needles, scissors, and machinery of all sorts and, thus, into a *vodun* of craft. Although individual artisans might be adherents of a number of different *vodun* and ancestral spirits, their common devotion to *Gu*

¹¹⁹ Interview with Georges Henri Ayadji, Dokpodji, Abomey, August 21, 2015.

¹²⁰ Interview with Abdou Ibrahim Bah, Zongo, Abomey, May 9, 2015.

¹²¹ Sandra T. Barnes, "Introduction: The Many Faces of Ogun," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* ed. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

served to unite an identity of *artisanat*. Pre-liberation sacrifices to *Gu* required roosters, chickens, red palm oil, corn flour, and/or greens and other leaves, which further increased the costs for families of the apprentice and limited their ranks.

The privacy of the *Gu* ceremony contrasted with the rest of liberation where gifts and money were exchanged in front of seated audiences. By the 1970s, apprentices and their families increasingly hired photographers, another type of artisan whose number and influence was spreading on the Plateau, to document their liberations. For tailors, the gifting of the measuring tape and its ceremonial hanging around the neck, provided a particularly good opportunity for a photograph and images of these moments reoccur in personal archives held in homes and workshops. For example, at his 1979 liberation, Célestin Godou Kpodou received a measuring tape from his master (Figure 3.4). But versions of this pose are repeated over and over. Another part of the liberation ceremony, the *palmatoire*, was mentioned in this chapter's opening vignette. During the *palmatoire*, the master paddled the apprentice's hands and audience members gave the master cash in exchange for lightening or stopping the blows to the apprentice's hands. Members of the audience walked up in front of the apprentice and placed cash in a nearby vessel, which would later be given to the master as a token of the excellent job that he or she did in disciplining the apprentice and teaching them their craft. In Figure 4.8, master tailor Marie Féllicité Babagbeto taps the hand of her apprentice in front of an audience. Although this photograph dates from the 2000s, it matches the description in the newspaper article from the 1970s. As often occurs during the *palmatoire*, the apprentice stands motionless with a stoic look on her face, while Babagbeto smiles widely. This moment served as a point of levity during the ceremony. Audience member cheered loudly, playfully encouraging the patron to discipline

her apprentice, while commending the apprentice for his or her fortitude. On general, audiences played an important role as both observer and participant in the process of liberation.



Figure 4.8: Marie Fèlicite Babagbeto and her apprentice during the *palmatoire*, Bohicon, 2000s. Courtesy of Marie Fèlicite Babagbeto.

Public benedictions given to the apprentice by his own *patron* were another key moment during the ceremony. The journalist from *Daho Express* recorded Madame Lebrun's advice to her six apprentices undergoing liberation:

Today it is your turn to enter into the line of artisans in the evolution of your country. / Above all, do not rest on your laurels, be curious to deepen and widen the little that you have learned during more than three years. Today's world is for you; it is up to you to discern elegance from the

ridiculous within the diversity of fashion. / Have the spirit of invention; the spirit of beauty; do not indulge in that ridiculous *yéyé* and you will be sure to make your way.¹²²

The *patronne* suggested to her apprentices how curiosity, innovation, and a sense of beauty would keep them competitive as tailors since it was up to them to design and sew the fashions of the future. However, she also warned them to avoid the trap of overly trendy styles - the ridiculous - and to stay modest, professional women by avoiding the path of the *yéyé* - a West African term for the trends and trappings of global youth fashion and music in the 1960s and 1970s. As this example shows, the advice given to the liberating apprentice reflected the multiple roles of the patron as someone who had passed on technical skills and competencies to the apprentice, as well as motherly or fatherly guidance.

The ceremony also provided an opportunity for apprentices to put their masterworks on public display and to start building a regular clientele. For example, tailors often made their own outfits as well as the clothing of family members. Liberations also took place in public venues, in front of workshops or compounds as opposed to within their walls. In this way, the entire community could assess the skill of the newly minted craftsmen. More recently, tailors made multiple outfits and changed periodically during the liberation ceremony in order to give the audience a better idea about their repertoire of styles. Liberated tailors and their families also

¹²² C'est votre tour aujourd'hui de rentrer dans la ligne des artisanes de l'évolution de votre pays. / Ne dormez pas surtout sur vos lauriers, soyez curieuses pour approfondir et augmenter le peu que vous avez appris pendant plus de trois ans. Le monde aujourd'hui est à vous; il vous appartient, dans la diversité des modes, des discerner l'élégance sans tomber dans le ridicule. / Ayez l'esprit d'invention, l'esprit du beau; ne vous complaisez dans le *yéyé* ridicule et vous serez sûres de faire votre chemin. "Sous le signe du centimètre," *Daho Express*, No 621, August 28, 1971.

danced in front of the audience in order to show how their styles flowed with the movement of the body and to emphasize their skill.

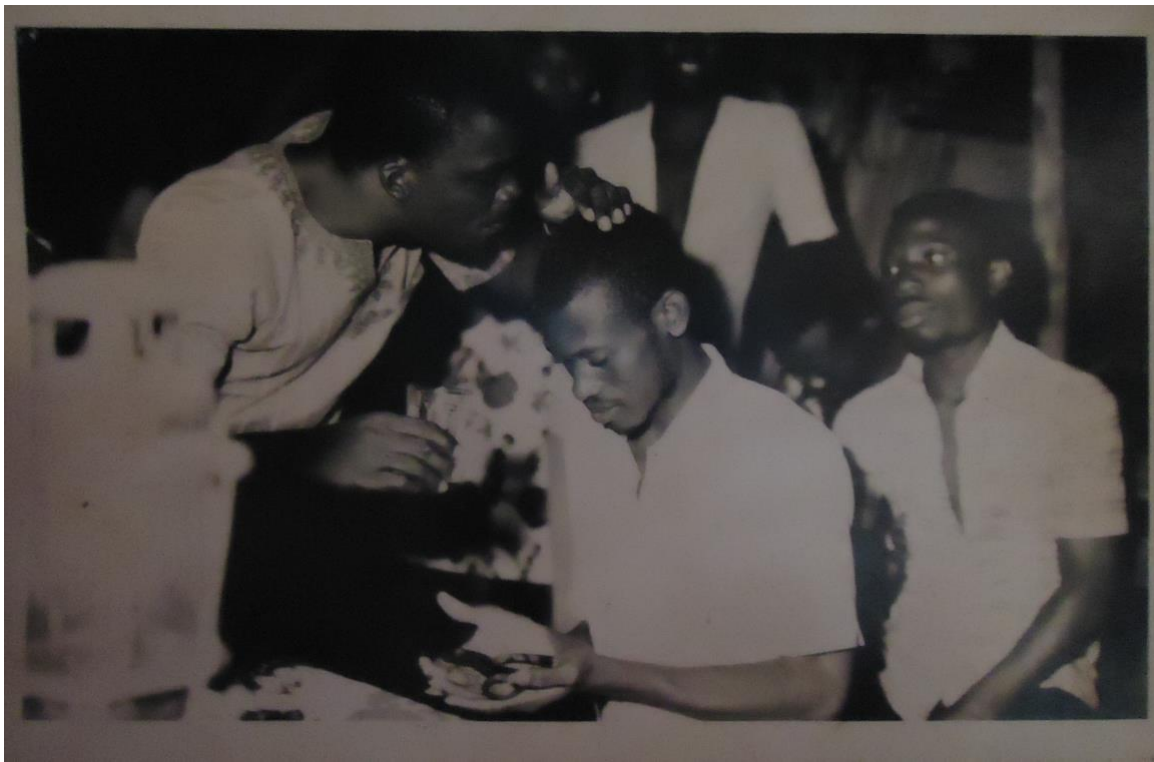


Figure 9: Alain Baba giving benediction to his apprentice Célestin Nicolas Kokossou, Bohicon, 1970s. Courtesy of Alain Baba.

Finally, sharing food and drink was an important part of liberation, and it increased the cost of the ceremony. During the benedictions, masters spit small amounts of liquor, beer, soft drinks, or water on the head of the apprentice. If Figure 4.9, taken in the 1970s, tailor Alain Baba whispers advice and blesses his first liberated apprentice Célestin Nicolas Kokossou by spraying liquor on his head from the glass held in his right hand.¹²³ Near the end of the ceremony, masters

¹²³ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

and apprentices drank together, signifying their newfound equality. In Figure 4.10, Célestin Godou Kpodou shared a small glass of *sodabi* (distilled palm wine) with his *patron*. Another of the photographs in Godou Kpodou's collection captured the toast between the master and his former apprentice. Other photographs held in the personal collections of tailors showed men and women toasting and drinking *youki* or Fanta together. At her liberation in 1980, Léocadie Zehouunkpé's master asked her to bring eight bottles of liquor.¹²⁴ While most masters required their apprentices to bring fewer bottles, drinks and food remained a cost. The celebration ended with a reception, where invited guests, including friends and family of the apprentice and the *patron*, and other masters, ate and drank food and drinks provided by the young person's family. An apprentice's family might serve multiple courses of meat, chicken, and fish in sauce with rice or *pâte* (a dense maize-based fufu) with each course served with a new bottle of beer, Coca-Cola, or *youki*.

¹²⁴ Interview with Léocadie Zehouunkpé, Zakpo-Anouame, Bohicon, June 18, 2015.



**Figure 4.10: Célestin Godou Kpodou drinks with his *patron*, Abomey, 1979.
Courtesy of Célestin Godou Kpodou.**

Masters, apprentices, and their families planned liberations far in advance, although rarely a master might give a diploma to an apprentice “in secret” by not having an open liberation. This occurred when a master felt that the cost of the ceremony was too great of a burden on the young person if, for example, he or she were an orphan.¹²⁵ Indeed, the costs of the ceremony have steadily increased until today families sometimes pay up to 250.000 fCFA (about \$500) to liberate their children, which is a significant expenditure in one of the world’s poorest countries. Liberation became a ceremony where apprentices showcased their accomplishments to family and friends, while *patrons* took pride in having one of their students enter into the rank of master. Liberated apprentices became a testament to both the wealth and the skills of the master craftsmen who they served under and their master’s master attended whenever possible. It

¹²⁵ Interview with Barthélemy Agbamande, Atchia (Zogbodomey), June 24, 2015.

became a moment when craft identity was solidified through ceremony, diplomas, and exchanges of all sorts and it also became one where craft identity and individual skill were put on display in front of entire communities.

IV. Cooperatives, Associations, and the Weaknesses of Artisan Identity

Despite the collective consensus around practices of contracting and liberation -and marking it the “graduation” of apprentices – other efforts to organize the work of artisans has proved less durable. Colonial and postcolonial states and artisans themselves have long imagined craft-specific organizations as a way to manage craft knowledge and promote innovation and investment. But these cooperatives and associations have an equally long history of failure, although there is little evidence about the roles of early cooperatives and associations and why they dissolved. As early as the 1930s, colonial educators promoted cooperatives as a way for artisans to increase productivity and cut costs by buying tools and primary materials at wholesale rates.¹²⁶ In the late 1940s, the Dahomean Work Inspector noted a trade union called the Professional Trade Union of Textile Workers (Tailors) (*Syndicat professionnel des travailleurs du textile (tailleurs)*), although this report contains no information on their membership and activities. In 1950, another administrator reported that the trade union had 76 tailors as members and it was likely that most of their activities took place in Cotonou and Porto-Novo. In the same report, he identified a Trade Union of Artisans in the Abomey Cercle (*Syndicat des artisans du*

¹²⁶ Lettre de LeGall à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général (Inspection Général de l'Enseignement). Bamako, March 1937. ANS, 2G/37/72.

Cercle d'Abomey) with 216 members.¹²⁷ But these groups quickly became inactive, if they ever even existed as more than an association on paper.¹²⁸

Archival records attest that artisans, particularly tailors, founded associations over the next few decades. By 1955, thirty-two tailors on the coast had formed the Union of Clothing Workers of Dahomey (*Syndicat des travailleurs de l'habillement du Dahomey*), although this single record of the group makes no mention of their activities.¹²⁹ In the decade after independence, a researcher sent by the ILO to investigate Dahomean artisans noted that tailors seemed “particularly receptive to cooperative work: the first was launched in Parakou on March 22, 1963, while the one in Cotonou is only in the process of being formed.”¹³⁰ The ILO researcher argued that tailors, especially, faced competition from international imports and that “tailors grouped into co-operatives seem only able to resist economically in the future.”¹³¹ Indeed, in the following few decades, tailors often led efforts to organize cooperatives and associates across the *artisanat*.

Cooperatives and associations regularly failed, in part, because they lacked a consistent source of funding. In 1961, the carpenters, masons, painters and tailors' cooperatives organized themselves into a pan-artisan cooperative union in Cotonou. The ILO researcher concluded that “it seems that [cooperatives and associations] have not produced tangible effects because of the lack of an appropriate funding mechanism.”¹³² But this may have not been the fault of the

¹²⁷ R. Berthoumieu, Inspection du Travail, Dahomey, Rapport Annuel, 1949. ANS, 2G/49/44.

¹²⁸ P. Berthoumieu, Inspection Territoriale du Travail, Rapport Annuel, 1954 ANS, 2G/54/32.

¹²⁹ P. Berthoumieu, Inspection Territoriale du Travail et Des Lois Sociales Rapport Annuel, 1955. ANS, 2G/55/27.

¹³⁰ Bureau International de Travail, 1965, 11.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid, 3.

individual association's internal framework or leadership. An inconsistent revenue stream was characteristic of Dahomean artisanship, since profits fluctuated regularly and entered long slumps after national and international economic downturns.¹³³ Also, Dahomean artisans avoided these associations because of membership fees, and also because they did not want to register as a business and be subject to taxes. The ILO researcher found that only 25% of artisans paid the fees to have a licensed business by the mid-1960s.¹³⁴ Municipalities such as the mayor's office of Abomey and Bohicon attempted to tax artisans based on the size of their business, either by taxing the number of apprentices or, in the case of tailors, the number of machines. But artisans easily evaded these taxes or bribed officials and very few regularly paid.

Cooperatives and associations also floundered on the Abomey Plateau because they relied on assumptions that artisan identity superseded other forms of difference, such as gender, generation, and class. For tailors, this problem was particularly acute because both men and women sewed clothes and women often felt left out of associational decision-making as men took on leadership roles. Za-Kpota tailor Barthélemy Adjahouinou refused to join the local tailor's association because his younger brother, also a tailor, was a member.¹³⁵ The hierarchical relationship between elder and younger siblings prevented them joining a group in which they would be equals. Finally, there were extremely successful tailors who were able to invest profits in expensive machinery such as embroidery machines, while other tailors farmed or sold small items on the side, such as soap or candy, in order to survive. The wealthy tailor with multiple

¹³³ Ibid, 5.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Interview with Barthélemy Adjahouinou, Tindji-Zecko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015

apprentices and the occasional tailors who lacked even a machine had little in common that would lead them to join the same association.

The 1970s brought a renewed interest in the possibility of cooperatives and associations. In the first part of the decade, the ILO returned to Dahomey to supervise the construction of *Maisons des artisans* in towns and cities across the country. These centers were open to artisans who used them to conduct meetings, although young people, other residents, and non-profits also used the *Maisons* as meeting spaces for community activities, such as skills-building classes and seminars.¹³⁶ After President Kérékou officially adopted Marxism-Leninism in 1974, there was a renewed interest in artisan cooperatives at the national level. As part of the Kérékou regime's drive to create a "revolutionary culture," they envisioned "cultural and artistic squads" of artists and artisans who would operate in "every village and every neighborhood" and teach Beninois proper revolutionary tastes.¹³⁷ In Abomey, the Kérékou government commissioned the National Office of Tourism and Hotel Management to reduce the number of artisans, especially those making objects for the tourist market, in order to make the sector both more manageable and profitable.¹³⁸ But, like most of the Kérékou government's attempts to create a centrally planned economy, state-organized artisan's cooperatives floundered on the Abomey Plateau and elsewhere.

Amid the increasing financial and economic difficulties of the 1980s, tailors organized some of the most long-standing artisans' associations. A tailor who ran a Cotonou shop named

¹³⁶ Bureau International de Travail, 1965; See also, Process verbal de reunion, Porto-Novo, March 2, 1972. ANB, 1G/13/11.

¹³⁷ "Nouveau visage des activités culturelles en RPB," *Ehuzu*, December 11, 1975.

¹³⁸ "Pour une organisation rationnelle du secteur artisanal," *Ehuzu*, December 17, 1975.

Pico-zi started an association in the economic capital in the late 1970s and, by the early 1980s, had travelled to Bohicon to help tailors organize on the Plateau.¹³⁹ Pico-zi emphasized the role that associations need to play in regulating liberation and he presided at a number of these events in the 1980s and 1990s. His association of tailors worked with other artisans to organize a pan-artisan group in Benin that they hoped would regulate contracts and apprenticeship and provide a means for artisans to present their collective concerns to the state.

After the 1990 National Conference in Benin and the successful presidential and legislative elections the following year, artisans created a pan-craft association that has been the most long-standing in Beninois history. On September 9-11, 1993, artisans from all over the country met in Cotonou to launch the National Federation of Beninois Artisans (*Fédération nationale des artisans de Bénin (FENAB)*) under the guidance of the new government. The artisans elected an Abomean furniture maker, Henri Georges Ayadji, as their president and its founders conceptualized the organization as explicitly political. FENAB would fight for the rights of artisans at the national level as opposed to earlier iterations of Beninois associational life where craftspeople designed cooperatives for mutual aid and assistance.¹⁴⁰ For Ayadji and Ernest Fiogbe, an Abomean master weaver, one of the most significant distinctions between FENAB and earlier groups of artisans was that FENAB was founded through “text” - it included an administrative structure and formalized set of documents - as opposed to the “word of mouth”

¹³⁹ Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Georges Henri Ayadji and Ernest Fiogbe, Dokpodji, Abomey, August 21, 2015.

organizational structure of earlier artisans groups.¹⁴¹ FENAB continued to operate as the largest association of artisans up until the time of this research in 2015.

The creation of FENAB created a new set of hierarchies within l'*artisanat*. FENAB issued cards to member artisans, which a number of artisans kept in their personal collections. Alain Baba, the former president of the Bohicon tailors, allowed me to photograph his expired membership card (Figure 4.11).¹⁴² His card, dated the year after the artisans founded FENAB, was valid for three years and was signed by the president of the Zou (the region where Abomey and Bohicon are located) as well as the national president Ayadji. FENAB had offices in every region and *commune* of Benin, Local chapters were further divided into groups based on craft, creating a large number of officeholders - presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, and treasurers - at each level of the association – village, *commune*, region, and national.

¹⁴¹ *Fédération nationale des artisans du Bénin (FENAB)*, Les 9,10,11 Septembre 1993. Interview with Georges Henri Ayadji and Ernest Fiogbe, Dokpodji, Abomey, August 21, 2015.

¹⁴² Interview with Alain Baba, Zakpo, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, November 28, 2014.

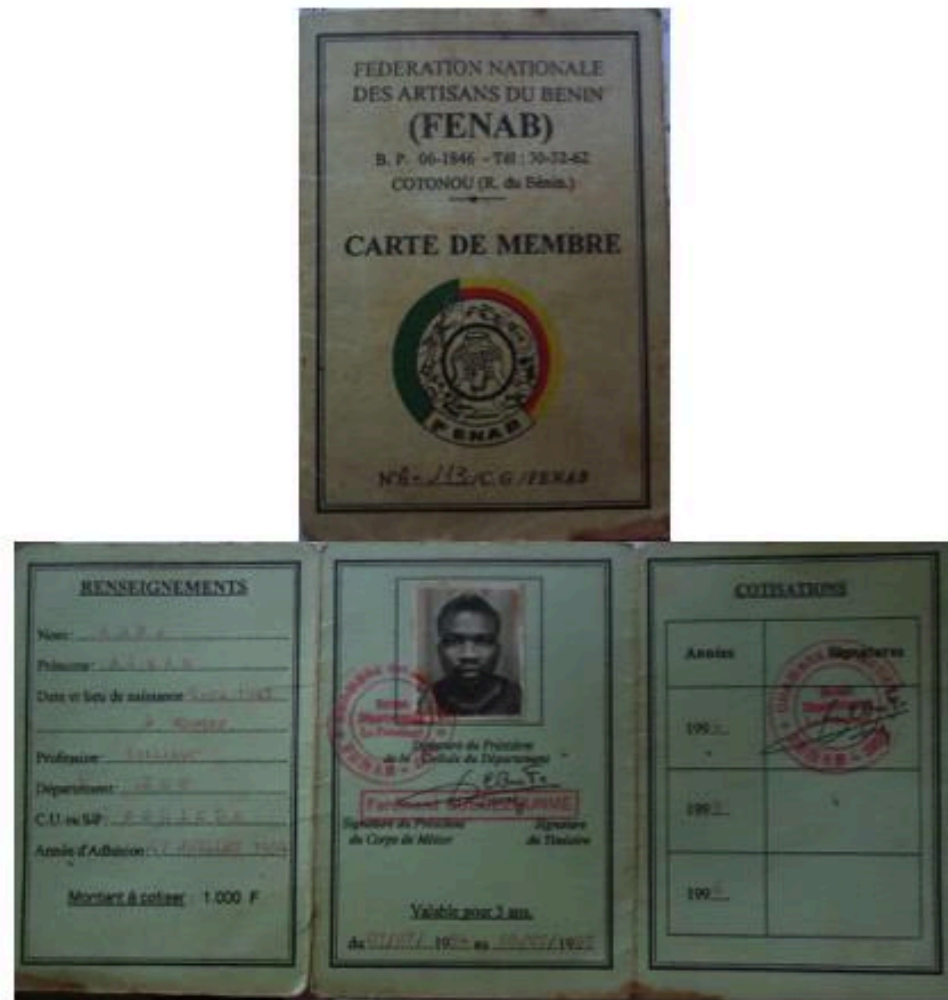


Figure 4.11: Alain Baba's FENAB membership card, 1994. Courtesy of Alain Baba.

Baba's membership card also shows that FENAB had problems financially supporting its organization much like earlier iterations of artisans' associations. Although a ranked member, Baba's card makes it clear that he paid his first year, but failed to pay dues for the remainder of the card's validity. FENAB also never included all Beninois artisans, since many opted out in

order to avoid fees or because they felt that the association had little to offer them based on gendered, generational, and class differences with other members. The identity of *artisanat* and their supposed common interests could not sustain cooperatives or even overtly political organizations like FENAB.

The colonial state instituted a number of programs that shaped artisans' conceptions of themselves as a collective and that introduced a set of practices which artisans used to assert this collective identity. Apprenticeship contracts, diplomas, and liberation first appeared on the Abomey Plateau in the 1950s and 1960s, but they became increasingly intricate and expensive for apprentices, and more standardized across professions, during the second half of the twentieth century. These practices developed largely outside the context of the state although they incorporated practices and objects from colonial education and expositions. Artisans used these colonial technologies in order to manage their craft and reduce competition. Artisans also attempted to form associations, often with the support of the state, but these often never took off because of competition among artisans, their rivalries as small business owners, and their inability to clearly articulate an economic or political purpose for the organization other than a shared commitment to acquiring new skills and regulating craft knowledge. These failed cooperatives and associations also reveal the inherent weakness of the colonial artisan identity because it could not supersede other forms of difference and social cleavage in postcolonial Benin.

The emergence of *l'artisanat* as a coherent social category with an institutional framework was a concurrent process to the spread of modern urban style and the development of

tailoring on the Plateau. Tailoring became commonplace in order to meet the demand for greater social differentiation among Beninois as clothes were used to convey identities such as the class and occupation of the wearer. *L'artisanat*, as a fixed social and political identity, was a product of these same changes, although colonial and postcolonial states, as well as artisans themselves, imagined it as an “authentically African” or pre-colonial identity with a set of “traditional” practices such as liberation. New practices of apprenticeship and liberation, the spread of modern urban style, and the expansion of tailoring would all contribute to tailor’s ability to re-fashion the urban landscapes of Abomey and Bohicon through the occupation and management of workshops, the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 5

The Feminization of Tailoring: Urban Growth and Women's Opportunity and Respectability in the Workshop

Growing up in the village of Bopa in southeast Benin during the 1970s, Séraphine Hounbandan occasionally travelled with her parents to Abomey's Houndjro market, which is where she first saw a woman tailor. Impressed by the woman, her work, and her workshop, Hounbandan begged her father to apprentice her to a tailor, but he refused and insisted that she make *lio* (balls of akassa, or fermented corn fufu) for sale in the local market and that she continue to work alongside her sisters in his fields. Unsatisfied with his response, Hounbandan stole some food from her family and fled to Abomey to find the master tailor. But the tailor would not take her on without parental permission, so Hounbandan lied and said she was an orphan. Because she also did not have money for contract fees, Hounbandan spent much of her time performing domestic tasks in return for scraps of food instead of learning the craft. Discouraged and hungry, she threatened to throw herself in a well until someone else from her village helped her return to her father's. There, Hounbandan married, but because she did not conceive, she and her husband quickly divorced.

With one failed marriage behind her and now in her early twenties, Hounbandan returned to Abomey to convince another woman tailor to take her on as apprentice. But she was still too impoverished to afford a contract and panhandled her monthly apprenticeship fees. This period of her life had a profound impact on Hounbandan, who described to us how Abomeans mocked her for her advanced age (for an apprentice), poverty, and "*villageois*" ways until someone in town told her *patronne* about her homelessness. The tailor took her in until she was

ready to receive her diploma, but she was once again too poor to pay for her liberation.

Wandering the streets, she met a man who, upon hearing of her troubles, signed a note promising to pay her *patronne* over a seven-month period, but, two months later, he lost his mind (*devenir fou*) and started to live in the streets. Hounbandan met another man and together they travelled to Abeokuta, Nigeria where she worked odd jobs, including as a mason's assistant, hauling bags on concrete on her head. She saved enough money to buy a sewing machine and to open a workshop in Abeokuta, where she found clients among the many Beninois migrants in town. But this man stole from her, so Hounbandan left him and returned to Abomey in 1983 to open a workshop near the Houndjro market. In Abomey, she became a success - her shop flourished and, by 2015, she had liberated over sixty apprentices. She also had a daughter who did well in school and continued on to university. Hounbandan ended her life story by telling us how, despite his lack of aid and support for her, she had paid for her father's funeral. She added, "that among all of my father's children, I am the only one with an occupation now, the only one with some value."¹ Tailoring had provided a pathway for Hounbandan to go from an exploited village girl to a well-respected *maman* and a *patronne* of an important Abomean tailoring shop.

Hounbandan told me the story of her life in front of her apprentices and asked me to return with a transcript of the interview so that her apprentices could study the trials and tribulations of their *patronne* and reflect upon the moral lessons of the narrative. There were a few themes from her story that many woman tailors repeated: men often blocked or derailed women's paths to material self-sufficiency; suffering and hard work paid off in the long run; and,

¹ Interview with Séraphine Hounbandan, Dota, Abomey, June 16, 2015.

above all, tailoring served as both a motivation for and means of achieving success and respectability. While Houngbandan's life history was exceptional because of the number of challenges that she faced and because of her flair for constructing an epic narrative of her journey from rags to (relative) riches, her story also exemplified how the role of tailored clothing and the craft of tailoring changed in the 1970s. The earlier generation of (mostly male) tailors on the Plateau used their cosmopolitan and modern expertise to create clothing that allowed Beninois to enact new ideas of self, city, and nation. In contrast, urbanization and later globalization reduced the tailor's role as mediator at the same time that it created new opportunities for women to establish themselves as upright and virtuous entrepreneurs - a status that was difficult to attain for women who engaged in more mobile economic activities, such as market trading or hairdressing, in the growing city..

This chapter traces the effects of urbanization and globalization on tailors and tailored clothing. It details three concurrent changes in tailoring that began in the 1970s - the shift from central markets to workshops as the site of production, the development and spread of women's fashions, and the feminization of the profession itself. As Abomey and Bohicon grew and the number of tailors increased, the site of tailoring moved to private workshops, which tailors used to exert their urban presence and to help shape the physical landscapes of the two cities.

Workshops served as places where tailors regulated the lives of their apprentices and met with other master artisans to discuss their craft, politics, or gossip. The growth of the city also led to a shift in tailored clothing itself and women's clothing became relatively more varied and complex than men's. President Mathieu Kérékou's 1974 adoption of state socialism curtailed Beninois men's experimentations in self, city, and nation and his economic policies, followed by market

liberalization in the next decade, limited men's opportunity to generate wealth as civil servants, wage laborers, or cash crop farmers. Urbanization and the feminization of Beninois fashion coincided with - and contributed to - the feminization of the craft itself. Women like Hounghbandan apprenticed themselves at astonishing rates and they used to tailor's workshop to carve out new forms of opportunity and respectability in the burgeoning city. However, their vast numbers, which increased rapidly as women tailors took on dozens of apprentices, reduced the prestige and profitability of the craft.

This chapter concludes by showing how demand for tailored clothing flourished amid globalization, although individual tailors did not have the means of the tailors who came before them. Scholars have well documented how the global shift to fast fashion in the 1980s created new supplies of secondhand clothing, much of which drifted into local markets in the developing world and, in some cases, decimated artisanal clothing production.² However, in Benin, markets in *acouta* (secondhand) did not destroy artisanal tailoring and most ordinary Beninois did not buy *acouta* instead of tailored clothing, rather they used secondhand to supplement their tailored wardrobes. As one tailor argued, "if you sew well and you do your work well, [secondhand] does not spoil your work."³ But secondhand was only a single aspect of globalization that encouraged Beninois clients to order more tailored clothing. In the 1990s and 2000s, regional integration and electrification, inexpensive Chinese cloth imports, new types of catalogues and posters mass-produced elsewhere in Africa, as well as the spread of international non-profits all led to more

² Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010)

³ Interview with Euphrasie Goudou, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

demand for and production of tailored clothing. Although tailors lacked the expertise and control over clothing style that made them important mediators of sartorial meanings and of opportunities for self-fashioning like they did in the middle of the twentieth century, their influence over everyday life continued as they built, occupied, and managed workshops in an urban Benin. This chapter begins by exploring how the relationship between local and national politics shaped the Plateau's cities before shifting to how the interiors and exteriors of tailor's workshops altered Beninois urban life.

I. Politics and Urbanization on the Plateau

On November 30, 1974, President Kérékou travelled to Abomey where, in the recently constructed public square, Place Goho, he declared Marxism-Leninism as official state policy. Exactly a year later, he returned to the same location to proclaim that the country's new name would be the People's Republic of Bénin. Kérékou's choice to make both announcements in Abomey was purposeful. In his revolutionary fervor, he argued that "[Beninois] must categorically reject all history founded on the magnificence of a dynasty," or that the history of the kingdom needed to be de-centered from the history of the postcolonial country.⁴ Although the Fon-speakers of the Abomey Plateau had never actually dominated Beninois national politics, Kérékou and others perceived that conceptions of an independent Dahomean nation were too rooted in the kingdom's history. The name "Dahomey" for the entire territory of

⁴ "Naissance de la République Populaire du Bénin et du parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin," *Ehuzu*, November 30, 1975.

present-day Benin was equally a legacy of colonialism and changing the name was a way to for Kérékou to signal rupture with a (neo) colonial past.

Abomey's Place Goho was rapidly built, in part, to provide a venue for Kérékou's announcements on the country's new course. Government officials initially scheduled his first speech for the second anniversary of the October 26, 1972 military coup d'état that put Kérékou in power, but the event was delayed until November 30 probably because of construction delays. Designers planned the square as a space for political rallies and leisure for the citizens of an independent Benin, in contrast to Abomey's preexisting public spaces that were next to pre-colonial palace complex or adjacent to the colonial-era mayor's office, prefecture, prison, and other structures in the northwest of town. The centerpiece of Place Goho was a large bronzed statue of Béhanzin, the king of Dahomey who had fought two wars against the French. Although the Kérékou regime rejected the centrality of the Kingdom to the history of the postcolonial nation, they likewise used Place Goho and public speeches to revive Béhanzin as an anti-colonial and anti-imperial figure, justifying their own rejection of the West.

Planners built Place Goho on the road from Abomey to Bohicon, in the same place where Béhanzin had fought his last battle against the French, and where the French had built their military camp. But the project was more than a public square; it also included a stadium and a hotel that a writer for *Daho-Express* described as having "charm that one cannot find in the *cité* of the Kings."⁵ Improving Abomey was another aspect of the project, which included the paving of five kilometers of Abomey streets, the installation of street lights from Djimè to Abomey, and

⁵ Mèhou d'Assomption, "Abomey, c'est bientôt," *Daho Express*, November 27, 1974.

the extension of the electrical grid to the *préfet's* residence, which would "illuminate a larger part of the city," including the central market and the police station.⁶ The highly publicized project was one of the first of a series of monuments and public squares that the Kérékou government built in cities and towns across the country over the next decade.⁷ Like Goho, these sites were built on the periphery of rapidly urbanizing cities and towns and most invoked the "Revolution" with a vaguely Marxist-Leninist aesthetic. But state-led urban development projects like Place Goho were rare and ordinary people did much of the work of shaping Benin's cities.

Benin's urban centers grew rapidly during the second half of the twentieth century, although not as fast as in many other Sub-Saharan African countries. The World Bank estimates that only 9% of Benin's population lived in cities in 1960, but by 2016, about 44% of Beninois were urban dwellers.⁸ Cotonou and the other coastal cities received the majority of rural migrants and grew at much faster rates than interior towns like Abomey, Bohicon, and Parakou. The national government hoped to slow the course of urbanization, or at least encourage migration to regional towns instead of the coastal cities, by investing in the infrastructure of regional towns.⁹ The Abomey Plateau, part of the Zou region, had a large population, although most of it was rural. The 1974 population of the Zou region was 542,554 inhabitants with 32,000 in Abomey

⁶ "Abomey s'apprête pour le 26 Octobre," *Daho Express*, September 3, 1974.

⁷ Some examples include Étoile Rouge in Cotonou, Place de la Revolution in Ouando, or the public square in Sé. It does not seem like there was much of an attempt to destroy colonial sites and completely rebuild. For example, the main square of Porto-Novo - Place Bayol - is still named after the French colonial governor of Porto-Novo who fought Glele's armies.

⁸ The World Bank, "DataBank: World Development Indicators," <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS&country=> (accessed July 10, 2018).

⁹ Obayomi Sacramento, "L'aménagement du Territoire au Dahomey," *Daho Express*, October 13, 1973; Obayomi Sacramento, "Amenagement regional et amenagement national," *Daho Express*, January 9, 1974.

proper.¹⁰ In another report, the Beninois state determined that the annual growth rate was 2.2% for Abomey and 3.2% for Bohicon during the years from 1979 to 1983. The 1983 population of the narrowly defined city centers was 42,021 and 25,840 in Abomey and Bohicon, respectively.¹¹ However, political boundaries and definitions of the urban centers changed frequently, making it difficult for the state to accurately identify urban populations and determine rates of growth.

While the national government occasionally spearheaded development projects like Goho, local politics influenced investment in urban infrastructure and the often contentious relationship between residents of Abomey and those of Bohicon shaped investment priorities. Abomey grew at a slower rate than Bohicon due, in part, to efforts to preserve the precolonial city as well as the conservatism of traditional authorities who often refused to build on ancestral lands.¹² The relatively high growth of Bohicon altered the economic and political dynamics on the Plateau. Bohicon's legal status and form of local governance changed a number of times both before and into the revolutionary period. By the early 1960s, the national government made Bohicon a *sous-préfecture*, although it was quickly reincorporated back into Abomey.¹³ The Kérékou government again made it a *sous-préfecture* and, in 1972, its population was 120,000 people in 85 villages. Later, when the Beninois government reorganized the country into

¹⁰ B. Kayossi, "Pleins feux sur la province du Zou," *Daho Express*, November 27, 1974.

¹¹ PUB, 1988, *Abomey analyses urbaines, Plan d'Urbanisme du Bénin*, Cotonou, quoted in Albert Tingbé-Azalou, "Cultural Dimensions of Urban-Rural Relations in Benin: The Case of Abomey and its Hinterland," in *Rural-urban Dynamics in Francophone Africa*, ed. J. Baker (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 1997), 83.

¹² Interview with Gabin Akouêdenoudjè, Adandokpodji, Abomey, September 4, 2015.

¹³ "Le président Ahomadegbe inaugure la Sous-Préfecture de Bohicon," *L'aube nouvelle*, March 6, 1965; "Ouverture du commissariat de police de Bohicon," *Daho Express*, September 7, 1973.

communes, Bohicon was considered "rural."¹⁴ The frequently-changing status of Bohicon meant that it was usually Abomeans that dictated priorities in the region, despite the greater wealth and tax revenue of the market town of Bohicon.

Despite the uneven political status of Bohicon, most industry, services, and utilities were located in the market town. The first bank in the region opened in Bohicon in 1970 and both Abomey and Bohicon had police stations after 1973.¹⁵ There were few factors in Benin, but many of these were in Bohicon, including ones that processed cotton, palm oil, and jute sacks.¹⁶ The latter employed dozens of tailors who worked round the clock. Bohicon also had water and electricity before Abomey due to its location on the intersection of the country's main north-south and east-west routes. In 1972, a USAID-funded project led to the opening of a water supply in Abomey and Bohicon.¹⁷ But the water system in Bohicon worked better than its counterpart in Abomey leaving one writer of *Daho Express* to remark that "the inhabitants of Abomey cast envious looks at their neighbors in Bohicon where water flows abundant."¹⁸ Bohicon also was on the nation's electrical grid before Abomey and it was not until the construction of Goho that the central part of the city became electrified. Yet, the influence of both the national and local states on the urban landscapes of the Plateau were minimal due to

¹⁴ "Coup mortel au regionalisme," *Daho Express*, November 13, 1972. "Décret No 74-27 du 13-2-74: Limites et dénominations des circonscriptions administratives de la province du Zou," *Daho Express*, February 25, 1974.

¹⁵ "Ouverture du commissariat de police de Bohicon"; B. Kayossi, "Pleins feux sur la province du Zou," *Daho Express*, November 27, 1974.

¹⁶ B. Kayossi, "Pleins feux sur la province du Zou,."

¹⁷ "Inaguration de l'adduction d'eau d'Abomey-Bohicon," *Daho Express*, October 25, 1972.

¹⁸ "L'eau manque à Abomey," *Daho Express*, July 23, 1973.

either lack of funds, organization, or motivation and it was largely up to ordinary people like tailors and their clients to give form and meaning to the cities and towns of interior Benin.

II. The Workshop as an Urban Space

The most obvious effect of urbanization on tailoring was that it led to more demand for tailored clothing and to more young men and women available for apprenticeship. However, urbanization also led to subtle shifts in notions of the prestige of tailors and the relationship between ability and place of production. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the decades covered in chapter three, there were always a few tailors who designed and sewed clothing in workshops or in their homes, although the majority of tailoring took place in the central markets. These workshop or home-based tailors were usually either middle-class women who made clothing for other middle-class women or men who made high-end outfits for civil servants and wealthy traders. But, in the decades surrounding independence, most ordinary people frequented tailors in the central markets.¹⁹ However, other artisans and *petits commerçants* (small traders) started to seek out tailors in workshops similar to the Plateau's middle class by the 1970s because of associations between private workshops and more skilled tailors. As one woman declared, "It's the villageois who come from their villages to order [clothing] in the market."²⁰ Lacking an intimate knowledge of the city, country folk and the very poor still visited the market to acquire tailored clothing, while urban residents began to frequent their neighborhood tailor. Customers

¹⁹ Interview with Elisabeth Sodokpa, Dota-Sogbadji, Abomey, June 16, 2015.

²⁰ Interview with Emiliene Agbo, Adandokpodji Daxo, Abomey, June 8, 2015.

began to call the male tailors who continued to work in the market "*petit tailleurs*" and visited them for repairs on clothing and inexpensive items.

Tailors choose the location of their workshops based on a number of factors. Oftentimes, they built shops in front of their family's compounds or rented a space from a relative. In urban Benin, houses were organized into compounds where multiple structures surrounded a central courtyard. A high wall, made either of mud brick or cement, encircled the compound and a single wood or metal door provided entry. While residents of a compound were often kin, in urban areas, many of the homes were rentals, which meant that unrelated individuals shared common spaces for washing clothes and cooking as well as latrines. Owners occasionally built shops into the exterior wall of the compounds, which they let out or used themselves as small neighborhood stores (*boutiques*) or as ateliers for tailors, barbers, photographers, and other artisans. Individual tailors often had access to shops on either family land or they worked out a deal with a neighbor. For example, Olga Dokponou constructed a workshop on land owned by her mother.²¹ But these arrangements, based on personal relationships, sometimes went awry. Tailor Laurence Dossou-Kpézé opened a workshop on her aunt's land and then, after her aunt's death, her cousins chased her out of her workshop and rented it to another tailor who, in turn, took all of her clients.²² Renting based on connections was a risky venture.

Other tailors chose rental spaces not because of personal contacts with the owner, but because they offered prime spots for attracting new clients. Tailors sought out locations on high traffic thoroughfares to central markets, churches, and schools. After having a workshop in

²¹ Interview with Olga Dokponou, Doto, Abomey, July 15, 2015.

²² Interview with Laurence Dossou-Kpézé, Agblomey, Abomey, June 17, 2015.

Cotonou for a few years, Célestine Dangbé moved back to Abomey and chose to open her shop on the road from Houndjro market to Adja. This location appealed to her, because, she remembered, "there were no artisans, but there were many people who passed by [there]." ²³ Another woman also opened her shop next to Houndjro because "a lot of villageois passed by," providing a future clientele as well as young people who, upon seeing her shop, might apprentice themselves. ²⁴ While some tailors stayed in the same location for decades, others moved because of rising rents or new landlords. ²⁵

Tailors started to hang signs, altering the visual experience of people walking throughout the towns. Other than government offices, there were few signs on the Plateau before artisans, bars, and shops began identifying their businesses to passersby. Tailor Lékolihoui Djibidisse was one of the four or five master tailors working out of Bohicon's Ganhi market in the 1950s. But, a few decades later, he moved his workshop to his family compound in Adame-Ahito, a Bohicon neighborhood northwest of the market. Although unable to read himself, Djibidisse ordered a metal sign (Figure 5.1) to affix on his compound wall in hopes of attracting clients. ²⁶ Djibidisse's sign contained basic information about him and his business, including his name, address, and profession. Later, tailors ordered signs from local painters who included depictions of clothing and the tailor's tools - the machine, the measuring tape, and scissors - alongside basic information. Other tailors choose names for their workshops, hoping that it might differentiate them from their competitors, and they had these names included on signs.

²³ Célestine Dangbé, Azali, Abomey, June 14, 2015.

²⁴ Interview with Thérèse Hountondji, Hountondji, Abomey, July 16, 2015.

²⁵ Interview with Marc Agbandjaï, Dota, Abomey, April 28, 2015.

²⁶ Interview with Lékolihoui Djibidisse, Zakpo Adame-Ahito, Bohicon, December 9, 2014.



Figure 5.1: Sign outside of Lékolihoui Djibidisse's compound, Adame-Ahito, Bohicon.
Photo by author.

The most successful tailors installed glass windows and purchased mannequins imported from Europe, allowing potential clients to absorb the newest styles and judge the skill of the individual tailor.²⁷ In Abomey, Olga Dokponou had finished her apprenticeship in men's and women's fashions in Cotonou and did not have a local base of clients. At first, she tried to dress mannequins in front of her shop, but they would quickly become covered in the red dust that quickly blanketed everything in the dry season. Dokponou saved up her money to install glass windows with lights strategically placed in the interior to illuminate her mannequins.²⁸ Brightly lit windows filled with mannequins sporting colorful wax prints or the starched grays, browns, and blacks of polyester-blend trousers created breaks in the monotonous dusty red streets of the

²⁷ Interview with Célestine Dangbé, Azali, Abomey, June 14, 2015.

²⁸ Interview with Olga Dokponou, Dota, Abomey, July 15, 2015.

Plateau's cities. These storefronts also led to a new type of shopping experience for Beninois by fostering distance between seller and buyer. In the market, even a slight glance at a piece of fabric, pot, or tomato led the vendor to initiate bartering, but windows depersonalized this process at the same time that they remade the urban landscape.

In the interiors of their shops, tailors strategically placed their tools and the objects of Beninois artisanship. Machines sat at the front of workshops so that tailors could take advantage of natural light. Behind the machines, there were colorful stacks of outfits ready to be picked up and piles of untailored fabric. Clients stored this fabric in their tailor's workshop, while they saved up the money to pay the advance for zippers, buttons, and other flourishes so that the tailor could begin her work. On the wall, tailors prominently hung their framed diplomas, often in plain view of the street if the door was open. If they could not afford three-dimensional imported mannequins, they also hung locally-crafted mannequins where they displayed their styles. In an old photograph kept in the workshop of Marié-Rose Kponsonon, two locally made mannequins hang on the wall of her workshop (Figure 5.2). The mannequins sport different styles that Kponsonon offered to her clients. While she used the mannequins to advertise her talents, she also used this photograph to show these particular styles after changing the mannequins²⁹ On exposed nails, tailors hung the scissors that they had received at liberation or the paddle that they used for the *palmatoire* when liberating their own apprentices. For example, tailor Christine Agbamandé's kept her paddle hanging on the wall of her workshop, although she had abandoned the shop and retired many years before.³⁰ As liberation and apprenticeship became more

²⁹ Interview with Marié-Rose Kponsonon, Houndonho, Bohicon, September 2, 2015.

³⁰ Interview with Christine Agbamandé, Atchia (Zogbodomey), June 24, 2015.

elaborate, the workshop served as a depository and an exhibition space for the things that signified one's abilities as a tailor.



Figure 5.2: Photograph of mannequins on the wall in Marié-Rose Kponsonon's shop, c. 1990s. Courtesy of Kponsonon.

Private workshops became places where ordinary people met to gossip, to discuss politics, and to enact local and cosmopolitan cultures. Deciding upon a style, taking measurements, and doing alterations was a long process and clients might spend an hour or more in a workshop. Tailors occasionally called upon other master tailors -often men or women who apprenticed under the same master - to work together on a large order or a particularly tricky article of clothing. During my years spent interviewing and apprenticing in workshops, I

observed how other people - neighbors and people walking by - also entered the workshop to chat with tailors and clients, but rarely with apprentices. Conversations often focused on clothing - the newest styles and their costs, who was wearing them, who was not, and what they said about the wearer. But conversations often turned to other topics, such as gossip about local scandals or intense debates about national politics. With a dearth of planned public spaces like parks and squares, tailors' workshops served as sites where small groups of Beninois amassed (and continue to amass) to meet and discuss topic beyond the reach of state or traditional authority.

Although workshops led to new opportunities for tailors to exert control over city spaces, storing all of one's possessions in a single spot created new problems. In contrast to tailors who worked in their homes or brought their machines to market, tailors in workshops left for the night, leaving all their tools, clothing, and unfinished products behind locked doors that were occasionally overcome. For example, Marc Agbandjaï had five machines stolen over the course of multiple break-ins at his shop in Abomey and, during the first break-in, the thieves also took his clients clothes and fabric, his other tools, and his diploma.³¹ Shoddy electrical wiring also led to fires that destroyed the livelihoods of tailors who lost all of their tools and diplomas. Tailors were ultimately responsible for reimbursing clients for their burned or stolen fabric if an incident happened while the cloth was in the tailor's possession.³² While workshops created new types of opportunities for tailors, these small, contained spaces also made it possible that tailors could be ruined from a single event.

³¹ Interview with Marc Agbandjaï, Dota, Abomey, April 28, 2015.

³² Interview with Euphrasie Goudou, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

Neighborhood workshops also resulted in disagreements among tailors, particularly when one moved into the "territory" of another. Edmonde Semassou chose the location of her Abomey workshop because she saw that there were no other tailors on the street, although it was relatively busy. When she first leased the shop, she noticed a new construction project next door and begged the landlord not to rent the space to another woman tailor. But he did, and the two women operated shops next door to each other for over twenty-five years. Semassou described strategies that she developed for avoiding conflict with the other woman, although their apprentices often had open fights that the two older women had to resolve. For example, if one of Semassou's neighbor's clients was unhappy with an outfit or felt like the tailor lacked the skill to make it, the client discretely passed cloth through Semassou's window. Later, the two would meet in the nearby mechanic's shop where Semassou took their measurements and discussed the outfit.³³ Workshops heightened competition among tailors, but they also allowed them to discreetly manage it.

Furthermore, workshop-based production also made tailors more legible to local authorities and facilitated their taxation by the state. Tailors who worked behind the walls of their compounds avoided taxation.³⁴ Although tailors operating out of the market paid authorities on a regular basis, the sum was less than in a workshop where masters paid per machine or per apprentice. As shown in the previous chapter, many tailors successfully avoided paying their entire bill by sending home apprentices and hiding machines on tax day, but most paid something if they operated out of an identifiable roadside space. Ultimately the move to

³³ Interview with Edmonde Semassou, Hêchiditô, Abomey, July 15, 2015.

³⁴ Interview with Antoinette Nonvignon, Bohicon, December 14, 2014.

workshops changed how tailors controlled apprentices and craft knowledge, at the same time that they altered how Benin's cities looked and how Beninois moved through them and experienced daily activities such as walking and shopping.

III. Feminizing Fashion: Women's Clothing in the 1970s

In the decades surrounding independence, men's styles flourished on the Abomey Plateau. Tailors made outfits like the *dètè* and the *bounba*, which permitted ordinary Dahomean men to refashion and reimagine Dahomean pasts, presents, and futures. These styles of dress, based on models from outside the borders of Dahomey, gained traction within the region and the rest of the nation, becoming Dahomean dress. Their popularity among all social groups on the Plateau continued into the 1970s, and into the 2010s. But slight changes in forms hinted at central Benin's incorporation into global fashion networks. Pant legs grew larger and, during interviews, tailors and their clients warmly (if comically) recalled the style *bas d'éléph* [shortened for of 'elephant bottoms' or bellbottoms]. Indeed, tailors continued to modify *dètès* and *bounbas*, usually in terms of fittedness, but also with new types of embellishments, especially after wealthier tailors invested in expensive embroidery machines. But there was less room for debates around the meanings of men's clothing and the possibilities that they embodied after Kérékou founded the People's Republic of Benin. The authoritarian Kérékou government offered only one official path for men - the Revolution - and deviation from it could mean a trip to the notorious political prison in the northern village of Ségbanon.

In contrast, women on the Plateau began to wear more complex and varied fashions in the 1970s. In the previous decade, the political elite in the coastal cities had promoted women's

modern urban styles to the literate masses. Newspapers ran frequent articles on the high fashion scene in Paris, which editors had picked up from wire services. Other articles explained women's styles that were popular in Europe and broke them down into patterns to show readers how to sew these blouses, skirts, and dresses.³⁵ Furthermore, unlike in other African states, there was not a popular movement against miniskirts and commentators defended them as expressions of the country's modernization.³⁶ As one man wrote, "To condemn the revolution in clothing is also to condemn the actual progress of humanity... Today the outfits in style during the reign of Louis XIV or during the dynasty of 'Ouegbadja' have disappeared."³⁷ A photograph (Figure 3.6) of Elisabeth Sodokpo and her apprentices, taken in 1971, shows that these styles also were popular in Plateau cities, although probably worn by fewer women than in the coastal cities. Women, other than the wives and daughters of the Beninois elite, began to adopt modern urban styles, with a few adjustments.

³⁵ For some examples see, "Un peu de couture: Un jumper pour mettre en valeur votre robe ou votre pantalon," *Daho Express*, July 11, 1970 and "Patron couture: Robe de jeune fille," *Daho Express*, August 8, 1970.

³⁶ Valentin Alagbe, "D'accord pour la mini-jupe, non à l'excentricité," *L'aube nouvelle*, July 6, 1968; Madagascar, Mali, Guinea, Tunisia, and Niger all ran campaigns against minis, see: "La mini jupe... en difficulté au Niger," *L'aube nouvelle*, May 19, 1968; Pierre François, "Visage authentique de la femme dahoméenne," *Daho Express*, September 5, 1969; Outlawed in Malawi, see: "Votre page madame," *Daho Express*, September 6, 1969; "Niger: Bandes anti-mini," *Daho Express*, March 19, 1970.

³⁷ Valentin Alagbe, "D'accord pour la mini-jupe, non à l'excentricité," *L'aube nouvelle*, July 6, 1968.



Figure 5.3: "The models after the fashion show," *Daho Express*, November 3, 1969.

Pre-revolutionary governments encouraged the women's fashion scene by supporting and publicizing the work of women designers in Cotonou. In 1969, the association of customs officials staged a fashion show at their annual banquet (Figure 5.3). The women in the image wear different long and short styles which the author of the accompanying article describing as successes with "one or two exceptions."³⁸ One wonders if the outfits that the author saw as failures are the styles modeled after *tchanka* and *grand pagne*, which are worn by the models

³⁸ "Un grand gala: Le syntradouane nous sort de l'ordinaire," *Daho Express*, November 3, 1969 and "Instantanes de la mode," *Daho Express*, November 15, 1969.

who are fourth and fifth from the left. Images and descriptions of the fashion show in the pages of the newspaper must have sparked significant interest in Porto-Novo and Cotonou, because features on women fashion designers in Cotonou and their designs became a regular occurrence from 1960 until Kérékou took power in 1972. The Cotonou Lion's Club staged an event in 1970, which made individual women fashion designers household names among the newspaper-reading public.³⁹ For example, the designs of Cotonou's Cherita Couture were frequently pictured and described in *Daho Express*. The woman who owned the shop gave her designs names such as "Sun," "Presidency," "Apollo," etc., which evoked contemporary national and international news. In Figure 5.4, the photographer captured the women in motion, or at least in the appearance of motion, perhaps a reference to fashion runways in the West. Women's political associations also held fashion shows where they gave out awards for design as well as hairdressing.⁴⁰ These programs brought attention to not only the women who designed the clothing, but also to the new ways that familiar textiles and forms could be re-fashioned for the urban Beninoise.

³⁹ "Presentation de Mode dans le cadre de la soirée de gala du Lion's Club," *Daho Express*, April 11, 1970.

⁴⁰ "La gala de la FFD: Un beau succès pour la femme Dahoméenne," *Daho Express*, February 21, 1972; "Des idées originales pour être élégante," *Daho Express*, February 26, 1972.



Figure 5.4: "Soleil, Soupir, Présidence, Soyoyo et Apollo..." *Daho Express*, March 20, 1971.

Another state intervention in women's fashion was the introduction of uniforms for women in the civil service and for those involved in formal politics. Uniforms occasionally required women to wear short skirts or pants, items not normally worn by women in Benin. In 1970, *Daho Express* featured images of Cotonou female police officers, sporting short-skirted police uniforms, although there is no evidence that such officers circulated on the Plateau.⁴¹ After the Kérékou Revolution, men and women clad in military fatigues rallied the masses in service of state events. For example, Alladass Sodonou, a middle-aged woman at the time, wore fatigues during her work on behalf of Kérékou's government. She had a photograph of her

⁴¹ "Je serai femme policier," *Daho Express*, September 26, 1970.

dressed in the oversized shirt and pants enlarged and framed to be hung prominently in her living room (Figure 5.5). She recalled how representatives came from the capital and handed out fatigues to Sodonou and other Kérékou supporters who then went door-to-door informing the population that the president or some other official was visiting and asking them to attend the event. After the visit concluded, state employees took back the fatigues and Sodonou donned her regular dress. When asked how people responded to her military-style dress, Sodonou replied, "everybody congratulated me because it is a good women who wears fatigues, who wears pants, and they knew that I am a fighting woman."⁴² Her dress hinted at her allegiance to the revolutionary state at the same time that it recalled an earlier period, during the Kingdom of Dahomey, when women – the Amazons – served as the state's elite combat unit. But despite the different aims of the liberal and revolutionary governments and their different visions for uniformed women's bodies, both governments encouraged experimentation in new forms of dress.

⁴² Interview with Alladass Sodonou, Zakpo Ahowamey, Bohicon, May 13, 2015.



Figure 5.5: Alladass Sodonou in her fatigues, c.1977. Photo by author.

But women on the Plateau did not simply adopt the modern urban styles of Europe or the coastal cities; the standard wear for both young and old women was *bounba* sewn from *pagne*. In

Figure 5.6, a Bohicon couple wears men and women's *bounbas* in a "uniform" of "*même tissu*" (same fabric). Women's *bounba* was similar to the version for men and consisted of a loose fitting tunic pulled over the head worn with a matching wrapped *pagne*. Other than occasional changes in sleeve length, women's *bounba* underwent fewer modifications than the men's version, which often featured buttons, zippers, embroidery and other flourishes. The two *bounbas* in the photograph also show how fabric influenced design differently for men and women. In the man's version, the tailor was able to cut and sew the outfit so that all the giraffes in the pattern faced the same direction, while the maker of the women's *bounba* sewed the sleeves with the giraffe on its side in order to match the way that the pattern would be worn as *pagne*. A women's *bounba* required two *pagnes*, one for the shirt and one worn on the bottom as a wrapper. Since most fabric was sold as a *demi-pièce*, or six meters, this left a two-meter *pagne* that women often used to wrap children on their back or to throw casually over the shoulder to highlight married status. Occasionally, women had the third *pagne* tailored into children's clothing, which their children often wore on days that their mothers wore their *bounba*, creating an opportunity for "*même tissu*."



**Figure 5.6: Men's and women's bounbas in giraffe fabric, c.1970s.
Courtesy of Fidel Ouèjo.**

Beninoise also wore wrappers with blouses other than the roomy wide-necked shirt of a *bounba*. These blouses were worn with a matching *pagne*, a style called *modèle* (French for "design"). The image of the Chertita Couture models (Figure 5.4) shows some of the many different types of blouses and skirts (or *pagne*) that could be made into *modèles*. Blouses might be sleeve-less or have tight-fitting or voluminous sleeves of varying lengths. The global trend of puffed sleeves in the 1980s was equally popular in Plateau *modèles* and, as one tailor declared, "there was a time when we used one meter of cloth to make the sleeves, only the sleeves! During that time, if you did not sew sleeves like that, you did not sew."⁴³ Many tailors named blouses by the *comin* (Fon: collar or neckline), the part of the top that gave tailors the most opportunity for creativity in designing and sewing. One popular shirt was called *hohononcomin*, in which fabric draped from the neckline, making it wearable by women in all stages of pregnancy.⁴⁴ Tailors used techniques such as honeycomb smocking (*nid d'abeille*) on *comin* with elastic thread, which allowed women to wear form-fitting styles without buttons or zippers.⁴⁵ The popularity of specific styles of blouses changed frequently and styles revived, regaining popular after many years.

In urban Benin, young women wore *modèles jeunes filles*, which consisted of a blouse that was more fitted than those designed for older women, worn with a matching skirt instead of *pagne*.⁴⁶ With the growth of cities on the Plateau, categories of "youth" became more prevalent

⁴³ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

⁴⁴ Interview with Christine Agbamandé, Atchia (Zogbodomey), June 24, 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview with Antoinette Nonvignon, Bohicon, December 14, 2014.

⁴⁶ Interview with Emilienne Agbo, Adandokpodji Daxo, Abomey, June 8, 2015.

as more young men and women delayed marriage and nightlife blossomed. In clubs, young people went to listen and dance to groups like the Renova Band and Picoby Band. Young women even began to wrap their *pagnes* differently. Instead of gathering the fabric in front, they would pull the fabric taut in the front and tuck it in the back, showing off more of their bodies.⁴⁷ But it was the adoption of skirts that was a greater sartorial change. As explored in previous chapters, ordinary women - those who worked as market traders, farmers, and artisans - rarely, if ever, wore skirts on the Plateau. Indeed, many of my informants remembered their mothers as "never" wearing skirts or dresses. But ordinary women began to adopt skirts and their length varied from just below the knees to nearly the floor. Skirts were often tightly fitted, although as *zemidjans* (taxi-motos) became more widespread, women chose styles that facilitated getting on and off the back of a motorcycle. For example, mermaid skirts were fitted through hips and thighs with a separate panel forming a *jupe ovale* (oval skirt) on the bottom. Styles such as these allowed women to hike up their skirts and grab fabric from the back, pulling it through their legs, in order to straddle the backs of motorcycles without revealing any skin above their knees.

Tailors and their clients used catalogues and samples to decide upon styles, similar to the previous generation of clothing-makers. But the growth of photography on the Plateau facilitated new ways of managing and negotiating women's styles. When tailors were particularly happy with a *modèle*, they called a photographer to take a picture of it (Figure 5.2). Tailors kept these photographs in their workshop and brought them out for clients who came in to order.⁴⁸ Tailors

⁴⁷ Valentin Alagbe, "D'accord pour la mini-jupe, non à l'excentricité," *L'aube nouvelle*, July 6, 1968. During my fieldwork in 2015, there was a *pagne* wrapping competition in Bohicon where young women were judged on their wrapping skill.

⁴⁸ Interview with Emilienne Agbo, Adandokpodji Daxo, Abomey, June 8, 2015.

could also purchase photographs from vendors and one woman emphasized how these images were produced locally.⁴⁹ Tailor Josephine Agounkpléto had opened workshops in Bohicon, Savalou, and Cotonou because her husband was frequently transferred for his work in the cotton industry. When asked if the styles were different in the three towns, she responded, "they were different because we bought photos and the photos were different."⁵⁰ Photographs of women's fashions allowed tailors to replicate styles and provided opportunities for women to order outfits that pleased them.

The increasing complexity and variability in women's dress relative to the lack of change in men's dress resulted from urbanization and a changing Beninois political economy. Despite economic stagnation and widespread poverty in the 1960s, men had access to the few lucrative jobs as civil servants. They could also find work as waged laborers, and they were represented by one of the strongest trade union movements in the former French colonies of West Africa. But after the adoption of state socialism, Kérékou integrated trade unions into the state, reducing their power.⁵¹ Furthermore, Kérékou's efforts to valorize rural Benin and vernacular national languages sidelined formal education and the appeal and social capital of the literate elite. Finally, the global economic crises in the 1970s lowered the price of cash crops throughout Africa, diminishing the purchasing power of (mostly male) peasants who grew cash crops. Economic decline and then the adoption of structural adjustment programs in the early 1990s

⁴⁹ I never encountered this system in Benin during my various trips from 2006 to 2015. However, at a bus station in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, an ambulant vendor selling Polaroid photographs of *modèles* approached me. In these images, the faces of the models wearing the outfits were scratched out.

⁵⁰ Interview with Josephine Agounkpléto, Adagamé, Lissezoun, Bohicon, September 1, 2015.

⁵¹ Craig Phelan, "Trade unions and 'responsible participation': Dahomey, 1958-1975," *Labor History* 3 (2014): 346-364.

further decimated the income-generating possibilities of men in the civil service, wage laborers, and cash crop farmers. Beninois women, still poorer than men overall, had relatively more opportunity in urban areas as market traders and artisans than their male counterparts. As a result, beginning in the 1970s, men were spending less on their clothing (although probably still more than women were), and women were spending more on clothing. In a sense, fashion had been feminized in central Benin.

IV. Seamstresses in the City: *Couture Dame* and Female Respectability

The world changed, there was development. Many women thought 'I need to know how to do something before I marry.' Before, it was not like that, your parents brought you to the field and you worked, you did fieldwork with them, but today, it is not like that.

- Marié-Rose Kpensenon, Houndonho, Bohicon, September 2, 2015.

In an interview, Marié-Rose Kpensenon described why she believed women started to apprentice themselves to tailors in growing numbers beginning in the 1970s. Similar to Séraphine Hounbandan's life story in this chapter's opening vignette, she explained how changing responsibilities towards one's parents as well as a growing urban center, created new opportunities for women. Unlike the middle-class women who learned sewing in mission and state programs, the women who entered the craft after the 1970s usually lacked formal education and were often the daughters of peasants. They moved from rural to urban areas and found the tailor's workshop as a place where they could achieve a level of autonomy, opportunity, and respectability not available to them in other more mobile occupations or through marriage. However, most of these women did not achieve the wealth and mediating role of the generation

of (mostly male) tailors who came before them. This was due, in part, to the limitations of their craft knowledge.

Men usually operated the more lucrative “*haute couture*” (high fashion) workshops, a phrase Beninois use to describe tailors’ workshops where men or women sew modern urban and traditional styles for both male and female clients. *Haute couture* workshops were occasionally mixed-gender with girls apprenticing under men. One woman tailor from Bohicon described how as a young apprentice she travelled to Porto-Novo with her *patronne* to visit the *patronne*’s sister, also a tailor. There she saw girls and boys apprenticed in the same shop and asked her *patronne* how that came about. Her *patronne* told her that her little sister did *haute couture*, “which means she can sew for men and for women, which is the reason why there are men and women apprentices who do both.”⁵² Another woman tailor who had apprenticed in Cotonou described how her *patron*, a man, taught her “French dress, women’s dress, and men’s dress,” or a *haute couture* apprenticeship.⁵³ Men and women, skilled in many different styles, were able to sew for different types of clients and operated some of the most lucrative shops on the Plateau.

However, a hierarchy of clothing production emerged, with women tailors and women’s and children’s clothing at the bottom. The vast majority of women tailors practiced *couture dame* as opposed to *haute couture*, which meant that they only sewed women’s and children’s clothing. Women who tailored *couture dame* traced their craft knowledge back to (post) colonial missionary and secular education programs that targeted women. After independence, the Catholic Church remained influential and local dioceses and Beninois priests continued to invest

⁵² Interview with Célestine Agassounon, Soglogon, Bohicon, June 14, 2015.

⁵³ Interview with Olga Dokponou, Dota, Abomey, July 15, 2015.

in teaching women sewing in ways very similar to those described in chapter two. North of Bohicon, in Dassa-Zoume, women took two-year courses in domestic education, followed by a third year where they learned cutting and sewing. This practical education was supplemented with what one newspaper reporter called "civic and moral instruction (subjects taught by Abbot Okioh) that they do not teach in the makeshift tailoring workshops situated here and there on the side of the road."⁵⁴ At the foyer Sainte Monique in Abomey, Agbainzoun tailor Jeanette Agadame learned basic math and French as well as tailoring. Although men taught her the academic subjects, female nuns of both Beninois and French descent taught her how to make women's and children's clothing. They also taught her Western recipes for potato dishes, salads and French toast (*pain perdu*) that she would later teach her own apprentices. In Figure 5.7, the "bishop who opened the center" blesses Agadame's diploma on the day of her liberation in July 1975.⁵⁵ A number of the women tailors who provided oral histories traced their craft knowledge to Davougou, a large Catholic mission with a hospital and a leprosy program, just south of Abomey. These programs and others taught women *couture dame*, a very narrow range of styles that were predictably conservative and rarely encouraged creativity in design.

⁵⁴ Romain Assongba, "Dassa- Zoume: Remise de diplômes de couture au centre féminin d'enseignement ménager," *Daho Express*, July 2, 1974

⁵⁵ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbainzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.



**Figure 5.7: Jeanette Agadame on the day of her liberation, 1975.
Courtesy of Jeanette Agadame.**

Postcolonial missions and churches trained large numbers of girls in sewing and the number of women tailors on the Plateau rapidly increased. Furthermore, graduates of these programs who opened workshops continued the practice of having many apprentices. Agadame

recalled that during her time at foyer Saint Monique, she was one of forty-five students learning to sew.⁵⁶ At Davougon, one tailor noted that incoming classes had up to 35 apprentices, although the number fell to almost half by the second year as girls left the program for personal reasons or because they (allegedly) did not like the work.⁵⁷ Likewise, graduates of these programs took on large numbers of apprentices after they established a workshop. Agadame liberated more than sixty apprentices before she retired, a Bohicon seamstress claimed to have trained about seventy apprentices, and another Bohicon seamstress, Amélie Gnancadja, liberated over 100 apprentices during her career.⁵⁸ Unlike most male tailors who may have had a handful of apprentices over the course of their lives, successful women tailors trained dozens of apprentices.

Many women recognized the limitations of *couture dame* and hoped to eventually re-train in *haute couture*. Although women who could only sew women and children's clothing often learned needlework skills that workshop-trained girls did not, particularly embroidery and lace making, they could not make clothes for men or pants, button-down shirts, and very fitted items for women. Like men who travelled for *cours de perfectionnement*, women could also pay other tailors to follow short courses in their workshops. After two years learning hand sewing of women and children's clothing at a Catholic institution, Victorine Glinman apprenticed herself to a woman tailor in Bohicon in order to learn more styles.⁵⁹ But, like apprenticeships, these short courses cost money. Beninois women were usually responsible for feeding and clothing their

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview with Lilia Abadahoue, Bohicon centre, August 5, 2011.

⁵⁸ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015; Interview with Pascaline Wankpo, Zakpo-Ahito, Bohicon, July 17, 2015; Interview with Amélie Gnancadja, Zakpo-Ahito, July 17, 2015.

⁵⁹ Interview with Victoire Glinman, Tinji Kpozoun Kpakpassa (Za-Kpota), August 17, 2015.

children, leaving them little spare cash to invest in their craft knowledge. As a Davougou-trained seamstress stated, “I prefer *haute couture*, but I did not have the money. After *couture dame*, if you have the money, you can go into *haute couture* to learn how to make men’s shirts and also pants... but if you do not have money you are incapable of making it.”⁶⁰ Indeed, women often felt constrained by their inability to sew certain styles and their lack of options for gaining new competencies.

Yet tailoring still provided opportunity for women looking to establish their own businesses and to become financially independent. Olga Dokponou left school to apprentice in *haute couture* during the 1983 *année blanche* (when a strike was so long that it forced a "cleared year" where country-wide no students progressed to the next class). Already a teenager and completely idle due to school strikes, she saw other young women of her own age making money as tailors and decided that the craft was a more stable route to material success than formal education.⁶¹ Other women, like Hounbandan had little formal education and had left the countryside for the city. They found tailoring to be refuge from toiling in other people's fields and from exploitation by men, particularly male relatives. But there were only a few possible career paths for women who lacked education and connections. They included tailoring, hairdressing, farming (if one had land), market trading, making and selling prepared foods, or working in bars, which often included prostitution. When asked why she choose tailoring, one woman responded, “you cannot stay stripped to the waist out in the world, so I prefer sewing so I

⁶⁰ Interview with Lilia Abadahoue, Bohicon centre, August 5, 2011.

⁶¹ Interview with Olga Dokponou, Dota, Abomey, July 15, 2015.

can dress myself and my family.”⁶² Tailoring helped women not only keep up with new norms for women's dress, but allowed them to profit from them.

Tailoring also appealed to women because the workshop created a new pathway to respectability on the urbanizing Plateau. The woman tailor achieved this, in part, by amassing dependents. Her apprentices usually called her *maman*, even if she was childless, and as a *maman*, she was more respected in the community. Her networks grew larger as she liberated apprentices who, in turn, took on their own apprentices and these multiple generations of women approached her as an authority not only in tailoring, but as someone who could provide them advice and help in other aspects of life. In Figure 5.8, a smiling Marie Félicité Babagbéto, a Bohicon tailor, sits surrounded by her apprentices in her workshop. In another of Babagbéto's photographs, her father stands at the center of another group of her apprentices. The staging of both photographs suggests that Babagbéto and her father were proud of the girl apprentices, perhaps because their presence heightened the status of their *patronne* and helped make her a respected *maman* in the local community.

⁶² Interview with Lilia Abadahoue, Bohicon centre, August 5, 2011.



Figure 5.8: Marie Félicité Babagbéto and her apprentices, c.1990s. Courtesy of Babagbéto.

But it was not just local notions of "wealth in people" that made the women tailor a laudable figure in the community, she also achieved respectability through her associations with Christian-inspired middle-class values and her relationship to urban space. Colonial and postcolonial Christian churches not only directly taught women tailoring, but also informed notions about the propriety of sewing as women's work. In the above photograph of Babagbéto

and her apprentices, someone had arranged a *pagne* with the image of the Virgin Mary in front of the machine. This imagery emphasizes both the craft's roots (as a feminine craft) in missionary education as well as notions of sewing as acceptable labor for women, an idea informed by notions of Western middle-class respectability that the Catholic church propagated in Benin. The respectability of women tailors also emerged from their rootedness in workshops. In the increasingly anonymous spaces of the cities, women grounded themselves in tailor's workshops, a particular identifiable space, unlike most other working women – such as market women and vendors of prepared foods - who sold their goods or plied their trade in the street. Furthermore, women who sewed *couture dame* in workshops were literally in walled-off female spaces where they taught the craft to girls and served women clients. The tailor's workshop became a female sphere that did not exist elsewhere in Benin, since homes often housed extended families and people brought in from the village.

Informants often contrasted sewing with hairdressing to emphasize the relationship between mobility, space, and respectability among craftswomen. Hairdressing and tailoring were the two primary crafts available to non-literate women who lacked resources. The choice of tailoring might be due to practicality and self-sufficiency. For example, Kponsonon justified her decision as "if I buy a *pagne*, I can sew my own blouse, one that I have in my head, that I can make it, but a hairdresser cannot do her own hair."⁶³ But other women decided to become a tailor because of perceptions of mobile hairdressers as lacking in respectability when compared to immobile women tailors. In a photograph taken by Eliot Elisofon and held in the Smithsonian's

⁶³ Interview with Marié-Rose Kponsonon, Houndonho, Bohicon, September 2, 2015.

Museum of African Art, an Abomean hairdresser works in the street in 1971 surrounded by children and men selling appliqué tapestries.⁶⁴ The image depicts a young woman braiding a child's hair in front of a building where men sell their goods, mostly to tourists. The photograph provides an example of how hairdressers travelled to people's homes or the space in front of them to work, which often put them in the enclosed spaces of non-relative men or, as in the picture, opened them up to their gaze. Tailor Jeanne Hanou contrasted the mobility of hairdressers with the stability of tailors. She explained, "girls who do hair move about a lot, they crawl along everywhere. But sewing! When a girl comes to her workshop, it's to work, when she leaves it's to go home."⁶⁵ The mobility of hairdressers affected perceptions of the women who worked in the craft. Abomean tailor Hélène Ahonon taught herself hairdressing before doing an apprenticeship in tailoring. She claimed to have been very successful hairdresser, but changed her profession because "here, people consider the majority of women hairdressers as prostitutes... I stopped doing hair because people considered me as a prostitute."⁶⁶ By opening a tailor's workshop, Ahonon achieved a heightened status in her community.

Fiancés and husbands often persuaded women to learn tailoring, a craft that they recognized as particularly suited to their middle-class aspirations. Jeanette Agadame attended a missionary program that taught sewing in Abomey after a conversation with her future husband. Agadame's mother sold dried fish in the market and she imagined that she too would enter into

⁶⁴ Eliot Elisofon, "Hairdresser in street, Abomey, Benin." EEPA EENG 01328. Eliot Elisofon Field photographs, 1942-1972, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

⁶⁵ Interview with Jeanne Hanou, Ahouamé, Bohicon, July 17, 2015.

⁶⁶ Interview with Hélène Ahonon, Dota, Abomey, July 14, 2015.

market trade. But then she fell in love with and started making plans for the future with a young man in his final year of middle school (*collège*). They decided that if he was going to continue on to Porto-Novo for high school (*lycée*) and eventually become an "intellectual," then she needed a profession beyond market commerce and tailoring seemed a perfect fit.⁶⁷ Echoing the assertions of missionaries and the realities of women in the craft, Agadame's husband interpreted tailoring as a craft particularly suited to the wife of an intellectual (*hunnukun*) and, while he prepared himself to enter into a job in the civil service, he set his future wife up at an institution that could help her become an ideal middle-class wife.

Husbands also advised their wives to take up tailoring so that they would have a better idea of their wives' whereabouts. Za-Kpota tailor Victoire Glinman did not open a workshop and instead worked out of her home after a conversation with her husband. She recalled, "It was a question of jealousy between my husband and me. When I received my diploma, he did not want me to open a workshop on the side of the road." She continued, "If I was on the side of the road, many [men] would see me and it would lure them in."⁶⁸ Beyond his middle-class aspirations, Agadame's husband specifically did not want her to engage in commerce because market women travelled. She remembered, "he did not want me to go out like that, he wanted me to stay [in the workshop] where he can see me"⁶⁹ Jealous husbands reinforced ideas that women confined to particular female spaces were less likely to consort with other men.

⁶⁷ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

⁶⁸ Interview with Victoire Glinman, Tinji Kpozoun Kpakpassa (Za-Kpota), August 17, 2015.

⁶⁹ Interview with Jeanette Agadame, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015.

However, jealous husbands also recognized that women working in female spaces where they were in control made them less likely to be exploited by men. Bohicon tailor Jeanne Hanou was a rarity among women tailors in the town. She had finished technical school with a certificate in stenography and typing before she married one Bohicon's most prominent businessmen. Once married, however, her husband no longer wanted her to work as a secretary and he set her up in an apprenticeship with a local tailor. Although much older than the other apprentices, she quickly finished and opened up her own shop, complete with fancy glass windows and imported mannequins.⁷⁰ Unlike in her former profession, she no longer worked in the office of a man and under his authority. Perhaps her husband worried about the potential for exploitation or even consensual adultery – or the perception of it - that occurred when Hanou worked in closed spaces with other men. The tailor's workshop provided an alternate space of bodily autonomy for the woman tailor and allowed her to exert authority over the bodies of her apprentices.

The workshop became a place that in many ways cloistered women, but also permitted them to assert a measure of power of their own lives and those of their apprentices. While the tailor's workshop created different opportunities for men and women, both men and women chose to invest in workshops because they created spaces where they could practice their craft without much interference. Yet, the space of the workshop also had important ramifications for women worked in them. The feminine space of a *couture dame* workshop created opportunity and respectability for the woman tailor at the same time that it reduced the overall prestige and

⁷⁰ Interview with Jeanne Hanou, Ahouamé, Bohicon, July 17, 2015.

profitability of the craft. Over the next few decades, the fortunes of individual tailors continued to decline even as tailors increased in number and the quantity and demand for tailored clothing grew. Globalization only exacerbated this shift.

V. Globalization and Clothing Production from the 1980s to the 2010s

Artisanal production of clothing increased amid globalization, although individual tailors rarely achieved the standard of living and social prestige of the tailors who came before them. Indeed, secondhand from the West, regional economic integration, inexpensive cloth from China, catalogues and posters from elsewhere in Africa, and the spread of internationally-funded non-profits all led to more production of tailored clothing. As in other parts of the developing world, Beninois wore more *acouta* (secondhand clothing) beginning in the 1980s because of the advent of “fast fashion.” This fashion system created quickly changing notions of style, wherein Western consumers donated an abundance of inexpensive “out of fashion” clothing, which created a large supply of used clothing that was then sent to developing countries.⁷¹

But other factors also helped shift local notions of the appropriateness of used clothing during the last few decades of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, a newspaper commentator had argued that “95%” of the wearers of secondhand were illiterates and semi-illiterates.⁷² A prominent seller of secondhand agreed and described how, “when [she] was young, [they] said that it was the *villageois* who live here or that is was the poor people who wore [*acouta*], and

⁷¹ Hansen, *Saluala*.

⁷² S. Videhouenou, “Faut-il condamner le commerce de vêtements d'occasion au Dahomey,” *L'aube nouvelle*, August 4, 1968; Valentin Alagbe, “Friperie, fripons, et frivolités 'imperialistes'” *L'aube nouvelle*, September 15, 1968.

today everybody wears it."⁷³ Early in the postcolonial period, Beninois in the capital argued whether the wearing something previously used by Europeans was indicative of Benin's marginal international position and commentators considered whether *acouta* was a national problem that exemplified the neo-colonial condition. A student in Porto-Novo summed up the consequences of wearing *acouta* and argued that the government "must abolish the sale of these clothes, in doing so, it will surely block imperialist who want to sell us everything." He foresaw the consequences of this as, "in the next few years, we will be powerless against the sale of the leftovers from meals already served in European restaurants."⁷⁴ Another interpretation of the role of *acouta* had to do with religious change. Secondhand trader Célestine Agassounon recalled that "they said [*acouta*] was dead people's clothing" and followers of *vodun* refused to wear it, but "today, they have preached the good news of Jesus Christ and he has changed the world and today we see clearly and, like that, everybody wears *acouta*."⁷⁵ Beninois embraced *acouta* - whether due to changing notions of the prestige of secondhand, the loss of its association with neocolonialism, or the spread of Christianity (especially Pentecostalism) – and members of all social classes and religious groups wore secondhand.

The market in secondhand was intricately linked to the production of tailored clothing. As shown in chapter three, in the early development of tailoring, tailors bought used clothes to cut apart and make into patterns. But the influx of *acouta* after the 1980s provided tailors with an inexpensive source of fabric for backings, linings, and finishes of all sorts.⁷⁶ Other tailors made

⁷³ Interview with Célestine Agassounon, Soglogon, Bohicon, June 14, 2015.

⁷⁴ S. Videhouenou, "Faut-il condamner."

⁷⁵ Interview with Célestine Agassounon, Soglogon, Bohicon, June 14, 2015.

⁷⁶ Interview with Odette Bèhanzin, Marché Sèhi, Bohicon, September 2, 2015.

new outfits from textiles salvaged from secondhand. For example, when Solange Kpèdé retired from making made-to-order clothing, she began to purchase *acouta* that she cut up and sewed into inexpensive children's clothes.⁷⁷ Tailors also repaired and altered *acouta* for clients, particularly the few male tailors who stayed in the market after the exodus to workshops. Many *acouta* vendors were retired woman tailors, which created another overlap between the markets for secondhand and tailor-made. One woman explained that she switched to selling secondhand because she preferred the on-the-spot exchanges of market trading to the drawn-out process of working with clients on bespoke clothing. She declared, "it annoyed me that you had to work hard and often clients come to tell you that they need it, you have to stay the night to do everything to finish and afterwards they come to take it and they do not pay you."⁷⁸ Selling secondhand shifted how these women interacted with protentional clients, reducing to the need to invest in long-term relationship building.

Despite inexpensive and readily available secondhand, Beninois continued to order made-to-order clothing from a tailor and production even increased over the final decade of the twentieth century. One of the most significant (and macabre) ways that globalization helped tailoring to expand on the Plateau has to do with regional integration, electrification, morgues, and funerals. Beninois recall how, during the 1990s, electrical power became more regular with fewer blackouts.⁷⁹ This was due, in part, to regional economic integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which ensured that Benin, a country that

⁷⁷ Interview with Solange Kpèdé, Agblomey, Abomey, June 16, 2015.

⁷⁸ Interview with Célestine Agassounon, Soglogon, Bohicon, June 14, 2015.

⁷⁹ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Marché Ganhi de Bohicon, April 24, 2014.

imports almost all of its electricity from neighbors, had access to a regular supply. Indeed, power supply in Benin was (and is) often more regular than in neighboring Nigeria, a power-exporting country. The consistent supply led entrepreneurs on the Plateau to open new morgues, allowing Beninois to store the corpses of their deceased relatives for weeks or months while they planned elaborate Fon funerals.⁸⁰ Part of the planning process included selecting three fabrics for different parts of the ceremony and ordering the fabric from Cotonou or abroad. Invited guests were told where to purchase the fabric so that attendees at the funeral wore *même tissu*. This, of course, created an abundance of work for tailors and the wardrobes of many Beninois are filled with outfits ordered for funerals and re-worn as everyday wear.

Beninois had more opportunity to purchase *même tissu* for funerals and other events as well as individual *pagne* as textile imports from China grew and drove down prices, particularly after the 2000s liberalization of the global textile market.⁸¹ While Chinese imports negatively affected industrial African textile and clothing production, whether for export or local consumption, consumers gained access to more fabric and finished clothing at lower prices.⁸² Companies made imitation wax *pagne* starting in the 1980s, but only in the 2000s did Chinese companies perfect methods to make fabric look like a wax, but without using the expensive stamped production process of companies like Vlisco.⁸³ These new and abundant *pagne* were of

⁸⁰ Interview with Paul Zoungbowenon, Marché Ganhi de Bohicon, April 24, 2014.

⁸¹ The International Multi-Fibre Arrangement expired January 1, 2005 and the global textile trade came under the jurisdiction of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

⁸² Ali Zafar, "The Growing Relationship Between China and Sub-Saharan Africa: Macroeconomic, Trade, Investment, and Aid Links," *The World Bank Research Observer* 22 (2007): 103-130.

⁸³ Togolese women worked with Chinese manufacturers to perfect the techniques of making imitation wax. Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016)

differing quality - some approached the price and quality of Vlisco, while others were cheaply made with colors that quickly faded. As a result, clients ordered different types of outfits based on the *pagne*. An expensive wax might be tailored into a timeless *bounba* or a simple *modèle*, while clients had less expensive fabrics sewed into risky, fleeting styles or housedresses. As anthropologist Nina Sylvanus shows for Togo, copies and imitation *pagne* created complicated new systems of prestige among women consumers.⁸⁴ However, they also created more work for tailors and greater differentiation among them, as clients often had nicer *pagnes* sewn by a more expensive tailor and used inexpensive tailors to sew low-quality *pagnes* or fabric that they did not like, but needed to wear to a funeral or other ceremony.

New African publishing houses produced fashion magazines and calendars depicting *modèles*, which also changed how tailors made clothing. In the 50s and 60s, tailors used their cosmopolitan expertise to design styles, while locally produced photographs circulated in the 1970s and helped tailors and clients decide upon styles. But, by the 2000s, women in Benin's central markets sold mass-produced magazine and calendars to tailors who hung them on the walls of their workshops to provide examples of what they could make. Often these publications came from Ghana and Nigeria and were in English, a language that very few tailors could read or understand. While tailors combined elements from different calendars in the making of a single outfit, these publications nevertheless had the effect of homogenizing style throughout West Africa.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Finally, internationally funded non-profits continued the colonial-era work of teaching tailoring to indigent boys and girls, creating an ever-increasing pool of semi-skilled tailors. These programs were widespread in Benin, particularly after democratization in 1990 when the country became an ideal place for conscientious donors to invest in development projects in a democratic, but very poor, country. Beninois ran some of these non-governmental organizations, while large international non-profits directly managed others. But all operated under the guise of sustainable development, which, in this case, manifested in the idea that teaching young people to sew would make them self-sufficient and foster entrepreneurship.⁸⁵ Other non-profits created programs to teach skills to craftsmen who already operated workshops. During short-term courses, tailors could learn new styles or management techniques and, at the end, tailors received an additional diploma for completing the course. In the mid-1990s, the German Hanns Seidel Foundation ran a center in Abomey where tailors could take ten-day and two-week courses in cutting and sewing, children's clothing, lingerie, and other subjects.⁸⁶ Similar to colonial and mission programs, non-profit organizations rarely offered capital to program participants, courses in business management, or even competencies that were not readily accessible in extant private workshops.

Globalization did not cause Beninois tailoring to fizzle and become irrelevant. Indeed, workshops multiplied and an apprenticeship in tailoring remained a frequent choice for girls and

⁸⁵ In 2011, I attended a meeting of the Bohicon tailor's association where a French couple proposed their idea for opening an orphanage that would teach indigent youth tailoring and a few other crafts. They did not plan on housing or feeding the children and expected master tailors to volunteer their time teaching the children.

⁸⁶ Attestation de formation, Fondation Hanns Seidel, Centre de Formation Professionnelle d'Abomey (CFPA), Jeanne Hanou.

boys who lacked formal education or only had a few years of primary school.⁸⁷ Secondhand, funerary practices, inexpensive Chinese fabric, African fashion calendars, and sustainable development projects led the number of tailors and the amount of tailored clothing to increase. Yet, tailors made less profit and the prestige of the profession decreased. There was also less room for tailors to exert creativity and innovation in form as magazines and calendars, usually from Anglophone countries, led to a generalized West African style. Globalization increased clothing production in Benin, but altered how clothes were made and worn.

The feminization of tailoring - of the clothes as well as the craftsperson - shifted notions of the prestige of the craft as well as its ability to serve a wider interpretive role in Benin. Despite a few attempts at formal urban planning, the cities on the Abomey Plateau came into being through the efforts of the ordinary people who used hand hoes to fix roads, called artisan electricians to string power to their properties, and built roadside stands that kept the city functioning. Tailors contributed to this process of making cities by occupying workshops, installing glass windows and lighting, and hanging bright fabrics in storefronts. Their efforts changed how people shopped as well as how they experienced and interpreted urban life.

Urbanization also contributed to the growth of women's fashion and pulled women into craft and away from farming and market trading. Women went into tailoring because of the

⁸⁷ Girls far outnumbered boys as apprentices during the past few decades. Tailors (and other artisans) frequently complain that boys and young men are less willing to pursue apprenticeship because of the easy money that can be made as a *zemidjan* (taxi moto) driver who are only men. One effect of this is that girls have started to apprentice in crafts that were traditionally male only. For example, in Abomey, a male car mechanic has girl apprentices.

opportunity and respectability that they found in the workshop. Tailoring provided a means to financial independence and self-sufficiency, although the limitations of *couture dame* meant that women rarely became wealthy. The particular respectability of tailors drew upon Western middle-class notions of sewing as proper women's work and the domestic sphere, but also on Fon ideas about wealth in people, as tailors amassed vast networks of dependents (apprentices). Although the women tailors of the 1970s and after lacked the mediating power of the generation that came before them, they nevertheless used the craft to influence the urban landscape and to change their lives and those of the apprentices that they trained.

This dissertation has traced the long history of tailors and tailored clothing in central Benin from the era of the Kingdom of Dahomey (c.1600-1894) to French colonization and from independence to the recent past. By focusing on the objects, craft knowledge, and practices of tailoring, this dissertation has revealed how ordinary people made and remade selves, cities, and nations in West Africa by designing, making, and wearing tailored clothes. Tailored clothing served as a site where Beninois worked out what it meant to be part of a new nation and a new city, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. In their work producing these clothes, tailors served as mediators of modernity, urbanization, and political transformation for ordinary Beninois.

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 Clotaire Blenon, Kpocon, Bohicon, May 4, 2015
 Nestor Dako-Wegbe, Houawe Zoungonsa (Bohicon), December 10, 2014
 Célestine Dangbé, Azali, Abomey, June 17, 2015
 Donatien Dansi, Adame-Adato, Gnidgazou (Bohicon), December 9, 2014
 François Dessou, Adjahito, Abomey, July 16, 2015
 Antoine Djedatin, Wingnansa (Bohicon), May 22, 2015
 Lêgbânnon Benoît Djezande, Tindji-Adjoko (Za-Kpota), May 27, 2015
 Lekolihoui Djibidisse, Zakpo-Adame-Ahite, Bohicon, December 9, 2014
 Sébastien Djokpe, Marché Ganhi de Bohicon, April 22, 2015
 Olga Dokponou, Dota, Abomey, July 15, 2015
 Laurence Dossou-Kpeze, Agblomey, Abomey, June 17, 2015
 Cyprien Fa, Détohou (Abomey), May 3, 2015
 Ernest Fiogbe, Ahouaja, Abomey, August 21, 2015, September 4, 2015
 Dah Ganmansso-Ahéko, Lissazoumé (Agbaignzoun), July 22, 2015
 Elie Gbeho, Hlanhossougon (Zogbodomey), June 23, 2015
 Victoire Glinman, Tindji Kpozoun Kpakpassa (Za-Kpota), August 17, 2015
 Celestin Godou Kpodo, Adandokpodji, Abomey, June 1, 2015
 Euphrasie Goudou, Agbaignzoun Centre, August 25, 2015

Amélie Gnancadja, Zakpo-Ahito, Bohicon, July 17, 2015
 Fidèl Guedjo, Bohicon, November 25, November 26, 2014, May 2, 2015
 Raphaël Guedo, Tindji-Adawémé (Za-Kpota), July 29, 2015
 Jeanne Hanou, Ahouamé, Bohicon, July 17, 2015, August 27, 2015
 Séraphine Hounbandan, Dota, Abomey, June 16, 2015
 Thérèse Hountondji, Hountondji, Abomey, July 16, 2015
 Juliette Kanlihanou, Ahouaja, Abomey, December 11, 2014
 Didier Kloué, Tindji-Kpozoun (Za-Kpota), May 20, 2015
 Solange Kpedé, Agblomey, Abomey, June 16, 2015
 Marié-Rose Kponsonon, Houndonho, Bohicon, September 1, 2015
 Appolinaire Lanteffo, Kpozoun-Zadanou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015
 Lambert Lokossi, Houndonho, Bohicon, August 26, 2015
 Antoinette Nonvignon, Bohicon, December 1, 2014
 Ichaou Odounharo, Bohicon, November 26, 2014
 Edmonde Semassou, Hêchiditô, Abomey, July 15, 2015
 Elisabeth Sodokpa, Dota-Sogbadji, Abomey, June 16, 2015
 Alladass Sodonou, Zakpo Ahowamey, Bohicon, May 13, 2015
 Alladassi Tavi, Tanta (Agbaignzoun), August 25, 2015
 Dah Todaho Houndadjo, Agbadjagon, Bohicon, May 13, 2015
 Pascaline Wankpo, Zakpo-Ahito, Bohicon, July 17, 2015
 Jean-Mari Wletche, Allahé (Za-Kpota), April 13, 2015
 Jules Wimèllo, Tindji-Kpozou (Za-Kpota), May 6, 2015
 Anago Yobode, Dota, Abomey, April 28, 2015
 Léocadie Zehoukpé, Zakpo- Anouame, Bohicon, June 18, 2015
 Antoine Zohou, Adame-Adate (Bohicon) April 20, 2015
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