The Superwomen of Ancient Dahomey: The World of the Amazons

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Amazonas of Black Sparta, The Women Warriors of Dahomey by Stanley B. Alpern


A
lpern is holding here the thin end of the thread which would unravel the warp of Dahomey’s history. Admittedly, anyone who broaches the issue of the Amazons of Dahomey is likely to take a broad sweep of the history of this country. This is hardly surprising when it is recalled that the military of which the Amazons formed the centerpiece was so pervasive of the Dahomean society that an analysis of the growth of this institution will reflect, retrospectively, all the twists and turns of Dahomey’s own political odyssey.1

As a result, Stanley B. Alpern’s Amazons of Black Sparta stands out as a succint, yet comprehensive, survey of the history of Dahomey. In its twenty-one chapters of unequal length, this book takes the reader through a panoramic recapitulation of the political history of Dahomey, this well-known West African polity, from its small beginnings in the early years of the seventeenth century to its sudden demise in 1893 at the hands of the French expeditionary force. Alpern is by no means the first writer to give an account of the Amazons of Dahomey.2 Yet, his is by far the most detailed and most convincing. The title of the book, which is borrowed from a statement by the English globe-trotter and ethnographer, Sir Richard Burton, may sound misleading on the surface, but Alpern is not in any way delving into a mythical topic.3 Actually, he is at pains to tell the reader that the Amazons about whom he is writing were no figment of his fertile imagination but historical actors whom many nineteenth-century European travellers had encountered during their stays in Abomey, Dahomey’s capital.

By recalling, at the beginning of his book, all the unproven stories about the existence of women warriors to be found in history books, Alpern seems to be trying, through the effect of contrast, to ground his own account on fact as opposed to fiction.4 No matter how incredible this may look to those who are not conversant with the history of Dahomey, Amazons were no fictional pictures invented by nineteenth-century European travellers driven by the thirst for exoticism, but did really exist in the kingdom. That is what Alpern set about proving by assigning to himself the daunting task of combing all the records he possessed on the battlefields. Compared to these lengthy treatments, the two-chapter treating the origin of the Amazons pales into insignificance (pp. 116, 160-162). It is on record that, on such occasions, Amazons pledged total fidelity to the king to whom they swore their readiness to defend the kingdom tooth and nail, far better than the male soldiers.5 It was not uncommon at these public meetings to see Amazons openly accusing the male soldiers of being responsible for any crushing defeat the army might suffer.6

Indeed, on the battlefield, seldom did they turn their backs to the enemy. Their boldness served as an incentive to their male counterparts, who were deterred from being heard to have seen act and killed them on the spot. Being an Amazon was, therefore, a harrowing individual decision. But, once taken, it was a decision which was bountifully repaid by the king of Dahomey, who not only ensured a decent living in his palaces for all his Amazons but also showered them with all kinds of gifts during public ceremonies held in their honour (pp. 122-131). All these details and many others can be found in this very informative book which, for the first time, assembled in a single document all the available knowledge spread across travellers’ accounts on the Amazons, ranging from their recruitment, training, dresses, entertainment, way of life, esprit de corps to their battle formation and equipment. Indeed, the very composition of the book reflects the amount of information the author possessed and utilized from other sources or chapters. Thus, the longest chapters deal with the battles of Abeokuta and the wars against France on which more information is available (pp. 174-185, 191-207). European eye-witnesses directly recorded the observations they had made on the battlefields. Compared to these lengthy treatises, the two-page chapter treating the origin of the Amazons pales into insignificance (pp. 36-37).

If there is any flaw in the book, it is the trap into which all historians are likely to fall, that is, the tendency to dwell too much on their sources for the reconstruction of the past. Alpern does criticize from time to time the unfriendliness of most English missionaries to Dahomey, which affected their writings, but he fails to set his criticism within the overall nineteenth-century European context, which very much determined what they said or did not say about the Amazons (p. 180). The same remarks apply to the twentieth-century female historians who
of the Amazons, whose agenda was also set by well defined concerns outside Africa, that is, feminism.11 As one can easily guess, Amazons are simply viewed in these perspectives as mere illustrations of the general debate raging in the provinces. The European readership whom the writings targeted in the first place. But such an approach to the question eventually dimmed any prospect of the perception of the autonomous development of the Amazons as an African institution. This is an epistemological perception of historical change which is rampant in African history. For instance, in most text-books, it is assumed that African institutions underwent no fundamental change until their encounter with the Western world in the nineteenth century. 

In this light, the Amazons, whose discipline, dress and organization in regiment, battalion and company recall a modern army, could be perceived as the outcome of some European influence on the part of some Brazilian returnees posted at the Whydah forts or the direct intervention of some Brazilian returnees (p. 52). But why did the phenomenon not arise in the Gold Coast, where European influence was much more numerous but also more long-standing? Moreover, the Gold Coast also received its fair share of the Brazilian returnees who wielded the same influence on African politics as in Dahomey. The accusation of exoticism levied at Alpern’s book by one of the previous reviewers of the first edition is true, not because he is trying to comply with the rules of a literary genre but because his reconstruction of the origins of the Amazons is quite estranged from the African context.12 To set the record straight and therefore return to this tradition, there is no other way but to acknowledge the Amazons’ perception of themselves.

Arguably, language is one area into which there is little difficulty in order to rediscover past world views.13 In Fonbge, the language spoken in Dahomey, the Amazons are known as axosi, that is, king’s wives. In other words, the Amazons of Dahomey appeared to be an outgrowth of the patrilineal kinship which characterized the societies of this corner of the world. As is common knowledge, by the mid-seventeenth century, the kingdom of Dahomey had grown into a major political power in the hinterland of the Slave Coast.14 In this area, patrilineal kinship became prevalent as the main form of political organization. On the Abomey plateau, tradition recalls a stiff form of polity as a result of the interactions between the various patrilineal households. Hwega, the founder of Dahomey, was, initially, a stranger on the plateau who was allied to the reigning king. He was responsible for their organization into a regular army known as the Amazons (pp. 72-73). There is circumstantial evidence to support his story. Indeed, the rapid emergence of kingship was first noticed at the coastal fringe of the Slave Coast, where the Hweda and Hwa laid claim to the exploitation of the salt pans dotting the creeks along the coast. This early kingship was associated with the python believed to be the totemic animal of the Hweda.15

Moreover, the further evolution of the royal households, particularly the emergence of kingship was first noticed at the coastal fringe of the Slave Coast, where the Hweda and Hwa laid claim to the exploitation of the salt pans dotting the creeks along the coast. This early kingship was associated with the python believed to be the totemic animal of the Hweda.15

Probably, the kingship of the python presented less problems of centralization than the kingship of the leopard which was to follow in its footsteps in the coastal hinterland. Thanks to Akinjobin and Robin Law, we know a great deal about the internal structure of the kingdom of Whydah.16 Indeed, the patriarchal households in this kingdom consistently reacted against any attempt at centralization in the wake of the growth of the Atlantic Slave Trade and colonialism which as a result, tore at the very heart of their own political downfall.17 Learning from this earlier experience, the kingship of the leopard, the totemic animal of the more centralized kingdom of Dahomey, saw itself on a war footing against the patriarchal households. Right from the beginning, the monarchy of Dahomey also had to come to terms with the opposition of some members of the Brazilian community of Whydah and the leading representatives of branches of the royal clan.20 We do not know all the terms of the secret agreement between these conspirators. But one of the outcomes of the coup was closer association of the royal clan with the exercise of political power. Henceforward, the constitutional arrangement that kept the princes outside the political arena, allegedly dating back to the reign of Hwega, was breached. From the moment Ghezo on, it became a regular occurrence to find the princes holding the official positions which were formerly earmarked for members of certain patriarchal households.21

Given these circumstances, which they could have interpreted as a setback to their political fortunes, the patriarchal households could have grown suspicious of Ghezo’s rule. With this frame of mind, it is easy to understand that he could have fallen back on his own household in his effort to build a more centralized administration. Hence, the use of women in royal administration. The widely advertised human sacrifices in which the monarchy indulged and the victims of which were mainly men could well be a public display of the feeling of defiance harboured by kingship against the prevailing Hwega kinship system. The spilling of blood was anathema to this system which held blood relations as the only cement of society. Alpern relates the pathetic episode of the Ketu Amazon who refused to be rescued by her relations after the first Aboekuta war, preferring the service of the king of Dahomey (p. 164). There can be no better testimony of the extent to which blood relation has been undermined by the new political dispensation inaugurated by Ghezo.

But it takes an exceptionally gifted individual to embark on any institutional reform within tradition. Unfortunately, oral tradition has very little to say about the biography of these individuals who could have given the final push to a particular evolution, except a vague allusion to their identity as foreigners. And at this juncture, I should turn to the existentialist French playwright, Jean Paul Sartre, for answers. Obviously, there are so many common points between Abomey, the capital of the Black Sparta described here by Alpern, and the city of Abomey chosen by Sartre as the location of his play but which was actually taken from Greek mythology. The ‘Mouches’, the title of the play the analysis of which I propose to undertake, can stand as a metaphor for human condition.22 In this play, Jean Paul Sartre has tried to answer, in the suggestive manner which characterizes his style of writing, the vexed question of innovation within a given tradition.

Abomey and Argos are both slumbering under the weight of past memories, symbolised in the play by the flies for whom there have already been outlined a particular destiny from which there can be no escape. In both cities, repentance and remorse dictate their law as every year on a particular date all the dead are called back to life to take part in a celebration in their honour. On this occasion, the high priest of Argos conjured them up from a deep pit by rolling aside the block of granite which had closed for a year its entrance so as to set them free in order to haunt the living. This forlorn state of affair is better described than the invasion of the flies which stand as a metaphor for human beings. Abomey also had to come to terms every year, during the annual customs, with its flies when the orgy of decapitation attracted millions of them into the ditches of the city where the corpses of the victims of human sacrifice were dumped.

The people of Abomey, like the inhabitants of Argos, had to placate their dead by sacrificing to them because they could not get rid of their false consciousness or sense of guilt which they wore as a badge of their identity. In Argos, Egesthe, their king, imposed these ceremonies fifteen years earlier when he brutally assassinated Agamemnon, his predecessor, to marry the queen, the beautiful Clytemnestra. The casualties were many. Although Electre, the daughter of Clytemnestra, was spared from the general slaughter which ensued, she was kept in the palace as a virtual servant of Phoenicians.23 Perhaps, she wore the same dirty clothes she had to wash. Her brother, Orestes was not so lucky. As a boy, likely to avenge the death of his
fathers whom whose tasks was entrusted did not discharge it but rather sold the little boy to some merchants who took him to Athens where he was brought up as a prince with the help of a pedagogue. Even though Oreste spent his youthful years away from Argos in an atmosphere quite different from that of his own home, he felt very inconsequential. He hankered after a more weighty existence which only a sense of belonging can provide. On the contrary, Electre, his sister who was raised in the precincts of the palace but with the consciousness of her condition, was very well aware of the falsehood of the state ideology of repentance which robbed the people of Argos of the joy of life. When the opportunity came, she would rush to address the people, she pressed them to change their ways and enjoy the good side of life. But her effort was in vain as they severely rebuked and threatened to kill her. She could not sound convincing, simply because she was speaking to them from within. Jupiter even deeply resented her attempt to open the eyes of the people because repentance and remorse are necessary evils to keep law and order, not only on earth but also in heaven.

In any case, when it came to the crunch, that is, when under the power of destiny, Oreste returned home and was led to the country of its persecutors, the royal couple. Electre failed to walk the extra mile with him, even though they both had agreed on the necessary steps to take in order to reach their goal. She was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and a feeling of remorse for taking part in the murder, were brothers, sons of the same father, Agonglo. In this version of the events, Ghezo is depicted as the younger brother to whom the throne was destined when he reached maturity. Meanwhile, Adandozan, as a regent, is said to rule on his behalf. But Akinkajubin casts doubt on this allegation and points out that, given the conditions in which Agonglo found his death and the relatively little difference between their ages, they might be distant cousins belonging to two branches of the royal clan. This is plausible. Adandozan even survived Ghezo. But if they are not brothers of the same father, the nature of the links binding Ghezo to the household of Agonglo remains to be proven. Perhaps, it is not too far fetched to assume that, in the early nineteenth century, Dahomey had reverted to the same situation of competition between patriarchal households as in the days of Hwegbaja. The decline of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the late eighteenth century could have deprived kingship of the material means of sustaining its supremacy over kinship and paved the way to the restoration of their former autonomy to the patriarchal households. Likewise, the household of Agonglo stood in the same position vis-à-vis Ghezo as that of Koli vis-à-vis Hwegbaja. Presumably, reading this treatise on the Amazons with an eye on institutional innovation is like stirring up the hornet’s nest of the contrived official memories of Dahomey.

Negotiating the Livelihoods of Children and Youth in Africa’s Urban Spaces
Michael Bourdillon
This book deals with problems facing children and youth in African cities today. African populations have high growth rates and, consequently, relatively high proportions of young people. Population growth in rural areas has stretched resources leading to urban migration and a rapid growth of cities. Economies have not grown apace with the population; and in some countries, economies have even shrunk. The result is a severe lack of resources in cities to meet the needs of the growing populations, shown in high unemployment, inadequate housing, poor services, and often extreme poverty. All the essays in this book draw attention to such urban environments, in which children and youth have to live and survive. The title of this book speaks of negotiating livelihoods. The concept of ‘livelihood’ has been adopted to incorporate the social and physical environment together with people’s responses to it. It considers not only material, but also a range of social resources, to local knowledge and understanding. It, thus, considers the material means for living in a broader context of social and cultural interpretation. It, therefore, does not deal only with material and economic existence, but also with leisure activities, entertainments and other social forms of life developed by young people in response to the dictates of the environment.