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RECRUITMENT

Every unmarried female in Dahomey was potentially the king's wife. In practice he sometimes expropriated married women too. But thousands who did become his wives became so only in name, although they lived in his palace at his beck and call, like the third-class royal wives of Whydah. Among these were the armed guards who metamorphosed into warrioresses.

Royal wives in general -all known as *ahosi* -were chosen in various ways. In the late nineteenth century at least, a male court official called the *Kpakpa* was in charge of recruiting women for the palace.' He toured the kingdom with his assistants, reportedly visiting each village every three years. A national census system that theoretically kept count of every individual by use of pebbles is said to have given the *Kpakpa* a good idea of how many young girls he might find in each household.² The king's representatives looked the girls over and picked those they judged suitable for royal service. A fleshy beauty, for example, would be intended for the king's bed, a particularly robust girl for the king's guard. Daughters of slaves were earmarked as palace slaves.

The institution of the royal recruiter may have grown out of earlier, automatic provision of girls to the palace as a form of tribute. Pruneau wrote that "each private person" was obliged to give the king one of his daughters.³ French voyager Pierre Labarthe, who visited Whydah in 1788, heard that all daughters (and sons) of "ministers" were at the king's disposal. "He keeps the girls in his seraglio", said Labarthe, "both for his pleasure and for the service and guard of his palace."⁴ Repin (1856) was told that *amazon* recruits "were

chosen from among the young virgin girls of the best families of the kingdom".⁵

Wealthy kin groups, or lineages, who could best afford the loss of daughters, voluntarily offered one or more to the king to increase their clout within the palace. Bouët asserted that nearly all the *amazons* were "daughters of chiefs or of rich inhabitants who are only too honored to make a gift of them to the king from the age of 8 or 10 years".⁶

Misbehavior could also land a woman in the palace. Methodist missionary Thomas Birch Freeman (English-born son of a white woman and a black) visited Dahomey in 1843 and noted that young wives who were "incorrigibly incontinent", badly behaved and unmanageable were turned over to the king. So were young daughters so disobedient to their parents that they were considered "irreclaimable", and rambunctious slave girls.' Another 1843 visitor, Frenchman Blaise Brue, heard that when an influential man complained of a wife's adultery, the king would confine her to "a house of discipline" at Allada and profit from her labor for the rest of her days.* Burton said that adulteresses who might otherwise have been executed were sent to the palace and enrolled in the amazon corps. Even intolerable shrews -"Xantippes who make men's hours bitter", in Burton's erudite prose -were donated to the king by their husbands and "very properly put into the army". Ellis, perhaps embroidering Burton, called them "termagants and scolds".¹⁰

A personally blameless wife or daughter might wind up in the palace if the head of her household ran afoul of the king. Powerful men, for example, might be accused of disloyalty, their households destroyed and their womenfolk confiscated."

One large pool of womanpower for the palace consisted of war and slave-raid captives. Indeed, some sources claim that King Gezo enrolled only young foreign prisoners as *amazons* because he could count on their loyalty. They owed him their lives, their livelihood, their legal freedom and their privileged social position, and were unlikely to

side with any disgruntled Dahomean faction. "He created an elite corps out of these girls", the historian Edouard Foà writes, "devoted to his body and soul."¹² A one-time slave village named *Sinwé-Jaloukou* dating from Gezo's reign is said to have been the site of "a veritable school of amazons".¹³ Burton noted some women soldiers chanting Yoruba songs, which suggests they were **foreign-born**.¹⁴

But even Gezo's amazons seem to have included native-born Dahomeans. The French historian Edouard Dunglas says that one female "regiment", which took part in that king's attack on the Yoruba city of *Abeokuta* in 1851 (chapter 17), was called *Ahouá-Na-Tô*, meaning "Our Warrior Princesses". It was recruited from among the numerous female descendants of the kings of Dahomey, a group known for their loose ways. As Dunglas explains it, "young Dahomean blood, always hot, equally inclined to war as to love affairs, drove,; good many young princesses into the profession of arms. (Besides "regiment", incidentally, such European designations as corps, division, brigade, battalion, company and platoon frequently appear in the literature and are always inaccurate in terms of numbers of troops when applied to Dahomean military units.)

Some amazons were daughters of amazons, which proves that not all soldieresses were virgins, as is sometimes claimed. Burton estimated that about one-third had been **married**.¹⁶ But as sacrosanct wives of a divine king, the amazons were sworn to. celibacy under pain of death.

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CELIBACY

Celibacy may not have been a particularly severe hardship for foreign-born amazons from ethnic groups that practised excision, euphemistically called female circumcision, in which the labia and sometimes the clitoris too are sliced off. Such operations, performed from infancy to adolescence, deprive women of the possibility of sexual pleasure. There is an oral tradition that Gezo had all the amazons excised for just that purpose, but it is credited to a single village source and therefore seems dubious.' The Fon in fact had a custom that produced the opposite effect: artificial elongation of the vagina lips, which heightened the joy of sex.

In the late eighteenth century both Dalzel and English ship captain John Adams reported that unusual custom among the women of Dahomey.² Three-quarters of a century later Burton wrote that labial elongation was so common that "a woman in the natural state is derided by others".³ He also suggested that the clitoris too was artificially enlarged;⁴ Ellis was sure of it, and linked the practice to worship of a priapic Dahomean god named *Legba*, distinguished by an outsized phallus.⁵ Ellis's claim is indirectly supported by an observation made nearly a century earlier by *Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-M&y* in a description of slaves in Haiti. Some "Arada" women from the Slave Coast, he wrote, besides having nymphae distended "to astonishing proportions", also had "another part" enlarged, "to the point that one sex could in a way fill the role of the other". (He also remarked that "Arada" females could be recognized by the "amplitude" of their hips and buttocks.)⁷

In the 1930s *Herskovits* looked into and clarified the

matter. He found that when Fon girls began to develop breasts, groups of up to a dozen were taught genital enlargement by a young married woman (and not operated on by "some ancient *sage femme*", as reported by Burton):

With a shaped piece of wood, [she] manipulates the lips of the vagina of each girl, pulling at them, stretching them, and lightly puncturing the vaginal tissues in several places. This she does eight or nine times for each of her charges during the first year of instruction, and during the next year the girls do this for each other. Freshly charged soot is injected into the vagina after each manipulation [and] rubbed into the irritated tissues to avoid infection. For two years at the very least this is continued and in addition there is the outer massaging of these 'lips' to cause thickening and muscular development, for 'thin-lipped' women are considered lacking in comeliness.

Such manipulation, Herskovits added, went on "more or less intermittently until marriage". Besides wooden instruments, he said, certain plant substances and stinging ants were inserted in the vagina to induce "irritation which encourages tugging and handling". The purpose of all this, the anthropologist determined, was to make sex play and coitus more pleasurable.*

Fon girls were programmed for sexual enjoyment in another way: cicatrization. Herskovits investigated this custom too and found that female scarring was viewed as "an enhancement of the erotic zones". Artificially raised skin surfaces, called keloids in anthropology and medicine, were intended to make sex more exciting.

A knife-wielding specialist performed the operation on groups of girls soon after their menarche. First food was sacrificed to Legba, then to Gu, god of iron and hence of the knife. Twelve sets of cuts were made in as many different parts of the body and in a specific order. A girl who could stand the pain of all twelve at a single sitting earned considerable prestige, but usually six or eight sets of cuts were administered first and the rest a year later. Scars on the sides of the neck and over the base of the spine were especially important in foreplay, but the ones "most immediately con-

cerned with sex excitation" were on the inside of each thigh. The latter operation involved eighty-one small cuts on each leg. A mixture of a certain crushed leaf with soot and palm oil was repeatedly rubbed into the cuts to form the keloids. A girl was considered ready for marriage if she had been cicatrized and had menstruated for four years. 9

A teenaged Fon girl was psychologically as well as physically conditioned for sex and marriage. Motherhood was the female norm, children were the ultimate blessing. Female bachelorhood was a weird notion, barrenness a tragedy if not a disgrace, and a childless wife an object of pity if not scorn. If a woman did not have offspring, who would care for her in sickness and old age and perform all-important memorial ceremonies periodically after her death? The closest emotional ties in Fon society were not between husband and wife but between a mother and her children; it was they who formed the elemental family unit. (And the closest generational loyalties were among siblings of the same mother.) If a wife did not become pregnant, a diviner was consulted to see whether a malevolent spirit was responsible. If that was found to be the case, either the spirit was appeased or another was asked to intervene favorably. Women also wore special charms to induce pregnancy.

Celibacy was so rare among early-twentieth-century Fon, according to one commentator, that it was observed only by those incapable of marriage, namely idiots, insane people, epileptics and lepers." This was doubtless an exaggeration because in a society where upper-class men have multiple wives, as was true everywhere in West Africa, many lower-class men are bound to have none simply because there are not enough females to go round.

A Partial solution to this problem is prostitution; in Dahomey it was institutionalized, like almost everything else." The royal court appointed public women, assigned them living quarters -according to Burton, Abomey had two red-light districts* -fixed their (modest) fees, required them to accept any paying customer, and taxed them annually. They

took part in public festivities as a song-and-dance troupe - Norris saw some 250 of them parade in 1772;¹³ Forbes and John Beecroft, a British consul who accompanied him to Abomey in 1850, watched "*demoiselles du pavé*" or "votaries of Venus" march;¹⁴ Burton heard "*filles de joie*" sing in 1864 - and play a special drum.¹⁵ In one of the more bizarre manifestations of Dahomean dualism, "prostitutes" within the royal palace matched the real ones on the outside. This may have encouraged Burton to suggest that most amazons were lesbians -preferring, as he put it, "the peculiarities of the Tenth Muse [Sappho]"¹⁶ -but he offered no firm evidence, nor did anyone else. If many amazons were lesbians, there would have been little need to resort to prostitutes. In fact, homosexuality of either sex is almost unrecorded in the European literature on precolonial West Africa.

Clearly, therefore, the vow of celibacy demanded of native-born amazons almost had to be a shattering experience, breaking them loose from their cultural moorings. It was not enough to call the amazons *ahosi*, the king's wives, when everyone knew that the great majority would never sleep with the monarch. (A few amazons did reportedly become royal sexual partners.)¹⁷ Nor was it enough to call them, in addition, *mino*, meaning "our mothers", as male officers and soldiers did in referring to their female counterparts. That was obviously no substitute for real motherhood. No, new ideals and goals were needed, a new focus for the energies of these young women, and in meeting these needs the Dahomean regime was remarkably successful.

Amazon libidos were not, as one might guess, completely sublimated, even though the penalty for breaking the vow of celibacy could be death. A deity represented at certain palace gates was thought to watch over the chastity of the soldieresses; if an amazon committed adultery, the spirit made her pregnant -or, in one version, gave her a bowel disease - thus exposing her crime. Dread of such exposure alone might force her to confess, even knowing that she and her paramour might be executed."

Dalzel heard of some royal "ladies of the seraglio" during Kpengla's reign (1774-89) who, bearing "evident marks of gallantry", named more than 150 men as their lovers. The latter were sold into slavery, "although most of them were afterwards found to have been innocent". We do not know if the women were punished. Mention of the seragho suggests that authentic royal wives and not amazons were involved.

Burton and Skertchly relate cases where female soldiers were explicitly the guilty parties and the supreme penalty was imposed on a few. The first involved "not less than 150" amazons who were found to be pregnant and were judged, along with their lovers, by King Glele himself in 1863. Eight men were executed, some were pardoned, and the rest were imprisoned or banished to remote villages. The amazons were "similarly treated", says Burton, who notes that female criminals were executed by female officers inside the palace with no men watching. In this regard, he commented, Dahomey was more civilized than Britain, where women were still hanged in public.*"

Eight years later seventy-two of Glele's amazons and eighty men were tried for adultery. According to Skertchly, the king, addressing a court during a three-hour "palaver", waived his right to the lives of all the defendants but said that justice must be satisfied. Four men and four women were singled out for capital punishment; the former were immediately beheaded -the usual method of execution in Dahomey - and the amazons were sent into the palace, where they quickly met the same fate. The rest of the miscreants, according to Skertchly, "were drafted into the gate-opening company of the army, a corps exposed to the hottest fire and the brunt of the battle".²¹ (Since no Dahomean army units were mixed, separate paired companies may have been involved.) Skertchly also reports seeing the heads of an amazon and her lover atop two poles flanking an Allada palace gate.²² But it would seem that it was rare for violating the vow of celibacy to cost an amazon her life, and then primarily as an object lesson to deter the others. At stake was not

the king's *amour-propre* but the viability of the amazons as a fighting force, unimpeded by pregnancy and motherhood (abortion being unheard of).

The monarch may at times have released some amazons temporarily from their vow to recruit male soldiers to fill gaps in the ranks. At least that is what a French trader, Edmond Chaudoin, heard in 1890 and subsequent authors repeated. The "youngest and most artful" women soldiers were sent out to the villages. One would remove ornaments identifying her as an *ahosi*, and walk into the market with a calabash on her head like any other girl, "simpering, chattering prettily, while provoking young men with her glance". In the evening she strolled along roads where young blades hung out, and enticed one into the nearby woods. Next day she would denounce him to the authorities for messing with a royal wife. He was then given a choice between the death penalty and army service. Sometimes, Chaudoin was told, the amazon fell for her lover and to save him named another youth. It was her word against his, and off he went to the wars.²³

Forbes asserts that particularly brave amazons were "given in marriage by the king to his favoured subjects".²⁴ Burton disputes it,²⁵ but Skertchly specifies that such awards were made at the annual customs.²⁶ Pierre-Eugene Chautard, a French missionary, reported in 1890 that the king exceptionally married off amazons "to his most deserving soldiers." Amazons disabled in combat, chronically ill or too old to fight may also have been allowed to marry.²⁸ Guillevin, a French naval officer who visited Abomey around 1857, heard that after seven or eight years of service amazons, "depending on their age and beauty, are destined for the [royal] harem or as wives to various state officials".²⁹ Wilmot heard that the king alone had the privilege of marrying amazons but rarely did.³⁰ Skertchly says that Glele had several amazon concubines,³¹ Foi that he authorized amazon marriages to chiefs.³²

Herskovits quipped that "the rule of chastity was observed at least as much in the breach as otherwise," probably sacrificing

accuracy for double entendre.³³ Of the thousands of women who served as amazons, relatively few may have dallied with men. For if they left behind a Me of marriage and motherhood to embrace what Burton called "that utterly gratuitous virtue, celibacy", they also left behind a life of ceaseless toil and second-class citizenship, and instantly acquired semi-sacred status.

7

A PRIVILEGED LIFE

In Dahomey as elsewhere in West Africa the average woman's lot was difficult. She did all the housekeeping and cooking, reared the children, raised, harvested and marketed crops, engaged in petty trade, tended livestock, collected firewood, gathered wild plants, fetched water, carried headloads, processed palm oil, made pottery and baskets, spun cotton, dyed cloth.

In 1803 M'Leod remarked:

The state of woman is, upon the whole, very abject here. Wives approach their husbands with every mark of the humblest submission. In presenting him even with the calabash containing his food, after she has cooked it, she kneels and offers it with an averted look, it being deemed too bold to stare him full in the face.'

M'Leod's experience of Dahomey was limited to Whydah. So, too, was that of the British naval officer Henry Veel Huntley, who visited the port in 1831. Describing Whydah at dawn, he mused: "A woman is here and there getting something ready to satisfy the early appetites of those for whom she is a drudge."² But later Repin, who traveled in the interior, noticed that a Dahomean wife presented food to her husband on her knees and was not allowed to eat with him. A family head, he asserted, had such authority over his wives and children that he could sell them into slavery, but he acknowledged that that was "very rare" and that a man generally treated his family "with great kindness". Nevertheless, Répin added, women did "all the housework...while their lord drinks, sleeps or smokes", and (with considerable exaggeration) he termed hunting, fishing and war "the sole occupations of men".³ (He was, however, more

perceptive than Huntley, who had the impression that "in Africa women alone do the work".)⁴

According to Chaudoin, the women of Dahomey, like those "throughout Africa", were "ordinarily.. regarded as an inferior being". He explains their "passion for motherhood" as "one of the consolations of their miserable life", a child being "the sole being who will return a little of their love".⁵

Chautard noted that in a country without a beast of burden, women and slaves shared that role." And another French observer, Victor-Louis Maire, characterized the women of Dahomey as "*bêtes à reproduction*". Edna Grace Bay, a modern American historian of Dahomey, notes that "in popular thought, women as women were the objects of scorn and contempt", regarded by men as disposed to "perfidy and treachery".⁸ Even now, she relates from personal experience, a man in Abomey who wants to describe another's job performance as worthless will say "He is less than a woman."⁹

The Dahomean woman was, in short, a classic victim of male supremacy. But when she became an amazon, however humble her origins, she joined the female elite of the nation. "The amazons are lodged in the palaces of the king", said Repin, "who supports them sumptuously, and they pass their time there drinking, smoking and dancing." Although their life was not easy, it was usually a great deal better than what they were used to.

Every inhabitant of Dahomey had to defer to a wife of the king, even if she was only a nominal one. When amazons, like all ahosi, walked out of the palace, they were preceded by a slave girl ringing a bell." The sound told every male to get out of their path, retire a certain distance and look the other way. Even women, it is said, had to back away and avert their gaze. Violation of this rule invited severe Punishment. A man who touched someone in an amazon procession risked death; the taboo shielded women slaves of the palace as well as their mistresses. Since palace women numbered thousands and groups of them were forever leaving the Palace on one errand or another, the ban could be

bothersome. While sightseeing in the Fon capital from a hammock, Skertchly "continually met gangs of the Amazons with their bells, causing our progress to be a succession of tacks from side to side, instead of making a straight course".¹² Burton called the interdiction one of the country's "greatest nuisances".¹³

The amazons' separateness and implicit superiority were also evident at state ceremonies and royal audiences. The soldieresses and other *ahosi* were set apart from the male world by a line of raffia palm midribs — called in the literature "bamboos"—laid end-to-end on the ground. In the midst of his women sat the king. The only other man who could cross the boundary at will was the chief eunuch of the palace, although ministers and other males expressly summoned by the monarch were allowed over. According to Skertchly, any other man who stepped across faced death.¹⁴

In Dahomey's dualistic system, royal protocol gave precedence to women officials over their male opposite numbers, and likewise to amazons over men soldiers (even the king being technically outranked by a "queen-mother"). According to Joseph Dawson, a long-time resident of Whydah in the 1850s and '60s, a man with a grievance could bring it to the king's attention through his amazon "mother", bypassing his own chief.¹⁵

Leaving a life with a large component of drudgery, the amazon recruit suddenly acquired her own female slave.¹⁶ (According to Burton, amazons had up to fifty slaves each; presumably he was referring to the highest-ranking officers.) Sometimes described as "servants" or "attendants" or "camp followers", these women may have been mainly war or slave-raid captives assigned by the king to work for the soldieresses. Others may have been hereditary Dahomean slaves. They seem to have spared the amazons most of the menial tasks that were the common woman's fate. They farmed royal lands, carried produce to the palace on their heads in big calabashes, cooked and served meals. They gathered wood for cooking fires. They headloaded huge pots of water from

springs outside Abomey. The slave women also accompanied the amazons on military campaigns, forming their baggage train. They carried provisions —British traveler John Duncan reckoned a headload of provisions to weigh about 60 pounds,* Foà nearly 90¹⁹ — and ammunition. For officers they carried muskets and such accessories as umbrellas of rank, and sleeping mats.

Burton says slaves of amazons also acted as spies.²⁰ Indeed, Dahomey had a well-developed intelligence system, but evidence suggests that only men were employed in this capacity. The one exception we have encountered is an oral-historical anecdote about two disguised amazons who seduced the military chief of a Yoruba town and stripped him of the occult powers that had guaranteed his success in the past, thus paving the way for a Dahomean conquest.²¹ However, spies doubled as scouts in wartime, and it may be that the amazons used their women slaves in this way.

Among European visitors particularly impressed with the amazons' prestige and position was Commodore Wilmot. "The Amazons are everything in this country," he wrote, "...the mainstay of the kingdom. [...] They are first in honour and importance."²² Foi credited Gezo with investing the warrioresses with "a sacred character" and obliging his subjects "to accord them the same honors as chiefs".²³

An amazon's apartness and exalted status were reflected in her uniform —or uniforms, for each unit had its own — her armory, her bands, songs and dances, her special symbols and guardian spirits, and her carefully cultivated, swaggering *esprit de corps*.