

## Recognition of the Place of Women in 19th-Century African Warfare: A Study of the Amazons of Dahomey

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### Abstract

*The role of women in pre-colonial warfare in Africa has been grossly under-researched. Extant literature on precolonial warfare tends to pay attention to the military exploits of men and therefore raises the question of gender bias in African precolonial military historiography. This paper studies the military organization of Dahomey and observes that the 'Amazons' who served as female warriors in battles and as bodyguards in the king's household exhibited professionalism in their assigned responsibilities, and secured for themselves a high profile and significant position in African warfare. The paper further interrogates the notion that wars and warfare in 19th-century Africa was the exclusive preserve of men, that women were relegated to preparation of food, and singing war songs for combatants in the war front. The paper uses descriptive analysis and available literature such as books, journal articles, and internet sources to examine the place of the Amazons in the reconstruction of precolonial African warfare. The paper found that the role of women in pre-colonial African warfare is understudied; this denies adequate representation of the female warriors in the historiography of African warfare. The study concludes that Amazon's of Dahomey represent evidence of women's participation in African warfare as combatants.*

*Keywords: Amazons, warfare, Dahomey, gender, warrior*

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## Introduction

The history of warfare in pre-colonial Africa mostly celebrates and refers to men's achievement and tends to relegate women to the backyard. All over Africa, while men have their exploits recorded in the annals of history and branded as "historical facts" as E.H Carr would have said, the participation of women in warfare – a supposedly male dominated field- even when they played an important role just as their male counterparts, as they did in other human endeavors from finance, commerce, intellectualism, craft and industry, politics, has not been fully appreciated, hence, creating a wide gap in historical documentation that is yet to be filled. Unlike in other aspects mentioned above, their military exploit has not been given much attention in documentation and is mostly relegated to footnotes. It was based on this that Oyedele while writing about the historicity and exploits of Queen Amina of Zazzau counters this gender bias, lamented with much disturbance and disappointment that scholars are not giving the feminine gender the attention they deserved as giving their male counterparts (Oyedele, 2008). Militarily, many African women played and are still playing their roles in battle just as their much-publicized male counterparts, even the role of women as couriers, praise singers, nurses in the battlefield is a theme that is suffering from negligence not to talk about their physical and strategic engagement in the battlefields and other military operations. However, history cannot be changed for African women have earned their place in history and left their indelible marks on the sand of time in different endeavors, for example, in the intellectual field we had Nana Asama'u bnt Fodio, (Jean, 1989); in royalty we had the *Maghera* (Queen Mother) of old Borno, (Omolewa1986); in creativity we had and still have the Yoruba dyers, (Ogbomo, 1993); in politics and freedom fighting we had Nzinga Matamba of Angola; likewise in battle and bravery, we had the female contingent of Shaka Zulu's army (Akpan, 2013) and the Dahomean *Mino* (also known as Amazons).

### Historical Overview of the Kingdom of Dahomey

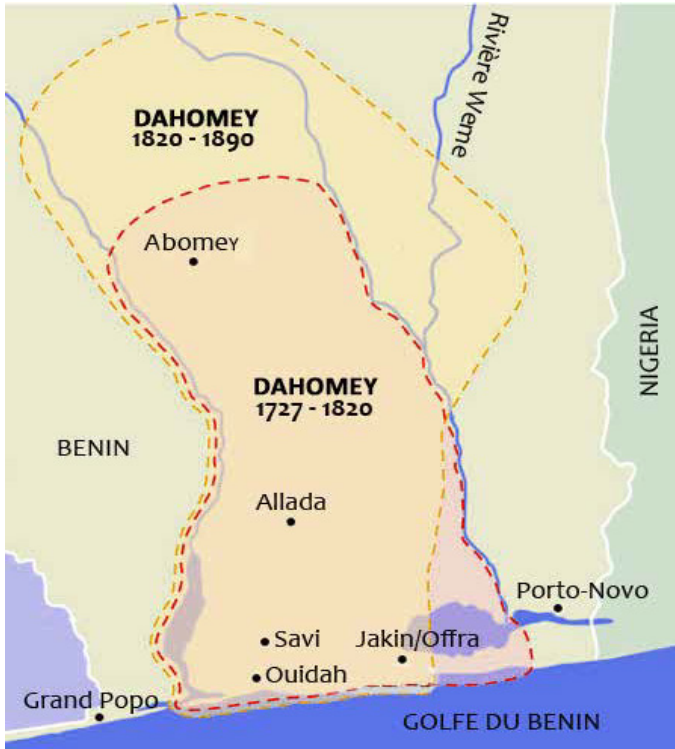
The Dahomey Kingdom, originally the name of the royal palace was a West African state located on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea slave coast, or Bight of Benin, boarded on the west by the Togo land, on the east by the Yoruba Land of South Western Nigeria, on the North by the *Mahi* Country, and South by the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. The Kingdom approximately corresponded with the southern modern West African francophone country of the Republic of Benin. It was a geographically small but powerful kingdom politically and militarily. The Kingdom was established in the 17th century. It was established by the Fon people. The *Fon* is a part of the Eastern Gbe language cluster that belongs to the Volta-Niger branch of the Niger-Congo family of languages. They were part of the *Adja* people, close relatives of the Ewu and Yoruba that emigrated to *Adja Tado* of Togo land in the 13th century from where some of them later emigrated to Allada and Whydah. In around 1625, a faction broke away headed by one Do-Aklin and founded the Dahomey Kingdom on the Abomey Plateau. King Webgaja (1650-80) was the first king (*Dada*). The *Dada* office was an autocratic office and the finale court of appeal. Other notable kings include Agaja, Tegbesu, Aglongo, Adandazo, Ghezo, Glele, and Benhanzin. Over the years Dahomey developed a sound political structure with a relatively stable state, Historians noted that from 1680-1889 there were only nine reigns in total, which shows a form of relative political stability and smooth succession (Barkindo, 1989). There was a succession policy where the first child of the king succeeds him after death subject to the approval of the chiefs. The King was the economic, political, religious, and cultural head of the land; the kingdom was divided into six provinces, each headed by a chief, appointed by the king. Dahomey was among the African kingdoms that continually developed in the pre-colonial times despite European distortion of African socioeconomic life. (Barkindo, 1989)

The Dahomey Kingdom had a centralized economy with an annual census to determine the population, sophisticated tax collection, and this made military conscription an easy task, the population in the 19th century

was put about 200,000, (Rodney, 1973), the census included even that of the domestic animals such as pigs, cattle sheep, chickens, etc. There was also crop production where every province was encouraged to concentrate on cultivating a given crop. As land was not privately owned, the Dahomeans were required to pay a certain amount of fee to acquire land annually. There was also revenue realization through tax, tolls, royalties, and tribute. The office of *Migan* (Prime Minister) and *Mehu* (Finance Minister) were the most important offices in the center after that of the king. In 1850, there were for example 209 members of the central administration. There was also the *Adjaho* (Interior Minister) *Tokpo* (in charge of agriculture) *Gau* (Commander in Chief) *Yegvo* (Governor of Whydah, an important coastal city, in charge of the trade with Europeans), *Sogan* (the head of royal Calvary), etc. Every one of the officials had a female counterpart in the palace that serves as check (Barkindo, 1989). Most of the kingdom practiced the traditional West African religion of *Vodho*, an ancestor spirit worship characterized by the *AhoSitamu* (Grand Custom) and *Hwetamu* (annual customs) where military parades, speeches and gifts, ceremonies, festivities, and human sacrifices were realized (Camaron, 2016).

Additionally, Dahomey also engaged in trade internally, with her immediate neighbors and more importantly with the Europeans on the coast. They mostly sell war captives as slaves, it was only the king or his trade agents that could sell slaves to outsiders, Europeans on the coast were also required to pay their dues and rent annually, for example during the reign of King Tgbesu (1740-1774), Dahomey experienced her economic boom from slave trade, the economy depended on the slave trade, which became difficult for the kingdom to accept the abolition of the trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the abolition, Dahomey switched to cultivating palm oil on slave ran plantations and traded it with Europeans on the coast during the legitimate trade (Law, 1997). Dahomey engaged in military conflict with her neighbors especially the Oyo Empire of Southern Nigeria. Earlier in the 1700s, Dahomey was defeated and required to pay tribute to Oyo annually, but in 1823 during the reign of King Ghezo (1818-1858), Dahomey regained her freedom from Oyo. At the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dahomey fall for

European imperialism, conquered, and declared a French protectorate in 1894 after the Second Franco-Dahomean war and later a colony in 1904. After attaining independence in 1960, the kingdom changed its name to People's Republic of Benin in 1975 and later the Republic of Benin from 1991.



*A Political Map of Dahomey 1727-1820. Source (UNESCO)*

## The Military Structure of Dahomey

Dahomey, for most of her survival, was an expansionist kingdom that was often at war with her neighbors, they held the belief that the greater the kingdom, the greater honor they did their ancestors. King Heougba

(webgaja), the third king of Dahomey, who established a ruling dynasty, was famous for always chanting “making Dahomey ever greater” and hence established a strict disciplined military state. It was among the pre-colonial kingdoms that had a standing army of about 15,000 - 40,000 soldiers including women, against the traditional call-up army mostly practiced then. While it used traditional crude weapons such as swords, spears, bows, and arrows, the army also possessed guns and ammunitions, at some points with even canons. There was also a reserve army that consists of every able-bodied man and woman that could bear arms. The King was the commander-in-chief of the Dahomey armed forces, the office of *Gau* was the commander of the army and *Sogan* was the head of the royal cavalry. The cavalry was not effective as Dahomey was in a forest belt. The notion that Dahomey was described as Sparta, comparing it with the most militaristic of the ancient Greek city States, by explorers of the 19th century attests to that. Alperne Stanley writing about Dahomey titled his work the “*The Amazons of Black Sparta*” (Stanley, 1998), so was also Rodney. This analogy is not surprised in European writings, for example, Segfeild Nadal described the *Nupe* of Northcentral Nigeria as “Black Byzantium” (Nadal, 1942).

More so, military life was indeed part and parcel of the kingdom's survival. Some, such as Mike Dash called them “the Black Sparta of the Slave Coast”. In his article, Dash talked about a European evangelist, Francisco Burgher, attending an 1861 military occasion in Dahomey observed that some 3,000 Amazons demonstrated some sort of military performance and props using their muskets and a female general, probably Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh energetically and fiercely gave a heroic speech (Dash, 2011). Walter Rodney had this to say:

Two unique innovations set Dahomey ahead to its African neighbors and even gave it a special claim within the context of feudal or semi-feudal military organization. Dahomey encourages an apprentice of war. By the age of 11/12, a boy would be attached to a veteran soldier;...observing battles. The Second innovation and (and the one that was most widely commented upon) was

Dahomey utilization of its female population within the army. The wives in the royal palace started up an as ceremonial guard in the 18thc, and then progressed to be an integral part of Dahomey's fighting machine on terms of complete equality of; hardship and reward . . . the state consistently managed to send 12,00-15,00 actives on its annual campaign. Of those, it was estimated in 1845 that some 5000 were women – the so-called Dahomey Amazons- who were feared for their ferocity in battle (Rodney, 1973).

There were two types of wars fought by Dahomey. The first was “a unity” war fought to unite the *Fon* with their kinsmen and other Adja-speaking people like the Whydah and Allada, while the second was targeted against the enemies of the Dahomey kingdom such as Yoruba, the *Mahi*, and the French. There was also the usual slave raiding. Captives and war prisoners were sold, sacrificed, or incorporated into the Dahomey kingdom as the case may be. The *Mahi*, Oyo, and Abeokuta were Dahomey's enemies that had always conflicted with. There was a sustained age-long sentiment against the Yoruba and Mahi in Dahomey. Dahomey was a militaristic state in every meaning of the phrase because she needed slaves to sell to Europeans at the coast for revenue—as selling Dahomean citizens was illegal- and to maintain the human sacrifice in the traditional *vodho* religion of ancestor worship. Added to that, Dahomey was an expansionist State especially during the reign of Webgaja, Agaja (1708-1740), Ghezo (1818-1858), and Glele (1858-1889) and it was always pressing to secure her independence and do away with her vassalage status under Oyo if not to revenge. There was also the need to protect trade routes to the coast. These factors made Dahomey a highly militaristic state in West Africa (Barkindo, 1989).

### The Place of Women in Dahomey

One striking thing about Dahomey was that unlike many traditional 19th-century societies that confined women as housewives, in Dahomey, women played critical role in the Kingdom, for example, every official

had his female counterpart in the palace, the female counterpart of *Migan* was *Miganon*, and the *Mehu* was *Mehanon or yehu* who also served as diplomatic conducting affairs with the Europeans in parallel with the *Mehu*. The female were supposed to serve as a check of their male counterparts. There was the “*Kpodjitot*” for example (Leopard mother or queen mother) playing a central role in the palace politics as far back as the reign of Agaja in the 1700s, there were the *Kposi*, traditional palace guards. Not only that the Dahomey females had a role to play in the Military exploits of Dahomey as the great contingent of the Amazons which proudly called *Mino* (our mothers as the men officials and soldiers called them) and *ahosi* (the wives of the king). The *Gau*, for example, had a female counterpart as the *Khetungan*, they also served as personal bodyguards to the king and partook in national debates. The *mino* proudly sang the following song patriotically; “We were created to defend the honey pot, Object of desire. Can the country where so much courage flourishes give up its wealth to foreigners? As long as we live, how mad the people who would try to impose their law on us” (UNESCO, 2019).

### **Etymology, Historicity and the Historiography of the Dahomean Mino (Amazons)**

Traditionally the all-female regiment of the Dahomean army was called *Mino* in the local *Fon* language which means “our mothers”. This signifies a sign of respect as mothers were known to be over-protective and highly sacrificial for their children’s survival at all costs. The term “Amazon” or French “Les amazons”, which does not have meaning in the *Fon* language, was first used to describe the all-female military regiment of the Dahomean army by European explorers in 1841 and was later popularized by explorers such as Fredrik Forbes in 1850s and Robert Burton in 1860s when they visited Dahomey, the term, amazons, was derived from the name of the mythical female warriors of the ancient Anatolia on the Black Sea; a community of mythical female warriors of great military prowess. The Europeans gave them that name because of their fearlessness, prowess, and exploits.



Dahomey was always in conflict with Oyo, Ketu, Savi, Mahi, and Abekouta, for instance, Reverend Samuel Jonson, in his *Magnus opus*, mentioned how the Abeokuta warriors, to their surprise, fought a fierce battle with the Amazons in the 19th century during the first and second Dahomean invasion (Johnson, 1992). A documentary by “Home Team History” discusses an Asante’s tradition fighting with female warriors from Dahomey and the Yorubas talking about one fierce *Tata Agachi*, a female warrior of Dahomey that gutted a man alive with his weapon. All these attested to the fact that the surrounding kingdoms knew about the female soldiers of Dahomey. When European explorers such as Burton (Burton, 1983) and Forbes (Forbes, 1851) visited Dahomey, they noted the existence of the *Mino* whom they called Amazons, the European historiography of the Amazons, as always, was enviously and jealously bias meant to depict the African females as barbaric, dirty, wild, rebels, slavishly obedient and unbecoming (Adams, 2010). As for naming them “Amazons” they tried to insinuate a force of resistance that awaited European planned imperial encroachment on the kingdom just as the mythical Anatolian Amazons fiercely resisted the Greeks.

### **The Dahomey Amazons (Mino)**

The Dahomey Amazons were said to be originally a legion of elephant huntresses known as *gbeto* in the local Fon language started at around 1625 that were later developed into the Palace guards and soldiers in the 18th century. For example, a French Naval surgeon on the coast of Dahomey in the 1850s observed and reported that twenty female huntresses attacked and killed three out of a herd of 40 elephants (Dash, 2011). In 1725, another French slave dealer on the port of Whydah talked about seeing women regiment policing. One Dahomean tradition maintained that when Ghezo praised the courage of the *gbeto*, they replied that “perhaps manhunt would suit them best.” This theory can be true considering elephants live in the tropical forests of Africa and Asia; Dahomey was in the forest belt of West Africa. After seeing their prowess in hunting, they were developed into Palace guards in around 1720s, this was instrumental because only

women could be allowed into the palace at night, Agaja was quoted to have said, “no man sleeps within the walls of any of [my palaces] after sun-set but myself” (Law, 1997) and though the kingdom had a somewhat smooth succession policy of patrilineal (where the first child of the king was declared *vidaho*; heir apparent since before the death of his father), however, there were contests and politics sometimes even leading to the coup as king Gezo ousted Adondazo in 1820s (Law, 1997). This may be why the king may need palace guards and such fierce bodyguards even in the night when his male servants could not be allowed into the palace to check the turbulence and treachery of his subjects and to ensure his safety; their chief utility was to prevent rebellion among the male soldiers as he (Gezo) set precedence in coups.

The tradition recognized the *minoasahosi* (the ceremonial wives of the king) since by tradition most of them were ceremonially married to him and some even recruited from his hundreds of wives. Other African rulers also used these tactics, for example, Shaka Zulu of Southern Africa was said to always sleep in the quarters of his female soldiers (Allen, 2014). There were reports by European explorers of female guards in Oyo and Borgu in pre-colonial Nigerian. Another theory suggests that they were formed in honor of Queen Hangbe (r. 1708-1711) the twin sister of king Agaja. According to Kplangan, the palace historian, she was the only female to rule the kingdom. Others believe that Hangbe herself formed the female corps as palace guards; the problem with this theory is that some historians see Hanagbe as a legendary figure that may not even exist just as Amina of Zazzau.

Whether as hunters or palace guards, the Dahomey Amazons were developed into all-female regiment within the Dahomean military between the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, what skip many historians is the question on why would 17<sup>th</sup> century kingdom established an all-female military regiment which many described as the only female military combat regiment that fought in battle in the known world then. What informed their creation? Was it survival instincts as Dahomey was often in conflict with her neighbors such as Oyo and Mahi? Was it because of her economic

dependence on the slave trade which could only be facilitated through raiding? Was it a sense of gender equality? Was it the capability and ferocity of her female population given the fact that they could hunt elephants—one of the most dangerous games to hunt? Was it a demographic factor that Dahomey might have lost most of her male population because of wars and the inevitable causality as Arthur Wilmot, a British naval officer, observed a demographical imbalance wherein 1861 women outnumbered men in the kingdom? Whatever may be the case; the amazons numerically rose from 600 in 1725 to 6,000/8,000 in the 1840s and were considered the spearhead of the Dahomey army and symbol of courage and unflinching devotion.

Recruitment into the regiment was initially meant to absorb the huntresses into the army given their audacity, then later criminals, erring women in their husband's or father's homes, captives, delinquents, princesses attracted to weapons, and hardened girls so that their personality trait could be utilized. However, given the state of continuous war, voluntary enlistment was entertained as well as conscription of non-criminals. "Tata Agache", a retired Amazon that survived the Franco-Dahomean war, said she was recruited as a girl slave captured during a raid in her village near Ketu. Many Ketu girls were taken and initiated into the *minos*. After they were captured as war prisoners in Abeokuta, they preferred going back to Dahomey to their parents. Dahomey had the policy of incorporating conquered people into her population. During Ghezo (1818-1858) recruitment and conscription, exercise was conducted every three years, where an official would be sent to villages to conscript physically fit girls, the criteria were that the girls should be tall and agile, during Glele, it became annually. Though this act of conscription was not always welcomed by the girls' families, but a census was always carried out in the kingdom. However, some girls were hidden by their families as they challenged forcing them to swear celibacy (UNESCO, 2019). They were mostly recruited in the teen ages, though sometimes even as young as 8-10 years, and had to abandon their family and women folks to a military life under the king. According to a source;

He (Ghezo) instituted the principle of routinely enlisting teenage girls throughout the region and authorized the inclusion of women prisoners of war and girls seized during raids on villages in neighbouring kingdoms. The female army, therefore, consisted of women from Dahomey and women from other population groups in the region (UNESCO, 2019).

The training was organized so that when they successfully passed out or graduated to serve the king, they became ruthless, insensitive to pain and mastered target accuracy, pain endurance, parades, discipline, wrestling, hand to hand combat, swiftness, magic, archery, and sometimes spending more than three months in the bush. They were recruited and trained to be a reliable elite corps that could give their lives for their king. Death was not to be afraid of but cowardice. They were trained to be iron wielded, resilient, diligent, flexible, and swiftly kill an enemy without any hesitation. Mostly they practice on war prisoners, according to Dash Wood, Jean Bayol, a French Naval officer that visited Dahomey in the 1889 watched a teen female recruit named *Nanisca* that had not yet killed anyone when she swung her sword three times calmly beheaded a prisoner, the same officer recognized her dead body after the second Franco-Dahomean war in 1894 (Dash, 2011). They were expected to swear celibacy, breaking which theoretically attracts death penalty. Meanwhile, not all of them were virgins since some might have married before being captured or committing a crime that would condemn them to serve. Those engaged in sexual relationships were said to use local contraceptives to avoid pregnancy, sometimes they were subjected to clitoridectomy, despite that, it is recorded some were still caught pregnant (Law, 1997). The insistence that they abstain from sex could be their source of effectiveness and ferocity as they would transfer their aggression derived from frustration of sexual satisfaction to fierceness in battle just as Shaka prevents his soldiers to marry until attaining 40 years (Akpan, 2013).

There were five regiments in the 19th century. Each regiment had its uniform, weapon system, and peculiarities. The five regiments identified

were the *gbeto* (huntresses with two antelope horns on their heads) which was the oldest, they were dressed in brown blouses and brown and blue knee-length shorts. Around the head, they wore a band of iron crowned with two antelope horns symbolizing power, strength, and flexibility. They were armed with long rifles and curved daggers attached to their belts; the *Gulohento* (Rifle Women using muskets, spears, and short swords was the largest unit), their uniform consisted of a belt made of banana leaves equipped with cartridges. The *Gulohento* also wore a blue blouse tied at the waist with a belt and white and blue striped culottes.

The king was the final say and commander-in-chief of the kingdom, the *minos* (Amazon) had their overall female general is known as *Khetungan*, the counterpart of the *Gau* the one depicted in Forbes' depiction was *Se-Hong-Dong-Beh* the leader of the amazons in the 1850s. They swore allegiance to the king doubling as his bodyguards and to protect the kingdom at whatever cost. Weapons and tactics largely depended on the regiment one was serving. Generally, they used muskets, guns, bow and poisonous arrows, stabbing dagger, spears, bayonet, and sometimes even canons. Most of the amazons preferred close hand to hand combat, intimidation, ambush, and taking their enemies by surprise as their main tactics. They were usually the last line to protect the king in battles because he had more confidence in them. There was the provision of welfares as they were given tobacco, slaves, and alcohol for their leisure and even engaged in weaving or other things as pass-time activities. They also played ceremonial functions at the annual or grand ceremony by performing parades in thousand, staging a raid performance mocking Dahomean enemies, and singing military songs. A military song of theirs sings thus; "We were created to defend Dahomey, the honey pot Object of desire. Can the country where so much courage flourishes give up its wealth to foreigners? As long as we live, how mad the people who would try to impose their law on us" (UNESCO, 2019).

### Battles and Exploits of the Amazons

As noted earlier, the *mino*'s origin can be traced to elephant hunting, elephants are never an easy game to hunt hence since their inception, they were always in the fighting. It was because of their ferocity that they were transformed into palace guards, the king's bodyguards, and later warriors in battle; they were soon used for the unending slave raids by Dahomean kings to capture slaves, slaves were sold so that the economy could be maintained with the accrued revenue. Most of the Dahomean wars were to capture slaves not to kill, but if it became necessary to kill, they slay enemies by beheading, for the king paid for any enemy head brought to him. The Amazon was also used in fighting Asante by the Dahomeans, in 1764 which the Asante described in their traditional "fighting women". War was a dominant factor in the history of Dahomey. They were also used in the Conquest of other *Fon* speaking people such as the Allada, and Whydah in the 1720s, the amazons were instrumental in conquering the *Mahion* the northeast, one of Dahomey's traditional enemies. Most times they outshined their male counterparts, a report by an observer in the 19th century showed how they conquered an unidentified village and Atakpeme after their men counterparts failed. (Law, 1997)

Furthermore, the Yoruba people, though sharing common relations with the Dahomeans, but they were always traditional enemies. There was always a traditional resentment and unforgiving prejudice against the Yorubas in Dahomey. Since the 1700s Dahomey was a vassal of the old Oyo Empire and Oyo always used her Calvary force to assert her over lordship on Dahomey. If there was anything critical for Dahomey, it was to regain her independence from Oyo and that was achieved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during king Ghezo in 1823 due to the impact of the internal conflicts and the Sokoto Jihads in Oyo. Dahomey used her military strength, the amazons inclusive, to regain her independence. The Dahomean military was also used to defeat and destroyed the Savi and Ketu. For instance, today many proponents of African traditional religion in Brazilian Yoruba settlements traced their origin to Ketu. Furthermore, Ketu girls were taken as slaves and trained as amazons after their defeat by the Dahomeans, they

were re-captured after the Abeokuta campaign in 1851 by the Yoruba and they chose the Dahomeans over their parents when they were brought to Ketu for ransom, these explain that during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century wars between Ketu and Dahomey, the amazons captured as many Yoruba prisoners of war as they could and sold them into slavery on the coast of Whydah given the notoriety of Dahomey in the slave trade and her wars with the Yoruba.

The Amazon attacked Abeokuta twice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even audaciously announcing their coming and laying siege in Abeokuta. Though they never successfully conquered the walled city, the Egbas – in attempting to castrate a Dahomean war prisoner- was very surprised to learn that, all this time, they were fighting with women so furiously and determined. The Yoruba tradition described a young Dahomean female warrior who gutted a man alive with his weapon, her name was Tata Agache, and she survived and related her story in 1920 where she claimed to be from Ekpo village of Ketu taken as a slave in 1858 after an attack by the Dahomeans (Law, 1997).

Apart from inter African conflicts; the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the penetration of Europeans into Africa with unquenchable rapacious ambition. There was nothing that could halt the European conquest of Africa. Europe was so determined that in 1884-5 at Berlin Germany, Africa was partitioned among Europeans and Dahomey was carved out by the French probably because of her trade interest on the coast. The kingdom was between German Togo land on the West and British Nigeria. By the 1850s France started to assert her influence on Dahomey, For instance, when the semi-divine Dahomean kings could not abruptly tamper with traditions and cultures such as the slave trade and human sacrifice which was well known to the French, the French used it as an excuse to attack the kingdom.

The French already established their base at Porto Novo, they soon captured Cotonou in the 1890s, but King Benhazin would not take that, hence, on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1890 the first Franco-Dahomean war erupted, the Dahomey amazons fought bravely and surprised the French in battle managing to penetrate and capturing the French stockade under heavy artillery. The Dahomeans were defeated and a treaty ceded Cotonou and

Porto Novo to the French. But they were determined to put the clause of “effective occupation”, agreed upon in the supplementary Brussels Treaty in 1890 to follow up any claim of African region in the Berlin Conference. The relative peace was short-lived, the French *Topaz* gunboat sailed on river *Weme*, a Dahomean waterway, the Dahomeans fired in defense of their territorial integrity from Senegal, the French sent Colonel Alfred Dodds with large artilleries and the French Foreign Legion with clear and straight orders to unfailingly march and captured Abomey, the capital, as punitive.

A second war ensued in 1892, many battles were fought. In the end, Dahomey was defeated and the Amazons were nearly decimated and obliterated. Very few of them survived the war. Even though Benhazin sued for peace, that was not what the French wished for; Benhazin was deported to Martinique and later to Algeria where he died in 1906. Dodds appointed Goli-Agbos (1894-1900) as a new puppet king, declared the kingdom as a protectorate, and hoisted the French colonial flag the “Tricolor”. In 1904 the Dahomey protectorate was transformed into Colony as French Dahomey within the larger French West Africa (Barkindo, 1989). They regained their internal self-rule within the French community in 1958 and independence in 1960, and then later change their name to the Peoples Republic of Benin in 1975 and Republic of Benin in 1991 to identify with the Bight of Benin.

The French described the amazons as their most determined enemies; they were very effective in bayonet and hand to hand combat and gave the French a tough fight. The failure of the Dahomean troops to withstand the French was based on the superiority of the French weapons with larger artilleries and gunboats, there was also a problem of strategy as Katagiri noted, that “it was nearly impossible for the Dahomeans to defeat the French in conventional warfare which the Amazons adopted, as France had the larger army, more sophisticated based on tactics, organization, and discipline above all weapons” (Katagiri, 2012), he concluded that the Dahomeans could have stood a chance if they used guerrilla warfare. After



the French took over, they disbanded the Amazons partially as they killed many French soldiers more than their male counterparts (Katagiri, 2012).

### Conclusion

This paper examined the roles of women in the history of pre-colonial warfare in Africa, especially in terms of the planning, strategizing, tactics, and finally the execution, with particular reference to the Amazons of Dahomey. The paper further interrogates the history of the existence of the Dahomey Kingdom, their political structure, economic exploits, military and defense formations with special emphasis on the place of the Amazons in the general defence structure of the kingdom as well as their role in actualizing the expansionist policy of the kingdom. For the highly regarded position occupied by women in the Dahomey Kingdom, the paper exclusively discussed the possible reasons for the presence of the Amazons as the sole palace guards against the common tradition of male soldiers occupying a similar position in other African kingdoms and empires. Among the findings of the paper also is the evidential position of the women in pre-colonial African warfare, with the examples of the Amazons and the female contingents of Shaka. Some other examples were cited of notable figures in other exploits such as intellectualism with Nana Asma'u bnt Fodio, in royalty, we had the Maghera (Queen Mother) of old Borno, Yaa Asantewaa of the old Ashante Kingdom, in politics and freedom fighting we had Nzinga Mbande of Matamba of present-day northern Angola among others.

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