

# *Introduction*



Ouidah is situated in the coastal area (in the Department of Atlantique) of the modern Republic of Bénin (formerly the French colony of Dahomey) in West Africa.<sup>1</sup> In origin, it is an indigenous African town, which had existed long before the French colonial occupation in 1892. In the pre-colonial period, it had belonged successively to two African states, first the kingdom of Hueda (whence the name ‘Ouidah’) and from 1727 that of Dahomey, from which the French colony took its name;<sup>2</sup> and the first language of its inhabitants today remains Fon, the language of Dahomey, with French inherited from the colonial period as the superimposed official language of administration and education. Today, Ouidah has a population of around 25,000, which by modern standards is quite modest, and it is dwarfed by the two leading cities of southern Bénin: the official capital Porto-Novo, 60 km to the east (with a population probably around 200,000), and the commercial centre and international port of Cotonou, 40 km to the east (perhaps approaching 1,000,000).

In the precolonial period, however, Ouidah was the principal commercial centre in the region and the second town of the Dahomey kingdom, exceeded in size only by the capital Abomey, 100 km inland. In particular, it served as a major outlet for the export of slaves for the trans-Atlantic trade. The section of the African coast on which Ouidah is situated, in geographical terms the Bight (or Gulf) of Benin, was known to Europeans between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as the ‘Slave Coast’, from its prominence as a source of supply for the Atlantic slave trade; and within this region Ouidah was by far the most important point of embarkation for slaves, far outshading its nearest rival, Lagos, 150 km to the east (in modern Nigeria). Ouidah was a leading slaving port for almost two

<sup>1</sup> The French colony became the independent Republic of Dahomey in 1960, the change of name to Bénin occurring in 1975. The Republic of Bénin should be distinguished from the kingdom of Benin, situated in what is today Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> In the present work, to avoid confusion, the name Dahomey is used only with reference to the pre-colonial kingdom, the modern territory being referred to as Bénin.

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centuries, from the 1670s to the 1860s. During this period, the Bight of Benin is thought to have accounted for around 22 per cent of all slaves exported to the Americas, and Ouidah for around 51 per cent of exports from the Bight.<sup>3</sup> Given the current consensual estimate of between 10 and 11 million slaves exported from Africa in this period, this suggests that Ouidah supplied well over a million slaves, making it the second most important point of embarkation of slaves in the whole of Africa (behind only Luanda, in Angola).<sup>4</sup>

This prominence of Ouidah in the Atlantic slave trade is reflected in the occurrence of versions of its name in various contexts in the African diaspora in the Americas. For example, there is a village called 'Widah' in Jamaica, originally a sugar plantation, presumably so named through being settled with slaves imported from Ouidah. In Haiti, one of the principal deities of the Afro-American *vaudou* religion, the goddess Ezili, is distinguished in one of her forms as Ezili-Freda-Dahomi, 'Ezili [of] Ouidah [in] Dahomey';<sup>5</sup> although one modern account has argued that Ezili is a purely Haitian creation, without African antecedents, there is in fact in Ouidah to the present day a shrine of Azili (*sic*), a female river spirit, who is evidently the prototype of the Haitian goddess.<sup>6</sup> The name of the town was also commemorated in that of the ship of the pirate Sam Bellamy, the *Whydah*, wrecked off Cape Cod in what is now the USA in 1717, but located and excavated by marine archaeologists, to become the subject of a museum exhibition in the 1990s, this ship having been originally, prior to its capture and appropriation by pirates, engaged in the slave trade and named after the West African town.<sup>7</sup> Ouidah's prominence in European commerce is also reflected in the application of the name Whidah-bird to a genus of the weaver-bird that is in fact common throughout tropical Africa but became familiar to the wider world through Ouidah; in English usage, the name was commonly corrupted into 'widow-bird' (whence, rather than directly from the name Ouidah, its zoological name, *Vidua*), under which form it was celebrated in a poem by Shelley.

In more recent times, Ouidah has figured in a historical novel dealing with the slave trade, by Bruce Chatwin, based on the career of the Brazilian slave-trader Francisco Felix de Souza, who settled permanently in the town in the 1820s.<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s a systematic attempt was made to exploit Ouidah's historical role in the Atlantic slave trade for its promotion as a centre of 'cultural tourism', with the development of monuments to the slave trade and its victims along the road from the town to the beach where slaves were embarked, now designated 'the slaves'

<sup>3</sup> David Eltis & David Richardson, 'West Africa and the transatlantic slave trade: new evidence of long-run trends', *SEA*, 18 (1997), 16–35; David Eltis et al., 'Slave-trading ports: towards an Atlantic-wide perspective', in Robin Law & Silke Strickrodt (eds), *Ports of the Slave Trade* (Stirling, 1999), 12–34.

<sup>4</sup> These figures relate to the period 1650–1870. Perhaps a further 1 million slaves were exported before 1650; the Bight of Benin would have contributed a much smaller proportion of this earlier trade, and Ouidah very little.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Le Vaudou haïtien* (Paris, 1958), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley, 1998), 58; for Azili in Ouidah, see Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Clifford, *Expedition Whydah* (New York, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (London, 1980). For de Souza, see below, Chapters 5–6.

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route [la route des esclaves]'.<sup>9</sup> This also led to the town featuring in television programmes dealing with the slave trade, including a BBC 'Timewatch' programme in 1997 and an episode of the African travels of Henry Louis Gates, Jr, in 1999.<sup>10</sup> What has hitherto remained lacking, however, is any study based on detailed research of the town's history in general, or of its role in the Atlantic slave trade in particular: a deficiency which this volume seeks to redress.

### *Situating Ouidah's history*

The present work represents, at one level, a continuation of my earlier research on the history of the Slave Coast, and in particular its role as a source of supply for the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>11</sup> A central concern of the present book, as of this earlier work, remains the organization of the African end of the slave trade, and the impact of participation in this trade on the historical development of the African societies involved. The present work, however, is informed by a significantly different perspective. My earlier analysis was very much written from the viewpoint of the Dahomian monarchy, in effect of the inland capital city of Abomey; and this focus is shared by other earlier work on the history of Dahomey, including the major published studies by Ade Akinjogbin (1967) and Edna Bay (1998), and the unpublished doctoral theses of David Ross (1967) and John Reid (1986).<sup>12</sup> This more recent research, on the other hand, in focusing on the coastal commercial centre of Ouidah, represents, if not quite a view from below, nevertheless a perspective from what was, in political terms, the periphery rather than the centre. It therefore foregrounds rather different aspects of the operation of the slave trade, including especially the evolution of the merchant community in Ouidah, and in particular the growth of a group of private traders that was distinct from the official political establishment, and whose relations with the Dahomian monarchy grew increasingly problematic over time.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For slave trade commemoration in Ouidah, see Thereza A. Singleton, 'The slave trade remembered on the former Gold and Slave Coasts', *S&A*, 20 (1999), 150-69; Roberta Cafuri, 'Silenzi della memoria: la tratta degli schiavi', *Africa* (Rome), 55/2 (2000), 244-60; Robin Law, 'Memory, oblivion and return in commemoration of the Atlantic slave trade in Ouidah', Republic of Bénin, in Ralph Austen (ed.), *The Atlantic Slave Trade in African and Diaspora Memory* (forthcoming, Durham, N.C.). See also the official Bénin government publication, Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos & Patrick Écoutin, *Ouidah, La Route des esclaves* (English version, *Ouidah, The Slave Route*) (Cotonou, n.d.); and two local tourist guide-books: Martine de Souza & Mère Jah Evejah, *Bienvenue à Ouidah au Bénin/Welcome to Ouidah in Benin* (Ouidah, [1998]); Martine de Souza, *Regard sur Ouidah/A Bit of History* (Ouidah, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> 'The African Trade', BBC 2, 1998; 'The Slave Kingdoms', episode in the series 'Into Africa with Henry Louis Gates, Jr', BBC 2, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Esp. Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750* (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours 1708-1818* (Cambridge, 1967); Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, 1998); David A. Ross, 'The autonomous kingdom of Dahomey 1818-1894' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1967); John Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats in crisis: the political effects of the transition from the slave trade to palm oil commerce in the nineteenth-century kingdom of Dahomey' (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> For a preliminary treatment, see Robin Law, 'The origins and evolution of the merchant community in Ouidah', in Law & Strickrodt, *Ports of the Slave Trade*, 55-70.

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African coastal entrepôts such as Ouidah played a critical role in the operation of the Atlantic slave trade, by helping to coordinate exchanges between hinterland suppliers and European ships, thereby accelerating their turn-round, and also by supplying them with provisions to feed the slaves on their voyage.<sup>14</sup> In addition to extending and deepening understanding of the working of the slave trade, a study of Ouidah also represents a contribution to a second area of growing interest recently within African historical studies, urban history. Studies of urban history in Africa have tended to concentrate on the growth of towns during the colonial and post-colonial periods;<sup>15</sup> but in West Africa especially, substantial towns existed already in the pre-colonial period, and Ouidah offers an exceptionally well-documented case-study of this earlier tradition of urbanism.<sup>16</sup> Within southern Bénin, Ouidah provides the premier example of the ‘second generation’ of pre-colonial towns, which served as centres for European maritime trade: what have been termed, although somewhat infelicitously, ‘fort towns [*villes-forts*]’, in distinction from the ‘first generation’ of ‘palace-cities [*cités-palais*]’, which served as capitals of indigenous African states, such as Abomey.<sup>17</sup>

The study of African coastal communities such as Ouidah also has a relevance for the currently fashionable project of ‘Atlantic history’, i.e. the attempt to treat the Atlantic as a historical unit, stressing interactions among the various states and communities that participated in the construction and operation of the trans-Atlantic trading system.<sup>18</sup> Although proponents of Atlantic history have tended to concentrate on links between Europe and the Americas, it needs to be recognized that African societies were also active participants in the making of the Atlantic world.<sup>19</sup> If there was an ‘Atlantic community’, the African coastal towns which served as embarkation points for the trans-Atlantic slave trade were part of it, their commercial and ruling elites being involved in political, social and cultural networks, as well as purely business linkages, which spanned the ocean.<sup>20</sup> The study of such African towns, moreover, adds an important comparative dimension to our

<sup>14</sup> A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), 106–7.

<sup>15</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, ‘Urbanization and urban history in West Africa’, *JAH*, 21 (1980), 269–77.

<sup>16</sup> See David M. Anderson & Richard Rathbone (eds), *Africa’s Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000). This includes a preliminary treatment of the case of Ouidah: Robin Law, ‘Ouidah: a pre-colonial urban centre in coastal West Africa, 1727–1892’, 85–97.

<sup>17</sup> For this classification, see Alfred Comlan Mondjannagni, *Campagnes et villes au sud de la République Populaire du Bénin* (Paris, 1977), 295–341; the ‘third generation’ being towns that served as administrative or commercial centres within the colonial system, and the ‘fourth generation’ the unique case of Cotonou as the modern economic and de facto political capital of Bénin. These ‘generations’, it should be stressed, are not to be understood necessarily as distinguishing among different groups of towns, since they may represent successive periods in the history of a single town: for example, Ouidah itself originated as a town of the ‘second generation’ but then developed as a colonial town of the ‘third generation’. The term ‘*villes-forts*’ seems unfortunate since, as Mondjannagni acknowledges (309–10), the European commercial establishments in them were not necessarily (and for example in Ouidah were not originally) fortified.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Bernard Bailyn, ‘The idea of Atlantic history’, *Itinerario*, 20/1 (1996), 38–44.

<sup>19</sup> See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Robin Law & Kristin Mann, ‘West Africa in the Atlantic community: the case of the Slave Coast’, *WMQ*, 56/2 (1999), 307–34; also Robin Law, ‘The port of Ouidah in the Atlantic community’, in Horst Pietschmann (ed.), *Atlantic History: History of the Atlantic System 1580–1830* (Göttingen, 2002), 349–64.

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understanding of the growth and functioning of port cities in the Atlantic world in the era of the slave trade, since previous studies of Atlantic port towns in this period have concentrated on ports in the Americas.<sup>21</sup> But such American ports were European colonial creations, which functioned as enclaves or centres of European power, a model that is not applicable to Atlantic ports in Africa, which remained under indigenous sovereignty (apart from the exceptional case of Luanda in Angola, which uniquely had already become a Portuguese colony in the sixteenth century).

There have been a number of studies of particular West African coastal 'port' communities in the pre-colonial period, which have served to delineate a number of general issues in their history: the organization of overseas commerce, the relationships between ports and their hinterlands, the effects of their involvement in Atlantic commerce on their political and social structures and demographic growth, and the problems posed for them by the transition from the slave trade to exports of agricultural produce such as palm oil in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Much of this work, however, has dealt with the general history of the states or communities in which ports were situated, rather than with the specific history of the port towns themselves. Examples are, within the Slave Coast, studies of two coastal communities west of Ouidah, the Gen kingdom (which included the port of Little Popo, modern Aného) by Nicoué Gayibor, and the Anlo confederacy (including the port of Keta) by Sandra Greene.<sup>23</sup> Those studies which have focused on the history of coastal towns specifically have generally related to communities which were 'city-states', in the sense of being independent of outside political authority: examples being, on the eastern Slave Coast, the study of Badagry by Caroline Sorensen-Gilmour; and beyond the Slave Coast, in the Bight of Biafra to the east, those of Bonny by Susan Hargreaves, of New Calabar by Waibinte Wariboko, Old Calabar by John Latham, and Douala by Ralph Austen and Jonathan Derrick.<sup>24</sup> In consequence, these have a rather different and more diffuse focus than the present work, which seeks to highlight especially the development and functioning of Ouidah as an urban community. The work which comes closest to my own concerns among earlier studies of West African port communities is Harvey Feinberg's study of Elmina, on the Gold Coast (modern Ghana), to the west.<sup>25</sup> But Elmina was a very different sort of place from Ouidah, not only in being

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Franklin W. Knight & Peggy K. Liss (eds), *Atlantic Port Cities* (Princeton, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> See the studies collected in Law & Strickrodt, *Ports of the Slave Trade*.

<sup>23</sup> Nicoué L. Gayibor, *Le Genyi* (Lomé, 1990); Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (London, 1996). See also Silke Strickrodt, 'Afro-European trade relations on the western Slave Coast, 16th to 19th centuries' (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Sorensen-Gilmour, 'Badagry 1784-1863' (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1995); Susan M. Hargreaves, 'The political economy of nineteenth-century Bonny' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987); W.E. Wariboko, 'New Calabar and the forces of change, c. 1850-1945' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1991); A.J.H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600-1891* (Oxford, 1973); Ralph A. Austen & Jonathan Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600-c. 1960* (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Harvey Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1989).

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a 'city-state', but also in the preponderant influence exercised there by a European power, in the form of the Dutch West India Company, so that its history, in relation to that of Ouidah, is illuminating as much by way of contrasts as of similarities.

The case of Ouidah may also serve to refine or qualify some of the conventional conceptual categories that have been applied to West African 'port' communities. In the most general terms, Ouidah can be interpreted as a 'middleman' community: this term being understood, as Austen and Derrick propose for the case of Douala, not only in relation to the exchange of commodities, but also with reference to the role of such coastal communities as intermediaries in the transmission of cultural influences, and in the longer term in mediating the accommodation of African societies to European economic and political dominance.<sup>26</sup> However, the more specific categories that have been developed in order to elucidate the interstitial position of African coastal 'middleman' communities seem more problematic. The concept of an 'enclave-entrepôt', applied to Elmina by Feinberg, for example, does not fit the case of Ouidah, where European power was much more limited, and which in this was a more typical case.<sup>27</sup> That of a neutral 'port of trade', propounded by economic anthropologists of the 'substantivist' school, such as Karl Polanyi, although elaborated with reference to the specific case of Ouidah, is not in fact sustained by the detailed empirical evidence relating to the operation of the Atlantic trade there.<sup>28</sup>

Chronologically, this study concentrates on the period of Dahomian rule over Ouidah, after 1727, although an introductory chapter deals with the town's origins, including its earlier history under the Hueda kingdom. The justification for this emphasis relates basically to the nature of the available source material, which is much more abundant for the Dahomian period. This, however, also reflects the fact that Ouidah became much more important under Dahomian rule, not only as a commercial centre, but also now as a centre of provincial administration. The study effectively concludes with the French occupation in 1892, although with a brief epilogue treating the fate of the town under colonial rule. This has been done with some hesitation, since in general there is a strong case for downplaying the conventional perception of the establishment of colonial rule as a watershed, and for tracing continuities and transformations in the 'middleman' role into the colonial period, as was illuminatingly done by Austen and Derrick for the case of Douala.<sup>29</sup> However, whereas in the cases of ports that remained prominent into the colonial period – such as Accra in Ghana, and Lagos in Nigeria, as well as Douala in Cameroun – the reality of continuity is transparent, this is less true of Ouidah,

<sup>26</sup> Austen & Derrick, *Middlemen*, 1–4.

<sup>27</sup> Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans*, 1–6, 155–8.

<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Arnold, 'A port of trade: Whydah on the Guinea Coast', in Karl Polanyi et al. (eds), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (New York, 1957), 154–76; Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (Seattle, 1966), 96–139.

<sup>29</sup> See also the emphasis on pre-colonial antecedents by John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Oxford, 2000), xviii–xix; although the study itself focuses on the period of colonial rule.

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where the imposition of colonial rule represented more of a historical break. The experience of Ouidah under colonialism was essentially of economic and political marginalization; although this process had begun already in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was only intensified and accelerated by the changed conditions of colonial rule.

### *Reconstructing Ouidah's history*

Apart from its intrinsic interest as one of the leading African slave-trading ports, the case of Ouidah also warrants study because the documentation available for its history is exceptionally rich, and serves to pose or illustrate some significant methodological issues of more general relevance in the field of pre-colonial African history, especially in the possibilities of combination of information from different categories of material: basically, as between foreign (European) contemporary and local traditional sources.<sup>30</sup>

The greatest mass of detailed documentation for the history of Ouidah derives from the European commercial presence, although the most useful sources are not in fact those deriving directly and specifically from the conduct of European trade. The most informative sources for the eighteenth century are the records of the permanently organized fortified factories which the three leading European nations involved – the French, English and Portuguese – maintained in Ouidah;<sup>31</sup> among which, the best preserved are those of the English.<sup>32</sup> These provide detailed documentation of the forts' day-to-day activities and interactions with the rest of the community, and thus constitute a rich source for the social and political, as well as the narrowly economic history of the town. With the legal abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, these forts were abandoned, leaving something of a hiatus in the evidence until the 1840s. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, documentation on the town's history is provided above all by the records of the British government, relating to its campaign to suppress the now illegal slave trade, which included the maintenance of a vice-consulate in Ouidah between 1849 and 1852. The French government also intervened in Dahomey, to defend France's commercial interests, from the 1850s, and likewise maintained a vice-consulate in Ouidah from 1863. Some material is also provided by Christian missions that operated in the town: British Methodists in 1854–67, and French Catholics in 1861–71 and again from 1884. There are also a number of detailed

<sup>30</sup> On this, this study represents a more optimistic perspective than that of Ralph A. Austen, 'The slave trade as history and memory: confrontations of slaving voyage documents and communal traditions', *IWMQ*, 58 (2001), 229–44.

<sup>31</sup> Only the French fort has been the subject of detailed study: Simone Berbain, *Le Comptoir français de Juda (Ouidah) au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1942).

<sup>32</sup> Since the original foundation of this factory, in the 1680s, predated the Union of England and Scotland (1707), it is properly called 'English' in its earliest phase. Strictly, it later became 'British', but insistence on this distinction can tend towards pedantry, especially as the word for 'British' in Fon (as also in French) is in fact 'English [Glensji]'; I have therefore continued to refer to the 'English fort' in conformity with local usage.

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published accounts by European visitors to Ouidah in this period, among which the most informative are those of the Scottish explorer John Duncan in 1845, the British naval officer (engaged in the anti-slaving squadron) Frederick Forbes in 1849–50, and the British consul (and pioneer anthropologist) Richard Burton in 1863–4.<sup>33</sup>

Source material of local provenance also includes some contemporary written material, deriving from the community of settlers from Brazil that was established in the town in the nineteenth century. Occasional items of correspondence from or addressed to Brazilian traders resident in Ouidah are preserved in overseas archives, especially in Britain among papers seized from illegal slave ships intercepted by the British navy. Little comparable material seems to have been preserved in Ouidah itself, although it is frequently claimed that written records which once existed were destroyed by fire or other hazards. A few items do, however, survive in local possession (or at least did so until recently), notably a letter-book of the Brazilian trader José Francisco dos Santos, containing correspondence from 1844–7 and 1862–71;<sup>34</sup> and the will of Antonio d’Almeida, an African-born freed slave who had returned from Brazil to resettle in Africa, made out at Ouidah in 1864.<sup>35</sup>

More substantial, as well as of greater chronological depth, is the information provided by local traditions. Much of this material also exists already in written form. Two surveys of Ouidah traditions were made by French colonial officials, Marcel Gavoy in 1913 and Reynier in 1917; the purpose of the collection of this material was explicitly to understand the existing political system, in order to inform administrative arrangements under French colonial rule.<sup>36</sup> Although these were published only many years later, they evidently circulated in Ouidah in typescript earlier, and have exercised considerable influence on local perceptions of history.

There is also a substantial tradition of local historical writing by African authors. Among such works by local writers, the earliest was a study of Ouidah ‘origins’ published in a Roman Catholic church journal in 1925–6, by Paul Hazoumé, a leading figure in the literary history of Bénin, who was in origin from Porto-Novo rather than Ouidah, but had worked for several years as a schoolmaster in the latter town.<sup>37</sup> The most substantial local history (and an indispensable source and guide

<sup>33</sup> John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa* (London, 1847); Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (London, 1851); Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (London, 1864).

<sup>34</sup> Published in French translation by Pierre Verger, ‘Cent-douze lettres de Alfaïate’, in Verger et al., *Les Afro-américains* (Dakar, 1952), 53–99 (cited hereafter as ‘Dos Santos correspondence’). Recent enquiries in Ouidah failed to confirm the continued existence of this letter-book in the dos Santos household there; it may be in the possession of a family member resident outside the town.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–3; with original Portuguese text in Pierre Verger, *Os libertos: sete caminhos na liberdade de escravos da Bahia no século XIX* (Salvador, Bahia, 1992), 121–4.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Note historique sur Ouidah par l’Administrateur Gavoy (1913)’, *ED*, 13 (1955), 45–70; ANB, 1E14, ‘Recherches sur l’organisation intérieure du commandement indigène’, by Reynier, Ouidah, 1 Dec. 1917, published as ‘Ouidah: organisation du commandement’, *Mémoire du Bénin*, 2 (1993), 30–68.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Hazoumé, ‘Aperçu historique sur les origines de Ouidah’, in 6 parts (apparently incomplete), in *La Reconnaissance africaine*, nos 4–5, 7–8, 10–11 (1925–6).

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for the modern historian) is a book by Casimir Agbo, published in 1959.<sup>38</sup> There are also a number of histories of particular Ouidah families. Traditions of the de Souza family, descended from the Francisco Felix de Souza mentioned above, were published by Norberto Francisco de Souza, a grandson of the founder and successor to the headship of the family, in 1955; and a more extended compilation of material from various sources was published by Simone de Souza, a Frenchwoman married into the family, in 1992.<sup>39</sup> Substantial histories also exist of the Dagba family, descended from a man who served as Yovogan, or Dahomian governor, of Ouidah for an exceptionally long period in the nineteenth century (1823–1870s); and of the Quénom family, who were the most prominent indigenous Dahomian merchants in the town in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> This material available already in written form has been supplemented by local fieldwork undertaken by myself, during several visits to Ouidah between 1992–2001. Besides interviewing informants in the town, this has involved extensive conversations with experts in local history, including members of the staff of the Historical Museum of Ouidah: especially Martine de Souza, one of the museum guides (and a great-great-great-granddaughter of the original de Souza).

Something may be said here of the character of historical ‘tradition’ in Ouidah. First, it should be stressed that it is not exclusively ‘oral’; not only has much of it been recorded in writing, as has been seen, since the early twentieth century, but it has also evolved in interaction with written sources. Gavoy’s survey of 1913 already represents an attempt to combine local traditions with information derived from contemporary European sources; and this conflation of written and oral material has remained characteristic of local history writing in Ouidah ever since. Agbo’s *Histoire*, for example, cites the earlier studies of Gavoy and Reynier, together with published sources, as well as additional material of his own; the latter including reminiscences of persons with direct personal experience of the late pre-colonial period, as well as more strictly ‘traditional’ material relating to earlier times. In Ouidah, as in coastal West Africa more generally, the ‘traditions’ current nowadays in oral form are regularly subject to the influence of ‘feedback’ from written sources, including now especially Agbo’s own work.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be noted that local traditions provide relatively little in the way of a narrative of the history of the community as a whole, apart from certain major events, such as the original foundation of the town, the arrival of the first European traders, the Dahomian conquest in the 1720s, and the establishment in the town of Francisco Felix de Souza in the nineteenth century. Local historical

<sup>38</sup> Casimir Agbo, *Histoire de Ouidah* (Avignon, 1959). Other examples of the genre are Venance S. Quénom, *Ouidah, cité historique des “Houeda”* (Ouidah, [1982]); Dominique Avimagboghènou Quénom, *L’Histoire de Glexwe (Ouidah)* (Dakar, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Norberto Francisco de Souza, ‘Contribution à l’histoire de la famille de Souza’, *ED*, 13 (1955), 17–21; Simone de Souza, *La Famille de Souza du Bénin-Togo* (Cotonou, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Léon-Pierre Ghézowounmè-Djomalia Dagba, *La Collectivité familiale Yovogan Hounnon Dagba de ses origines à nos jours* (Porto-Novo, 1982); Maximilien Quénom, *Les Ancêtres de la famille Quénom* (Langres, 1981). See also a shorter version of the Quénom family history: Faustin Possi-Berry Quénom, *Généalogie de la dynastie Houéhoun à la collectivité familiale Azanmado Houénou-Quénom* (Cotonou, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> On ‘feedback’, see David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982), 81–7.

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memory is in general more focused on the component elements that make up the town. As it existed by the end of the nineteenth century, Ouidah comprised twelve quarters, each with its own distinct origins and history. These were: first, Tové, the original settlement, which predated European contact, on the east of the town; second, three quarters associated with the European forts which were established in the town in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – from west to east (which is also the chronological order of their establishment) Ahouandjigo (French), Sogbadji (English) and Docomè (Portuguese); third, two quarters on the north of the town, which represent the Dahomian administrative establishment installed after the conquest of the 1720s – Fonsaramè, the ‘Fon [i.e. Dahomian] quarter’ (the location of the residence of the Dahomian viceroy), and Cahosaramè, ‘Caho’s quarter’ (originally the site of the Dahomian military garrison, whose commander had the title Caho); and finally, six further quarters were added in the nineteenth century, all on the western side of the town, and all founded by individual merchants – Ganvè, founded by the Afro-French trader Nicolas d’Oliveira; three quarters associated with the Brazilian Francisco Felix de Souza, called Blézin, or in French Brésil (i.e. Brazil), Maro and Zomaï, and two established by indigenous African traders, Boya and Quénium quarters.<sup>42</sup> Gavoy’s survey thus follows a sketch of the history of the town by separate notes on its various quarters, while Reynier’s is wholly organized around the distinctive histories of the twelve quarters, and indeed most of its material relates to the origins and history of individual families within them; and a large section of Agbo’s later *Histoire* reproduces this framework (along with most of Reynier’s detailed information). In addition, as noted above, some prominent Ouidah families have published their own histories; and my own fieldwork has also related mainly to the history of particular families and compounds in the town.

The focus of local tradition on individual families is paralleled by the mass of detailed documentation in contemporary sources, which record the names or titles of many individuals in Ouidah with whom the various European agencies had dealings. In many cases, the same persons figure in both traditional and contemporary sources; in fact, my own interest in the possibility of a study of the town’s social history was initially stimulated by the realization, in my first visits to Ouidah in the 1980s, that many of the names of families still living in the town were already familiar to me from the contemporary documentation of the pre-colonial period. The combination of traditional and contemporary sources often permits a quite detailed confrontation between the two, in which each can serve both as a control over and to elucidate obscurities in the other; and the history of particular families can

<sup>42</sup> The 12 quarters were listed by Reynier in 1917, although by then Boya and Ganvè were regarded as subdivisions of a single quarter. Subsequent amalgamations reduced the number of recognized quarters to six: by the 1930s, these were Tové, Ahouandjigo, Sogbadji-Docomè (amalgamated in 1936), Fonsaramè (now including Cahosaramè), Boya-Ganvè and Brésil (incorporating Maro, Zomaï and Quénium quarters). On the other hand, some subsections of the original 12 quarters have subsequently claimed autonomous status: e.g. the compound of the Hodonou family, formerly part of Fonsaramè, is nowadays regarded as a separate quarter, Hodonousaramè.

KEY	
D	= Dangbe temple
DS	= De Souza compound
En	= Site of former English fort
Fr	= Site of former French fort
M	= Mosque
Po	= Portuguese fort
Yo	= Site of former residence of Yovogan
Zo	= Zobé market



Map 2 Ouidah, showing the quarters and major historical sites

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be traced over several generations, in some cases back into the eighteenth century.

A further important ‘source’ for the history of Ouidah is the town itself, as it survives to the present. One consequence of Ouidah’s marginalization in the twentieth century was that it was not subject to radical redevelopment. There were some important changes: notably the elimination of the office of the Dahomian viceroy, together with his official residence, whose site was given for the construction of the Roman Catholic cathedral in 1901, and the demolition of the French fort (now a public square) in 1908. But the basic layout of the town as it existed in the second half of the nineteenth century was preserved; the major colonial developments were added on to the town, as an extension of it (to the north-west), rather than disturbing the character of its historical centre. It is thus quite possible to use the walking tour of the town in Richard Burton’s account from the 1860s to find one’s way around and identify the major monuments even today.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, a detailed survey of the town’s architectural heritage was undertaken as a joint project of the Bénin government with the French Organization for Overseas Research in 1990–91, and provides invaluable information on the town’s history.<sup>44</sup>

### *The problem of perspective: Ouidah and the slave trade*

Any study of an African ‘middleman’ community such as Ouidah in the pre-colonial period necessarily emphasizes the role of specifically ‘African agency’ in the operation of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>45</sup> I am very conscious, in part through some of the responses to earlier presentations of my own work, that this is a controversial issue, in so far as there is a widespread disposition to regard any emphasis on the voluntary cooperation of Africans in the slave trade as, by implication, an attempt to deny or minimize the culpability of Europeans in it.<sup>46</sup> My own motive and purpose are quite other: it is because my starting point is within the history of Africa rather than of the slave trade as such, that I approach the latter from the perspective of its mode of operation and effects within Africa. Nor do I personally subscribe to the view that the involvement of some Africans in the operation of the slave trade serves to exonerate either the European societies or the individual Europeans who engaged in it. In part, this is because it implicitly assumes a sort of moral calculus, positing a fixed quantum of responsibility available for distribution, which would seem bizarre if applied in other contexts – in a case of murder, for example, where contributory responsibility assigned to others would not, I think, normally be thought to cancel or even diminish the guilt

<sup>43</sup> Burton, *Mission*, i, 58–116, chapter IV, ‘A walk round Whydah’.

<sup>44</sup> Alain Sinou & Bernardin Agbo (eds), *Ouidah et son patrimoine* (Paris/Cotonou, 1991); see also the coffee-table spin-off, Alain Sinou, *Le Comptoir de Ouidah, une ville africaine singulière* (Paris, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> For the recent trend to emphasize the role of African agency in the slave trade, see, for example, David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000), ch. 7.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Lansiné Kaba, ‘The Atlantic slave trade was *not* a “black-on-black holocaust”’, *African Studies Review*, 44/1 (2001), 1–20.

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of the murderer. Beyond this, in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke,<sup>47</sup> I am in general sceptical about the enterprise of assigning guilt retrospectively, where this runs the risk of applying standards of moral or legal judgement in an ahistorical manner, as in the case of the slave trade, which, although nowadays consensually stigmatized as a ‘crime against humanity’, was for most of its history legal under both European and African law.<sup>48</sup> The historian is more properly concerned with issues of causation than of moral judgement of past events. Here, the view that the Atlantic slave trade was driven by supply conditions within Africa rather than by demand in the Americas seems to me perverse.<sup>49</sup> Even in narrowly economic terms, it is difficult to square with the statistics of the trade, which were characterized, at least from the late seventeenth century onwards, by a combination of increasing volume of exports with rising prices, implying that this expansion was demand-driven.<sup>50</sup> Beyond this, at a more basic level, it was after all not Africans who turned up in ships at ports in Europe or America offering cargoes of slaves for sale. As King Glele of Dahomey said in 1863, to a British mission urging him to abolish the trade, ‘He did not send slaves away in his own ships, but “white men” came to him for them ... if they did not come, he would not sell’.<sup>51</sup>

It may also be said that, in stressing African agency in the slave trade, this work is consistent with the perceptions of the people of Ouidah themselves, who are of course in many cases descendants of the slave merchants prominent in the town’s earlier history. It is sometimes suggested that Africans are nowadays reluctant to admit the ‘complicity’ of their ancestors in the slave trade.<sup>52</sup> In Ouidah, however, there has been little disposition to deny this aspect of the community’s history. The local historian Casimir Agbo, for example, explicitly invokes the partnership that operated between European slave-traders and the local African authorities: ‘The Europeans were very accommodating in their relations with the Hueda kings ... and the latter benefited from the situation ... [this] secured large resources to the throne’; likewise, when Ouidah was brought under the rule of the kings of Dahomey after 1727, ‘all these judicious arrangements [for the administration of the town] and above all the slave trade enriched the kings and their representatives’.<sup>53</sup> When the French authorities demolished the former French fort in Ouidah in 1908, this provoked protests from the community that it was a valued monument

<sup>47</sup> Van Ranke’s famous dictum about telling history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* was not, as it is commonly misunderstood, a claim that the historian can determine ‘objective’ truth, but rather a repudiation of the view that the historian should or could act as a judge.

<sup>48</sup> Although in the last period of the slave trade (in Ouidah, effectively from 1815) it was illegal under European law, though still legal in African systems of law.

<sup>49</sup> See William Gervase Clarence-Smith, ‘The dynamics of the African slave trade’, *Africa* (London), 64 (1994), 275–86.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life* (Cambridge, 1990), 92–9.

<sup>51</sup> PP, Despatches from Commodore Wilmot respecting his Visit to the King of Dahomey (1863), no. 1, 29 Jan. 1863.

<sup>52</sup> This was alleged, for example, by African-Americans resident in Ghana, in connection with controversies over the representation of the slave trade in a historical exhibition at Cape Coast Castle in the 1990s: Christine Mueller Kreamer, ‘Contested terrain: cultural negotiations and Ghana’s Cape Coast Castle exhibition, “Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade”’, in Austen, *Atlantic Slave Trade*.

<sup>53</sup> Agbo, *Histoire*, 34, 50.

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of local history, and in particular of its long association with France.<sup>54</sup> Why the French demolished the fort is not clear, though many people in the town nowadays believe that it was out of feelings of shame at France's earlier role in the slave trade; if this is so, it is ironic, since local people evidently did not have any such feelings of shame.

There has been, at least until very recently, a local consensus that the slave trade was a good thing for Ouidah. Burton in the 1860s found that Kpate, the man who according to tradition welcomed the first European traders to Ouidah (and thereby inaugurated the town's participation in the slave trade) was 'worshipped as a benefactor to mankind';<sup>55</sup> and the cult of Kpate continues to the present. Under French colonial rule, when Ouidah, although now commercially marginalized, remained a leading centre of French education and literate culture, the emphasis in celebration of Kpate shifted from the material benefits of the slave trade to its role in the penetration of European influence: in the 1930s, it was noted that Kpate was venerated as 'the hero of the importation of European civilization'.<sup>56</sup>

This perspective evidently focuses on the implications of the slave trade for the local community, those who benefited directly or indirectly from the sale of slaves, rather than for the victims of the trade. The experience of the slaves themselves does not appear to have figured largely in local understandings of the trade. Attitudes to the slave trade in Ouidah have also, however, been affected by the fact that some of those exported as slaves returned to resettle in West Africa. One quarter of Ouidah, Maro, in the south-west of the town, was settled by former slaves returning from Brazil, beginning in the 1830s. Casimir Agbo, while acknowledging the brutalities involved in their original enslavement and transportation, nevertheless maintains, on the authority of some of these returned ex-slaves, that slaves 'were quite well treated in the Americas', and in particular that 'almost all' gained their freedom and 'most' returned home to Africa (whereas, in fact, only a very small minority of those exported into slavery were able to return). Again, he stresses their role in the dissemination of European culture: their enslavement in America enabled them to get 'a taste of civilization' and by their return they 'contributed to the civilization of their country of origin by the modern habits which they transmitted to their descendants and relatives'.<sup>57</sup>

In more recent projects of historical commemoration in Ouidah, emphasis has continued to be placed upon the cultural interactions deriving from the slave trade, though now with increasing interest in the town's role in transmitting the African religious traditions visible in America, especially the *vaudou* religion of Haiti, Brazilian *candomblé* and Cuban *santería*, as well as in the Brazilian influence in West Africa. Reciprocal cultural influences between Brazil and Bénin are thus central to the representation of the history of Ouidah in the exhibition in the Historical Museum established in the 1960s;<sup>58</sup> while the transmission of African religion to

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>55</sup> Burton, *Mission*, ii, 297.

<sup>56</sup> Christian Merlo, 'Hiérarchie fétichiste de Ouidah', *BIFAN*, Série B, 2/1–2 (1940), 7.

<sup>57</sup> Agbo, *Histoire*, 52–3.

<sup>58</sup> See the original version of the museum guidebook: Pierre Verger & Clément da Cruz, *Musée historique de*

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the Americas was celebrated in the UNESCO-sponsored 'Ouidah '92' conference (actually held in January 1993), which took the form of a 'world festival of *vodun* arts and cultures'. It can be argued that this emphasis on the cultural consequences of the slave trade serves implicitly to silence the sufferings of its victims.<sup>59</sup> However, the victims of the trade were also commemorated in monuments constructed in connection with the 'Ouidah '92' conference along the 'slaves' route' from the town to the sea, notably the 'Door of No Return [La Porte du Non-Retour]' at the embarkation point on the beach. And in 1998 an explicit 'ceremony of repentance' was instituted in Ouidah, held annually in January, at which speeches are made requesting forgiveness from the descendants of enslaved Africans in the diaspora for the community's historical role in their forcible transportation.

In writing the history of Ouidah, there is no doubt that part of the problem of perspective arises, in my own case, from the experience of courteous welcome and generous assistance received in the course of my research from members of the Ouidah community nowadays, and a perhaps inevitable tendency to read this friendliness back into the historical representation of their ancestors. It is difficult in any case to attempt to reconstruct the history of a community from within without historical empathy sliding into a degree of emotional sympathy. However, the most important dimension of the problem relates to the more basic technical problem of the nature of the sources. Not only does this study depend mainly on European rather than African sources, but even the African sources available reflect the perspective of local beneficiaries of the slave trade – Dahomian administrators and local merchants, or persons providing ancillary services (such as porters and canoemen) – rather than of its victims. Moreover, in so far as local traditions principally represent the collective memories of particular families, they inevitably recall slave-traders such as Francisco Felix de Souza in relation to their descendants, as benevolent founding ancestors, rather than in relation to the slaves whom they sold, as exploiters of their fellow-humans.

Local tradition does give some access to the experience of enslavement, to the extent that many slaves were retained within Ouidah, rather than being sold into export; and such slaves also have descendants, who may preserve some memory of their lives. Martine de Souza, for example, is descended not only from the slave-trader Francisco Felix de Souza, but also, in the maternal line, from a slave; one of her great-grandmothers, Marie Lima, being in origin a captive taken, at the age of 15, by the Dahomian army in an attack on the town of Meko to the east, in modern Nigeria (in 1882), and sold in Ouidah to a prominent Brazilian trader, Joaquim João Dias Lima, who took her as his wife.<sup>60</sup> But those retained in local slavery were, in

<sup>58</sup> (cont.) *Ouidah* (Porto-Novo, 1969). This emphasis is less prominent in a more recent version: Romain-Philippe Ekanyé Assogba, *Le Musée d'histoire de Ouidah: Découverte de la Côte des Esclaves* (Cotonou, 1990). However, the exhibition itself remains substantially unchanged.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Sutherland, 'In memory of the slaves: an African view of the Diaspora in the Americas', in Jean Muteba Rahier (ed.), *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities* (Westport, 1999), 195–211.

<sup>60</sup> Fieldwork, de Souza compound, Eulalie Dagba (Martine de Souza's mother, and grand-daughter of Marie Lima); Lima compound, both 9 Dec. 2001. Joaquim Lima died in 1915, his wife Marie in 1948.

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comparative terms, the fortunate ones, in escaping the brutality of the middle passage and the harsher exploitation that was generally the fate of those taken into slavery in the Americas; indeed, it is recalled that, when Marie Lima's mother visited Ouidah, in an attempt to secure her daughter's liberation and return home (probably after the French conquest of Dahomey in 1892), she declined to leave. Partly in recognition of this, the descendants of slaves in Ouidah tend to maintain an identification as clients with those of their ancestors' owners, even when not actually absorbed into the family through intermarriage.

The experience of those who were transported into trans-Atlantic slavery is in comparison very poorly represented in the surviving documentation. A few of those sold into export, as noted above, were able to return to Africa, and some of the families founded by repatriated former slaves in Ouidah preserve some recollection of the circumstances of their original enslavement in Africa. Joaquim Lima, for example, was himself descended from an ex-slave from Brazil, and tradition in his family recalls that its founder, who was probably his grandfather, was originally from Mahi, north of Dahomey, and had been seized as a slave when he went to Abomey in an attempt to redeem his brother, who had earlier been taken captive by the Dahomian army.<sup>61</sup> But firsthand accounts by victims of the Atlantic slave trade are very rare. Of over a million slaves who were exported through Ouidah, only two appear to have left any sort of personal record. One of these, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, was exported through Ouidah to Brazil in 1845, and published his autobiography in the USA in 1854.<sup>62</sup> A second, Kazoola, alias Cudjo Lewis, was taken from Ouidah to Alabama, USA, in 1860; his story was recorded over 50 years later, when he was a very old man.<sup>63</sup>

Given that their sufferings and exploitation were the basis of the prosperity of Ouidah, as well as of the much greater opulence of the slave-owning European colonial societies in the Americas and of slaving ports in Europe, the slaves themselves arguably ought to occupy centre-place in an analysis of the history of the town during its period as a port of the Atlantic slave trade. But, although an attempt has been made in what follows to give attention to what the slave trade meant for the slaves who passed through Ouidah in transit to the Americas, as well as for the permanent inhabitants of the town, it cannot be claimed that proportionally, in terms of the amount of space their experience is accorded, they are adequately represented. The dedication of this book to their memory is offered as a compensatory gesture of acknowledgement of this inevitable failure.

<sup>61</sup> Reynier, 'Ouidah', 42. Joaquim Lima was probably a son of Joaquim de Cerqueira Lima, attested at Ouidah in the 1860s, whose father was an 'emigrant' from Brazil, formerly resident in Lagos: Burton, *Mission*, ii, 8–9.

<sup>62</sup> *Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua* (ed. Samuel Moore, Detroit, 1854); see also the modern edition, Robin Law & Paul E. Lovejoy (eds), *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* (Princeton, 2001).

<sup>63</sup> He was interviewed on several occasions, including by Zora Neale Hurston, 'Cudjo's own story of the last African slaver', *Journal of Negro History*, 12 (1927), 648–63; see also Natalie Suzette Robertson, 'The African Ancestry of the Founders of Africatown, Alabama' (PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 1996). The date of his transportation is commonly given as 1859, but was more probably 1860.

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### *Note on spelling*

The spelling of local words and names in this study presents considerable difficulty. The Fon language can be transcribed in a variety of ways. Most accurately, a phonetic script is employed, which includes some letters additional to (or with different values from) the standard Latin alphabet. This script is not widely used in writing, however, Fon words and names being more commonly spelled in the standard Latin alphabet, thereby losing some of the distinctions made in the phonetic script. Very often, moreover, spelling follows French conventions, offering for example ‘ou’ for ‘u’, ‘dj’ for ‘j’, ‘c’ for ‘k’. As an illustrative example, the name of the kingdom from which that of the town of Ouidah is derived may be written ‘Xweđa’ in the phonetic script, ‘Hueda’ in the Latin alphabet, or ‘Houéda’ in the French spelling.

The conventions adopted in this work are a compromise among the conflicting demands of accuracy, consistency and recognizability. For ordinary Fon words, titles and common personal names and for the names of pre-colonial kingdoms and ethnic groups, the quasi-phonetic transcription in the standard Latin alphabet is generally employed: as, for example, ‘Hueda’. For the names of towns, and of families that still exist in Ouidah, however, it seemed proper to use the forms that are currently in use, which are generally in the French form: for example, the names of two villages to the south of Ouidah are given as ‘Zoungbodji’ and ‘Djegbadji’ (which is what a visitor will find on local signposts), rather than ‘Zungboji’ and ‘Jegbaji’; and those of three of the major merchant families of the town as ‘Adjovi’, ‘Codjia’ and ‘Gnahoui’ (which is how family members nowadays spell these names), rather than ‘Ajovi’, ‘Kojia’ and ‘Nyawi’. Spelling conventions were, of course, not standardized until recently, so that early written sources employ spellings that are inconsistent with each other, as well as being inaccurate by modern standards. In general, such deviant forms are employed in this work only in direct quotations from sources; otherwise modern spellings are preferred. In a few cases, however, corrupt early forms of local toponyms have become sanctioned by usage, and remain in general use today, and these are retained here, examples being the names of the kingdom ‘Dahomey’ and its capital ‘Abomey’ (rather than the more strictly correct ‘Danhomé’, ‘Agbomé’). A special problem is posed by the case of Ouidah itself, whose name is commonly given in Anglophone literature (including earlier work of my own) in the form ‘Whydah’, which was the usual English spelling in the pre-colonial period. But here considerations of familiarity have to yield to the usage of the community itself, in which ‘Ouidah’ is the spelling in current and official use.