Located in the present day Republic of Benin, the West African kingdom of Dahomey had its principal palace in the pre-colonial capital of Abomey (fig. 1). By the late nineteenth century, the mud constructed palace embodied two and a half centuries of rule. It ultimately covered one hundred and eight acres of land and housed as many as eight to ten thousand residents, almost all of whom were female. This massive complex consisted of a series of palaces built for individual monarchs, surrounded by a common wall. Before the French colonial army invaded Abomey in 1892, the palace was an impressive labyrinth of round and rectangular buildings, open courtyards, and internal walls. The overall complex functioned as a place of residence, a ruling center, and ceremonial grounds.

The plan for the individual palaces of the kings remained relatively constant throughout the kingdom’s lifetime (mid-seventeenth century to late nineteenth century). Each palace consisted of covered entrances leading to major open courtyards, which were surrounded by royal buildings. The first covered entrance, the hounwa, was manned by servants or guards of the king who prevented unwanted visitors from entering. Each courtyard had increasingly restricted access. In the first courtyard, the kpodoji, the royal council met and women in charge of ancestral

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1 King Akaba’s palace (r. c. 1685-1708) is the only of these royal palaces that remained outside this common wall. In addition to the individual palaces, the palace complex also included other structures, such as the Hall of the Amazons and the School of the Princes.

II With the invasion of the French colonial army, King Behanzin (r. 1889-1894) set fire to the palace, so as not to let it fall into French hands. The palaces of Kings Guezo (r. 1818-1858) and Glele (r. 1858-1889) have been fully restored and now act as a National Museum. The restoration of king Huegbadja’s palace (r. 1650-1685) is likewise well underway. Besides these, the majority of the palace structures have been overgrown by vegetation or have suffered from exposure to the elements.
The second courtyard, known as the \textit{djehorennu} or the \textit{ajalalahennu}, contained a reception hall called the \textit{ajalala}. Here, the king would receive audience, and rituals and festivities for past kings were generally observed.

From the architectural plans of the palace it is difficult to determine the exact original shape of the third courtyard. Known as the \textit{hoga}, access to this courtyard was restricted to the king, his wives, children, and eunuchs. This was the privileged interior of the palace, where the royal women worked and lived in their own metropolis within the larger Abomey. Within the palace women were able to earn money and spend it at an exclusively female market located in the palace precinct. As scholar Robert B. Edgerton succinctly puts it, the palace complex was “a city within a city;” it was a space dominated by women.

Gender not only played a central role in the dissemination and the manifestation of power, but also in the palatial architectural layout. Palatial space was divided along gender lines creating a dichotomy of a female interior and male exterior. With the exception of the king, no uncastrated males resided in the palace, while the number of women who lived and labored within its walls increased with each generation of rule. By the nineteenth century between five to eight thousand \textit{ahosi} (translated as wives or followers of the king) resided in the Abomey palace complex along with their female slaves, daughters, and the female descendants of deceased


\footnote{In an interview with Bachalau Nondichau, he explained that no uncastrated males were permitted to enter this privileged space, though Francesca Pique calls this portion of the palace the \textit{honga} and explains that this area was reserved for his “favorite wives and children, his healers, his five principal ministers, and his designated heir” (Pique, 37-38).}

kings. VI The king used these women in both court functions and ceremonies to display his wealth, as well as his social, sexual, and military power.

The female residents of the palace also found opportunity to exude power and authority in their own right through various means, however; some held royal office, others exuded a military presence, and all had primary access to the king and controlled access to him. The palatial space created a female interior / male exterior dichotomy which manifested itself in the gender balanced separation of court officials, royal army troops, and even royal family members. This worked to both the degradation and empowerment of the royal women.

Royal Dahomean women fulfilled the duties performed in other West African Kingdoms by slaves, eunuchs, and members of royal associations. VII In the royal court, for every male officer, there was a corresponding female position; this included even the king who had a kpojito, or reign mate who functioned as his female counterpart. The establishment of this gender-balanced court likely began with the reign of Tegbesu (1740-1774) whose powerful mother, Hwanjile, aided her son in overcoming opposition to the throne VIII.

In Richard Burton’s report to the Ethnological Society of London he explained, “With regard to the position of women, it must be remembered that the king has two courts, masculine and feminine. The former never enters the inner palace; the latter never quits it except on public occasions.” IX Thus, these gender divisions had spatial manifestations. Linguistically, male and female court ministers had corresponding names. Burton explains, “There are, for instance, the female Mingan and the man Mingan, the she Meu and the he Meu, and the woman officer is

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called the “no,” or mother of the man.”\textsuperscript{X} Thus, the maternal designation of the female’s title indicated a slight privilege over the male, and was mirrored spatially through the woman’s access to the privileged palace interior.

Male and female officials were physically separated by means of designated space when they met during certain ceremonial or public. Abolitionist Frederick E. Forbes, in his 1850 account, described an area of separation within the palace that he referred to as “neutral ground.” On the occasion of listening to the female troubadours sing praises to historical achievements of the kingdom, he explains, “where we stood was a sort of neutral ground, between the male and female positions, not allowed to be passed by any male but the king.”\textsuperscript{XI} Forbes mentions various uses for this space, including a place where “the royals assembled,”\textsuperscript{XII} the ornamented skulls of defeated kings were displayed,\textsuperscript{XIII} meat was strewn as part of the “watering of the graves” ceremony,\textsuperscript{XIV} and newly sacrificed humans were possibly deposited.\textsuperscript{XV} These various functions indicate that this space was an outdoor courtyard and very possibly the living king’s \textit{ajalalahennu}, within which the second courtyard, his \textit{ajalala}, the reception hall, was located. However ambiguous the full purpose of this space, it was of obvious religious and political weight.

Another partitioned area of the nineteenth-century royal complex served to separate the king from those outside the palace. When receiving audience, the king sat as described by historian Edna Bay, “obscured under the low, thatched roof of a long verandah,” likely his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{X} Ibid., 405.
\item \textsuperscript{XI} Frederick E. Forbes, \textit{Dahomey and the Dahomans: Being The Journal of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at his Capital, in the Years 1849 and 1850} (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851), vol. 2, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{XII} Ibid., 104.
\item \textsuperscript{XIII} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{XIV} Ibid., 128.
\item \textsuperscript{XV} Ibid., 23-24.
\end{itemize}
A row of palm branches divided the court acting as a boundary to keep the visitor from approaching the king. In order to relay a message from the palm branch boundary to the king, the visitor required the assistance of a *daklo*, or female spokesperson. Many, possibly hundreds of wives, surrounded the king on such occasions. This spatial layout, Bay explains, had both political implications, by distancing the outside world from the royal realm, and sexual implications through the overwhelming presence of royal women. She then explains,

> The divided courtyard pointed to another reality of nineteenth-century government in Dahomey. It expressed spatially a fundamental ideological and organizational principle that any whole is made up of complementary parts: inside/outside, right/left, royal/commoner, male/female. The palace was the center of a universe that was the kingdom of Dahomey, but it was a center that balanced the interests of a periphery, a complementary ‘outside’.

The palace complex acted as a microcosm for a larger whole. In addition, the king’s marriage to wives from every lineage in Dahomey, and the prominent visual presence of these women to visitors, represented his control over every lineage of the population.

The king’s ability to maintain sexual control of his wives, therefore, had symbolic implications for his ability to exercise political control over each of the kingdom’s lineages. For this purpose, the king maintained sexual control of the royal women even when they left the palace walls without him. The king achieved this through enforcing laws, which forbade anyone to look at these women. Furthermore, touching one of the royal wives was grounds for execution. Upon leaving the palace, each of the king’s wives was accompanied by three or four female servants. One of these servants, a Yoruba woman, explained in an interview, “If one of the king’s wives was going out two female servants would go before and two behind. The two

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*XVII* Ibid.
*XVIII* Ibid.
*XIX* Burton, 405.
in front would shout, so no one would see them on the way, *A fe su sijaa me dagbe* A king’s wife is coming!” One of the servants used a hand gong as an additional warning.\textsuperscript{XX}

Various travelogues document this tradition. For example, in his nineteenth century account, John Duncan describes how, “The moment this bell is heard all persons, whether male or female, turn their backs, but the males must retire to a certain distance. In passing through the town this is one of the most intolerable nuisances.”\textsuperscript{XXI} Naturalist J.A. Skertchly, who visited the kingdom late in the nineteenth century, made a similar observation when he wrote that with an approaching wife on the road, men and women were forced to “hurry from the path as though a man-eating tiger were approaching.”\textsuperscript{XXII} This legal procedure had visual implications, not in what was seen, but by what was forbidden to be seen. The same women, who accompanied the king in the court as he received audience, were not to be viewed by outsiders without his claiming presence. In this way, the king was able to assert his sexual control and maintain spatial protection of his wives, legally compensating for what lacked architecturally.

However, the king still used royal women for display purposes, yet only under his strict surveillance. Besides accompanying the king while he received audience, women took part in processions. Well-dressed women often ushered the king to ceremonial and political events. In the annual "display of wealth," observed as part of the Annual Customs, royal women were among those carrying and displaying objects of wealth. The king, in this manner, was able to display his wealth, but also his women as wealth. Both functioned as indications of the king's

\textsuperscript{XXII} J. Alfred Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is: being a Narrative of Eight Months’ Residence in that Country with a Full Account of the Notorious Annual Customs, and the Social and Religious Institutions of the Ffons* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), 113.
power and control, the former showing his economic power, the latter his social and sexual power.

With the exception of the king and his eunuchs, men were not permitted to reside in, or even enter, the inner-most courtyard of the palace. Once the king’s sons reached the age of ten, they too were forced to leave the palace. Even the king's designated heir lived outside of the palace quarters. When a crowned prince was named, he would have his palace built in an unsettled part of Abomey, and a new city quarter would spring up around his palace (fig. 2). In this way the city was very much established around royalty, giving each city quarter a distinctive character and tie to a particular monarch. Having one’s own crowned prince’s palace did not, however, guarantee the throne. Upon a king's death, the outside population, especially the princes, depended upon the female palace residents to inform them of the event. Since there were commonly competitors for the throne, the role of the royal women became critical in determining the kingdom’s future. According to Edna Bay, “Evidence suggests strongly that the death of the king was kept secret as long as possible: the persons in attendance on the king would have tried to control the news in order to assure that a candidate of their choice took power.” This was especially true in the eighteenth century. In the cases of kings Agaja and Tegbesu, their successors “were in effective power by the time the kings' deaths became known.” XXIII

Royal women were also separated from others by demarcated space imposed by vegetation-marked limits. Bamboo boundaries lying lengthways on the ground running parallel to the road separated royal women who participated in parades from men. XXIV In addition to being practical visual dividers, these bamboo stalks may have had religious significance. Skertchly mentions the presence of bamboo boundaries along roads frequented by the king's

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XXIV Burton, 405.
female soldiers, referred to by western visitors as the Amazons, which protected them from any malevolent influences left behind by male priests. He also mentions that within the palace the female soldiers were separated from the rest of the court through the same means.  \(^{xxv}\)

As with royal family members and court ministers, whose female members resided in the palace while their male counterparts resided outside, the Dahomean army likewise adhered to the female interior / male exterior model. The king maintained two armies, one female who resided in the palace and the other male, whose quarters were outside of the palace complex. Though technically considered *ahosi*, or wives, the king’s female soldiers served a unique function which was to expand the kingdom's borders and provide the king with slaves and sacrificial victims. Known as the Amazons of Dahomey, they often performed dances, songs and reenactments of battle at ceremonial court functions. On such occasions, they praised the king, declared their loyalty and demonstrated their desire to fight ruthlessly in his name.

Unlike other royal women, these soldiers met with men on the battleground without any vegetation marked boundaries or sacred ground to separate them.  \(^{xxvi}\) Though they paraded and fought aside men, they were still technically wives of the king. Therefore, even in battle the king maintained sexual control over them, executing anyone who sexually defiled one of his female warriors.

The palace complex also included ceremonial grounds for ancestral worship, namely, the tombs of deceased kings, located within their individual palace quarters. While royal women, as ceremonial attendants in the ancestral worship ceremonies, played an imperative role in linking the living monarch to his predecessors, they were sometimes also honored by having their own

\(^{xxv}\) Skertchly, 113.
\(^{xxvi}\) Ibid., 72.
tombs within the palace space. This was especially true with *kpojito*, reign mates of kings, as well as with royal wives who sacrificed themselves at the death of a monarch.

Gendered space within the pre-colonial palace of Dahomey and the overwhelming presence of powerful, royal women represented the king’s social, political and sexual authority. The palace functioned to house and display women from every lineage of the kingdom. Though limiting and constraining on the one hand, the palace’s female interior empowered royal women on the other. Women could earn their own money, were present at important court events, controlled access to the king, had some control over the successions of kings, and were even buried in this sacred political space. This female interior / male exterior gender balanced dichotomy as manifested through the court officials, royal family members, and army troops attested to the palace’s role in separating, displaying, and sustaining the power of these women while acting as a microcosm for the larger Dahomean kingdom.
Figure 1: The Palace of Dahomey, King Huegbaja’s *hounwa*, or covered entrance, restored. Author’s photograph, 2008.

Figure 2: Guezo’s Crowned Prince’s Palace, Abomey. Author’s photograph, 2008.
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