Above: Images on the Route of the Slaves in the ‘port’ town of Ouidah in present-day Benin.

Left: Statue of a bound slave as part of the Zoungbodji Memorial on the Route of the Slaves.

Right: Image of the Door of No Return and its platform on the beach at Ouidah.
Basic Timeline

Overview of the TAST in Dahomey

- **1550s**: Allada participates in TAST with the Portuguese at Offra
- **1600s**: Other European powers join Portuguese in regional trade
- **1620**: Kingdom of Dahomey is founded on the Abomey plateau
- **1675**: Dahomey first appears in the written record, called “Fon”
- **1690s**: Europeans begin referring to Benin as the “Slave Coast”
- **1715**: Dahomey declares independence from Kingdom of Allada
- **1724-1727**: Dahomey conquers the southern portion of Benin
- **1734-1735**: The first narratives of Dahomey’s conquest in Britain
- **1789-1793**: Histories of Dahomey for the slave-trade debates
- **1894**: Dahomey’s last king, Béhanzin, is conquered by the French
- **1904-1960**: Dahomey is ruled as a colony of French West Africa

Oral tradition about the founding of Dahomey: The kingdom was built on the Abomey Plateau, inside of Da’s belly, after his refusal to pay tribute to Hougebada of the Fon.
Right: A contemporary image of King Haffon from the Kingdom of Hueda (r. 1695-1727)

Left: An image of the borders of the Kingdom of Dahomey at its height in the nineteenth century.
Above: Robert Norris’s map of the “Slave Coast” featuring Dahomey from his Memoirs in 1789

Geography: The “Slave Coast” was a peculiar place to base trade. It was extremely dangerous. There were no good harbors or landing points. Ships had to anchor in Hueda Road and then send boats across the surf, navigating sand bars. The route was so treacherous that many people drowned and were eaten by sharks when boats were overturned. Europeans had to hire Fante canoe men from the Gold Coast to come over and navigate their goods ashore. The town of Ouidah wasn’t even a port. It was located 2.5 miles inland, which meant that slaves had to marched down to the coast and ferried across a lagoon just to get to the beach. This is a testament to how desperately Europeans wanted to trade here.

Documentation: We know so much about Dahomey for four reasons.

1) Hospitality: Dahomey was very hospitable to white traders. It required administrators to attend the annual festival at the Abomey royal palace in winter.

2) Exoticness: Dahomey was very different from other African states that Europeans had experience with. Different relationship between violence and stability.

3) Interiorness: Dahomey was one of the few states where Europeans traveled into the interior of the African continent to do business. The map shows the route.

4) Slave Trade debates: Dahomey’s culture of public violence lent itself to a ready defense of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, so writers wrote about it a lot.
Above: Two eighteenth-century plans of William’s Fort, the English Fort at Ouidah, in the Kingdom of Dahomey. One of three European forts in Ouidah in the eighteenth-century.

Notes: Here European administrators—notably a resident governor, factor, and Dahomean linguist—worked with European and Dahomean slave traders, castle slaves, and the viceroy, known as the Eubigah, to manage shipments of slaves. Slaves were bought in handfuls from the compounds of private traders. The king delivered messages by way of “half heads.”
Above: An image depicting the Annual Customs festival at Abomey from Dalzel’s *The History of Dahomey* (1793)

Talk here about the various roles of the customs: human sacrifice, wealth redistribution, re-affirming patriotism, airing of grievances, honoring ancestors.

Europeans were interested in this event because they could use it to support the TAST. Purchasing African war captives was “rescuing” or “saving” them.
Above: Another image depicting the Annual Customs festival at Abomey from Dalzel’s *The History of Dahomey* (1793)

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Above: Two historical images of the *Ahosi* or “Amazons,” Dahomean warrior women. Both of these images are from the nineteenth century.

They were called the *Ahosi* (“king’s wives”) or *Mino* (“our mothers”). They started as royal palace guard in the reign of King Agadja (1716-1740).

Women were also part of the king of Dahomey’s palace community in other ways. For example, the *king’s wives* and the *kpojito*, or reign mate.
Above: Two more images depicting the Amazon warrior women. **Left:** King Behanzin ruled from 1889 to 1894. This image is a characterization of Behanzin with Dahomean royal guard from the French *Le Petit Journal* in 1892. **Right:** This is an image of Amazon veterans, women of Dahomey’s all-female unit at a memorial event in Abomey in 1908.
Above: Another nineteenth-century image depicting the Amazon warrior women from Dahomey.
Above: The Amazon warriors of Dahomey have inspired both historical films (*Adanggaman*, 2000) and fiction films (*The Black Panther*, 2018).

The **Dora Milaje of The Black Panther film** may have been inspired by the Dahomean warriors. Of course, the Dora Milaje were based in the comic books first. They had their first appearance in 1998's Black Panther issue No. 1. I have not read an interview where the director, Ryan Coogler, directly claims that this was his inspiration, but c’mon....
The literature on Dahomey is extensive. There is more written on Dahomey than probably any other West African state in the precolonial period. This is because Dahomey became a source of interest for Europeans who were trying to debate the morality of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This is the subject of your article by Robin Law. Despite all of the time which has passed, some of the main questions have remained largely the same:

1) Why did Agadja conquer the southern coast of Benin in the 1720s? Did he want to stop the slave trade, join the trade, or was there really any difference between these?
   a) Some writers like Atkins said that Agadja conquered the south of Benin in order to “redeem” his people, others like Snelgrave said he wanted to profit from the TAST

2) How should we understand the precolonial state of Dahomey?
   i) Unstable? Public displays of violence reached relatively large proportions; i.e. Dahomey’s kings instituted an annual festival during which they sacrificed captives of to honor their ancestors; Dahomey was regularly at war with its neighbors; Dahomey continued to run the TAST; the king decorated his palace with severed heads; and European observers described Dahomey as a violent, savage, and despotic place for native Africans of the “Slave Coast” region.

   ii) Stable? Dahomey made peace with Oyo to prevent continued raids; it regulated the practice of debt slavery to prevent abuses; it enforced laws against such crimes as rape, arson and robbery; and it prohibited the exportation of Dahomean citizens; citizens often expressed an exceptional level of allegiance to their sovereign; Dahomey’s slave trade was actually less than its predecessors; and Europeans had a reason to exaggerate the savagery of Dahomey in defending the TAST.
Conclusions

Dahomey is an exceptional kingdom in Atlantic Africa
Dahomey’s historical record makes it a great case study
Dahomey is both a polarizing and complicated kingdom
Dahomey was designed to meet the demands of the TAST
Dahomean kings welcomed European traders
European traders enjoyed trading in Dahomey

Here is a controversial question to pose: Is Dahomey an African Kingdom to take pride in today? Obviously, historians differ on this question. Some like Henry Louis Gates have said that Dahomey is not a kingdom to take pride in because it thrived only through the enslavement of Africans in nearby regions. Others like Walter Rodney have said that Dahomey was a kingdom to take pride in, and that it thrived in spite of the European slave trade, not because of it. Finally, some like Robin Law have argued that Dahomey did thrive because of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, but it represented an innovative and admirable attempt to achieve stability in an era of limited options for precolonial African states.

Question: Can we have it both ways? Can we honor Dahomey while explaining away the parts of it that we don’t like?

Quote one from Rodney’s How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972): “...it is suggested that certain African kingdoms grew strong economically and politically as a consequence of the trade with Europeans...[yet] The destructive tendency of slave trading can be clearly established; and, wherever a state seemingly progressed in the epoch of slave trading, the conclusion is simply that it did so in spite of the adverse effects of a process that was more damaging...This is the picture that emerges from a detailed study of Dahomey...” (102).

Quote two from Rodney’s How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972): “In the long run, the trade in slaves cast a blight on Dahomey...Without selling captives to get firearms to carry on more warfare for slaves, Dahomey felt its glory and military honor was slipping. Resort to human sacrifice was one attempt to compensate for the diminishing reputation of the state and its monarch...” (121).
Creating Historical Sites

The Example of Ouidah, Benin

Ouidah’s Impact: In the eighteenth century, Ouidah had a population of no greater than 8,000 people, yet it shipped approximately 1 million slaves (Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving ‘Port,’ 73). In short, Ouidah was an example of the kind of port that Ndiaye had pretended Gorée in Senegal was.

Ouidah was a part of the Hueda (Xwéda) Kingdom until it was conquered by King Agadja of Dahomy in 1727. It became a middleman community in the era of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The city was a province of the Kingdom of Dahomey when it became famous as a major ‘port’ in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The situation in Benin was very different than the situation in Ghana, even though both developed diaspora tourism in the 1990s.

1) There were no factories on the coast of the country. Slaves held in private compounds, sent in canoes across a lagoon, and then then marched down the beach to waiting boats.
2) Although European powers kept small forts within the town of Ouidah, slaves were not imprisoned there. Rather, slaves were kept in people’s compounds, houses, and private yards. The forts were used for storing imported European trade goods. As such, there was no real existing infrastructure to build TAST memorials on.
3) As a French-speaking country, Benin could not hope to get the US tourists that Ghana could get. It did not have a long history of courting African-Americans
In 1994, the government of Benin under president Nicéphore Dieudonné Soglo began a reconciliation and cultural development program by working in conjunction with UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The government developed historical markers known as the Route of the Slaves (Rte. des Esclaves). They set up interpretive markers along the 2.5 mile route that enslaved people walked to get from the merchants’ quarters where they were held to the boats on the Gulf of Guinea.

Right: The Route of the Slaves officially begins at the Ouidah Museum of History, which is located in the old Portuguese fort in Ouidah. The fort was called The Fort of São João Baptista de Ajudá (Fort of St. John the Baptist) and it was first built in 1680 and then re-erected in 1721. Ouidah Museum of History or Musee D’Histoire De Ouidah.

Above: Images of the Memorial of Remembrance (also the Wall of Lamentations). This 20-foot memorial displays imagery that tells the history of slavery in Benin. According to the description, the wall was erected on the site of a mass grave of slaves who died before leaving Africa. The Memorial of Remembrance is surrounded by a series of statues that depict people in chains. Pictures online if I want to expand this section. https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindadevolder/32740440420/in/photostream/

The Memorial of Remembrance is only one of the many memorials on the Route of Slaves. There is also a Slave Auction at Place Chacha, in front of the home of the famous Afro-Brazilian slave trader Fransciso de Souza; the Zomaï Cabin, which was apparently a confined hut where the slaves were held prior to departure; there is the village of Zougnbodji, which was a customs point on the route and the last place for slaves. There is the Temple of the Python, which is dedicated to the serpent deity Dangbé; the Maison de Brazil (also Casa de Brazil), a museum that displays works showcasing Vodun culture and the African diaspora; and the Sacred Forest of Kpassè Zoun, which features ancient trees and sculptures and woodcarvings of Vodun deities. One large Iroko tree is said to be the site where king Kpassè, founder of Ouidah, turned into a tree to escape enemies.
Left: The Mamiwata Statue marks the Tree of Forgetfulness along The Slave Route in Ouidah, Benin.

According to legend, slaves were branded according to the mark of the purchaser at the Tree of Forgetting. The name of the place stems from an alleged ritual whereby slaves would be forced to walk around the tree in order to forget where they came from. Slavers did not want the spirits of enslaved people returning to Africa to punish them after death. Apparently, men were walked about the three 9 times and women 7 times.

Right: A statue that marks the Tree of Return along the The Slave Route in Ouidah, Benin.

According to legend, King Agadja of Dahomey planted the Tree of Return in the grand palace of the village of Zoungbodji in order to mark the point of last goodbye. By turning three times around the tree, slaves could ensure that their spirits would return to their homeland after death.

TAST Memorials as Invention: Robin Law in Ouidah: A Social History argues that there is no historical documentation to support either of these stories (see page 153). Of course, these would not be the only Transatlantic Slave Trade Memorials that are less based in fact and more based in the public’s fascination with the history of slavery. For another example, see the following video in which the Tanzanian historian Abdul Sheriff states that the famous “slave caves,” “slave dungeons,” and “whipping post” of Zanzibar Island in East Africa never actually held slaves during the era of the trade. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvPN9Vxp464](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvPN9Vxp464)
**Left:** This is a statue of Segbo Lissa, the vodun chameleon god, on *La Route des Esclaves* in Ouidah.

**Right:** This is a statue of Tohossou, the vodun god of water, on *La Route des Esclaves* in Ouidah.

In addition to slave-trade memorials, the route also features shops where people can but vodun fetishes or totems. It has vodun temples where visitors can make devotion, leave a gift, or attend a ceremony. From Ana Lucia’s Araujo’s *Welcome the Diaspora* (2010): “The debates about Vodun festival were surrounded by controversy, because some perceived the festival as an attempt to diminish the importance accorded to the Slave Route Project,” (157). Nonetheless, the Vodun monuments and shrines which stand alongside the slave-trade memorials on the Route of the Slaves show us that “promoting the memory of slavery means fighting to occupy the public space...” (173).

What is Benin’s most important legacy to the diaspora, vodun religion or the Transatlantic Slave Trade? How are these negotiated together?
The Route of Slaves ends at another Door of No Return.

The monument is called The Door of No Return and it is the final stop on the Route of the Slaves. It stands at the beach where slaves would wait to be put onto boats, after first being ferried across the lagoon and then marched across the sand. The title The Door of No Return is a common name for the departure point of enslaved Africans to the New World. It is also used to reference, for example, the exit point for slaves at Gorée Island.

The door is flanked by metal statues depicting slaves that are bound together to be sent to the New World. The upper pediment of the structure has a slave ship in the middle, with two rows of slaves marching toward it; their hands are bound behind them and they are all linked together by a rope or chain. The opposite side of the pediment has two rows of slaves who are marching outward from the shore and onto the plantations of the New World.

Note: This is an active site. In contrast to the castles at Ghana, which Bayo Holsey tells us are seen by locals as mostly for tourists, The Door of No Return in Ouidah is a site used much more by locals. There are ceremonies, gatherings, speeches, celebrations, and other events held on the site. Here is a picture of the site holding an event.

From Ana Lucia’s Araujo’s Welcome the Diaspora (2010): “This memorial contrasts with the other neighbouring monuments commemorating Vodun and the Atlantic slave trade, by sending to the visitor contradictory messages about the country’s slave trade past. Indeed, the Catholic Church contributed to legitimate slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, during French rule, and still today, representatives of the Catholic Church denounced African religions by associating them with witchcraft,” (169).