

*The Dahomean Royal Palace Sphere: Administrative Tactics in a West African State of the Atlantic Era*

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The Dahomean royal palace sphere during the tumultuous era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, extending the power and reach of the Fon royal dynasty in ways never before attempted on the Slave Coast of West Africa. Whereas kingdoms of the 17<sup>th</sup> century established political and economic control over their respective territories largely through the implementation of a variety of ceremonial rites and ritual obligations, this paper examines sharp distinctions that characterized the administrative tactics Dahomey deployed to centralize state power in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. On one hand, Dahomey developed a powerful bureaucratic apparatus, one centered at the royal palace that maintained an increasingly heavy hand in broader political and economic affairs of the region. I argue that these institutions, contra Polanyi, were designed largely to provide the royal family and its agents the power to profit from the mercantile and agricultural activities of a wide range of Dahomean social groups across the kingdom. As domestic and Atlantic commercial sectors expanded and shifted over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, Dahomean political institutions transformed dramatically to exploit new economic opportunities. The bureaucracy thus demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in the face of potential economic and political collapse. Despite these advances, the royal dynasty struggled, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to integrate and curtail the aggrandizing tendencies of rival nobles, merchant elites, bureaucrats, and ritual leaders. The royal palace sphere was, therefore, a contested zone of political interaction, one that almost collapsed on multiple occasions. This paper will discuss the historical evidence for these bureaucratic strategies and their limits in Dahomey, as well as the limited archaeological evidence illustrating Dahomean bureaucratic expansion over the course of the Atlantic era.