



Bas-Relief Art

Early in the eighteenth century, King Agaja is believed to have initiated the tradition of decorating palace walls. Decoration consisted of murals, encrusted shells and pearls, perforations, and bas-reliefs, but it is the bas-reliefs that have remained the most remarkable element. In addition to their exceptional artistry, which has led them to be described as "one of the most beautiful artistic creations of the people of the West African coast," they provide a document of exceptional historical value, because few other areas in Africa have so well preserved the traces of a cultural memory as it developed over the centuries. Examples can be found on temples, palaces, and other buildings throughout the region.

*Bas-relief at temple
near Abomey.*

*Photograph by
Leslie Rainer, 1996.*

AGADJA



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Commonly called *noudidè* in Fon, from the root word meaning “to design” or “to portray,” the bas-reliefs are three-dimensional, modeled- and painted-earth pictograms. Early examples of the form, first in religious temples and then in the palaces, were more abstract than figurative. Gradually, figurative depictions became the prevalent style, illustrating the tales told by the kings’ heralds and other Fon storytellers.

Palace bas-reliefs were fashioned according to a long-standing tradition of architectural and sculptural renovation. Ruling monarchs commissioned new palaces and artworks, as well as alterations of earlier ones, thereby glorifying the past while bringing its art and architecture up to date. While much of the original earth or clay was probably used again in the new building



The original earth used to make bas-reliefs came from termite mounds such as this one near Abomey.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

Princess Houedehoun seated in her temple, which is decorated by several types of three-dimensional wall decorations.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.



Traditional coloring materials.

Photographs by Francesca Piqué, 1994.



Woman at an Abomey market selling balls of kaolin clay used as a white coloring material.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1994.



structure, the bas-relief designs themselves were subtly altered over time. Although this alteration complicates the issue of their originality, it also emphasizes the important function of the bas-reliefs as visual records of the kingdom's history. Some bas-reliefs may have been commissioned by newly enthroned rulers for their predecessors' *ajalalas*, or reception halls. Or, perhaps, the late king's bas-reliefs may have been remodeled and repainted to coincide with the Grand Customs ceremonies held in his honor after his death. The subject matter treated in some of the *ajalala* bas-reliefs of King Guezo, for example, suggest that they may have been completed soon after Glélé came to the throne in 1858. Glélé's bas-reliefs, in turn, were perhaps finished under the reign of King Behanzin, in preparation for ceremonies planned for the early 1890s but canceled because of the French conquest. Even today, the repainting and redecoration of important local buildings are timed to coincide with the onset of ritual ceremonies.



Bas-relief from the compound of the Hountondji family, whose generations of artisans fashioned the Abomey palace bas-reliefs.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.



Example of the earliest and most abstract form of three-dimensional wall decoration showing sculptural forms in window spaces (detail at right), in a temple.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.



The bas-reliefs are embedded in the walls, usually in niches on the facades of palace buildings and voodoo temples. Originally, earth used in their fabrication came from termite mounds; it was dried, crushed, and mixed with a liquid residue of palm oil—a by-product of palm oil production—with some fibers added for strength. The sculptures were allowed to dry and then brightly decorated. Paint was made locally with organic colorants and inorganic pigments: dried and ground indigo leaves for blue; wild gingerroot for bright yellow; a wood powder or millet-stalk extract for red; and lamp soot for black. Kaolin, a natural clay, was used for white.



While statuettes and pottery were traditionally made by women, bas-reliefs were fashioned only by men. Historically, these artisans were part of the larger Hountondji family guild, whose members included blacksmiths and jewelers working exclusively for the royal court making metal sculptures and decorative arts of striking originality and beauty. This attribution is supported by the fact that bas-reliefs decorating the Hountondji family temple today are stylistically similar to the original bas-reliefs of Glélé. Also, it was the head of the Hountondji family who often explained to foreign visitors the objects and presentations performed during the ceremonies. By including various

ceremonial motifs in the palace bas-reliefs, these artisans at once both artistically encapsulated and preserved a record of the kingdom's most important ritual.

Early European descriptions of the decorated palaces are relatively sparse. Such travelers as Alexandre d'Albe (1895), Edouard Foa (1895), and René Le Herissé (1903 and 1911) all wrote reports, but the first comprehensive documentation was rendered in 1911 by E. G. Waterlot, who was so taken with the originality of the bas-reliefs that he had molds made of thirty-six of them at his own expense. Today these molds constitute an invaluable archival record, housed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, with casts made from the molds in

The first two types of bas-reliefs, showing the evolution toward a more figurative style, in the temple of Princess Houedehoun.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.



The second type of bas-relief, with three-dimensional sculptural elements set into niches, in the temple at Tinji outside Abomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Abomey. Together with old photographs and contemporary surveys of palace buildings and local temples, this documentation provides important clues to the stylistic development of the bas-reliefs.

Three broad stylistic patterns of three-dimensional wall decoration seem to have predominated at various periods of Abomey's history. The first type—abstract, or iconic, in nature—appears to consist of simple wall perforations in geometric form—usually triangular, rectilinear, or circular—that actually cut through the body of the wall. They probably appeared first in temples; even today, temple bas-reliefs tend to be more abstract than figurative. The adventurer J. A. Skertchly, who visited King Agaja's ajalala in the late nineteenth century, described the whitewashed walls pierced with square punctures, generally arranged in five motifs representing *weke*, the cosmos, and marking the four cardinal directions and the central sun. This icon, which can also take the form of a cross within a circle, appears frequently in Abomey today on royal stools, umbrellas, jewelry, and other artifacts, as well as in the inner temples of important gods and historical figures. It symbolizes the centrality and cohesion of the Dahomey kingdom as a divinely sanctioned space.

These perforations were functional as well as decorative and symbolic. Cut-outs, for example, could harbor small oil lamps that provided light for nighttime ceremonies. Others served as windows for ventilation and light. Still others were used as spy holes. Skertchly, for example, observed the Amazons—the elite female warriors who formed part of the palace guard—“peeping through loop-holes . . . in the wall.”

The second type of wall decoration found in early palace and temple architec-



ture combined the geometric cutouts with three-dimensionally modeled forms ranging from sculpted religious vessels to symbolically important animals. These decorations can be found in temples, where they depict gods; secular examples dating to the eighteenth-century reigns of Agaja and Tegbessou survive in the inner areas of some of these kings' private palaces. They are obvious forerunners of the last and most prevalent style, which consists of symbolically significant figures—humans, animals, weaponry, and other objects—all of which had particular meanings for the ruling king. Bas-reliefs of this type figure most prominently in the ajalalas of the kings Guezo and Glélé.

The Abomey bas-reliefs, while carefully rewrought by generations of artisans, have always retained their historical and artistic authenticity. Both in safeguarding



Bas-reliefs set in niches in the walls.

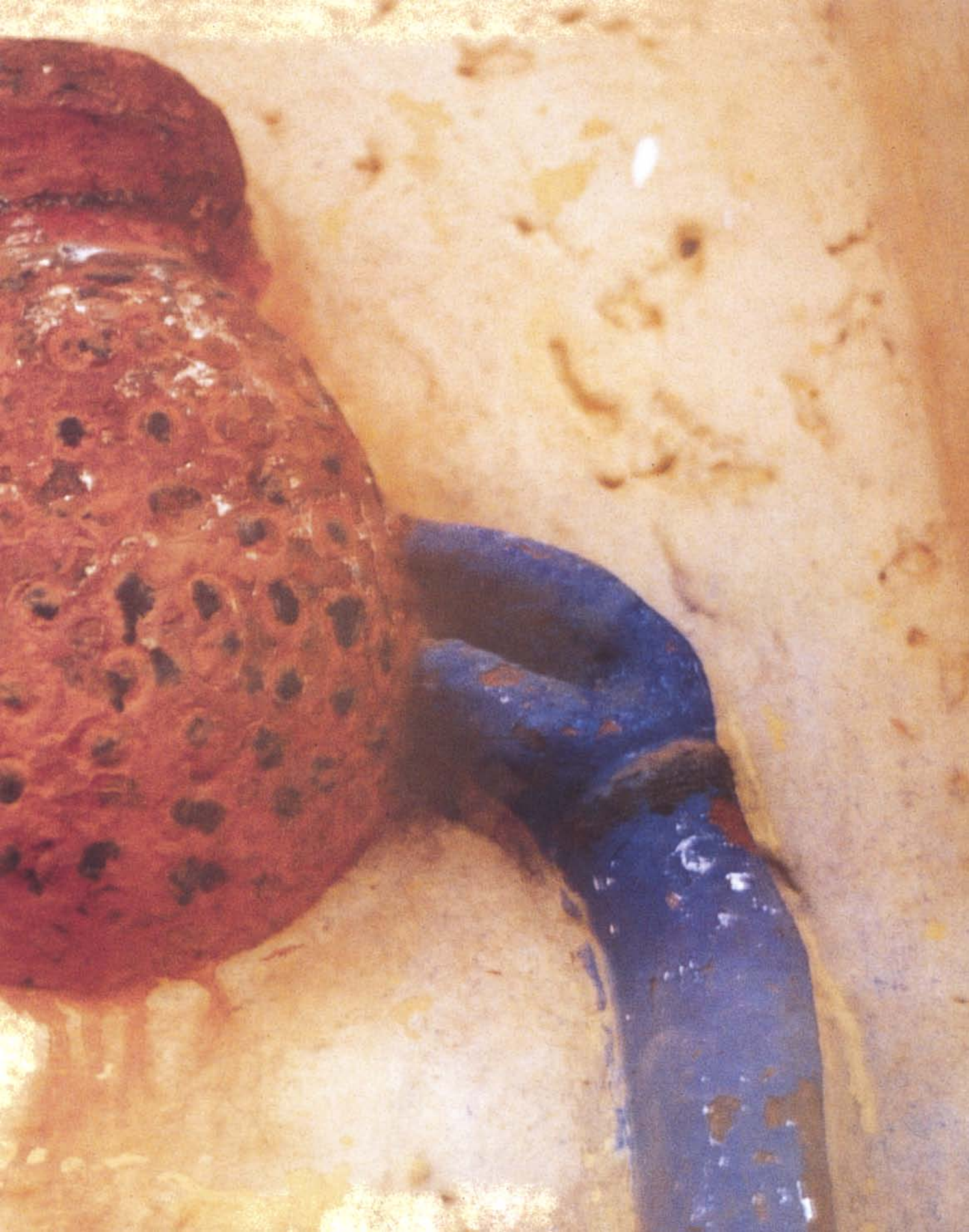
Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

Example of the last and most fully rendered type of bas-relief, from the palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

the earlier bas-reliefs and in remodeling and repainting contemporary forms, conservation efforts during the twentieth century reinforce the interaction between past and present, between royal and popular art.







Column from Glélé's rebuilt ajalala showing typical arrangement of bas-reliefs, with depictions of weapons forming the top row, various narratives in the middle, and royal symbols along the bottom.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

Previous page: Detail of the jar-of-unity bas-relief before its removal from the ajalala of Glélé.

Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

Reading the Walls

The palace bas-reliefs compensated in part for the lack of writing in Fon culture, serving as visual stories that recounted the history, customs, and rituals of the people. For nearly three centuries, the history of the Dahomey dynasty was perpetuated by various figures, from cult keepers and warrior chiefs to heralds who recited epic tales of kings. The bas-reliefs can be interpreted both as symbols and allegories, on the one hand, and as illustrated history, on the other. Their overarching theme is the glory of kingship—or, more prosaically stated, the strength and centralization of royal power.

Perhaps because the stories were transmitted orally before their depiction in the bas-reliefs, their narratives are very precise. They might illustrate the circumstances surrounding a king's accession to the throne, describe his program of government, or glorify his victories in battle. Royal omnipotence is often evoked through animal figures that symbolize powerful qualities attributed to a particular ruler—such as strength, perseverance, or courage—and through allegories that praise and sanctify the Dahomean monarchy. Once we are aware of the specific associations evoked by each bas-relief, we can "read" the stories on the walls.



"Our freedom can be compared to a jar with many holes, which cannot hold water. If each one of you, the sons of this nation, can put his finger in one hole, the jar will hold water."

In the early nineteenth century, King Guezo had just wrested the throne from his older brother Adandozan, under circumstances that could have caused a rift among the people of Abomey, and he relied on stories, song, and imagery to send them a powerful message of unity. This conserved bas-relief is replicated on the rebuilt palace walls of Guezo's son and successor, King Glélé. The image has been adopted as the national symbol of Benin.

*The jar-of-unity
bas-relief, after
conservation.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1996.*



"The powerful buffalo crosses the country and nothing can stop or confront it."

As well as calling for unity, Guezo projected an image of strength by comparing himself to the buffalo, an animal reproduced fourteen times on his ajalala.

From the palace of Guezo.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

"Hornbill, it is to you that Se [the god of heavenly light] gave a burden to carry. If Se had given it to just any bird, it would not be able to hold it. But when Se put it on the head of the hornbill, this bird supported the weight."



When Glélé, who compared himself to the hornbill, succeeded to the throne, he inherited a number of problems. The “burden” noted in this phrase, one of several slogans associated with Glélé, is the hornlike protuberance at the top of the bird’s beak. Glélé is reported to have said, “The baggage of life does not stay on the head of just anyone. The baggage of the whole country is on my head.”¹ The hornbill was considered “the king of birds,” and its beak was depicted as strong enough to pick up a man.

From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1997.

"The lion cub strikes terror in his enemies as soon as his teeth have grown."

After his victories over the neighboring Mahi at the outset of his reign, the young king Glélé compared himself to a lion cub, as a message to foreign enemies who might attempt to slow the kingdom's expansion, as well as to rivals within the kingdom who might challenge his power. A lion—with a supposedly human gaze—represents King Glélé on fifteen successive bas-reliefs on the bottom row of his ajalala.



From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

From Glélé's private palace.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1995.



**"The chameleon walks slowly
but can go far, and he will never
break even the finest branch he
walks on."**

The chameleon, here depicted on one of the bas-reliefs of Glélé's ajalala, evokes a wily politician and is the symbol of King Akaba, who died some 150 years before Glélé came to power. Akaba reached the age of sixty before acceding to the throne. Here, the

chameleon stands over a *goubassa*—the sword of the god of war.

From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

"Lightning strikes the palm tree but never the pineapple plant, which is close to the earth."



*From the palace
of King Kpengla.*

*Photograph by
Francesca Piqué, 1995.*

King Agonglo's *djebo*—the small, round spirit house where his soul is believed to reside—bears emblematic bas-reliefs of pineapples, his main symbol. They allude not only to the danger of being struck by lightning (which the king avoided) but also to the obstacles he overcame when he ascended to power.



From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

One of the major themes of the Abomey bas-reliefs is the glorification of the kingdom's military conquests. The scene above depicts Glélé's sacking of the rival kingdom of Kétou. A Dahomean warrior has felled one enemy and hacked off another's arm. On the right, a warrior aims point-blank at the head of a Yoruba enemy.



From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.



The bas-reliefs depicted mythological figures as well as historical events. This image is of a fierce mythical warrior named Daghessou—a human figure with an animal head, who spits fire. According to tradition, Daghessou possessed a magical power that struck terror in the hearts of enemies. The fire evokes the lightning of a Fon god; the horned figure recalls the formation of an Amazon battalion known as “the furious antelopes” (see photograph of Amazons wearing horns, p. 14).

*From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.*

*Cast of bas-relief from the palace of Glélé.
Photograph from E. G. Waterlot, 1926.*



*Cast of bas-relief from
the palace of Glélé.*

*Photograph from
E. G. Waterlot, 1926.*

*From the palace
of Glélé, after
conservation.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1997.*



The ajalala bas-reliefs of Guezo and Glélé flaunt an arsenal of weapons. Bas-reliefs represent the king's ceremonial *recades* (messenger sticks), as well as head-splitting *makpos* and other weapons, such as rifles, sabers, and swords.

*From the palace
of Guezo.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1994.*



Female warriors, known as Amazons—fierce, reputedly invincible, and deeply devoted to the king—held the place of honor as an assault regiment in the Dahomean army. They appear repeatedly on Guezo’s ajalala. Here an Amazon carries off a captive. The valor of the Amazons was legendary. In one account of the final battle of Abeokuta in the mid-nineteenth century, they fearlessly scaled the walls of that rival city-state, only to be repulsed and thrown from the ramparts. One warrior, to show her disdain for the defenders, sat down some distance away, with her back to the enemy, and lit her pipe, which she calmly smoked while bullets from Abeokuta sharpshooters flew around her. Finally, she was killed and, soon after, beheaded. An Abeokuta defender carried her head through the besieged town, crying,

**“Look well, soldiers.
These are women
fighting against us.”**



Amazon warriors.

*Photograph by
Edouard Foa, ca. 1890.
Courtesy Getty Research
Institute, Research Library,
93.R.114.*

*Catholic nun with
two wives of King Glélé
next to the throne of
Guezo.*

*Photograph by F. Gadmer,
1930. Courtesy Musée
Albert-Kahn-Département
des Hauts-de-Seine, France.*



*Bas-relief of Guezo's
throne.*

*Photograph by T. Spini
and G. Antongini, 1972.*



Perhaps the most impressive bas-relief commemorating victory is of Guezo's imposing throne. It sits on the heads of defeated enemy chiefs and is flanked by a recade and a ram's-head makpo.

Many bas-reliefs show the punishment inflicted on conquered enemies; this one, on the ajalala of King Glélé, depicts an Amazon torturing a Kétou warrior. The victim's stomach is being split open and filled with earth.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.



War trophies are another popular theme. Here the severed head of a chief from a neighboring kingdom has been strapped to his horse—the penalty for having warned the enemy that the Dahomean army was approaching.

*From the palace
of Glélé, after
conservation.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1996.*





Another bas-relief on Guezo's ajalala shows a spindle over a severed head. It belonged to an enemy who boasted of "killing Guezo and spinning his head on the end of a spindle," and who was himself subjected to this torture.

*From the palace
of Guezo.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1994.*

The bas-relief depicting a baboon holding an ear of corn is a good example of how a single image evokes a long and complex story. It memorializes Dahomey's efforts to extricate itself from the grip of the Oyo overlords. To mock the Oyo king as a glutton never satisfied with Dahomey's annual tribute payment, King Adandozan sent him a parasol on which was an appliqué of a baboon gorging itself. In response, the Oyo leader sent back a hoe, encouraging the king to cultivate the land to pay his tribute. In response, Adandozan is reputed to have raged, "Our fathers cultivated, but with rifles, not with hoes. The Dahomey kings only cultivate war." Adandozan was eventually overthrown and his name obliterated from the dynastic tradition. His successor, Guezo, continued attacking the villages allied with the Oyo; Guezo's son Glélé undertook their systematic conquest and was able to free Dahomey from Oyo rule.

*Modern bas-relief by
Cyprien Tokoudagba
and family, from wall
at Abomey market.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1997.*

GUEZO



"No one can blame a crocodile for eating a fish."



*Photograph by T. Spini
and G. Antongini, 1972.*

*From rebuilt palace
of Glélé.*

*Photograph by
Leslie Rainer, 1996.*

Oral tradition holds that King Glélé excelled in allegory. Those he devised are still famous, having been faithfully conserved and sung during homage ceremonies by the royal heralds and their descendants.

One of the most simple and yet most cryptic examples is the crocodile and the fish—an image that may suggest that the king's triumphs, however violent, are part of the natural order of things.



King Guezo was compared to Dan Ayido Houédo, a serpent biting its own tail. In this bas-relief, the serpent has horns, a sign that it is in fact the symbol of the male god Dan. It is painted in Dan's emblematic colors. By comparing himself to a god, Guezo projected an aura of timeless power; this image can be interpreted to signify that the kingdom of Dahomey was so vast that it was universally known.

**"The rainbow in the sky cannot
hide from the universe."**



*From the
zinkpoho,
formerly known
as the Hall
of Thrones.*

*Photograph by
Susan Middleton, 1994.*

NOTE

1. Suzanne Preston Blier, "King Glele of Danhome: Divination Portraits of a Lion King and Man of Iron," *African Arts* 23, no. 4 (October 1990): 42–53, 93–94.

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