

Slave Trade in the Kingdom of Dahomey (1658–1849)

Dr. Dahmas warda

University of Algiers 2- Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, (Algeria)

Email : dahmaswarda15@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This study focuses on one of the most important and tragic activities during the European colonial period in Africa: the slave trade. The research explores the specific case of the Dahomey Kingdom, which became a central hub for the trade starting from 1658. European powers developed several mechanisms to support and expand this activity, including offering African kings material rewards such as weapons and luxury goods in exchange for enslaved people. The Kingdom of Dahomey was one of the most organized and active centers along the Guinea Coast, attracting many European traders due to its structured system and strong leadership. The slave trade continued in Dahomey until 1849, when Britain issued a ban on the trade in an effort to stop the deportation of Africans overseas—though forced labor and exploitation continued in different forms within the continent. This study aims to understand the mechanisms of the trade, its impact on Dahomey, and how it shaped the kingdom's social and economic history.

Key words: Slave trade – Whydah- Gezo - Francisco Da Souza

Résumé :

Cette étude porte sur l'une des activités les plus importantes et les plus tragiques de la période coloniale européenne en Afrique : la traite des esclaves. La recherche examine le cas spécifique du royaume du Dahomey, qui devint un centre névralgique de ce commerce à partir de 1658. Les puissances européennes mirent en place plusieurs mécanismes pour soutenir et étendre cette activité, notamment en offrant aux rois africains des récompenses matérielles telles que des armes et des produits de luxe en échange d'êtres humains réduits en esclavage.

Le royaume du Dahomey fut l'un des centres les plus organisés et les plus actifs de la côte de Guinée, attirant de nombreux négociants européens grâce à son système structuré et à la solidité de son autorité politique. La traite des esclaves se poursuivit au Dahomey jusqu'en 1849, année où la Grande-Bretagne proclama l'interdiction de ce commerce dans le but de mettre fin à la déportation des Africains vers l'étranger — bien que le travail forcé et diverses formes d'exploitation aient perduré à l'intérieur du continent.

Cette étude vise à analyser les mécanismes de la traite, son impact sur le Dahomey, ainsi que la manière dont elle a façonné l'histoire sociale et économique du royaume.

Mots clés : Traite des esclaves – Whydah- Gezo- Francisco da souza.

. Introduction:

Before the arrival of European colonial domination, Sub-Saharan Africa was a land of vibrant societies, powerful kingdoms, and dynamic empires. Across its vast regions, political systems were well organized, trade networks connected distant peoples, and cultural traditions flourished for

centuries. However, the era of colonialism erased or distorted many of these achievements. European powers destroyed monuments, disrupted local institutions, and deliberately portrayed the continent as a place without history, science, or culture. This false image served to justify their conquest, but the historical reality is quite the opposite. Africa possessed a deep and complex past long before European intervention.

One striking example of this hidden richness is the Kingdom of Dahomey, which stood as one of the most organized and influential African states in the precolonial era. Located in present-day Benin, on what Europeans once called the “Slave Coast,” Dahomey developed a strong centralized government, a disciplined army, and an economy that reached far beyond its borders. Its rulers skillfully managed both internal administration and external trade, allowing the kingdom to grow in wealth and reputation.

In this study, we will focus on the period before Dahomey fell under French colonial rule, examining the kingdom at the height of its independence. Particular attention will be given to its role in the economic sphere and its complex involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Far from being a passive victim of European exploitation, Dahomey played an active—though controversial—part in the trade of enslaved people, shaping the political and social life of the region.

To explore these aspects thoroughly, this research employs a Descriptive-Analytical Method, combining careful historical description with critical analysis. This approach helps reveal the inner mechanisms of the slave trade in Dahomey: How exactly did the trade operate? Who controlled its routes and profits? What impact did it have on the social hierarchy, the economy, and the kingdom’s relations with neighboring states? By addressing these questions, we aim to shed light on the true historical complexity of Dahomey and, more broadly, on the rich precolonial history of Africa that colonial narratives tried to silence.

1. Localisation :

The Kingdom of Dahomey was located between two meridians: 0.41° West and 0.26° East (Brunet 1900, p 2) and between two parallels: 6° (C-C-E 1974, p 4) and 9° North (Maurice 1939, p 85). This precise geographic position placed the kingdom in the heart of the coastal region of West Africa, giving it both access to the sea and a natural connection to the interior trade routes of the continent. Dahomey stretched from east to west over a distance of approximately 74.57 km, and from north to south for about 333.33 km (See comment 1), dimensions that allowed it to maintain a compact but highly strategic territory. The relatively narrow width combined with considerable north–south length created a corridor that facilitated movement of goods and people between the Atlantic coast and the inland markets.

Dahomey reached its maximum territorial extent in the nineteenth century (Asiwaju 1989, p 699), a period when the kingdom consolidated its political power and economic influence. At that time, its authority expanded from the Ouémé River in the east (See comment 2) to the Couffo River in the west (See comment 3), and from the Atlantic Ocean in the south to the Mahis Mountains in the north (Le Hérisse 1911, p 2). These natural frontiers—rivers, coastline, and mountain ranges—served not only as defensive barriers but also as channels of communication and trade, enhancing Dahomey’s capacity to interact with neighboring states. Altogether, the kingdom covered the southern quarter of present-day Benin, with an estimated surface area of 24,140.60 km² (Skertchly 1874, p 36), making it one of the most significant political units of the precolonial Gulf of Guinea.

French geographer J. F. Rest (See comment 4) expressed admiration for the kingdom's strategic location, stating that "*Dahomey is like a hand coming out of the ocean and holding on to the land*" (Reste 1934, p 3). This vivid image captures the way Dahomey projected power from the coast into the interior, as if grasping the territory around it. Its map, with its elongated northward reach, also resembles a plant growing upwards, a metaphor used by later historians to symbolize both strength and territorial ambition (Cornevin 1965, p 7). Such descriptions reflect not only the physical geography of the kingdom but also the dynamic spirit of expansion that characterized Dahomey during its peak.

2. The Reasons for the Slave Trade in Dahomey:

The Kingdom of Dahomey was founded through a series of deliberate military invasions that aimed not only to secure land but also to expand political influence across the region. These campaigns, often planned with careful strategy, resulted in the capture of large numbers of people who were transported to the royal capital of Abomey. Captives taken during such wars filled many roles within Dahomean society. Some were placed on royal plantations or private farms, where they cultivated staple crops and provided a steady food supply for the population. Others were organized into teams that transported goods within the kingdom's borders and along trade routes reaching neighboring territories, ensuring the circulation of agricultural products, textiles, and other commodities. Beyond basic labor, many enslaved individuals were trained in specialized crafts such as weaving, textile production, sewing, and even sculpture, skills that contributed to Dahomey's reputation for artistic refinement and economic vitality. Remarkably, the treatment of slaves in Dahomey was, in certain respects, more humane than the brutal systems introduced by European slave traders. Unlike the transatlantic trade, where captives were permanently alienated from their homelands, many enslaved people in Dahomey could eventually gain freedom and even integrate into the larger society, sometimes rising to positions of influence. This practice was partly motivated by the kingdom's need to maintain demographic balance, as continuous warfare caused high mortality rates, especially among adult males (Obichere 1978, pp 6–8).

The secret to the kingdom's success lay primarily in its formidable military strength, which served as both a defensive shield and an offensive tool. This military capability was one of the main drivers behind Dahomey's deep involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, allowing the kingdom to capture and control large numbers of captives who were exchanged for European imports such as firearms, colorful fabrics, alcohol, and precious metals. Access to weapons in turn reinforced Dahomey's military supremacy, creating a cycle in which war produced captives, captives purchased weapons, and weapons enabled further war. Historical records show that as early as 1658, Dahomey carried out its first known slave-trading operation, selling 228 enslaved individuals to European merchants. Most of these early captives were young men seized during conflicts with neighboring groups including the Mahi, Porto-Novo (See Appendix 1), and the Yoruba (See comment 5). Only the strongest and most able-bodied were selected, as physical endurance was essential for the harsh labor awaiting them in the Americas (Meredith 2015, p 183).

There were several distinct pathways to slavery in Dahomey. The most common involved capture during military campaigns or small-scale raids, but other routes included kidnapping within local markets and even the condition of birth into a family already enslaved. In especially desperate times, impoverished individuals might resort to selling themselves or mortgaging their children to

survive periods of famine or extreme hardship, demonstrating how economic pressure could be as powerful a force as war in supplying captives (Obichere 1978, p 7).

The impact of the slave trade on Dahomey was multidimensional—economic, political, and social. King Aghossou Gezo (See comment 6), one of the most influential rulers, openly acknowledged this dependence when he confessed to an English officer: *“I can do anything you ask me—except end this trade. Slave trade is the main activity of my people. It has been, and still is, the source of their glory and wealth. Their famous songs, their victories, even the stories mothers tell their children, all speak of enemies who became slaves”* (Meredith 2015, p 193). Gezo personally supervised the trade, coordinating with royal agents and local private merchants to ensure a steady flow of captives. Beginning with the reign of Aghossou Tegbesu (1740–1774) (Alpern 2011, p 16), the monarchy tightened its grip by establishing a royal monopoly over the slave trade, systematically eliminating rival merchants and ensuring that only the king and his appointed officials could conduct transactions (Meredith 2015, p 126). This centralization not only enriched the royal treasury but also reinforced the king’s political authority over ambitious nobles and competing clans.

The coastal port of Whydah (See Appendix 1) became the principal hub for slave exports and a focal point of European commercial activity. At the start of the eighteenth century, English merchant John Atkins described Whydah with astonishment: *“Now it is the most important commercial center on the coast of Guinea, where many slaves are sold. There is equality among the fifty-four ships—French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch.”* Initially, European traders competed fiercely for influence, often forming temporary alliances with local factions, but over time they reached practical agreements to share access to the port in order to maintain the flow of human cargo (Davidson 1977, p 229). This bustling maritime exchange turned Whydah into a cosmopolitan marketplace where African intermediaries and European merchants negotiated daily, blending cultures even as they deepened the tragedy of enslavement.

In this complex context, the power and wealth of the Dahomey Kingdom were directly tied to its ability to trade slaves (Davidson 1965, p 181). Enslaved people effectively became a form of currency, enabling the kingdom to acquire European goods, strengthen its armies, and assert dominance over neighboring polities. Yet this economic model carried a heavy moral and human cost. As European demand increased, wars and raids intensified, transforming the once-prosperous coastline into what contemporaries grimly called a *“coast of misfortune”* for countless African communities (Davidson 1977, p 230). The paradox of Dahomey’s history lies in this dual reality: a kingdom that achieved wealth and fame through military brilliance and shrewd trade, but at the irreversible price of human suffering.

3. Categories of Slaves in the Kingdom of Dahomey:

The table shown on the following page presents the main categories of enslaved individuals in the Kingdom of Dahomey, offering a clearer and more detailed picture of how slavery was organized within the kingdom. Far from being a single, uniform system, Dahomean slavery was structured around multiple social categories, each of which fulfilled a specific function within the state. This careful classification demonstrates that the Dahomean monarchy regarded slavery not only as a source of labor but also as an instrument of governance and social control.

Each type of captive had a distinct social or economic role that reflected the needs of the Dahomean state. For example, Kannoumon (people of the cord) were strictly controlled captives who were often kept under close supervision to prevent escape or rebellion. They were considered

particularly valuable because of their physical strength and potential use in large-scale state projects, which explains the tight restrictions placed upon them. Deve, on the other hand, served as domestic servants and were sometimes offered by the Ahousou (king) as rewards to warriors and nobles for their military service and loyalty. Their close association with the royal household meant that some Deve could, over time, integrate into their masters' families and, in certain cases, even acquire a limited social status, a rare pathway to upward mobility within an otherwise rigid hierarchy.

Another important group, the Ganto, consisted mainly of prisoners of war captured during the kingdom's frequent military campaigns. Their numbers often increased after successful raids or territorial conquests, making them a vital source of manpower for state projects and private enterprises. The Azowato, by contrast, were laborers assigned to heavy and exhausting tasks such as clearing new farmland, constructing defensive walls, or carrying out royal building projects. Their physical work helped sustain the kingdom's agricultural base and infrastructure, underscoring the economic importance of forced labor.

Other categories reveal an even greater level of complexity and adaptability. Individuals known as Gbanu were used as pawns in debt arrangements, serving as a form of payment or living guarantee until financial obligations were fulfilled. This practice shows how slavery in Dahomey could emerge not only from warfare but also from economic agreements and family crises. Some captives, such as Kannoumon Vodunsi, were dedicated to religious cults and played ceremonial roles in temples and sacred spaces, performing rituals that reinforced the spiritual legitimacy of the monarchy. Finally, the Ouemesi represented social outcasts or persons officially proscribed by society, a reminder that Dahomean slavery also served a punitive function by isolating those who violated communal norms.

These varied classifications illustrate not only the diversity of the enslaved population but also the way slavery was deeply integrated into the political, economic, and religious systems of Dahomean society. The existence of categories ranging from royal servants to ritual specialists reveals that slavery was more than a simple mechanism of exploitation; it was a complex institution that shaped relationships of power, labor, and belief, influencing everything from state ceremonies to market production. Such details help us understand that slavery in Dahomey was not a single uniform practice but a multifaceted social order that permeated nearly every aspect of life (Obichere 1978, p7) (See table1).

Table1: The main categories of enslaved persons in Dahomey, each with a specific name and role in society

The type		The name
1	People of the cord	Kannoumon
2	Servants of the house, are presented by the Ahousou to notables and warriors as a reward for their heroism. And a person from this category can rise over time to become a member of his master's family.	Deve
3	Prisoners	Ganto
4	Laborers	Azowato
5	Puncheon roller	Gbablito
6	Pawns	Gbanu
7	Cult slaves	Kannoumon Vodunsi

8	Proscribed persons, outcasts	Ouemesi
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Source: Obichere, 1978, p7.

4. The End of the Slave Trade:

In 1807, Britain officially banned the transatlantic slave trade, (see appendix 2) and by 1833 it had abolished slavery in all its colonies. This legislation was celebrated in Britain as a landmark victory for humanitarian ideals and moral progress. Afterward, Britain took serious measures to combat the slave trade worldwide, deploying its naval forces to patrol the Atlantic and signing treaties with other European powers to discourage the continued trafficking of enslaved Africans. However, despite these official positions and the moral rhetoric used to justify them, British ships were still involved in the transport of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic after 1808, revealing a clear contradiction between Britain's humanitarian claims and its imperial economic interests. The persistence of clandestine slave voyages underscores how economic profit and imperial expansion often outweighed the principles Britain publicly defended. (Hopikens 2014, p 112)

One of Britain's underlying objectives was not only to end the human suffering caused by slavery but also to weaken the economies of powerful African kingdoms it aimed to control or influence. Dahomey, whose economy was strongly tied to the slave trade, was deeply affected by this sudden shift in global markets. The kingdom's rulers, long accustomed to deriving wealth and political strength from the export of captives, now faced the challenge of maintaining their prosperity in a rapidly changing Atlantic world. In response to British pressure, the Ahousou continued to trade slaves secretly with certain French merchants from Marseille, exploiting loopholes and the slow enforcement of international agreements to keep their economy afloat. (Bonardel 1973, p 177) As European demand for slaves declined, Brazilian merchants—who operated under looser restrictions and maintained strong links to the Atlantic slave economy—became Dahomey's preferred partners. The shrinking number of available markets caused slave prices to rise, which paradoxically made the trade even more profitable for those willing to defy international law. To overcome the language barrier and negotiate effectively with these Brazilian traders, Gezo appointed Francisco Félix da Souza (See comment number 7) as his key intermediary. Da Souza, a Portuguese-Brazilian merchant with deep connections in the Atlantic trading world, became increasingly important, especially as international restrictions tightened, due to his ability to manipulate prices, secure supplies, and maintain profitable exchanges despite the mounting diplomatic pressure. (Koslow 1997, p 45)

Eventually, Ahousou Gezo recognized that the abolition of the slave trade was inevitable and that Dahomey could not indefinitely sustain itself by relying on a commerce that was becoming both dangerous and politically costly. At the same time, Europe was entering the Industrial Revolution and had an increasing demand for palm oil, a versatile commodity used in lubricating machines (Jamieson 1943, p 126), furniture production (Koslow 1997, p 46), candle making, shoe polish, rubber composites, and textile processing. This growing European appetite for palm oil opened new economic opportunities for Dahomey and offered the possibility of replacing the declining slave trade with a legitimate and lucrative export market. (Jamieson 1943, p 341–342)

In 1849, the British naval officer Frederick Forbes visited Dahomey and attempted to convince Ahousou Gezo to abandon the slave trade with the Brazilians altogether. In exchange, he proposed a British-supported economic program focused on cultivating palm oil and developing an export-based oil industry that could provide Dahomey with steady income and international recognition. (Koslow 1997, p 46) Although Gezo was intrigued by the idea of a new source of wealth

and saw the strategic advantage of aligning with Britain, he remained cautious of falling under British economic dominance. He feared that the abrupt end of the slave trade would create a severe economic vacuum that could weaken his state and leave it vulnerable to foreign interference.

Therefore, Gezo adopted a pragmatic dual economic strategy. He gradually reduced slave trading while simultaneously encouraging his people to cultivate palm oil, ensuring that Dahomey could benefit from both markets during the transitional period. Instead of selling prisoners of war as slaves, he began employing them in agriculture, redirecting the kingdom's military practices toward the production of valuable cash crops. This calculated shift allowed Dahomey to maintain internal stability, preserve royal authority, and adapt to the emerging global trade realities. Gezo's policy demonstrates his acute political awareness: he understood that embracing new economic opportunities while cautiously disengaging from the slave trade was necessary to ensure the survival and sovereignty of his kingdom in a world increasingly dominated by European industrial and commercial power. (Koslow 1997, p 47)

CONCLUSION :

Europe has always depended on Africa—both in the past and in the present—for its natural and human resources. In earlier centuries, this dependency gave rise to the transatlantic slave trade, where the Kingdom of Dahomey became a key supplier of human labor. Through a system of organized warfare and slave raids, thousands of young African men and women were captured and forced across the Atlantic to work on plantations, dig mines, and build the wealth of European empires. The profits of this trade enriched European economies and provided Dahomey with temporary financial rewards, but these gains came at a tremendous human and social cost.

Although Dahomey experienced periods of economic growth from the slave trade, the long-term consequences were overwhelmingly destructive. The kingdom's focus on capturing and selling people diverted energy away from agriculture, industry, and education, leaving its economy fragile and dependent on foreign markets. Wars fought to secure captives weakened internal stability, while the loss of so many young people undermined demographic growth and the development of local skills. What appeared to be wealth in the short term ultimately delayed social and economic progress for generations.

Tragically, this pattern of exploitation has not disappeared. In modern times, new forms of economic dependency continue to draw young Africans across seas in search of work, often under dangerous or degrading conditions. Migration, resource extraction, and unfair trade practices repeat the same cycle in which Africa's people and resources are used without meaningful investment in their future.

The history of Dahomey therefore stands as a powerful warning. It shows that short-term profits gained through the sacrifice of human dignity bring only instability and loss in the long run. Remembering this past is not only an act of historical understanding but also a call to resist systems—old or new—that place economic gain above human life and social development.

Comments:

Comment 1: Because of the distance between two longitudinal lines being approximately 111.31 km, and the distance between two parallels of latitude being about 111.11 km, geographers were able to calculate with remarkable precision the total area and territorial extension of the Kingdom of Dahomey. This mathematical method, based on the measurements of meridians and parallels, was a standard practice in early 20th-century colonial cartography and provided European

explorers with a reliable way to describe African territories long before the advent of satellite mapping.

Comment 2: The Ouémé River was the most important river in Dahomey, both geographically and economically. Originating from the Atacora Mountains, it flows southward and eventually pours into the Atlantic Ocean, stretching over a length of roughly 500 km. Its two principal tributaries, the Zou and Ocpara, enriched the fertile valleys along its banks, making the region a vital zone for agriculture and trade. Historically, the Ouémé served not only as a natural transportation route but also as a strategic line of defense and a key artery for the movement of goods and enslaved individuals during the height of the Dahomean slave trade. (Gerber 1957, p 448; G-G-A-O-F 1906, p 37)

Comment 3: The Couffo River, a smaller yet strategically significant waterway in West Africa, originates from Lake Ahémé before pouring into the Atlantic Ocean. With a length of approximately 150 km, the river facilitated regional trade and communication between coastal and inland areas. Despite its modest size compared to the Ouémé, the Couffo played an essential role in the economic life of Dahomey by connecting agricultural zones to export markets. It also marked an important geographical boundary during conflicts with neighboring kingdoms. (Forlière 1902, p 12; Trouillet 1902, p 8; Maurice 1939, p 86)

Comment 4: J. F. Reste, the French colonial administrator mentioned here, served as Governor-General of the French colonies during the early 20th century. His writings reflect the French colonial perspective on West Africa, providing both geographical observations and political commentary. Reste's accounts remain a valuable, though Eurocentric, source for understanding how colonial officials interpreted the strategic importance of Dahomey within the broader context of French expansion in West Africa. (Reste 1934, p 2)

Comment 5: The Yoruba area is the largest in the Mono-Niger region. It includes today's Nigerian states of Ogun, Lagos, Oyo, and Ondo, and about half of Kwara State. It also covers nearby areas in eastern Benin and central Togo to the west. (Asiwaju 1989, p 700)

Comment 6: In the Kingdom of Dahomey, they called the king "Ahouso", and Gezo was the ninth Ahousou of Dahomey (1818- 1858). The Kingdom regained its power when he took the throne. He was very popular, which gave him a good opportunity to carry out economic and military reforms. (Davidson 1977, p233) , (Reste 1934, p 25)

Comment 7: He is Portuguese from Dahomy mother, he was employed in the kingdom, his task was to negotiate with European merchants in Wydah. (Koslow 1997, p 46)

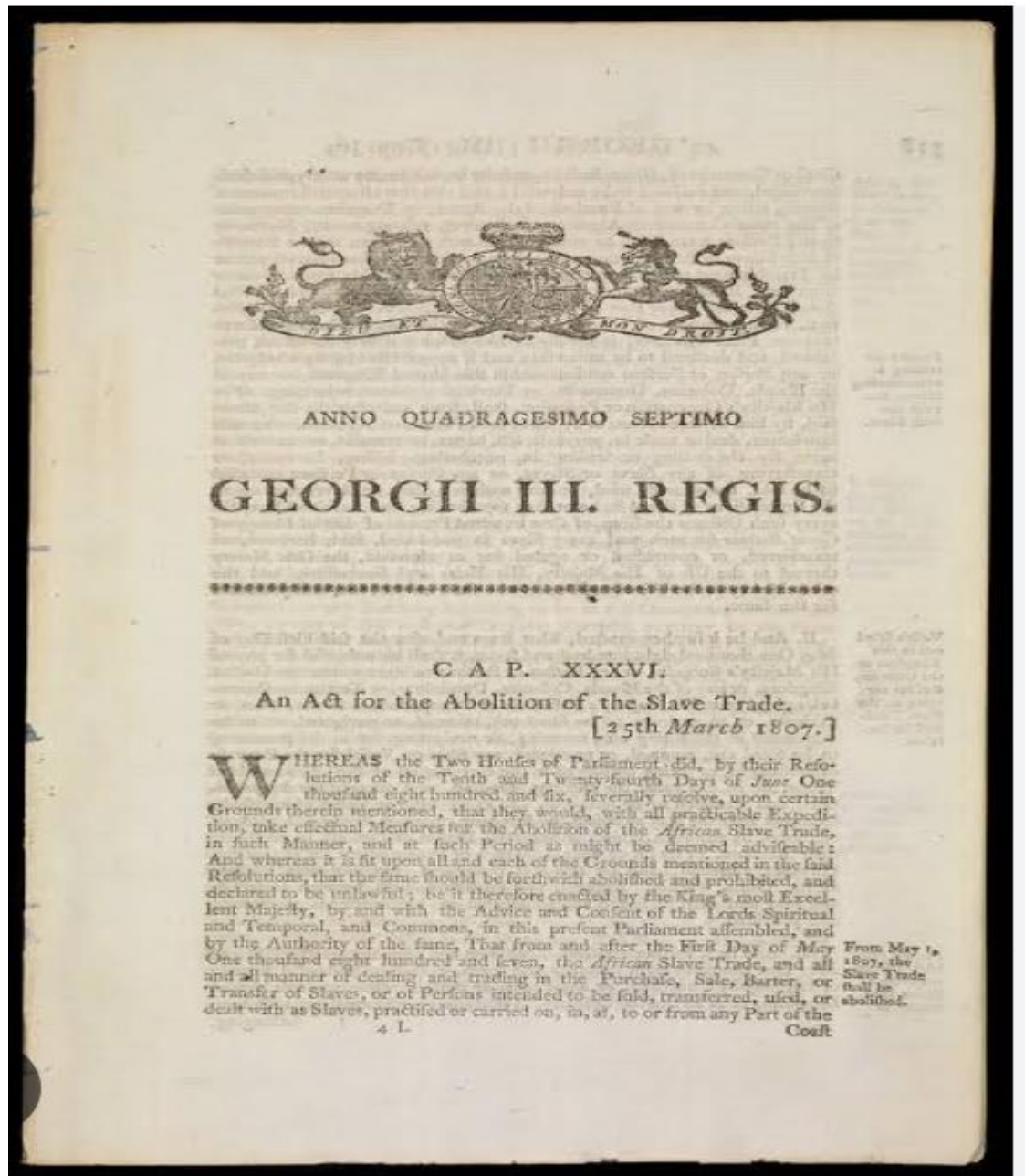
Appendices:

-Appendix 1: Map of the Kingdom of Dahomey at its Greatest Extent in the 19th Century



Source: Alpern 2011, p p 14- 15.

- **Appendix 2:** The First Page of the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade
(25th March 1807)



Source: <https://www.rmg.co.uk>(Royal Museums Greenwich)

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3. Internet websites: <https://www.rmg.co.uk>(Royal Museums Greenwich)