

Chapter 5

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Forgetting and Remembering the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Legacy of Brazilian Slave Merchant Francisco Félix de Souza

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Brazilian slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza (1754-1849) plied his trade between Brazil and the west African kingdom of Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin. Since the 1960s, de Souza's biography has been the object of numerous studies.¹ However, most scholars have not yet considered the visibility he acquired as a result of official projects to promote the memory of slavery in the Republic of Benin. Of greater significance than the bare facts, de Souza's biography offers us a methodological example of how to deal with the old opposition between oral tradition and written sources. It questions the relationship between memory and the writing of history.

In recent years, Robin Law has questioned the key political and economic role usually assigned to de Souza in the history of Benin.² De Souza's image seems disproportionate to his real place in the slave trade in the Bight of Benin. Even if new evidence indicates that many other merchants were more prosperous, de Souza continues to occupy a central place in the memory of the slave trade, not only in Benin but in the whole South Atlantic region. What elements allowed the merchant's memory to survive? Why

and how did Francisco Félix de Souza become a symbol of the exchanges between Bahia and the Bight of Benin? How did his identity become mythologized as a founder and reference point for the Afro-Luso-Brazilian community in Benin? How can collective memory and family memory reconcile his dual roles as slave merchant and philanthropist? What role does Brazil have in the reconstruction of de Souza's myth? By analyzing historical documents, interviewing members of the de Souza family, and examining the memorial of Francisco Félix de Souza at the de Souza family compound of Singbomey in the Benin coastal city of Ouidah, I attempt to answer these questions.

Trans-National Memories of Slavery

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At the beginning of the 1990s, the memorialization of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade came to constitute a transnational movement that reached beyond the Americas and Europe. In Benin, the emergence of a debate about the slave past was followed by the development of a number of official projects, carried out by the Benin government and by international agencies including UNESCO and non-governmental organizations. Even local elites, connected to some extent to the slave trade of the past, were part of this new movement. Many descendants of Brazilian and Portuguese slave merchants, along with the descendants of former slaves who returned to West Africa from Brazil, started promoting their past in the public space, contributing to the success of the memorialization phenomenon.

The emergence of the memory of slavery in Benin is associated with the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. At the time, it was argued that little attention was being given to the Atlantic slave trade and the contribution of Africans to the construction of the Americas. This debate gave rise to two distinct initiatives: a transnational scientific venture entitled "The Slave Route" project, and a Vodun festival entitled *Ouidah 92*, which focused on religion and aimed in part to increase tourism. The two projects were to some extent combined, and both received the support of UNESCO and of Benin's new government.³

In 1991, after more than twenty years of Marxist-Leninist military dictatorship, democratic elections had been held and Nicéphore Soglo elected president of Benin. The new government sought not only to promote religious freedom but also to develop the national economy by attracting tourists. In this context, both the Vodun religion and the transatlantic slave trade became the focus of programs aimed at developing cultural tourism.⁴ The new projects emphasized the material and non-material heritage of the slave trade through forms of commemoration, the construction of monuments, and the creation of family museums. These projects were controversial,⁵ resulting in a widespread debate covered in the local newspapers.⁶ In Ouidah, it is possible to grasp the multiple dimensions of the memory of slavery, expressed on the one hand by the descendants of slaves, and on the other by the descendants of those who were responsible for the slave trade. The memory of slavery is inscribed in the physical and political landscape, which is divided by conflicts that are not always perceived by visitors and tourists. In this context, the family of the Brazilian slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza, which still occupies an important position within Ouidah society, has been playing a crucial role in this memorialization movement.

Francisco Félix de Souza's biography sheds light on the existence of plural memories of slavery. Though they sometimes converge, these multiple memories very often present dissonant elements. In the Republic of Benin, a specific memory is visible in the discourses of the descendants of former slaves and slave traders. Because these individuals did not live the experience of their ancestors, however, studying their memories entails dealing with mediators: the witness no longer exists.

As Marianne Hirsch has stated, "postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated."⁷ In this context of mediated memory, the notion of heritage, material or non-material, is unavoidable, because heritage is an inheritance that actively participates in the transmission of identity.⁸ For the heirs of slavery (those who claim to be, directly or indirectly, the

descendants of slaves), the memory is marked by rupture and gaps. Among the descendants of the perpetrators of slavery (masters, slave merchants, and other collaborators), memory is rather characterized by continuity. The families of the slave merchants of American or European origin who established themselves on the West African coasts during the period of the slave trade have been able to preserve their bonds with the cities where their ancestors settled while also preserving ties with the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. These ongoing connections and the wealth these families accumulated via the transatlantic slave trade have allowed them to perpetuate their personal and family possessions: houses, furniture, objects, photographs, and so forth. The stability of their elite position in the local society has helped them to preserve cultural and religious practices associated with their Brazilian or Portuguese community of origin, by means of incorporating indigenous customs into these practices. This deep South Atlantic identity, largely based on Luso-Brazilian traditions associating paternalism and Catholicism, is solid but at the same time flexible and mixed because of its openness to reciprocal exchanges.⁹

The Brazilian Slave Trade and Slavery

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The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in the Gulf of Guinea. In 1721, they founded the fort São João Batista da Ajuda in Ouidah. In 1727, the kingdom of Dahomey conquered the kingdom of Hueda, seized Ouidah, and gained direct access to the coast. During the period of the slave trade, Ouidah became, after Luanda, the most important African slave port.¹⁰

The enslaved Africans sent to Brazil came from different regions commercially controlled by the Portuguese. The majority of them were captured in West Central Africa (mainly Angola), though some came from the Gulf of Guinea (including the Bight of Benin); by the end of the eighteenth century, they also came from Mozambique in East Africa.¹¹ In the South Atlantic region, especially between Angola and Brazil, slave voyages were direct instead of following the traditional triangular model.

Starting at the end of the seventeenth century, the Brazilian slave system relied on the one hand on the importation of large numbers of slaves, and on the other hand on a large number of

manumissions.¹² Recent estimations indicate that between 1550 and 1850, Brazil imported more than 5 million enslaved Africans, the largest number in all the Americas.¹³ In cities like Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, slaves constituted almost half of the population. They performed many different kinds of activities: they were domestic servants, merchants, shoemakers, surgeons, barbers, carriers, artisans, artists, tailors, and so on.

In 1835, Africans in Bahia numbered 21,940 out of a total population of 65,000, of whom 17,325 (26.5 percent) were slaves and 4,615 (7.1 percent) were freed former slaves.¹⁴ During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, most of the 7,000 Africans who arrived each year in Bahia were Yoruba-speaking people from the regions that now form Nigeria and the Republic of Benin.¹⁵ These Yoruba and, in much smaller proportion, Hausa populations were captured during the wars between the Fulani and the states dominated by the kingdom of Oyo.

Muslims were a minority in Bahia but had religious freedom to some extent and were able to organize themselves into various groups. Although they belonged to many distinct ethnic groups, African Muslims were all referred to as Malês. The origin of this term derives from the Yoruba word *imale*, meaning Muslim. The large Yoruba population, and the Hausa presence, played a role in the Malês uprising of 1835 in Bahia.¹⁶ Many participants in the uprising were familiar with the Qu'ran. They carried amulets, they were able read and write in Arabic, and many wore long white robes called *abadas*. After the rebellion's defeat in 1835, deportation to the Bight of Benin was the most common penalty imposed on free Africans alleged to have participated in the rebellion but against whom the Bahian government had no evidence.¹⁷ Former slaves continued this movement of return throughout the nineteenth century until the very beginning of the twentieth century.

The Formation of an Afro-Luso-Brazilian Community

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Between 3,000 and 8,000 former slaves returned to the Bight of Benin. Once in West Africa, they settled in the coastal towns in what is now the Republic of Benin (Petit Popo, Grand Popo, Agoué, Ouidah, Cotonou, and Porto-Novo) as well as in the cities

of what is now Nigeria (Badagry and Lagos). Here, they joined Portuguese and Brazilian slave merchants already established in the region, forming a community that came to be called Aguda. In Ouidah, Francisco Félix de Souza supported former slaves and helped them to settle in several neighborhoods of Ouidah: Maro, Brazil, Quénúm, Zomaï, and Boya.¹⁸

In Benin, the Aguda represent 5-10 percent of the current population.¹⁹ However, they are not a homogeneous community: among them are descendants of former returned slaves, descendants of Brazilian and Portuguese slave merchants, and descendants of the slaves kept by these two groups, who were later assimilated by them. These assimilated descendants carry the Portuguese names of their old Brazilian masters, and they share Brazilian customs and culture.²⁰ The Aguda are Catholic, but among the former returned slaves were also Muslims and adherents of traditional religions such as Vodun and Orisha worship.²¹ African-born former slaves belonged to various ethnic groups and had several different native languages, but spoke mainly Yoruba or one of Gbe languages.

Despite these distinctions, all the former slaves had a common past marked by enslavement and their experiences in Brazil. Unlike the indigenous population, they were baptized, carried Portuguese names such as Silva, Reis, Assunção, Almeida, Santos, Cruz, Paraíso, Oliveira, and Souza, dressed in European fashion, and had so-called white manners. In the early days, the Aguda often chose to marry within their community, in order to preserve its cohesion. These former slaves brought from Brazil a particular cuisine, including dishes such as *feijoada* (beans and several kinds of pork, similar to the French *cassoulet*), *cozido* (boiled meat and vegetables), and *acará* (deep-fried dough made with white beans). The Aguda community also marked its presence in the public space through the development of a vernacular architecture inspired by Luso-Brazilian houses. In Benin, the construction of these “Brazilian” houses, which typically had two storeys and a veranda, exerted an influence on the local community, which adopted some decorative elements of this style.²²

Once settled in the Bight of Benin, these former slaves attempted to continue following the model of the Brazilian slave

society, and not only in customs and culture; many former slaves became slave merchants. Even if they were not able to amass great fortunes, as other slave merchants of the region did, some became prosperous. By 1850, several former returned slaves were actively involved in the slave trade at Ouidah, Agoué, and Porto-Novo.²³

The former slaves also brought to the region Catholic brotherhoods such as the *Nosso Senhor do Bom Fim*, which had helped to free numerous slaves in Bahia. They also reproduced on African soil the *bouryan*, a masquerade popular in the Brazilian north-east and very similar to the *bumba-meu-boi*. Today, by preparing dishes inspired by Bahian cuisine, singing songs in an approximation of Portuguese,²⁴ and dancing the samba, the Aguda keep alive an Atlantic memory.

The indigenous population perceived the Aguda as a more educated and civilized group because of their different manners. Their Westernization was seen as assimilation and denial of their African origins, and this apparent “superiority” was not always well accepted by the local population. As being an Aguda meant belonging to a modern bourgeoisie, some indigenous families sought to follow or even imitate the Aguda way of life, sometimes by adopting Portuguese names.

In 1892, the regions constituting the kingdom of Dahomey and the kingdom of Porto-Novo were conquered and became part of the French colony of Dahomey. The end of the slave trade had led to a decrease in prosperity in the Aguda community. However, they were now able to forge a new place in the colonial society. Still connected to a Brazilian culture, they perceived the European presence as an advantage.²⁵ Many of their descendants continued to perform the professional activities their ancestors had in Brazil (as carpenters, tailors, and masons) and others occupied administrative positions (as clerks, interpreters, and traders).²⁶ They collaborated with the French regime and received favors in exchange, consolidating their privileged place in the colonial society. The pages of the *Journal officiel de la colonie du Dahomey* not only identify the names of several members of the Aguda community who held administrative positions during the colonial period but also thus reveal the extent to which they endorsed the colonial regime.²⁷

After the independence of Dahomey in August 1960, the Aguda definitely lost their influence. With the emergence of national sentiment, they were perceived as having collaborated with the French regime. When General Mathieu Kérékou became president of the country in 1972 and established a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship, the economic and social changes had a negative effect on the most prosperous Aguda families. Those who opposed the new regime, such as Francisca Patterson (born Medeiros), were sent to prison,²⁸ while other businessmen, such as Urbain-Karim-Elisio da Silva, considered leaving the country.²⁹

In 1990, several distinguished members of the Aguda community, including Monsignor Isidore de Souza (1934-1999), archbishop of Cotonou, actively participated in the organization of the National Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation, which established the means for a democratic transition of power and prepared the schedule for presidential elections.³⁰ With the end of the dictatorship and the development of projects to promote Vodun cultures and religions and to memorialize slavery, some members of the Aguda community regained prestige and visibility on the political scene. This was true of Vieyra family, whose ancestor Sabino Vieyra was a former slave who had “returned” from Rio de Janeiro. Rosine Vieyra Soglo, the wife of President Nicéphore Soglo, was elected a deputy in the 1990s and participated in her husband’s government, while during the same period her brother, Désiré Vieyra, was appointed minister of culture.

The international attention Benin received over projects to promote Vodun and African cultures and to recuperate the memory of slavery and the slave trade played a large part in creating the opportunity for some Aguda to gain back political prestige following the National Conference. By claiming their Brazilian identity, the Aguda were encouraged to talk publicly about slavery, formerly a difficult subject. However, in emphasizing the slave past the Aguda did not insist on the elements they shared with the descendants of slave merchants but rather on their differences. From this perspective, conceiving a common Brazilian memory is sometimes a complicated task because it means erasing the plurality of the memories of slavery.³¹

Embracing the memorialization movement, the Aguda promoted their history and their heritage. American tourists and Brazilian authorities traveling to Porto-Novo and Ouidah visit the most important Aguda families. The Aguda continue to emphasize the centrality of their connections with Brazil, but this is no longer a naïve enterprise. Brazil is now a new power, different from the old French colonizer. It represents not only a link with the past but also a promise of a future, a horizon of hope.

The Brazilian Slave Merchant

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Francisco Félix de Souza is considered the founder of the Aguda community in Benin. He may have been born in 1754 in Salvador, Bahia,³² but we know very little about the period prior to his settlement in Ouidah. Family tradition represents him as a typical Brazilian rich man. He is described as white, with Portuguese ancestors on his father's side but native Amazonian heritage from his mother. Although Amazonia was almost unknown territory at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, the rainforest is often present in the family discourse as the symbol of an imagined Brazil, rich in natural resources. Simone de Souza, a historian who is member of Souza family, for example, describes Francisco Félix de Souza as a member of a noble family composed mainly of military and administration employees. According to her, the Brazilian merchant was an eighth generation descendant of the Portuguese officer Tomé de Souza (1503–1573 or 1579), the first governor general of Brazil and the founder of Salvador.³³ Today, this version has been slightly modified by the family and Francisco Félix de Souza is said to be the grandson of Tomé de Souza, even though this claim is incompatible with the death of the governor almost two hundred years before de Souza's birth.³⁴ This revision is an attempt to fill in the lack of information about de Souza's early life, thus contributing to the reconstruction of his memory.

De Souza came to the coast of Western Africa for the first time in 1792.³⁵ He spent three years in the region, returned to Brazil, and then came back to settle permanently in Africa by 1800. In Ouidah, he may have served as governor of the Portuguese fort, a post left vacant by the death of his brother, Jacinto José de Souza.³⁶

Some years later, he left this position to become a private slave merchant.³⁷ According to travelers who met de Souza, he was so poor when he first arrived in Africa that he was obliged to steal the cowries given as offerings at Vodun shrines.³⁸

Once in Ouidah, de Souza clashed with Adandozan (r. 1797-1818), the king of Dahomey, probably because of a debt that Adandozan owed him. The tradition says that de Souza went to Abomey, the capital of Dahomey, to claim the money, but the king sent him to prison.³⁹ According to tradition, to punish de Souza the jailers plunged him in a large jar of indigo. This operation was repeated several times over many weeks.⁴⁰ In prison, de Souza is said to have met Prince Gakpé, one of the sons of King Agonglo (r. 1789-1797), who had been murdered in 1797. Gakpé visited de Souza in prison and together they decided to gather their forces to fight Adandozan. To confirm their alliance, the tradition states they made a blood pact, a well-known practice in the old kingdom of Dahomey.⁴¹

De Souza escaped from prison and probably settled in Little Popo (modern-day Anécho). From there, he supplied Prince Gakpé with guns and goods, allowing him to prepare the *coup d'état*.⁴² Adandozan was deposed in 1818, and Prince Gakpé became King Gezo (r. 1818-1850). The new king invited de Souza to settle in Ouidah and take charge of the kingdom's commercial affairs. De Souza adopted the title "chacha," an honorific title associated with the nickname he had received when he escaped from prison with the help of his allies.⁴³ According to tradition, the Dahomean guards asked de Souza's men what they were carrying out of the prison. They replied that it was a *chacha*, meaning "mat."⁴⁴ However, this version of the story is unlikely, as in the Fon language spoken in the kingdom of Dahomey, the word for "mat" is *zàn*. In the Fon language the word *chacha* (written *cacà*) actually means "quickly done."⁴⁵ It is probably an adaptation of *jà jà*, a Portuguese expression meaning "quick, quick," that de Souza used to repeat. Eventually, *chacha* came to be a hereditary title given to the highest-ranking representative of the Souza family. After the death of the first *chacha*, the king of Dahomey nominated his successor.

The position occupied by Francisco Félix de Souza is commonly equated with that of viceroy.⁴⁶ In recent years, however, local tradition, which usually designates de Souza as the chief of

the whites, has been questioned by Robin Law, who reminds us that this position, also known as the *yovogan*, was always filled by a native.⁴⁷ The exaggeration of de Souza's status can be attributed in part to British travelers who described him as a rich and powerful man. However, these same travel accounts indicate that when European visitors arrived in Ouidah, they first met the *yovogan*, and only after this first meeting visited the *chacha*. Thus, de Souza was in fact a local chief, or *caboceer*.⁴⁸ Even if the term viceroy does not accurately define de Souza's function, Alberto da Costa e Silva has observed that in the context of an autocracy, "being the king's commercial agent was a political function."⁴⁹ Thus, it is not surprising that de Souza was perceived as an actor of great importance in Dahomean society.

The period of Gezo's rule and de Souza's appointment as his agent coincided with the slow decline of the transatlantic slave trade and a transition to the palm oil trade. Until the 1830s, de Souza was a very prosperous man who owned several slave ships.⁵⁰ However, in the 1840s, his activities considerably decreased, partly because of his advanced age and partly because of repressive measures against the slave trade imposed by the British navy, which confiscated twenty-two of his slave ships.⁵¹ At the time of his death in 1849, de Souza had significant debts with King Gezo as well as with Brazilian and Cuban merchants. According to some members of the family, when de Souza died, the king of Dahomey sent his agents to his residence to seize his possessions.

The Memorial at Singbomey

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Singbomey, the de Souza family compound, is located in the Brazil neighborhood of Ouidah, where de Souza and some Aguda families settled during the first half of the nineteenth century. At the end of the courtyard are two large houses painted in reddish-orange inspired by the Brazilian vernacular architecture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Inside the two single-storey buildings, formerly part of de Souza's residence, is a memorial. Although it has existed for many years, it became accessible to the public only in the 1990s, when Honoré Feliciano Julião de Souza was appointed *Chacha VIII*.

When I visited the memorial in the company of Christian de Souza and David de Souza⁵² they were evidently trying to rehabilitate the memory of their ancestor, framing him not as a slave trader but as a great entrepreneur.⁵³ They emphasized the family's bonds with Brazil, and justified the merchant's activities by insisting that slave trading was a legal activity at the time. According to the family's point of view, de Souza contributed to the development of Africa by introducing new goods and new crops to the region, including the oil palm tree.

The various accounts I collected during my interviews indicate that the history of Francisco Félix de Souza's family includes betrayal of each other, and collaboration with the Europeans in exchange for political power. The existence of different interest groups within the family often created serious conflicts; some episodes involve suspicious deaths, probably the result of poisoning. Disagreements with the royalty of Dahomey also deeply mark the family's memory. There is still a belief that marriage between a de Souza and a Fon from Abomey will be unsuccessful and may have serious consequences such as illness and divorce. One older woman in the de Souza family told me that her daughter was deeply depressed because of her marriage to a Fon from Abomey.⁵⁴ According to the various accounts circulating, those who did not listen to the family warnings regretted it later. It seems that even if the blood pact with King Gezo was profitable, its price was very high.

While visiting the memorial, one sees the intersection among several memories related not only to slavery and Dahomean royalty but also to the exchange between Dahomey and Brazil. Christian de Souza noted that the official history stresses the opposition between King Gezo "the builder" and Francisco Félix de Souza "the slave merchant," but Christian de Souza himself minimizes the conflicts between the family and the royalty of Dahomey, instead putting the accent on the collaboration between them.

According to the family, de Souza rescued Na Agontimé,⁵⁵ a wife of King Agonglo and reputedly the mother of King Gezo, from slavery. After the murder of her husband, Na Agontimé is said to have been sold as a slave and sent to Brazil by King Adandozan. Although there is a lack of written evidence confirming this event,

several deities of the kings of Dahomey are present in the Vodun practiced at the temple Casa das Minas in the Brazilian state of Maranhão.⁵⁶ These deities existed prior to King Agonglo and were not “borrowed” from the neighboring states during the wars.⁵⁷ According to the story accepted by some scholars such as Melville Herskovits and Pierre Verger, Na Agontimé introduced the Vodun of Abomey to Brazil.⁵⁸ By allegedly liberating the king’s mother, Francisco Félix de Souza transformed the rupture provoked by the transatlantic slave trade into a fruitful connection with Brazil.

Despite this tradition, no evidence confirms that de Souza actually travelled to Brazil to search for Na Agontimé. In 1821, he obtained a passport allowing him to visit his homeland, but he did not embark to Brazil and it is hard to explain why he did not attempt the trip later.⁵⁹ There are two possibilities: either King Gezo prevented de Souza from leaving Dahomey, or the slave merchant had legal problems that prevented him from entering Brazil. King Gezo probably sent one of de Souza’s employees, Dossou-Yovo, one of the men who may have helped de Souza escape from Abomey’s prison.⁶⁰

Christian de Souza and David de Souza reinforce the idea that their ancestor was a virile man. According to them, Francisco Félix de Souza had 201 children: 106 daughters and 95 sons. They ascribe this remarkable progeny not to his wealth or the great number of slaves he owned but to his extraordinary physical force. Because of his reputation as a prosperous man, many people living in Ouidah today claim to be his descendants. Physical strength and seductive qualities are traits assigned to him not only in the family discourse but also in works of fiction such as Bruce Chatwin’s novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980) and Werner Herzog’s film adaptation *Cobra Verde* (1987). In the film, the Brazilian merchant terrifies other men and attracts beautiful women without having to say a single word.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Dahomean monarchy was abolished under French rule, the de Souza family as an assembly became responsible for choosing the chacha. By this time the family had lost much of its influence and its internal divisions had increased. The difficulty in electing the highest representative of the family led to long periods of vacancy.

The Healer Ancestor

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Inside the memorial, Francisco Félix de Souza's old bedroom is still intact. In it one finds not only his original Brazilian wood bed, freshly made each day as if he were alive, but also his tomb. The room reinforces the idea that he remains among his family members. According to David de Souza, when his ancestor died, the king of Dahomey "sent a dozen slaves, a dozen men to be buried alive at the same time as the merchant, but his children said 'there is no question, we do not support this kind of thing,' ... and the men were freed."⁶¹ Despite family opposition, de Souza received all the honors related to the funeral of a great Dahomean chief: four individuals were sacrificed, two on the beach and two others on his tomb.⁶² The account of this episode presents a Westernized and humane image of the family, which rejected both local religious practices and the cruelty practiced against the slaves.

The de Souzas are said to be Catholic, but when their ancestor settled in Ouidah, King Gezo ordered the installation of several Vodun shrines in the city to protect him. Close to the tomb of Francisco Félix de Souza is a large ceramic jar that may have been brought by him from Brazil. This jar contains water, used in libation rituals aimed at healing members of the family.⁶³ In this context, the ancestor himself becomes a sort of vodun, a divinity who is able to heal. In the Vodun religion, the spirit or divinity must be located in a precise physical space. The presence of Francisco Félix de Souza in his former room is ensured by his tomb, while water from the earthenware jar produces the cure. This room has become a major symbol of the original bond with Brazil as well as the political influence still exerted by the de Souza family over the Aguda community and other communities in Ouidah. This sanctification of Francisco Félix de Souza increases the family's authority, which reaches beyond the political, economic, and family arenas to also gain a religious dimension.

Like other elite families of Ouidah, the de Souzas owned slaves brought from the neighboring areas and used in the local economy. They were employed in agricultural and household activities. Those who were initiated into the Fa or Egungun and Zangbeto forms of worship were given religious roles. For example, an ancestor of the Olougoudou family who belonged to

the royal family of Abeokuta was brought to Ouidah in 1830, at the time of the illegal export slave trade. According to the historian and professor, Emile Olougoudou, his ancestor was in a slave ship whose final destination was the Americas. While skirting the West African coast, the ship ran into difficulties and went to Ouidah. According to Olougoudou, de Souza bought all six hundred slaves who were on board, thereby “saving” them from being sent into slavery in the Americas.⁶⁴

Olougoudou’s account suggests that far from being perceived negatively by his slaves, de Souza was rather seen as helping them. This image is similar to the one presented in British travelogues of the time. According to Frederick Forbes, de Souza’s values differed from those of the indigenous population; for example, he was opposed to human sacrifice.⁶⁵ The de Souza family perpetuates this aspect of his reputation, as evidenced in David de Souza’s words:

When the slaves were brought to Ouidah to be sold, some families recognized their members. They used to ask Chacha to help them recover the captive who was to be sold and sent overseas. In the praise names [the panegyrics] there is a particular word hailing Dom Francisco Félix de Souza. We say, the one who re-buys the slave and gives him back to his family [...] is the one who saves the slave.⁶⁶

Indeed, David de Souza referred to *é plé vi plé nò*, which means “he used to buy the child and the child’s mother.” However, by the 1990s, when Honoré Feliciano Julião de Souza was appointed Chacha VIII, this portion of the praise name has been suppressed because it clearly referred to commerce in human beings. Although buying the child and its mother can be interpreted as an attempt to prevent family members from being separated, it can also be understood as a demonstration of how rich the Brazilian merchant was; he could buy many members of the same family. The memory of Chacha I is thus reconstructed according to moral values belonging to the present. He is depicted as concerned with human rights and disposed to liberate his slaves. However, it seems this idea is not new. In his account of his travels, John Duncan reported that de Souza was benevolent to his slaves.⁶⁷ Indeed, some travel-

ers who met him mentioned that de Souza considered himself a great philanthropist, “on the grounds of having saved the lives of the slaves whom he purchased for export” and consequently prevented them from being sacrificed.⁶⁸

About one hundred meters from Singbomey, on the road towards the beach, is the temple of Dagoun, the vodun of Francisco Félix de Souza. Although he was Catholic, the merchant was the only Aguda who had his own vodun. According to the most reliable version of Dagoun’s origin, when King Gezo invited de Souza to settle in Ouidah, he gave him two voduns to protect the city; the first was installed at the entrance to the city, and the second was placed at the exit. He was ultimately awarded a third vodun for his personal protection: Dagoun.⁶⁹

Today, the descendants of the religious chiefs sent to Ouidah during Gezo’s reign still remain close to the de Souza family.⁷⁰ The relationship between the merchant’s family and Dahomean royalty was not always positive, and the presence of the traditional chiefs sent by the king of Dahomey was part of this combative relationship. Through them the king was able to exert his control over the family. The current chacha conserves his authority over the traditional shrines overseen by the religious chiefs of the Brazilian quarter. Unlike the chiefs of other shrines, the chief of Dagoun’s shrine is chosen by the council of the de Souza family, and not by the Vodun’s supreme leader.

Updating the Memory of Francisco Félix de Souza

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The rehabilitation of the memory of Francisco Félix de Souza started about fifteen years ago, when Chacha VIII was nominated. Today, the family members openly discuss the slave trade. Many of them believe that de Souza and his children cannot be condemned for the past involvement of the family in the slave trade. They think one should not judge the past through the eyes of the present and note that the slave trade was a legal form of commerce at the time, although Francisco Félix de Souza and his children are known to have continued their slave trading activities until the 1850s, when it had become illegal. In spite of these justifications, in order to rebuild the memory of their ancestor and to gain politi-

cal capital it has been necessary for family members to obscure the slave trading aspect of de Souza's biography.

In recent years, probably because of the repercussions of "Ouidah 92" and the launch of The Slave Route project by UNESCO, discussing the slave past is no longer taboo in Benin. However, slavery within Africa and the Muslim slave trade are absent from this public memorialization. Slavery on African soil is still seen as more humane and benevolent, and thus more acceptable, than the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. However, we know that with the intensification of the transatlantic slave trade the nature of slavery in Africa changed, and slavery became a central institution in many African societies.⁷¹

Robin Law claims that during the first half of the nineteenth century Francisco Félix de Souza was not the only important merchant in Ouidah. Several other successful slave traders established themselves in the town, including Joaquim Teles de Menezes, Juan José Zangronis, Joaquim d'Almeida, and Domingos José Martins. Although his examination of Ouidah slave trade networks is a detailed one, Law neglected an essential dimension related to memory rather than to history, specifically how Francisco Félix de Souza became a mythical figure in the history of Ouidah and of the kingdom of Dahomey despite being only one of many actors in the region's slave trade. Élisée Soumonni and Alberto da Costa e Silva have put forth some important points with respect to this issue. They note that de Souza played a central role during the transition to the palm oil trade, which contributed to the establishment of his reputation. For a long time, he was perceived as the "protector" of the Aguda community. The local population considered him Westernized and more evolved than the indigenous population. He was able to exercise this role thanks to the appointment conferred on him by King Gezo. This position contributed to the construction of his reputation as a generous and benevolent man. In spite of his Brazilian ancestry, Francisco Félix de Souza became a perfect African chief.⁷²

The myth around him is based on the bonds and exchanges between Brazil and the kingdom of Dahomey. In the framework of the construction of a South Atlantic zone, marked by the disruption provoked by the Atlantic slave trade, de Souza is no longer

the slave trader who became rich by buying and selling human beings but the benevolent patron who preserved a flexible Brazilian identity and who allowed the community of former Brazilian “returned” slaves to find their native Africa.

Although de Souza was not the only active and prosperous merchant in the territory of the old kingdom of Dahomey, he made his mark on the history of the slave trade in the area by becoming an important reference for the Aguda community and also a genuine myth. Today, the reconstruction of his memory is based on the reconstitution of the region’s connections with Brazil. The evolution of the myth of Francisco Félix de Souza is also the result of the work of historians and anthropologists, who have privileged the study of relations between Bahia and the Bight of Benin even though the majority of the slaves brought to Brazil came from West Central Africa.

Even though de Souza and his descendants have been having children with African women since the merchant first arrived in Africa, there seems to persist among the family members an idea of “biological” authenticity. This idea is not associated with racial purity but rather with a certain “Brazilianity,” which here refers to hybridity and miscegenation. The de Souza myth borrows from the Brazilian founder myth of the three races: the origin of the family is based on the encounter of a white Brazilian of Portuguese origin and an Amerindian woman, who gave birth to a genuine Brazilian individual, who then perfectly adapted himself to the African context. “Smoothed by the oil of the deep miscegenation,”⁷³ this hybridity allowed de Souza to forge an idealized “Brazilian” identity which combined Catholicism, paternalism, polygamy, and African religions, and therefore incorporated different cultures and traditions.

The construction of this myth was possible thanks to several political and economic factors, including de Souza’s wealth and his position during a crucial period of the involvement of Dahomey in the Atlantic slave trade. Over the years, the religious aspect of this myth has played an important role in consolidating de Souza’s position as a kind of viceroy. De Souza introduced Catholicism to Dahomey but also inserted himself into local religious practices. The most important representative of the Afro-Luso-Brazilian

community in Ouidah, Francisco Félix de Souza was gradually Africanized. He symbolizes the idea of mixed identity based on bonds with an imaginary or imagined Brazil. These elements, which form the basis of the myth, are reinforced by the present wave of memorialization and the new importance being accorded to local chiefs, allowing the de Souza family to regain political power lost since the decolonization of Benin.⁷⁴

In a globalized world, in which slavery and the slave trade are considered crimes against humanity, the de Souza family has succeeded in reinforcing its position of legitimacy, although not necessarily at the economic and political levels. Its new symbolic position relies on its Brazilian origins and on the celebration of “miscegenation” and the encounter of cultures. Paradoxically, the official projects of UNESCO have helped to commemorate not only the victims of slave trade but also those who enslaved and sold them. Through a process of reconstructing the memory of the ancestor, endorsed by these official projects, the de Souza family is slowly recovering its political capital. If celebrating a slave trader is inconceivable from a Western point of view, in the African context it is better accepted because the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas are not perceived also as an African problem. Moreover, slave trade and slavery on African soil are part of a recent history in which multiple actors were involved, making difficult distinguish victims and perpetrators.

The valorization of the memory of Francisco Félix de Souza, relying on the idea that he was not only the most important slave merchant of the region but also a protector of the weak, is a relatively successful enterprise among the local population. Nevertheless, certain tourists, in particular African Americans and those whose populations that provided a great number of captives to the slave trade, such as the Ketu and Savalu, strongly contest this historical reconstruction.

Notes

1. See David Ross, “The First Chacha of Whydah: Francisco Félix de Souza,” *Odu* 2 (1969), 19-28; Robin Law, “A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza na África Ocidental (1800-1849),” *Topoi* (2001),

- 9-39; Alberto da Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza, mercador de escravos* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2004).
2. See Law, “A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza;” Law, “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Local History Writing in Ouidah,” in *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History*, ed. Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008); and Robin Law, *Ouidah, The Social History of a West African Slaving “Port,” 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).
 3. See Emmanuelle Kadya Tall, “De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin,” *Cahiers d'études africaines* 137 (1995), 195-208; Ana Lucia Araujo, “Mémoires de l’esclavage et de la traite des esclaves dans l’Atlantique Sud: enjeux de la patrimonialisation au Brésil et au Bénin” (PhD diss., Université Laval, 2007), and Ana Lucia Araujo, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010).
 4. Vodun religion comprises different deities who personalize the forces of nature. The word *vodun* also means “deity.” According to Suzanne Preston Blier, *vodun* are “mysterious forces or powers that govern the world and the lives of those who reside within it;” see *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.
 5. See Tall, “De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin” and Nassirou Bako-Arifari, “La mémoire de la traite négrière dans le débat politique au Bénin dans les années 1990,” *Journal des Africanistes* 70, no. 1-2 (2000), 221-231.
 6. Araujo, “Mémoires de l’esclavage et de la traite des esclaves dans l’Atlantique Sud,” 156.
 7. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames, Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.
 8. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Patrimonialiser les mémoires pour accorder à la souffrance la reconnaissance qu’elle mérite” in *Traumatisme collectif pour patrimoine: Regards croisés sur un mouvement transnational*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Vincent Auzas (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2008), 7.
 9. Gilberto Freyre was one of the first scholars to insist on this particular feature of the Portuguese colonization in the South Atlantic.

See Freyre, *Casa Grande & Senzala* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2003 [1933]).

10. See Law, *Ouidah*, 2 and Paul E. Lovejoy, “The Context of Enslavement in West Africa: Ahmad Bābā and the Ethics of Slavery,” in *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Jane Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 25.
11. Herbert Klein, “Tráfico de escravos,” in *Estatísticas Históricas do Brasil, Séries econômicas, demográficas e sociais de 1500 a 1985* (Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 1987), 53.
12. Rafael de Bivar Marquese, “A dinâmica da escravidão no Brasil: resistência, tráfico negreiro e alforrias, séculos XVII a XIX,” *Novos Estudos* 74 (2006), 109.
13. See *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <http://www.slavevoyages.com>.
14. João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 6.
15. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 93-94.
16. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 96-97.
17. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 207.
18. See Law, *Ouidah*, 181.
19. The population of Benin in 2005 was 8,294,941 inhabitants.
20. Milton Guran, *Agudás: Os “Brasileiros” do Benim* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Fronteira 1999), 88.
21. Júlio Santana Braga, “Notas sobre o ‘Quartier Brésil’ no Daomé,” *Afro-Ásia*, no. 6-7 (1968), 189; Guran, *Agudás*, 15; and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, *Negros, estrangeiros: os escravos libertos e sua volta à África* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985), 189.
22. Alain Sinou, “La Valorisation du patrimoine architectural et urbain: l’exemple de la ville de Ouidah au Bénin,” *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 29, no. 1 (1993), 36.
23. See Cunha, *Negros, Estrangeiros*, 109.
24. Today the Aguda do not speak Portuguese, however they preserve some words and expressions, such as: *cama* (“bed”), *chavi* (“key”), *camisa* (“shirt”), *gafu* (“fork”), *Bondyé Senhor* (“good morning sir”), etc. See Dohou Codjo Denis, “Influences brésiliennes à Ouidah,” *Afro-Ásia* 12 (1976), 198-199.

25. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L'Afrique occidentale au temps des Français : colonisateurs et colonisés (c.1860-1969)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), 373.
26. Bako-Arifari, "La mémoire de la traite négrière," 222.
27. Araujo, "Mémoires de l'esclavage et de la traite des esclaves dans l'Atlantique Sud," 135-136.
28. Interview with Francisca Patterson (born Medeiros), Porto-Novo, August 2, 2005.
29. Interview with Urbain-Karim Elisio da Silva, Porto-Novo, July 22, 2005.
30. See Tall, "De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin."
31. See Bako-Arifari, "La mémoire de la traite négrière," 223.
32. See Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 12; and Law, "A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza," 5.
33. Simone de Souza, *La Famille de Souza du Bénin-Togo* (Cotonou: Les éditions du Bénin, 1992).
34. "Discours de bienvenue du porte-parole de son Excellence Mito Honoré Feliciano Julião de Souza, Chacha 8 à la délégation de l'Université de Rutgers (État du New Jersey)," Ouidah, July 24, 2005.
35. See Law, "A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza," 13-14; Law, *Ouidah*, 165 and Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 12.
36. Law, *Ouidah*, 165.
37. See Pierre Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVII^e au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 638; Law, "A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza," 16 ; and Law, *Ouidah*, 165.
38. See Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 14; Law, "A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza," 11.
39. Paul Hazoumé, *Le Pacte de Sang au Dahomey* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1956), 28.
40. Hazoumé, *Pacte de Sang au Dahomey*, 29.
41. Hazoumé, *Pacte de Sang au Dahomey*, 29.
42. Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 86.

43. See Ana Lucia Araujo, “Enjeux politiques de la mémoire de l’esclavage dans l’Atlantique Sud: La reconstruction de la biographie de Francisco Félix de Souza,” *Lusotopie* XVI, no. 2 (2009): 107-131.
44. Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 89.
45. Basilio Segurola and Jean Rassinoux, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* (Madrid: Société des missions africaines, 2000).
46. The inaccurate information stating that de Souza received the title of viceroy was disseminated mainly via Bruce Chatwin’s novel, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. See Law, “A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza,” 18; and Law, *Ouidah*, 167-168. Guran (*Agudás*, 22) also states that de Souza received the title of viceroy.
47. After 1823, a man whose last name was Dagba occupied this position.
48. Law, *Ouidah*, 168.
49. Costa e Silva, *Francisco Félix de Souza*, 90.
50. See Law, “A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza,” 23.
51. John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 and 1846: Comprising a Journey from Whydah, through the Kingdom of Dahomey, to Adofoodia in the Interior* (London: Frank Cass, 1968 [1847]), vol. 1, 204; and Law, “A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza,” 28.
52. Christian de Souza, during the visit of Francisco Félix de Souza’s memorial, Singbomey (Ouidah), June 19, 2005.
53. See Ana Lucia Araujo, “Renouer avec le passé brésilien: la reconstruction du patrimoine post-traumatique chez la famille De Souza au Bénin” in *Traumatisme collectif pour patrimoine*, ed. Jewsiewicki and Auzas, 305-330.
54. Interview with Marie de Souza (fictitious name) and David de Souza, Cotonou, July 23, 2005.
55. Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 180; and Edna Bay, “Protection, Political Exile, and the Atlantic Slave Trade: History and Collective Memory in Dahomey,” *Slavery and Abolition* 22, no. 1 (2001), 16-18.
56. See Luis Nicolau Pares, “The Jeje in the Tambor de Mina of Maranhão and in the Candomblé of Bahia,” *Slavery and Abolition* 22, no. 1 (2001), 91-115.

57. See Pierre Verger, "Le culte des vodoun d'Abomey aurait-il été apporté à Saint Louis de Maranhão par la mère du roi Ghèzo?" *Études Dahoméennes* 8 (1952), 22-23; Edna Bay, "Protection, Political Exile and the Atlantic Slave-Trade: History and Collective Memory in Dahomey," in *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil*, ed. Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 57 and Judith Gleason, *Agotime: Her Legend* (New York: Grossman, 1970).
58. Pierre Verger, *Os Libertos: Sete caminhos na liberdade de escravos da bahia no século XIX* (Salvador: Corrupio, 1992), 71-72.
59. Law, *Ouidah*, 166.
60. Law, *Ouidah*, 177 and Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 179.
61. Filmed interview with Christian de Souza and David de Souza, during the visit of Francisco Félix de Souza's memorial, Singbomey (Ouidah), June 19 2005.
62. Law, *Ouidah*, 215.
63. Filmed interview with David de Souza, during the visit of Francisco Félix de Souza's memorial, Singbomey (Ouidah), June 19, 2005.
64. Interview with Emile Olougoudou, Ouidah, July 24, 2005.
65. Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans. Being the journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey and Residence at his Capital in the Years 1849 and 1850* (London: Frank Cass. 1966 [1851]), vol. I, 106-108.
66. David de Souza, during the interview with Honoré Félicien Julião de Souza (Chacha VIII) and David de Souza, Singbomey, Ouidah, June 19, 2005.
67. Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 and 1846*, vol I, 114.
68. Law, "The Atlantic Slave Trade in Local History Writing in Ouidah," 274 n20.
69. Guran, *Agudás*, 203-204.
70. Interview with Honoré Félicien Julião de Souza (Chacha VIII) and David de Souza, Singbomey, Ouidah, June 19, 2005.
71. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

72. Élisée Soumonni, *Daomé e o mundo atlântico* (SEPHIS, South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development, Centro de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos, 2, 2001), 13.
73. As Freyre stated this Brazilian identity “suavizou-as aqui o óleo lúbrico da profunda miscigenação,” *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, 231.
74. See Tall, “De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin,” and Emmanuelle Kadya Tall, “Dynamique des cultes voduns et du Christianisme céleste au Sud-Bénin,” *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 31, no. 4 (1995), 797-823 and Guran, *Agudás*, 274-275.