

Welcome the Diaspora Slave Trade Heritage Tourism and the Public Memory of Slavery

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Article abstract

This article examines the emergence of the public memory of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in the Republic of Benin, by explaining how the heritagization of slavery was crucial for the development of a local tourism industry. The article shows that the rise of the public memory of the Atlantic slave trade in Benin is not an isolated venture and that similar initiatives were also developed in other West African countries. The article also discusses how the plural memories of slavery are articulated with the expectations of African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists, who are the main target of projects focusing on slavery cultural heritage and roots tourism. The article concludes that although slavery heritage tourism helped to place Benin among the international slavery tourist destinations, it also contributed to make visible the plural memories of slavery and to commodify African tangible and intangible heritage.

WELCOME THE DIASPORA

Slave Trade Heritage Tourism and the Public Memory of Slavery

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Over the last two decades the Atlantic slave past has received increased attention. In the Americas, Europe, and Africa, emerging initiatives highlighting the memory of slavery in the public space largely resulted from the political struggle of social actors fighting for social justice or seeking to occupy the public space to obtain political prestige and economic profits. To examine the public memory of slavery and its relations with the development of African diaspora tourism, this article develops a historical and ethnographic analysis of Atlantic slave trade commemoration initiatives. It argues that the work of memory conveyed through festivals, monuments, and local museums remembering slavery and the Atlantic slave trade allows recreating, reinventing, and rethinking this painful past. Consequently, public memory of slavery is not direct transmission, but belongs to the scope of postmemory (Hirsch 1997), to a transitional space where this past is relived, re-enacted, and re-experienced (Robin 2002). This article argues these multiple discourses emanating from public manifestations with the public discourses of local social actors who during the last twenty years actively participated in the debates surrounding the implementation of slave trade tourism initiatives.

The article is divided into two parts. The first part introduces the broad context of the emergence of the public memory of slavery and slave trade tourism in West Africa. It sheds light on how North American and Western European conceptions of heritage and tourism were transplanted, adapted and transformed in West African countries, including Ghana, The Gambia, Senegal, and the Republic of Benin. It argues that the promotion of the Atlantic slave trade heritage was crucial for the development of a West African tourism industry. The second part contextualizes the development of official slave trade cultural

heritage projects in Benin, particularly in Ouidah, an important former slave trade port. By examining selected monuments and memorials built as part of the Vodun festival “Ouidah 92” and the Slave Route Project, we situate these initiatives in the light of the various discourses conveyed by local social actors — such as local businessmen, descendants of former slave returnees and slave merchants — and the representatives of official local and transnational organizations such as UNESCO, NGOs, and the Catholic Church. The article aims to understand how the public memory of slavery in Benin is built to fulfill the expectations of African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists, who were and still are the main target of projects focusing on the heritage of the Atlantic slave trade and African roots tourism.

Slave Trade Tourism in West Africa

In the beginning of the 1990s, in addition to the initiatives promoting the public memory of slavery, the emergence of the Internet and the growing access to transatlantic travels contributed to the reinforcement of the ties of African diaspora and to the dissemination of information about African tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Brandon 2008; Murphy 2008; Rosenthal 2009). In West Africa, local governments wishing to promote slave trade tourism supported UNESCO actions attempting to preserve African heritage. However these initiatives did not break the silence around the existence of slavery on African soil, the Muslim slave trade, and the African participation in the Atlantic slave trade (Holsey 2008; Bellagamba 2009; Noret 2011).

Official initiatives focused on the promotion of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Atlantic slave trade, found in coastal towns of countries such as Senegal, Ghana, and Benin. In the West African context, what was considered heritage was not limited to built heritage and to actual historical sites, which in places like Benin are rather scarce. Instead, newly built monuments, memorials and museums constitute the stage where the Atlantic slave trade is reenacted. From this perspective, as explained by Laurajane Smith, heritage is here seen as “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present” (Smith 2006: 44) or as defined by Melanie K. Smith a “contemporary use of the past, including both its interpretation and representation” (Smith 2009: 79).

Thus, although castles and forts, along with their dungeons and doors opening to the sea, where Africans were gathered before being deported to the Americas still are “the most powerful places where the memory of slave trade resides in West Africa” (Singleton 1999: 150), the cultural process consisting of reenacting the slave trade also led to the promotion of intangible cultural heritage. In this context, Vodun religion was used as an instrument to engage the work of remembrance and to develop connections between West Africans and the African diaspora. Therefore, former slave castles and other built heritage sites attracted thousands of international tourists, especially African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Moreover, some of these sites became paramount places where political and religious leaders from all over the world publicly expressed their apologies for more than three centuries of slave trade.

The first initiatives aiming at preserving the West African Coast slave trade tangible heritage can be traced to the 1940s and became more intense during the period of the decolonization of Africa. The development and promotion of the Atlantic slave trade sites started with the addition of some of these sites to the national heritage lists within the various countries and their later addition to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In Benin, the conservation and the promotion of built heritage sites associated with the Atlantic slave trade started during World War II. In 1943, the French administration created the Abomey Historical Museum on the site of the old royal palaces of Abomey that survived the fires of the period of the French conquest. After the end of colonial rule, in 1967, the Portuguese fort of São João Batista da Ajuda in Ouidah became the Ouidah Museum of History. The origins of this museum can be traced to 1961, when Guy Georgy (1918-2003), a former colonial administrator and the then French ambassador to Dahomey, visited the ruins of the fortress and decided to develop a slave trade museum on the site. Earlier that year, after the independence of Dahomey, the building had been burned down. Georgy obtained the support of IRAD (Institut de recherches appliquées du Dahomey) and the French Ministry of Cooperation to develop the project. With the further contributions of the French photographer, *babalawo*, historian and ethnographer Pierre Verger and Clément da Cruz, curator of the Abomey Historical Museum, the restoration of the building was launched in 1964.

In 1985, a tornado damaged the royal palaces of Abomey. As a result, the buildings were placed at the same time on the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger of UNESCO¹. The project of restoration and conservation of the royal palaces, included in the program of PREMA (Prevention in Museums in Africa), started in 1992 and received the support of Benin's government. The colored bas-reliefs decorating the walls of the palaces constitute a visual narrative illustrating events that marked the history of the Dahomean dynasties. The representations of Dahomean female and male warriors and decapitated prisoners evoke the military campaigns waged by Dahomey against the neighbouring kingdoms. The promotion and the investment in the restoration of the palaces whose bas-reliefs celebrate slaving campaigns conveyed a complex and sometimes contradictory message, because during the same period, other projects aimed at developing the public memory of the victims of the Atlantic slave trade were also in progress in southern Benin. Eventually, the promotion of the royal palaces contributed to highlight Dahomey's slave trade past from the point of view of the perpetrators, instead of the victims.

In 1972, the government of Ghana added twenty-two old fortresses and castles to its national heritage list, placing these sites under the protection of the law and under the authority of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (Singleton 1999: 154). In 1979, during the third session of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO approved the addition of Elmina Castle, founded on the Gold Coast by the Portuguese in 1482, to the World Heritage List (UNESCO 1979). Moreover, another ten castles in the regions of Volta, Accra and its environs, and in central and western Ghana were also included in the List. Therefore, Ghana witnessed the development of African diaspora roots tourism.

Among the most important sites visited by tourists in Ghana are Cape Coast and Elmina Castles (MacGonagle 2006). Tourists from around the world, and many African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, visit Ghana castles to mourn and to celebrate the memory of their ancestors (Richards 2008; Hartman 2008). In Ghana as in other slavery

1. See Decision 29 COM 7A.13 of 1985. On June 25, 2007, the palaces were removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/323>). However, in January 2009, a fire that seriously damaged several buildings ravaged the palaces.

sites in West Africa, tourist guides provide accounts of the Atlantic slave trade to satisfy an international audience. Usually they emphasize “the suffering of Africans at the hands of Europeans” (MacGonagle 2006: 252) by very often omitting African participation in the slave trade enterprise. The goal of these simplified narratives is twofold. On the one hand, they prevent the emergence of conflicts among the local communities that still today include descendants of enslaved individuals who were brought from the North and remain in the region (Holsey 2008). On the other hand, they fulfill the specific demands of the tourism industry offering quick visits to the castles. Since the early 1990s, during the government of Jerry Rawlings (Bruner 1996; MacGonagle 2006; Schramm 2010), Elmina and Cape Coast castles received prestigious visitors, including former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, President Barack Obama and his family, as well as Michaëlle Jean, former General Governor of Canada. Moreover, since 1998, August 1st, the date of the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies, is officially commemorated in Ghana (Holsey 2008: 151), in a clear attempt to promote and reinforce the connections with the African diaspora.

Although the fortresses and castles on the coast of Ghana played an important role as repositories and points of embarkation of captives to the Americas (Essah 2001), over the 1970s other sites on the West African coast attracted many African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists as well. Since the 1970s, following the traces of Kunta Kinte, the character and so-called ancestor of Alex Haley whose story is narrated in his famous novel *Roots*, African American tourists started travelling to The Gambia. Once in the country, they visit Juffureh, which according to Haley was the village where Kinte was kidnapped. Since then, and especially during the 1990s, the country intensified the initiatives promoting slavery tourism, welcoming each year dozens of thousands of tourists (Bellagamba 2009).

Since the 1960s, Gorée Island and its Slave House started acquiring notoriety among international visitors, including African American tourists and political and religious authorities. The promotion of Gorée as a slave trade site of remembrance began when Léopold Sedar Senghor was President of Senegal. In 1966, the first World Festival of Black Arts was held in the country. By developing and promoting African arts, Senegal called the public's attention to African heritage and to the

importance of Gorée Island in the history of West Africa. The festival had significant repercussions in Europe and the Americas, contributing to develop and promote Gorée Island and its Slave House not only as a site of memory of the Atlantic slave trade, but also as a tourist destination.

However, the Slave House on Gorée Island is a contested historical site. Among others, its date of construction is uncertain. The late Boubacar Joseph N'Diaye (1922-2009), its curator, stated that the Dutch constructed the building in 1776². N'Diaye used to describe the building as a slave warehouse, a kind of structure introduced to the island by the Portuguese in 1636. According to him, the two-story house could accommodate about two hundred slaves. During the tours, the curator also used to state that the slaves remained in the dungeons from two to three months while waiting to be embarked for the Americas. He explained that each cell, measuring 279 square feet, accommodated between 15 and 20 slaves in chains, adding that the place's deplorable sanitary conditions caused the first epidemic of plague on the island in 1779. As in other similar slave trade sites of remembrance, on the first floor, at the end of a corridor, there is a door opening out to the sea, called the "Door of No Return", because, according to N'Diaye, it was through this door that enslaved men, women, and children were embarked on slave ships sailing to the Americas.

In the early 1960s, Senegal created the BAMH (Bureau d'architecture des monuments historiques), the office of Historical Monuments Architecture. In 1972, Senegal ratified the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO during the seventeenth session of its general conference. Three years later the country included Gorée Island in its inventory of historical monuments. In 1978, during the second session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage held in Washington, DC, UNESCO added Gorée Island to the list of World Heritage sites (UNESCO 1978). In the 1980s, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, UNESCO Director-General, launched an appeal to the international community to help finance and safeguard Gorée Island, by emphasizing its role in the shared

2. See the video online: "Visite virtuelle de l'île de Gorée" : <http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/fr/index.shtml>.

imagination of Africa and the Americas³. After this initiative, at least eight postage stamps were created to promote Gorée's future. During the 1990s, as part of the same trend already observed in Ghana and The Gambia, the Slave House, as well as other buildings, were rehabilitated.

The Slave House became internationally known thanks to the narrative developed by N'Diaye. His convincing story describing the tragic experience of enslaved men and women during their passage through the slave warehouse touched the hearts of thousands of tourists who visited the island each year. According to N'Diaye, between 10 million and 15 million enslaved Africans passed through the Slave House before leaving for the Americas. Indeed, still today, N'Diaye's fantasist estimates (French 1998), which are higher than the volume of slave imports for all the Americas, were not actually questioned by scholars (Katchka 2004: 4) who recently examined the public memory of the Atlantic slave trade in the region, and are widely disseminated on the Internet. For instance, on the website of the House of Slaves, Koïchiro Matsuura, at the time Director of UNESCO, claims that dozens of millions of Africans were deported to the Americas during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. Actually, according to the most recent estimates (Eltis *et al.* online) — which indeed increased but did not significantly change since 1969, when Philip Curtin published its first census (Curtin 1969) — about 12,521,000 enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic Ocean during the Atlantic slave trade, even though many others died during the Middle Passage, or were killed while still on African soil by starvation, illness, and by the wars intensified because of the growing demand for captives during their displacement inside the continent.

Indeed, the House's "Door of No Return" leads out to rocks, which makes it hard to imagine how it was used to embark slaves. Moreover, the French artist Adolphe d'Hastrel de Rivedoux (1805-1875) depicted in the detail the Slave House in an 1839 lithograph titled "Une Habitation à Gorée (Maison d'Anna Colas)". If the lithograph's title is accurate, by 1839 the owner of the Slave House was not a European

3. "Appel de M. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, directeur général de l'UNESCO, à l'ouverture de la première session du Comité intergouvernemental pour la promotion du retour de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine ou de leur restitution en cas d'appropriation illégale."

slave merchant, but a *signare* named Anna Colas. *Signares* were Afro-European and free African women slave traders, well known during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in the region of Gorée and Saint-Louis (Wilson-Fall 2011).

During the 1990s, with the development and dissemination of the estimates on the volume of the Atlantic slave trade, historians publicly debated the role of Gorée Island during the Atlantic slave trade. In 1995, Philip Curtin contested N'Diaye's narrative on the H-Slavery online mailing list: "though Gorée is a picturesque place, it was marginal to the slave trade"⁴. Curtin's objection was hotly debated on the mailing list. Among others, Achille Mbembe argued: "it isn't possible to comprehend the significance of Gorée Island for African-Americans if one considers it only a matter of numbers"⁵. Other scholars perceived Curtin's objection as similar to Holocaust negationism. Curtin then responded: "the fact that not much slave trade took place at Gorée has nothing to do with the horror of the slave trade in general, and that accurate evidence is a fundamental base to all historical enquiry"⁶. One year later, the French journalist Emmanuel de Roux published a short article in the newspaper *Le Monde*. The journalist challenged N'Diaye's account that the Slave House had been built during the eighteenth century by the Dutch⁷ and insisted on the unimportant role of Gorée Island during the period of the Atlantic slave trade: "[T]he legend of the Slave House owes everything to the undeniable talent of Joseph N'Diaye, who took about twelve years to forge a myth that today is unquestionable" (Roux 1996). Today, despite the latest estimates provided by The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (www.slavevoyages.org) indicating that between 1514 and 1866 the slave exports from Gorée Island numbered 33,562⁸, the Slave House

4. <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Slavery&month=9508&week=a&msg=cb004Uul%2bT0leKSlrZ5NIA&user=&pw=>.

5. <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=IMgfWfUXw&user=&pw=>

6. <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-africa&month=9508&week=c&msg=SuW%2bQP0tq1CP1ov100osQ&user=&pw=>

7. During his last years, Boubacar Joseph N'Diaye used to state that the house was built in 1776. See the video "Visite virtuelle de l'île de Gorée": <http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/fr/index.shtml>.

8. This volume is based only on the existing records found by the editors of the database. The estimates are usually 25 percent higher than the actual volume, which would increase the slave exports from Gorée to 40,000.

continues to occupy the position of a major place of memory of the Atlantic slave trade, by attracting 200,000 tourists each year.

Several factors allowed the Slave House to become a successful tourist site that launches the process of remembrance by bringing the slave trade past to the present. When the public memory of slavery became part of a transnational movement, the victims of the Atlantic slave trade were condemned to the silence of the grave. Reproducing, feeling, and sharing the experience of enslavement was and still is a hard task that historians are not able to perform. However, although slavery sites such as the Slave House embody multiple references of the slave trade past, the building itself is not the vehicle that allows conveying this memory. The enslavement experience becomes accessible only when an individual such as N'Diaye plays the role of mediator, by becoming an agent who transmits the experience of the victims who are no longer there. Regardless of whether N'Diaye's narrative is accurate or not, he was able to bring the slave past to life by describing and narrating in detail the sufferings of those men, women, and children who were deported.

The popularity of the Slave House on Gorée Island can be explained by other factors as well. Its location, dungeons, and a door opening to the sea — elements that according to Theresa A. Singleton (1999) are fundamental elements that incarnate the memory of the Atlantic slave trade — helped to construct a convincing and moving narrative. N'Diaye's account, today widely disseminated in documentaries and television programs — very often available on the Internet — is successful in conveying the experience of slavery. As the guardian of a heritage site, N'Diaye acted in the role of a witness. He was able to narrate the events of the past in the same site where these events were said to have taken place. By sharing his account, he allowed tourists to actually feel the experience of enslaved men and women. Repeating his version of the story of the Slave House innumerable times, N'Diaye himself also became a part of the living heritage of Gorée Island and thereby contributed to the memorialization of slavery and tourism development. This allowed the controversial Slave House to become not only a slave trade tourist site, but also a site of repentance that attracted important political, religious, and artistic personalities such as the Pope John Paul II, U.S. President George W. Bush and the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose visits to the site received great media coverage.

Slave Trade Tourism and Cultural Heritage in Benin

From the early eighteenth century, the Kingdom of Dahomey dominated the slave trade in the Bight of Benin. The high degree of militarization and the introduction of firearms by the Europeans allowed the kingdom to expand its territory. Most of Dahomey's war captives were sold to European slave merchants, while others remained in the kingdom performing several kinds of agricultural and domestic activities or were sacrificed to honour the ancestors.

Dahomey became a French colony at the end of the nineteenth century, then an independent country in August 1960. Several coups d'état followed until 1972, when Major (and later General) Kérékou seized power, inaugurating a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship. During this period, the government created a strong repressive apparatus. In the following years, both the freedom of speech and religion were suppressed, discouraging public debates on the country's slave trade past.

The beginning of the 1990s was a period of social unrest in Benin, marked by strikes, student and popular demonstrations. The pressure exerted by the opposition resulted in the convocation of the National Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation, by President Kérékou, which eventually established a democratic transition and prepared the schedule for presidential elections (Tall 1995). At the time, the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the end of the Soviet Union, which was no longer able to support the Beninese dictatorship, contributed to accelerate the process of redemocratization. Nicéphore Soglo, a lawyer and economist who during the dictatorship lived abroad and held various positions in international organizations such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank, was then designated Interim Prime Minister. In 1991, following the democratic opening, he was elected President of the country and claimed a new Marshall Plan for Africa (Soglo 1992: 5). Such a plan aimed mainly at renegotiating or releasing the external debt of African countries that emerged during the same time that the Organization of African Unity began demanding reparations for the slave trade and colonization (Howard-Hassmann 2004: 84; Ajayi 2004: 56). Benin did not demand material and financial reparations, but rather adhered to the idea of memorial reparations. During this period, the country started requesting financial aid from the World Bank and the IMF. Thus, cultural tourism

became one of the viable alternatives for promoting the economic development of the area.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the public discussion in Benin about the memory of the Atlantic slave trade was no longer a taboo. However, the political stakes involved in the discussion remained complex as the Beninese society is composed of descendants of slave merchants and descendants of former slaves. Among the descendants of slaves there are not only descendants of former slaves sent to the Americas (especially Brazil) who returned to Dahomey but also descendants of slaves who remained on Dahomean soil. Indeed, many former slaves who returned from Brazil to the Bight of Benin became slave merchants (Araujo 2007, 2010). Some of these former slaves also became slave owners and married Portuguese and Brazilian slave merchants who were established in the region since the eighteenth century. Although many individuals are aware of the slave status of their ancestors, they still prefer not to publicly claim this ancestry, because slavery is still a heavy stigma. In addition, several individuals are descendants of the royal family of Abomey and their own ancestors captured and sold prisoners into slavery. In this context of plural and conflictive memories of slavery (Araujo 2010; Forte 2010), the government of Benin, UNESCO, and the Embassy of France encouraged the development of official projects promoting the memory of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, of which the main aim was fomenting cultural tourism.

During the various meetings held in preparation for the commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, the members of Haiti's delegation noticed the absence of any mention of African contribution to the building of the Americas. During the twenty-fifth session of the General Conference of UNESCO, the representative of Haiti introduced the idea of an initiative that would become the Slave Route Project, which aimed to discuss the impact of the discovery and colonization of the Americas on Africa and Africans (Assogba 1991: 5). In 1994, the project was eventually launched in Ouidah during an international scientific conference aimed at defining the objectives of the project.

According to its initiators, the Slave Route Project emerged from the need to break down the obstacles that prevented "mutual understanding" and "international reconciliation" (UNESCO 2006: 3). Slavery and the Atlantic slave trade should be remembered because of

the “extreme violence that accompanied it, the troubling light that it sheds on the ideologies used to justify it, and the paradoxical exchanges to which it has given rise” (UNESCO 2007: 4). In one project’s brochure, the transatlantic slave trade is described as the greatest tragedy in the history of humanity “by its scale and duration ... and also as a strange form of globalization. It has caused deep-seated changes worldwide, which account in part for the geopolitical and socio-economic configurations of the world today” (UNESCO 2007: 3-4). But the most important justification for developing the project came from the need to debate the impact of the Atlantic slave trade “on the development of the African countries and on the socio-economic and cultural status of people of African origin elsewhere in the world” (UNESCO 2007: 4). Because the transatlantic slave trade involved human travel and cultural exchanges among peoples, cultures, and civilizations, the idea of a “route” was chosen to represent this dynamic. Basically, the project was built around three main objectives:

- 1) To put an end to the silence surrounding the tragedy of the slave trade and slavery by contributing to a better understanding of its deep-seated causes, its implications, and its forms of operation through multidisciplinary research; 2) to objectively highlight the consequences of the slave trade on modern societies, in particular, the global transformations and cultural interactions among peoples generated by the tragedy; 3) to contribute to the establishment of a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between peoples by encouraging debate on cultural pluralism, the building of new identities, citizenship, and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO 2006: 5).

The Slave Route Project was entrusted to an international scientific committee composed of some twenty members from different disciplines and geographical areas, whose responsibility was to guarantee an objective and consensual approach to the main issues of the project. National committees were created in order to promote the objectives of the project in various countries involved in the Atlantic slave trade. The project relied on a scientific research program; an educational and academic program; a program on the contribution of the African diaspora aimed at promoting the living cultures and artistic and spiritual expression that resulted from the slave trade and slavery; a program aimed at collecting and preserving the written archives and oral traditions related to the slave trade, and a program to identify and preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of the slave trade and slavery, especially

through tourism of memory development (UNESCO 2006: 7). When the project was initiated, the need to emphasize the importance and the estimated volume of the trans-Saharan and the internal slave trades was discussed. However, the Atlantic slave trade became the actual focus of the project. UNESCO's choice to keep the main focus on the Atlantic slave trade and neglect the other trades that strongly affected West African populations reinforced the idea according to which the Slave Route Project was intended for an international audience and not for the local population, among whom there are descendants of slaves who remained living on African soil.

In the early 1990s, relying on the cultural and religious exchanges established during the period of the Atlantic slave trade, and parallel to the debates aimed at developing the Slave Route Project, Beninese government authorities discussed a proposal for a Vodun festival which would be called "Ouidah 92: Festival mondial des cultures vaudou. Retrouvailles Amériques-Afriques". This choice was justified because Dahomey is the cradle of Vodun, a religion characterized by trance, possession, and the belief in the existence of a multitude of deities (Blier 1995: 4). Enslaved Dahomeans brought Vodun to Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti by contributing to the birth of new religions such as Candomblé, Santería, and Voodoo in the Americas. This kind of festival was also inspired by the FESTAC 77 (Festival of Black & African Arts and Culture), held in Nigeria in 1977 and the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, held in Senegal in 1968 (Apter 2005: 60-61). The debates about Vodun festival were surrounded by controversy, because some perceived the festival as an attempt to diminish the importance accorded to the Slave Route Project.

The "Ouidah 92" festival proposal was supported by Bernard Hadjadj, the chief of the French Mission of Cooperation and Cultural Action in Benin (*Ouidah 92*, Printed festival program guide). Among the local personalities who questioned the Vodun festival project was Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher and professor at the National University of Benin, who was the president of the provisional international Committee of Coordination of the Slave Route Project and the minister of Culture. Hountondji saw the project as an opportunity to discuss not only the relations between Africa and the Americas but also the relations between the various groups constituting Beninese society. Indeed, Hountondji wanted Benin to lead the promotion of the memory of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. He

publicly disputed the idea of a festival emphasizing religion as being the right vehicle for establishing connections between Africa and the diaspora (Hountondji 1992: 5).

Moreover, developing a debate on Benin's slave past was a complicated task because President Soglo claimed the historical heritage of the kings of Dahomey, who sent captives into slavery to the Americas. In addition, his wife Rosine Vieyra Soglo and her brother, Désiré Vieyra, the minister of State, publicly asserted their ancestry as descendants of Sabino Vieyra, a former slave who returned from Brazil (Araujo 2010). The family of the President constituted a good example of the old division between victims and perpetrators (Bako-Arifari 2000: 226). In this context of conflicting memories of slavery, the descendants of slaves and slave merchants would better accept celebrating the intangible heritage of the Atlantic slave trade represented by the religions and cultures derived from Vodun. Moreover, as Vodun worshipers were denounced, persecuted, and sent to prison as "sorcery" practitioners who opposed the goals of the "revolution" in the years of military dictatorship, the Vodun festival could underscore the emerging religious freedom (Tall 1995: 197; Rush 2001:32). Unlike the Slave Route Project, "Ouidah 92" was perceived as a project unifying different groups and as an initiative that could eventually allow the descendants of the Dahomean royal family to obtain political gains without emphasizing the debate about the Atlantic slave trade past (Tall 1995). Following these debates, "Ouidah 92" and the Slave Route Project were finally associated and even merged.

The Vodun festival was held February 8-18, 1993 in Ouidah, Porto-Novo, and Cotonou, one year before the launching of the Slave Route Project. UNESCO supported it and Noureini Tidjani-Serpos, UNESCO's minister-counsellor and deputy permanent delegate, was the leading figure at the "Ouidah 92" organization. The three main sponsors of the festival were the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development, the government of Germany, and the government of the United States. The festival was also supported by several heads of state, including Félix Houphouët Boigny (President of Ivory Coast), Ibrahim Badamassi Babangida (President of Nigeria), Abdou Diouf (President of Senegal), Jerry Rawlings (President of Ghana), and Gnassingbé Eyadéma (President of Togo). Several institutions and international personalities also sponsored the festival, among them France Libertés (Danielle Mitterrand Foundation), Léopold Sédar

Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Wole Soyinka, Christiane Diop, René Depestre, and Pierre Verger. Several cultural, religious, and artistic events were held in the cities of Ouidah, Porto-Novo, and Cotonou. In Ouidah, four sites were part of the festival: the House of Brazil (today renamed "House of Memory"), the Sacred Forest, the residence of Daagbo Hounon Houna (1916-2004), Vodun supreme chief of Ouidah, and the Slaves' Route.

The Slaves' Route is a two-mile road starting at Ouidah's downtown, close to a former slave market, and ends at the beach, where the captives are said to have been put on board pirogues that brought them on board the slave ship. Actually, because the coastal lagoon separated the town from the shore (Lafitte 1880: 77), it is more likely that the captives covered part of the way to the outer shore by canoe (Law 2004: 26). About one hundred monuments placed along this road, specially created for the occasion, were also unveiled. Along the road, painters from Nigeria, Togo, Haiti, and Brazil decorated with paintings various Vodun temples. The number of foreign guests, the financial support of the U.S. government, and the brochure translated into English show the extent to which the festival was designed to be a meeting place for the African diaspora, especially African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans.

In the festival program guide, President Soglo stated that Vodun culture was "not only a religion with its gods, temples, rituals, and calendars but also was the wellspring of inspiration which has fostered the blossoming of a literature, a drama, a music, and plastic arts, the importance of which is universally recognized" (Ouidah 92, Printed festival program guide). Although the President did not forget to mention slavery as the vehicle that originated the encounter between Vodun and the world, he sought to spread an optimistic message of valorization and promotion of African cultures by adding that "Ouidah 92" was an "event of major importance, ... a key signpost of the rebirth of a continent proud of its cultural unity, creativity, and a determining contribution to the modern world" (Ouidah 92, Printed festival program guide). Indeed, by promoting the Vodun religion and the exchanges between Africa and the Americas, he presented slavery and the Atlantic slave trade not as a rupture between generations, families, and traditions but as events that produced continuity across the Atlantic. The approach chosen by the festival's organizers also successfully conveyed the idea

of tourism of roots, relying on the celebration of Vodun religion (Forte 2007, 2009, 2010; Ciarcia 2008; Landry 2010).

The success of the Vodun festival led the Benin Parliament to establish the “National Vodun Day”, which is celebrated on January 10 each year (Sutherland 2002). Over the following years, other festivals aiming to promote tourism and the country’s intangible cultural heritage emerged as well. These initiatives include the Gani Festival in Nikki, the Biennale of Popular and Religious Dances in Abomey, the Festival of Gelede Masks in Porto-Novo, and the Yéké Yéké Regional Festival at Mono (Tall 1995: 200). In 2001, the launching of the festival Gospel and Roots clearly reinforced the idea of establishing connections with the African diaspora.

Welcome the Diaspora

The city of Ouidah is situated in the western half of the coast of Benin. The town is located in the region formerly occupied by the Kingdom of Hueda, which was conquered by the Kingdom of Dahomey in 1727. The town became the most important African slave port, second only to Luanda in present-day Angola. Today, the population of Ouidah is estimated at 83,503⁹. After the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of French colonization, the city’s economic life declined dramatically. During the twentieth century, the lack of economic opportunities led the children of elite families to leave Ouidah and move to Cotonou, Benin’s economic capital. The two projects aimed at promoting cultural tourism in the region were an attempt to increase the city’s economic activity.

Following the Vodun festival and the launching of the Slave Route Project, Ouidah started attracting Beninese and international tourists to visit its built heritage attractions such as the former Portuguese fortress that houses the Ouidah Museum of History, as well as the monuments and memorials unveiled during the early 1990s. Tourism helped to intensify the city’s economic activity, which was in decline since the end of the nineteenth century. Actually, since the launching of the official projects, a number of hotels were opened on Ouidah’s beach. The hotel *Le jardin brésilien: Auberge de la diaspora*, whose name evokes the presence of Brazilian slave returnees in the region, is a less expensive

9. See “Ouidah” in Geonames Database: <http://www.geonames.org/>.

option located at the edge of the beach; the *Casa del Papa* and the *Djegba Hotel* are more luxurious alternatives that mainly attract members of the Beninese elite and international tourists.

Because of the various initiatives developed since the 1990s, the city became not only an intriguing example of the impact of UNESCO's influence in the region, but also an interesting case of commodification of slave trade tangible and intangible heritage. Today, the monuments, memorials, and museums created during the establishment of both initiatives share the public space with other projects such as the Gate of Return and the Door of Return Museum as well as the memorial for the Great Jubilee of the Catholic Church of the Year 2000. These different initiatives provide a revealing image of the national and international political issues associated with the reconstruction and the promotion of the memory and the heritage of the Atlantic slave trade.

The "Ouidah 92" festival and the Slave Route Project left important marks on Ouidah's landscape. The Slaves' Route in Ouidah became a place of pilgrimage that was visited each year by several thousands of tourists from Benin and abroad. In 1998, some of Ouidah's prominent residents organized the Walk of Repentance gathering not only descendants of slaves from Benin and the United States but also descendants of slave merchants and other collaborators, who marched to ask for forgiveness for the wrongs of their ancestors who participated in the Atlantic slave trade. The Walk of Repentance is now held each year on the third Sunday of January, and attracts foreign tourists, in particular African Americans, who travel in groups to participate in this activity.

Despite the relative success of the Slaves' Route, only the local population living in the neighbourhoods is sufficiently audacious to walk along the road. The two-mile road is long and because the traffic is intense and there is no reserved space for pedestrians to walk, it is rather difficult to safely observe the monuments. Indeed, individual tourists experience the Slaves' Route by *zemidjan* (local motorcycle taxis). If in groups, they see the route by car or bus, and stop only at the end of the road, at the beach.

About one hundred monuments and memorials mark various stations along the road. Cyprien Tokoudagba, a prominent artist from Abomey, conceived most of the cement statues displayed along the road. The choice of Tokoudagba was motivated by his local and

international reputation and by the fact that Vodun was already the main theme of his artistic work.

Passing within several quarters, the Slaves' Route highlights the existing historical sites and Vodun temples, decorated with paintings during the preparations for the "Ouidah 92" festival. Whereas some monuments and memorials mark actual historical sites, other statues do not indicate any specific point of reference but rather emphasize the idea of continuity.

According to those who participated in the organization of the Slaves' Route in Ouidah, the sculptures were placed randomly along the road and at the last minute. Many statues do not contain a panel with any kind of description or historical explanation, which for tourism purposes makes the narrative confusing or at least less understandable to visitors who are not familiar with the history of Dahomey, the slave trade, and Vodun. Today, many of these statues and memorials are abandoned, but the local population appropriated several monuments representing Vodun deities, by placing offerings at the base of the statues as if they were actual Vodun shrines.

The Place des enchères (Auctions Square) or Place Chacha is the first station of the Slaves' Route in Ouidah. This square is located in the Adjido quarter, in the same zone in which a market existed in the past. Its name refers to Francisco Félix de Souza (1754-1849), alias Chacha¹⁰, a famous and wealthy Brazilian slave merchant who settled in the Bight of Benin in the early nineteenth century. By 1818, de Souza supported Prince Gakpé who led a coup d'état against King Adandozan (r. 1797-1818). After taking power, Gakpé became King Gezo (r. 1818-1858) and appointed de Souza as his commercial agent in Ouidah.

Despite the reference to Chacha, the sculpture displayed in the square represents an Amazon of Dahomey's army, depicted as a female warrior with naked breasts and horns. The public memory of slavery conveyed in this monument is not related to the Brazilian slave merchant, but refers to his partner Gezo, who waged military campaigns annually against neighbouring kingdoms. Indeed, upon the cement base of the monument a plaque with no mention to Chacha reads: "Place des enchères, Ouidah 92. In this place and under this tree were held public slave auctions during which the slaves who would be embarked to the

10. Chacha is a nickname that became an honorific title.

Americas were exchanged for shoddy goods”¹¹. In 1999, six years after the “Ouidah 92” festival, another commemorative plaque displaying “Place Chacha” was placed next to the monument. According to the plaque, the restoration of the place was made possible by the financial support of the Federal Republic of Germany (via the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau), a country that had already supported the “Ouidah 92” festival and the restoration of the Abomey royal palaces¹².

In 1993, when the statue representing the Amazon was unveiled, the old compound of Francisco Félix de Souza was almost abandoned. In 1995, the buildings were restored and the family built a new four-story “palace” at the same place where his old residence was located. The new imposing building, situated behind the Place des enchères or Place Chacha, symbolizes the power of the Souza family, today actively engaged in rehabilitating the memory of their ancestor (Araujo 2008). In addition, the Souza compound comprises two single-story buildings housing a memorial to honour the Brazilian slave merchant. This memorial existed for many years, but became accessible to the public only in the 1990s. Paradoxically, slavery heritage official projects also helped to promote the memory of the slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza (Araujo 2008, 2009).

With the increasing interest in the slave past and the emergence of a local tourism industry relying on the memory of the Atlantic slave trade, a growing number of African Americans visiting Ouidah are intrigued about the history of the legendary Brazilian slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza. However, unlike other large tourist sites associated with the Atlantic slave trade, such as the Elmina or the Cape Coast Castles in Ghana or the Slave House on Gorée Island in Senegal, a visit to a private memorial honouring a perpetrator is rather difficult to sell. African Americans for example hardly see in Francisco Félix de Souza and the Afro-Luso-Brazilian community enough identity bonds to awaken an actual mutual interest. Actually, a visit to the memorial makes sense only if the members of the family guide the visitors. As

11. Author’s translation of: “C’est sous cet arbre et en cette place que se tenaient les enchères publiques pendant lesquelles les esclaves destinés aux Amériques étaient troqués contre des marchandises de pacotille”.

12. “La réhabilitation de cette place a été rendue possible en 1999 grâce au concours financier de la République Fédérale d’Allemagne, à travers la Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW)”.

most members of the family speak French, it is difficult for ordinary African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists to understand the trajectory of the slave merchant and the various chapters of the family history. The promotion of this tourist site for a non-English-speaking audience also faces other obstacles. Still few Afro-Brazilians travel to Benin for tourist purposes, as most of them do not have the financial resources to travel to Africa. Moreover, such travels are very expensive compared to other international destinations such as Europe and the United States. Indeed, Brazilians who visit Benin's Atlantic slave trade sites are usually researchers, political authorities, and other cultural and artistic personalities. Despite these difficulties, in the section "Tourism" on the website of the city of Ouidah, the Museum of the de Souza Family is featured as an important attraction under the rubric "Other heritage sites".

By following the Slaves' Route the visitor is able to see several monuments and memorials that evoke scenes related to slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, but many other sculptures depict Vodun deities. These sculptures represent the divinities highly ranked in the Vodun pantheon, such as those associated with different elements of nature (air, water, fire, earth). Usually these images are restricted to private and sacred spaces, but in the Slaves' Route they are displayed in the public space. Although the sculptures created by Cyprien Tokoudagba and Dominique Kouas are aimed at an international audience, especially the African diaspora, there are no titles or inscriptions describing the Vodun deities. Despite the idea of a path and the passing of time proposed by the Slaves' Route, the various sculptures depicting the voduns of Dahomean kings do not appear in chronological order.

Along the route, two stations mark the places where the captives supposedly stopped before being embarked to the Americas. The first place is the Tree of Forgetting, indicated by a small symbolic tree and a sculpture by Dominique Kouas representing a three-headed *Mami Wata*, the deity of water, which is very popular in West Africa and Central Africa (Drewal 2008). The representations of this deity evoke a mermaid and borrow elements of the Hindu pantheon, such as the three heads of the goddess Dattatreya (Rush 1999: 63). If the sculpture does not convey the idea of victimhood, at the bottom of the statue, a plaque explains:

In this place there was the tree of forgetting. The male slaves should turn nine times around it, the female slaves seven times. Once they

finished turning, the slaves were expected to become amnesic. They forgot their past, their origins, and their cultural identity to have no will to react or rebel¹³.

Although no historical evidence confirms the tradition, this monument evoking captives' amnesia and victimhood propagates a current and mistaken idea according to which enslaved Africans were absolute victims, who did not develop agency, and did not have any will or means to react against their condition as captives (Law 2004: 153).

Still following the route, the visitor arrives at the Zomai enclosure, the place where "fire (or light) is prohibited." According to the plaque explaining what the location means, the slaves were said to have been imprisoned within this enclosure before being transferred to the the Tree of Return, in the Zoungbodji quarter. The text displayed on the plaque reads:

This absolute sequestration completely disoriented the slaves and made extremely difficult any attempt of escape or rebellion. Their stay in this enclosure conditioned them for the life of promiscuity and darkness of the slave ships' holds¹⁴.

However, as Law points out, there was not one but several barracoons in Ouidah. Actually, the Zomai enclosure was a gunpowder storehouse owned by the Brazilian slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza (Law 2004: 137). At the place where the enclosure is said to have been located, there is one sculpture created by Dominique Kouas and two sculptures created by Cyprien Tokoudagba. The sculpture by Kouas represents slaves of different ethnic groups with scarification marks. The two sculptures by Tokoudagba depict slaves recalcitrant, muzzled, squatted, and attached to a carrier chair. Here again, the route emphasizes victimhood, and the trauma of the experience lived by enslaved Africans, perhaps because these stereotypes, highly

13. Author's translation of: "En ce lieu se trouvait l'arbre de l'oubli. Les esclaves mâles devaient tourner neuf fois autour, les femmes sept fois. Ces tours étant accomplis les esclaves étaient censés devenir amnésiques. Ils oubliaient complètement leur passé, leurs origines et leur identité culturelle, pour devenir des êtres sans volonté de réagir ou de se rebeller".

14. Author's translation of: "Cette séquestration absolue désorientait totalement les esclaves et rendait extrêmement difficile toute tentative de fuite ou de rébellion. Ce séjour ici les conditionnait pour la vie de promiscuité et d'obscurité des cales des négriers".

disseminated in textbooks, websites and television are the only ones that effectively draw the attention of the African diaspora's visitors.

The next station of the Slaves' Route is the Zomachi Memorial of Repentance and Domain of the Return's Station, created by the Institute for Development and Endogenous Exchange (IDEE) in Benin. The site is a large enclosed area covered by abundant vegetation. On the Zomachi façade's wall, one finds bas-reliefs depicting the history of the slave trade in the region. The IDEE is coordinated by Professor Honorat Aguessy, whose biography is described in detail on the organization's website¹⁵. He is presented as an important national and international figure. However, in the political sphere, Aguessy's activities are rather controversial. In 2001, he was involved with a group of Ogoni refugees from Nigeria, to whom he offered his political support, a lawyer and accommodation. But in exchange for his support, Aguessy is said to have used the refugee workforce to build the memorial remembering the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery (Vanderlick 2002: 58-59). During the 1990s, the IDEE became an important organization for the promotion of African cultures among the diaspora. The Institute headquarters is situated in a building at Ouidah's entrance. It contains conference rooms, a restaurant, meeting rooms, a library, an exhibition room, a museum, a botanical garden, and one hundred guest rooms. The Institute organizes conferences and also administers the Zomachi Memorial, which is part of an ensemble of initiatives led by Ouidah businessmen to promote the image of the city in order to develop tourism and the local economy. Since 1998, the Walk of Repentance is the most important public activity organized by the Institute. Coordinated by Aguessy in collaboration with other individuals, each year this activity attracts hundreds of local dignitaries and also African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists¹⁶. The various projects led by the Institute confirm that the promotion of the memory of the Atlantic slave trade, initiated by public and private organizations as well as by businessmen, is part of a large commercial initiative aimed at attracting tourists, especially from North America and the Caribbean, and developing the economic interests of local elite groups. If the activities promoting reconciliation between the local descendants of slave

15. Institut de développement et d'échanges endogènes: <http://www.idee-benin.com>.

16. "Zomachi : la flamme jamais éteinte" : <http://www.idee-benin.com/zomachi.htm>
Institut de développement et d'échanges endogènes.

merchants and collaborators and the members of the African diaspora receive growing attention, public authorities and elite groups remain silent not only about the existence of slavery on African soil during the period of the Atlantic slave trade but also about the Muslim slave trade that lasted even longer.

After the Zomachi Memorial, the visitor finds the Zoungbodji Memorial. According to oral tradition, in order to facilitate their identification by the slave merchants, the captives were marked with a red iron at this location (Law 2004: 142)¹⁷. Also according to tradition, several slaves who did not survive the time spent at Zomai were buried on this site. The memorial is an enclosed structure of concrete measuring about sixteen square yards, containing two statues, representing a male and a female slave on their knees; they are handcuffed and their mouths are muzzled. Another two sculptures composed of recycled metal represent the faces of two captives. Then, one sculpture depicts an enslaved African, arms opened and breaking their chains. Representing the fight for freedom, this is one of the only monuments representing an enslaved person where agency, instead of victimhood, is emphasized. Despite the considerable investment made to build such large structure, the memorial is located in an isolated spot and remains almost abandoned. Its gate is kept locked, its paint is peeling off the walls, and its sculptures are completely rusted.

The next station is the Tree of Return, marked by a sculpture representing *Aziza*, the vodun of the forest. According to the organizers of "Ouidah 92", the tree was planted in the eighteenth century during the reign of King Agaja (r. 1708-1732), even if no contemporary source refers to it (Law 2004: 153). According to the plaque at the base of the statue, after leaving the Zomai enclosure, and before the embarkation, slaves were told to walk around this tree in order to allow their spirits to return to Africa after their death. Indeed, evidence shows that it "was the chiefs, rather than slaves, who circled the tree (three times), prior to formally greeting the Europeans" (Law 2004: 153). By emphasizing the idea of return, this monument is in harmony with the idea of encouraging African diaspora tourists to visit the Slaves' Route.

17. According to Law the tradition corresponds to historical evidence.

The apogee of the Slaves' Route is the Gate of No Return, the only monument in Ouidah sponsored by the Slave Route Project. Situated at the end of the road, at the beach, the imposing gate was unveiled in November 1995, and still today attracts numerous tourists and leading foreign visitors, such as the Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva who visited the monument during his travel to the country in 2006. The monument, designed and ornamented by the Beninese artist Fortuné Bandeira, evokes the monumental Soviet aesthetics that dominated the country's public monuments until the beginning of the 1990s. It symbolizes the place where slaves were embarked for the Americas, although "the slaves and other commodities exported through Ouidah had therefore to be taken overland and across the lagoon to the beach, rather than being embarked directly into European ships" (Law 2004: 18). Placed on a large cement platform, higher than the level of the soil, the Gate's arcade marks the transition between the beach and the Atlantic Ocean, which is visible through it. The monument is painted in white and in a tint of reddish brown, a colour very often used to paint the facades of local houses and similar to the colour of Benin's soil. The monument's four columns display bas-reliefs painted in ochre representing pairs of naked captives on their knees. At the upper part of the monument, one sees two long lines of naked slaves walking on the beach toward a large ship located in the centre of the image, where the vanishing point of the perspective is. At each side of the gate, one sees giant copper sculptures created by Gnonnou Dominique Kouass that represent a group of captives breaking their chains. When the visitors cross the Gate, they are able to see on the monument's platform bas-reliefs depicting several voduns, such as *Dan Aïdohuedo*, *Mami Wata*, and *Gu*, as well as the sculptures representing the *Egungun*, the spirits of the ancestors in the Yoruba Orisha worship, created by the artist Yves Apollinaire Kpédè. The sculptures of *Egungun* placed across the gate facing the sea honour the ancestors who left for the Americas and died in the Middle Passage. The statues also suggest that once the captives left Africa, only their spirits would be able return to their homeland after their death. Despite its grandiosity and UNESCO support, the Slave Route Project is not mentioned on both plaques displayed close to the monument. Close to the monument, tourists can stop at a kiosk to buy "African" sculptures, wooden masks, bijoux, and calabashes. In addition to these "authentic" objects, the visitors can also buy actual Vodun fetishes, taken from neighbouring temples.

The enterprise to attract tourists was not limited to UNESCO's initiatives. In 2000, the construction on the beach of two new monuments similar to the Gate of No Return modified the landscape. The first monument, located about one hundred yards from the Gate of No Return, is called Memorial of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. It was commissioned by the Catholic Church in order to commemorate the arrival of the first Catholic missionaries in Dahomey during the second half of the nineteenth century. The memorial, built of cement and granite, sits on a large platform that places the monument higher than the level of the beach. Moreover, the colours of the monument are very similar to those of the Gate of No Return. The memorial consists of a large curved wall where the contour of an immense map of Benin is cut out and through which the Atlantic Ocean is visible. Across from the monument's interior face, which is decorated with bas-reliefs representing the Catholic missionaries, there is a large cross in granite, which can also be seen through the wall, from the beach side. On the memorial's wall, one can read some passages from the Bible as well as the names of the missionaries. This memorial contrasts with the other neighbouring monuments commemorating Vodun and the Atlantic slave trade, by sending to the visitor contradictory messages about the country's slave trade past. Indeed, the Catholic Church contributed to legitimate slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, during French rule, and still today, representatives of the Catholic Church (Araujo 2008: 126) denounced African religions by associating them with witchcraft¹⁸. The monument constituted a way of marking the Catholic presence in a city that became an important tourist centre attracting thousands of African Americans who despite being Christians are not Catholic. Moreover, the monument can also be perceived as a reaction against the growing proliferation of Pentecostalist churches in Benin (Strandsbjerg 2005).

About two hundred yards away, a huge plaque written in French and English announces the Gate of Return monument and the Door of Return Museum. Created in 2004, these initiatives were led by a non-governmental organization named PROMETRA (Organization for the

18. See the letters of Dusser and the French administrator Geay: "Les religions traditionnelles". *Mémoire du Bénin* 3, 1994, p.13-41; "Au cœur du vaudou", au Bénin l'église catholique ne cache plus ses liens avec la sorcellerie". *Le Figaro*, August 29, 2005.

Promotion of Traditional Medicine), based in Senegal since 1971¹⁹. This organization is now present not only in Senegal but also in several other African and European countries, and in the Americas, including the United States and the Caribbean, regions from where most international tourists visiting Benin come from. Similarly to the IDEE (Institute for Development and Endogenous Exchange), PROMETRA aims at promoting African medicine and local knowledge. However, unlike the IDEE, the non-governmental organization is not the initiative of one single individual and its structure is much more transparent.

Since 2007, PROMETRA organizes the initiative “Ways of Remembrance and Spiritual Connection”, which is intended for an African diaspora audience. Once a year, the project promotes a nine-day pilgrimage aiming to heal the wounds of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. The program consists of visiting places related to the Atlantic slave trade and participating in various Vodun ceremonies. In Benin, the journey includes Cotonou, Ouidah, Grand Popo, and Sahoue Doutou. The participants also visit Togo, where they participate in Vodun ceremonies held in Aklakou and Agbanakin. The full day spent in Ouidah comprises a daylong ritual at the location of the Door of Return and the Door of Return Museum.

The Door of Return monument comprises a map of Africa and three large-scale bronze sculptures representing a mother receiving a couple. The man and the woman, dressed in Western fashion, seem to come from North America. Recently, the three sculptures were painted in different colours in order to clearly represent their clothing styles. On the museum’s façade, resistance is emphasized by two bronze sculptures representing slaves breaking their chains and also another sculpture denominated Column of Freedom, and “around which all are equal and free”²⁰.

The first room of the museum displays an immense mural decorated with a huge bas-relief representing a group of African male and female captives attached in chains who are walking under the supervision of two unidentified men. The two rooms of the museum display objects and masks whose provenance is not clear. Visitors from the African diaspora are invited to bring with them a memento and to leave it in a

19. Prometra International (Organisation pour la promotion de médecines traditionnelles): <http://www.prometra.org/>

20. Prometra International, “Les voies du souvenir 2011,” program folder 24.

special room dedicated to the memory of the ancestors who left Africa and who were unable to return.

Although the majority of enslaved Africans sent to the mainland of North America did not come from the Bight of Benin, several travel agencies based in West Africa and in the United States offer numerous slavery heritage tours. In general, the length of these trips can vary between eight and twenty days. Spector Travel²⁴, a travel agency based in Boston and specializing in African roots tours, offers packages for Benin, Ghana, Senegal, and The Gambia. Tourists usually spend one day in Ouidah where they visit The Ouidah Museum of History, the sacred python temple, and the various slavery monuments and memorials. The agency Land Tours specializes in Ghana and West African itineraries. Although based in Ghana, according to the agency website about eighty per cent of their clients come from North America. Among the proposed itineraries there is a “10-Day Traditional Religious Festival Tour” departing from Accra and with a one-day stay in Ouidah. Proposing the same landmarks of the previously mentioned tour, this itinerary is however designed to allow the visitors to attend the national Vodun Day in Ouidah, described on the agency’s website as “a joyous occasion accompanied by colourful costumes and much singing, dancing and drumming”²². The travel agency Royal Derby Africa proposes a longer tour named “18 Days Slave Routes in Benin, Togo, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali”. However, the itinerary includes only part of a day in Ouidah in which the participants visit the python temple and another unidentified Vodun temple, before leaving for Grand-Popo and Accra²³. Today, tourism is Benin’s second largest source of foreign exchange after cotton. Despite offering a friendly environment, the tourism industry is still considered an incipient activity in the country, because of the poor quality of services such as electricity, telephony, transportation and logistics (IMF 2008: 43).

21. Spector Travel: <http://www.spectortravel.com/>

22. Royal Derby Africa: http://www.royalderbytours.com/benin/18_days_benin_togo_gh_bf_mali.php

23. Royal Derby Africa: http://www.royalderbytours.com/benin/18_days_benin_togo_gh_bf_mali.php

The various monuments of the Slaves' Route constitute a *mise en scène* of the Atlantic slave trade past, which to some extent is similar to that found in other slavery tourist sites. The statues and the different stations on the Slaves' Route are intended to emotionally move the visitors, especially African-American and Afro-Caribbean tourists who can buy travel packages costing thousands of dollars. Although foreign tourists who are not familiar with Vodun religion can find it difficult to understand the sculptures representing Vodun deities, these statues succeed in positioning the visitor at the crossroad of several memories and histories of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, replacing the simplistic representations of heroes and/or victims with the valorization of African art, religions, and cultures.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the promotion of the Atlantic slave trade past in the public space is a project embraced by several West African countries, including Ghana, The Gambia, Senegal, and Benin. The analysis of initiatives aiming to commemorate the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa and Benin showed that monuments, memorials, and museums became the stage where the slave trade past is re-enacted. However, despite evoking the Atlantic slave trade past and the sufferings endured by enslaved Africans before their embarkment for the Americas, most initiatives repeatedly convey simplified representations of enslavement. Even though these simplified narratives have been successful in attracting and moving local and international tourists, they persistently ignore the multiple dimensions of the experiences of the victims, by reinforcing various misleading stereotypes and omitting unpleasant aspects of African participation in the slave trade business.

Despite these shortcomings, the promotion of the slave trade built and cultural heritage with the aim of developing local tourism gave hope of economic development to several West African countries, which in the early 1990s were almost facing bankruptcy. Probably because of its relatively stable economic and political situation, a country like Benin became a pole of attraction for several non-governmental organizations and consequently an ideal place for the development of tourism projects targeting African diaspora audiences. Slave trade tourism initiatives helped to put Benin on the map of international slavery tourist destinations, contributing to commodify African cultural

heritage, including Vodun religion, and make it a leading culture export commodity. Unlike Ghana, where tangible heritage of slavery is prominent, in Benin the most visited landmarks are newly built monuments and museums. For interested visitors, tourist activities also include visiting Vodun temples and attending religious festivals and public ceremonies. Most international tourists, especially African Americans, who visit Ouidah are seeking to live the experience of returning to the land of their ancestors. Generally they spend one day visiting the city, eating good “African” food, and buying some “African” souvenirs. During these short trips, the contact with locals is rather limited, as most African American tourists speak only English and locals speak French, in addition to one or more local languages.

The various initiatives promoting the Atlantic slave trade past in Benin made visible multiple layers of the memory of slavery. Whereas the descendants of the royal family of Abomey were able to take advantage of the promotion of Vodun religion, the descendants of slave merchants and other auxiliaries in the slave trade business saw in the various slave trade tourism projects an occasion to request forgiveness for the wrongs of their ancestors and to rehabilitate their memory. However, by publicly recognizing the involvement of their ancestors in the Atlantic slave trade, they had not put their privileged position at risk. Actually, most of these elite groups were able to obtain political and economic advantages from the several slave trade tourist initiatives. To fulfill the expectations of African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists and in order to avoid the emergence of local conflicts — in a context where promoting the memory of slavery means fighting to occupy the public space — these two groups were not interested in helping to deepen the understanding of the experiences of the victims of slavery.

For African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists, most of whom are the descendants of enslaved Africans, visiting public monuments dedicated to the memory of the Atlantic slave trade has been an efficient means to mourn their ancestors and to re-establish real or imagined connections with motherland Africa. However, for the descendants of enslaved men and women who were forcibly brought from other regions and remained on Dahomean soil, acknowledging their slave past is still an embarrassing issue, which reinforces the stigma carried by their families and can hardly bring them any social advantage.

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