

## Article

# Ships on the Wall: Retracing African Trade Routes from Marseille, France

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**Abstract:** With this essay on decolonizing ways of knowing, I seek to understand the phantom histories of my father's French family. Filling in silences in written family accounts with scholarship on Marseille's maritime commerce, African history, African Diaspora studies, and my own archival research, I seek to reconnect European, African, and Caribbean threads of my family story. Travelling from New Orleans to Marseille, Zanzibar, Ouidah, Porto-Novo, Martinique and Guadeloupe, this research at the intersections of personal and collective heritage links critical genealogies to colonial processes that structured the Atlantic world. Through an exploration of family documents, literature, and art, I travel the trade routes of la Maison Régis.

**Keywords:** colonial heritage; African history; critical genealogies; slavery; Marseille; Ouidah

We must be prepared to make detours into the imperial and colonial zones . . . . The empires were not simply out there—distant terminal points for trading activity . . . . Imperial mentalities were brought back home long before the immigrants arrived.

—Paul Gilroy (2004, p. 164)

There are other ways of remembering the past than by speaking of it.

—Rosalind Shaw (2002, p. 2)



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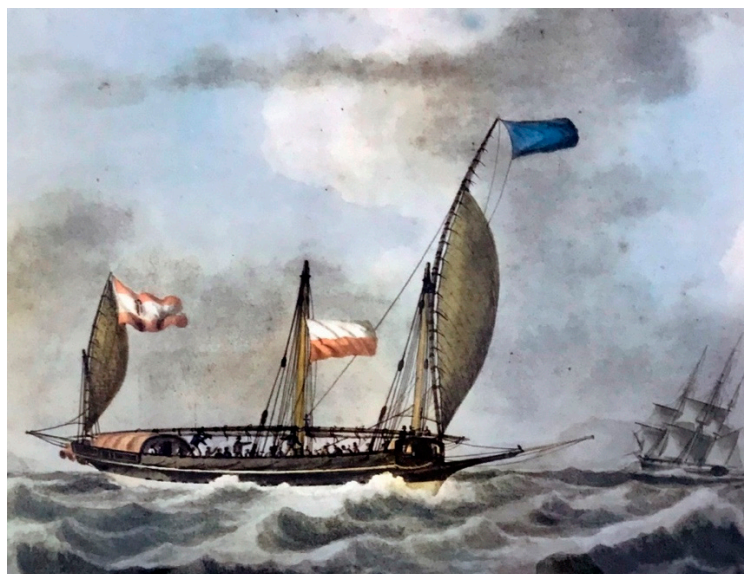
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## 1. Introduction: “I Am—De la planète MARS”

When I was in my early 20s, my father, Claude Régis, distributed prints of ships to all of his children. He loved sailing, and as a young girl, I spent a few weeks every summer with my family on or near a boat. I remember a lot of cleaning, washing and folding sails, scrubbing the deck, sanding teak and varnishing it, but also playing cards, picnics, and swimming in the deep cold waters of the Mediterranean. The prints he gave us did not have anything to do with the boats I knew as a child. They were large, color reproductions of paintings from the port of Marseille, France where he had grown up—the three-masted schooners and brigs were the kinds of ships involved in long-distance trade (see Meissonnier 1968; Garcin et al. 2011). The painters, Antoine Roux and son, were known to be so precise in their representations that they could be used for insurance purposes, like photographs today. Claude told me to select two of them. The one I liked the best was a *Felouque espagnole*, a smaller ship—as I remember it, my father explained it was precisely the kind of fast-moving, highly maneuverable boat that would have been used by pirates preying on cargo ships which Roux also painted. In the broader context, I recognized and admired its subversive aspect. See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Antoine Roux's *Felouque espagnole*, Spanish shebek, from 1830. Public domain.

The prints seemed a bit old fashioned and stodgy, but I framed them to hang in my home in New Orleans, and they have followed me from move to move ever since. It wasn't until I returned to France in the early 2000s that I began to think of these ships as part of my family heritage. Alison Bechdel has written of the ways in which her father's restoration of their family home expressed truths about his life through décor (furniture, scrollwork, cornices, fireplaces, chandeliers) and books, that were never expressed in words ([Bechdel 2006](#)). In the same way, in my own family, ships on the wall silently convey our histories of global trade. It seemed all of my relatives had them. Whether in the form of original oil paintings or elaborate model ships encased in glass displays, when I have stepped into family members' homes in France, I think to myself, "Oh! They have them, too." Some of their paintings predated our ancestors' role in maritime commerce, such as a view of Marseille from a Turkish perspective I once saw in the living room of a relative. See [Figure 2](#).



**Figure 2.** A view of the port of Marseille by a Turkish artist, possibly Matrakçı Nasuh, in 1563. Print courtesy of the Regis family. Public domain.

Sometimes, the maritime scenes were lighter and featured pleasure boats, a rowboat, or a sailing dinghy. However, everywhere there were boats and water. Nathalie [Rachlin \(2014, p. 48\)](#) explains why residents of Marseille, like my family, often look out to sea:

Surrounded by mountains and built in the shape of an amphitheater, facing the Mediterranean, Marseille turns its back on Paris and the rest of France. Looking outward to other Mediterranean port cities, like Genoa, Barcelona, Algiers, or Athens. It has a good deal more in common with them than it does with Le Havre or Brest.<sup>1</sup> (See Appendix A)

On the Indian Ocean, in the coastal cities of Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Lamu, members of Swahili merchant families displayed their heritage as coastal elites in the interior design of their homes as well. “Trade ornaments and decorative objects were carefully staged to foreground a family’s direct connection to overseas social and cultural networks” ([Meier 2009, p. 10](#)). As Meier shows, plates and porcelain bowls imported from China and Persia, as well as furniture from India and Europe, had important meanings, speaking to Swahili families’ maritime heritage, mercantile success, and cosmopolitan identities similar to those of Marseille. See Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** A postcard depicting “Marseille le Vieux Port,” the old port of Marseille, could be found in shops around city in the early 2000s, showing a place defined by its relationship to the sea. Image courtesy of the Regis family.

When I lived Marseille in the spring of 2006, forty percent of residents were born outside of France. The city was in the midst of a regional and cosmopolitan renaissance. On the radio, it was common to hear songs in both in French and Occitan, the vernacular language of the region, as well as Arabic and English. The hip-hop group IAM proclaimed “I am—de la planète MARS” playing on the common abbreviation for Marseille and the Afrofuturist imaginary of the city. In one of his songs, he raps:

Ici, on est marseillais bien avant d’être français.

Here, we are Marseillais long before being French.

(IAM 1993)

During the riots that swept cities in France in late 2005, Marseille “did not burn,” residents claimed, because many working-class people and descendants of Algerian and African immigrants lived in the heart of the city. In Paris, however, most lower income people, including “visible minorities” (French citizens whose parents or grandparents had immigrated from North Africa and elsewhere) lived in far-flung suburbs known as Les Banlieues ([Mitchell 2011; Rachlin 2014, p. 48](#)).



Despite its distinctive identity, Marseille has still had to confront the far right's political movement in France. Former journalist Jean-Claude Izzo published a series of noir detective novels (*Total Chaos*, *Chourmo*, *Solea*) which explore the vibrant intercultural metropolis during the rise of far-right racism and xenophobia. On the back cover of his books, Izzo proclaims his own genealogy as "100% marseillais," which is to say that his father was Italian and his mother was Spanish. Anti-racist activists made a t-shirt announcing "Marseille: It's where I belong" written in both French and Arabic. Paper Jali, a member of Massilia Sound System, explained that the band was formed partly in response to the rise of Le Pen and the Front National in Marseille, which he described as "shameful:"

Marseille is a fisherman's city. The sea is very important in our history. All these ships came from Africa, Asia, every part of the world.

(Jali 2006)

When asked why reggae is so popular in Marseille, he replied "because Africa is just on the other side of the Mediterranean. Here, you have a lot of people from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and of course many from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco" (Jali 2006).

Although I did not have any direct experiences of the city growing up, my father's ancestral connections in Marseille are part of a Provençal genealogy that includes two-hundred years of connections to West and Northern Africa through work and trade. Claude and his siblings came of age during the German occupation of the city, and my father joined the army straight out of high school. Although he returned for short visits with family, he never lived in the city again. Instead, before he met my mother, an American woman working abroad, he dreamed of becoming an officer in the *Affaires Indigènes*, travelling the deserts of North Africa. In a self-published manuscript he gave me and my siblings in the 1990s, he explained, "these officers functioned as administrators in zones without civilian functionaries: Southern Morocco and the Sahara" (Régis n.d., p. 29). He was stationed in Algeria from 1957–1958 (when my mother joined him) but his military career coincided with the end of the colonial era—the end of empire. Other futures awaited him. Nonetheless, he longed for the solitude of desert horizons and was known by some of his colleagues as "le moine soldat," the monk-soldier (Régis n.d., p. 54).

Growing up in a military household, I experienced our family as outsiders to Bretagne, Alsace, Ardèche, and—after we moved to the United States when I was nine—the black belt/wiregrass country of South-Central Alabama. Back in Marseille, I appreciated being in a city where my family was known. At a Marseille subway office, with Tante Françoise, my father's sister made small talk with the clerk while we waited, "C'est ma nièce," (She's my niece) Françoise said. The clerk laughed: "Ah, vous ne pouvez pas la nier!" (You can't deny her). Our looks made our kinship evident See Figure 4.

The truth is, in Marseille, I felt everyone looked like me. This was a city of brown-hair, brown-eyed folks—whether they came into the city from Provence long ago or first, second or third generation citizens with family histories in La Réunion, Senegal, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Greece, Spain, or Italy.<sup>2</sup> Although my father had mostly cut his ties with the city, I kept going back.





**Figure 4.** (Left) View from an apartment in the Quartier Belsunce. (Right) The author, Helen A. Regis, with her aunt Françoise Margaritis in Marseille. Photographs courtesy of the Regis family.

## 2. Phantom Histories: *Les Régis au Dahomey*

In 1997, on a trip back from research in Cameroon, I stopped in Marseille to visit my family. I was living in New Orleans where I had just completed my Ph.D. in cultural anthropology, so Marseille was an easy stopover between flights. I was hosted by my father's youngest brother, Oncle Henri, a neurologist and psychiatrist. As a scientist with a keen interest in all aspects of the human experience, he cultivated friendships with scientists, artists and historians in the city. During our walks, I was struck by the immediacy and presence of the war in his memories. Remembering the period he and his siblings were caught up in as children—World War II, the German occupation, the bombings of the city, and the deep scars it left among those close to him—he sought to understand the human motivations of all those involved. During my stay, Oncle Henri took me on a tour of Marseille that focused on the city's Mediterranean history. We climbed the steps of Notre Dame de la Garde, the hilltop church where sailors and their families made pilgrimages to thank Our Lady for saving them from shipwrecks. One of the chapels was covered in plaques, oil paintings, and model ships, with messages of gratitude. Henri told me his mother (my grandmother) made a pilgrimage there after his older brother, Camille, survived a shipwreck during a trip with the marine scouts. See Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Paintings in Notre Dame de la Garde (Our Lady of the Watch) in Marseille include ships sailing into harbor. Photograph by Helen A. Regis.

A townhouse built in 1857 by Camille Jouvencel had since been converted into university housing (Régis 1941, p. 14). When my father and siblings were growing up, cousins lived across the street, and other family friends lived nearby. Henri told me they used to communicate with a home-made telephone—its string connecting their balconies across the narrow street. See Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** (Left) The medieval streets of Le Panier in Marseille in 2010. Photograph by phgaillard2001, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons. (Right) Henri Régis, the author's uncle, in front of their cousins' home on Rue Sylvabelle. Photograph by Helen A. Régis.

A few blocks away, he showed me La Préfecture, where prisoners were tortured by the Gestapo during the war, and another section of downtown, near the Vieux Port, which was demolished during the German occupation because of the resistance networks it harbored.<sup>3</sup> As a young boy, he and Claude helped move families from those apartments before the explosions, and the modern buildings which stand there today serve as a constant incongruous reminder of the violence of those demolitions.

Occupation was a tumultuous time. French society had been starkly polarized in the decade leading up to the war, with communists and socialists on the left aligned against various groups on the right ranging from those advocating for a more "social" capitalism, to royalists who wanted to bring back the monarchy. Some went underground to join the maquis (the resistance) while others supported the resistance quietly while staying in place, going to work or school or looking after their families.<sup>4</sup> My uncle explained, "Some joined the resistance army via London with General de Gaulle and the Armée de Libération Nationale. One of the ways to do so was to join the British Royal Air Force (RAF). Many in the family fought, and some died, in such situations. Among them: Jean Fournier, Roland Frayssinet, Nikolas Zafiropulo, and Pierre Régis." Some sought to profit from the situation with black market schemes. Families were divided and the question of how to resist caused "extreme tensions" between my grandfather and my father. Claude wanted to join the resistance and his father refused, arguing this would place the entire family in danger. The argument grew so heated that his father pulled a pistol on him. Claude retreated to his room, carving into the desk in his room "Mieux vaut mort que souillure." (Better to be dead than defiled.)

Amidst these social divides, the Régis name was considered to be a liability. My father wrote that "in every large city there was a list of 100 families whose members of the bourgeoisie that was to be physically eliminated, which is to say, executed" as a first step in the coming revolution. In Marseille, the Régis family was among them (Régis n.d., p. 1). Between June and September 1944, during a period of summary justice, "at least 4500 summary executions took place in France in the months following the liberation. Most of the violence occurred south of the Loire valley, an area that was liberated, not by allied troops, but by the French themselves" (Farmer 1999, pp. 62–65). The Régis family was spared.

Henri now lived with his wife on the sixth floor of a modern apartment building in one of Marseille's newer neighborhoods, on the hills south of downtown. After his tour of the city, we stopped by, and I saw a large bronze bell just outside the front door in the landing. I ask him, "What's that?"

"Oh! That's the bell from Ouidah."

"What?" I ask.

"You don't know?!"

"No, I don't know," I answer uncomprehending. He looks at me again. "I thought for sure, with all of your African travels, you knew about the family history." I didn't.

"This is the bell from the *factorerie*." He used the French word "*factorerie*," which I heard without understanding. "What?"

"From the Fort."

"The fort?"

"In Ouidah!" I still shook my head.

After living and working in West Africa, I was stunned that I had never heard of this African connection in my family. To help orient me on our family history, Uncle Henri gave me a photocopy of an article that mentioned the Régis family firm's role in the cowrie shell trade (Iroko 1991). He also gave me a copy of his father, Jean-François Régis's, family history, *Les Régis au Dahomey* (1941). After he was demobilized in the aftermath of a stunning military defeat to the Wehrmacht, my grandfather wrote a family history of his grandfather, Louis, and great-uncle Victor, who were in business together until 1848 when Louis left the business.

On the opening page of his book is an image of the flag (a modified version of the blue, white and red framed with a white border) that his ancestors raised in the fort in Ouidah. Although "most family historians give little or no attention to the social context in which the family lived," Jean-François was deeply interested in the economic and political context in which his ancestors created a shipping empire, which ultimately led to the establishment of the French colony of Dahomey (present-day Benin) in West Africa (Sleeter 2020, p. 1). But what is most striking to me is that he writes the history of our family through the social upheaval of World War II when France was trying to use its navy and overseas colonies as assets to negotiate better terms with the German Reich. In January of 1941, he writes of the founding of a trading post by the Maison Régis in 1841:

In the midst of the painful trials inflicted on our French spirits (*nos âmes françaises*), it is not without interest to commemorate, in the family circle, the foundation of the first establishment of our grandparents in Dahomey. [ . . . ] In fact, it was effectively a commercial initiative which gave France one more colony.

(Régis 1941, p. 7)

In his conclusion, he continues similar themes:

In an hour when one hears talk of new conditions for the exploitation of the black continent, as a consequence of a program of political and economic reorganization of Europe, the descendants of those men who realized French colonial expansion must contribute to an awakening of national conscience to safeguard this sacred heritage.

Coming of age in Marseille, where the French empire was a source of prosperity for many, my grandfather saw his ancestors' contributions to French colonialism in a positive light. As I read his account of our family, I thought of the different ways that it could be approached—as *le roman familial* (a family novel), or as a route into *l'histoire réelle* (the real history) which could help me understand the opportunities and conflicts my relatives



had to face, the impasses into which they got trapped, and especially the impact of this history on personal experience (Gaulejac 1999, p. 123).

My father always told us that there were two Régis brothers—Régis le riche and Régis le pauvre—and that we descended from le pauvre, that is the poor one, but never explained why. In his father's second book, *Notre Famille*, the family split is discussed as domestic history (Régis 1961, p. 7). Almost 20 years after Louis left the family business, Victor and his wife Félicie Fabre, a member of a prominent Marseille family, were grooming Félicie's nephew, Cyprien Fabre, to take over the family firm, which was at the height of its power in West Africa. According to local historians, Victor had the:

sole ownership of comptoirs (trading establishments) in Grand-Popo, Wydah, Porto-Novo, Lagos, Palma, and with his associates, in Petit-Popo, Godomey, Kotonou, and Leke.

(Caty and Richard 1986, p. 50)

Unbeknownst to his wife, during the years that Victor expanded la Maison Régis, he also expanded his family. He tells Félicie that he wants to recognize the children—aged 18, 11, and 9—he has with their former housekeeper (Madame Mante) and to bring his oldest, Victorine, into their home to live with them. Shocked, Félicie takes Victor to court for “un procès en séparation de corps” (a legal separation) (Caty and Richard 1986, p. 123). Divorce in France had been abolished in 1816 and was only restored in 1884. The proceedings were widely covered in the press—every detail known to the public. Writing to his uncle in 1867, Cyprien Fabre, calls the whole thing a “horrible scandal” (Caty and Richard 1986, p. 124). After two years, Félicie Fabre wins her case, and in February 1869 is awarded a very substantial alimony of 2500 F per month or the gains of 600,000 in capital.

My great-great grandfather, Louis Régis, sides with Félicie. Cyprien Fabre, who was married to Louis' daughter, also sides with his aunt. Cyprien's “signature” is withdrawn from the firm, and he is told to move out of the home where he had lived with Victor and Félicie. Victor's sons, Théodore and Louis Mante, join the Maison Régis, which becomes known as “Mante Frères de Régis Aîné” (Mante Brothers of Régis the Elder) as they legally held their mother's name (Caty and Richard 1986, p. 124; Régis 1961). When Victor dies in 1881, he leaves everything to the Mante Brothers. Victor's heirs were transmitted his properties and considerable wealth, but not his name. In the public record, Victor Régis's outrageous life story, variously described as bold, courageous, audacious, defiant, proud, isolated, and alone—appears to overwhelm that of his brother Louis. Victor's portrait still hangs in the Chamber of Commerce, but it is Louis's descendants who have inherited the name. In the family tree that accompanies my grandfather's book, the only line of Régis descendants is Louis's.

In his family histories, my grandfather selected the parts of Louis's time with La Maison Régis that he was proud to associate with, interjecting his own point of view into the public record, and silencing the rest. As a scholar of the African diaspora, I knew I needed to contribute what genealogists call “critical histories” to our family story. Gaulejac writes of those who are “haunted by histories which are not their own, that is, that they have not lived through personally.” The ghost can be someone else's secret, and yet it affects everyone in the family—sometimes across the generations (Gaulejac 1999, p. 123; Abraham and Torok 1975, p. 391). In telling these stories, there can be a “fragile solidarity in the face of the fear of revealing (dévoiler)” something that has been kept quiet (Gaulejac 1999).

Reflecting on the opening of America's Black Holocaust Museum in 1988, Toni Morrison writes of the growing movement to face racism and to create more accurate representations of the centrality of slavery to American life:

We are becoming more industrious in substituting accuracy, other perspectives, other narratives in place of phantom histories, polluted politics, and media manipulation.

(Morrison 2019, p. 78)

With this essay on decolonizing ways of knowing, I seek to contribute a new approach to my own family history in the place of phantom histories. I hope that it is possible to do so without disowning my own family or being disowned by them. Wrestling with my grandfather's family history is for me an effort at taking a stance that we must reckon with how racialized inequality came to be structured into the Atlantic world and into the very structures of modernity. Through an exploration of family documents, literature, and art, I travel the trade routes of la Maison Régis.

### 3. La Maison Régis: From Cotignac to Côtes des Esclaves

My grandfather's account of our family begins with Joseph-François-Victor Régis, known as "La Guêpe" ("The Yellow Jacket") after a portrait of him in a family home in Marseille wearing a striped vest. He was born in Cotignac, about 90 km away, in 1767. According to my grandfather, the family had resided in the small town where they worked as tanners and leather merchants since at least 1660. As one of eight siblings, Joseph-François-Victor saw few opportunities for himself in the family trade. In February 1793, he moved to Marseille when he was 26 years old, and went into business with André Martin, who fabricated fezes under the business Martin and Company. Known as *bonnets de Tunis*, the hats were made with felt from the Pyrenees and red dye from the garance (*rubia tinctorum*, or "madder") grown near Toulon. The finished products were exported to North Africa. Régis's influence in the business grew strong enough that the name was changed to Martin and Régis and expanded to les échelles du levant, the Ottoman Empire's ports of call.

In 1802, Joseph-François-Victor married Agnès Blanc de la Ciotat, and they had a son named Victor a year later. This is the Victor who is the focus of much family drama. During the Napoleonic Wars, French maritime commerce shut down after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and Régis had to find another trade while also welcoming two other sons Pierre (b. 1806), and Louis (b. 1812). After the restoration of the French monarchy, and peace with England, he resumed maritime commerce in 1816. When their father died in 1827, Victor, the eldest, took the lead of the family firm and brought his brothers along with him. The middle brother, Pierre, known as "l'Africain," had first gone to Senegal on behalf of his father, and established his own business there while continuing to collaborate with his brothers, "until he contracted in Senegal illnesses which required him to abandon colonial life. He retired near Aubagne where he died in 1853" (Régis 1941, p. 13). My grandfather says very little about him except that he was a "bachelor," but much is suggested by the term "colonial life." In an appendix to *Les Régis au Dahomey*, he lists the ships connected to the family from 1816–1848, including those purchased by La Guêpe in the early years and those jointly owned by Victor and Louis between 1827 and 1848. In total, la Maison Régis purchased 14 ships and constructed five others: three three-masted schooners and two brigs (Régis 1961, p. 7). After 1848, no other ships are listed, although Victor's African commerce continued for another three decades.<sup>1</sup>

How did the Régis brothers get from Marseille to West Africa? The article *Oncle Henri* gave to me by Félix Iroko, a professor of history at the University Nationale du Bénin in Cotonou, explains the route developed through their involvement in the international cowrie trade (Iroko 1991). "Cowrie" is the generic name for:

several varieties of marine gastropod mollusks or sea snails sometimes called 'porcelains.' Two very small varieties, *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*, endemic to the tropical latitudes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, were at the center of a vast exchange system across the Islamic world, starting from the region where they were almost exclusively collected: the Maldives Archipelago.

(Fauvelle 2018, p. 251)

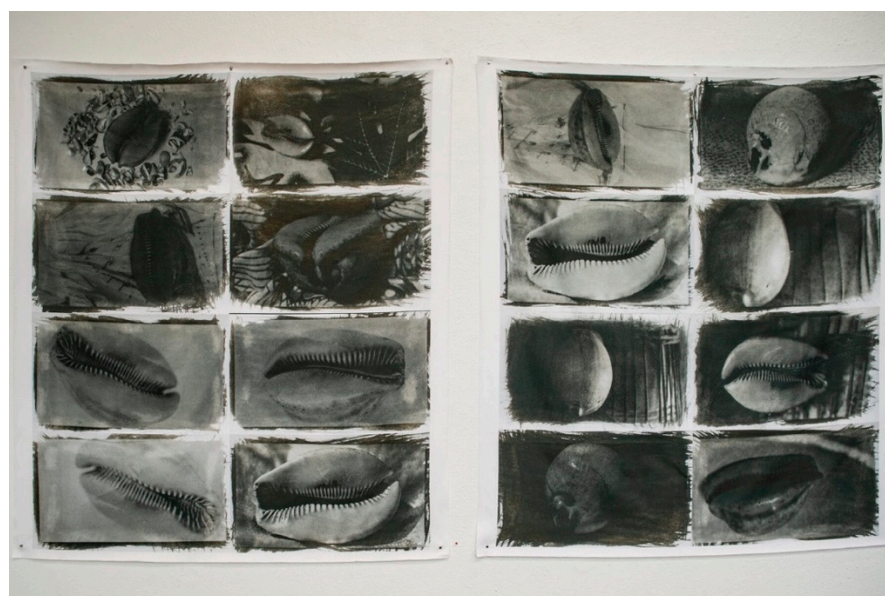
Cowries were imported by dhow boats from the Maldives Islands and transported by caravan across the interior of Africa. In my grandfather's family history, he refers to the cowrie trade as "troc" or "commerce de troc," which means barter. However, historians now understand them differently. In *A Fistful of Cowries*, Toby Green argues that many

of the objects Europeans thought they were bartering with African traders were actually currencies with widespread exchangeability across great distances, from cloth to iron and copper bars, kola nuts, and gold and silver coins (Green 2020, pp. 433–34). Archaeologist Akinwumi Ogundiran reports that while cowrie motifs appear on public art (bas-relief, sculpture, and pottery) from Ilé-Ife from 1200 to 1500, “cowries themselves are relatively scarce in the archaeological record until the sixteenth century” (Green 2020, p. 316; Ogundiran 2002, 2009). The rise of cowry imports has also been connected to militarization and state-formation in West Africa—particular in Dahomey and Oyo:

What was occurring was a rapid expansion of the money supply and state power with it. At least 30 million cowries went to the Bight of Benin between 1500 and 1875, accounting for 44 percent of the total value of merchandise shipped.

(Green 2020, p. 316)

In the nineteenth century, cowries became important to Yoruba religious practice (Green 2020, p. 19) and were used in family shrines. While they were useful for any form of commerce, they were indispensable to the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Iroko 1991). See Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** “Cowrie asa asa,” cotton twill and ink jet, 44” × 40, by Jasmine Abena Colgan, an Ameri-Ghanian artist, educator, and scholar from her series “Human Currency”, which explores the connection between the cowrie and slave trades in West Africa. To create the artwork, Colgan photographed a cowrie shell and printed it in platinum and palladium photographic solution on cotton paper. Each image is portrayed in a saturated monochromatic tile which narrates artistic rituals and cultural traditions. The prints were scanned and then printed onto a cotton fabric. The documented shell is collaged into an ‘asa asa’ and this tradition migrated over the Atlantic Ocean into what is called a quilt.

Europeans had been involved in the cowrie trade since the 13th century, and by the 19th century, French merchants needing cowries to trade in Africa purchased them primarily in Amsterdam, Liverpool, London, and Hamburg (Iroko 1991, p. 362). When the Régis brothers came on the scene, the trade was dominated by Germans who were also purchasing palm oil in the Gulf of Benin (Iroko 1991, p. 369). In Marseille, Victor and Louis Régis took the lead in “breaking the Hamburg monopoly” (Iroko 1991, p. 369). Their business strategies involved thousands of miles of trade routes connecting Marseille, London, Hamburg, Saint-Louis, Zanzibar, the Maldives and the Philippines. In cowrie producing regions, they established direct ties with local chiefs. In the Lacquedives Islands



off the coast of Kerala, India, and further into the Indian Ocean on the Maldivian Islands, they signed contracts to buy the precious shells. They also made connections in the Pacific to obtain a second variety, *annulus*, in the Philippines. These shells were shipped by Jerome Borelli, one of their associates who was established in Zanzibar (Iroko 1991, p. 369, citing Paul Masson 1906, p. 375). Iroko remarks:

for the first time in two centuries of West African commerce based on cowries, the French, thanks to the house of Régis of Marseille, had a foothold in the three primary areas of cowry distribution in indo-pacific space—Zanzibar, the Maldives and the Philippines—the most important source areas for cowries in the world.

(Iroko 1991, p. 370)

Based on his sojourn in Zanzibar in the second half of the nineteenth century, traveler and diplomat Sir Richard Burton reported on the lucrative nature of the cowrie trade, writing that “one sac which was valued at one dollar forty-four cents (\$1.44) when loaded on the island, was worth eight or nine upon arrival on the West African coast” (Burton 1862, p. 678; Hogendorn and Johnson 1986).

La Maison Régis imported the shells into Marseille before shipping them out again towards the côte des esclaves (the Slave Coast) to purchase palm oil. With the development of new processes to purify the oil into palmitine, a variety of stearine, the oil could be employed in making soap, candles, and oils destined for industrial uses—such as reducing friction of locomotive wheels on train tracks. According to Iroko:

The quantity of cowries imported by the Régises is impressive: as they themselves estimated it, at least between 160 to 180 barrels (tonnaux) per year during the first years of their trade in palm oil, a commerce based in cowries.

(Iroko 1991, p. 372)

In the second quarter of the 19th century, the Régis brothers also imported cowries from the British firm Langlois of Calcutta (Iroko 1991, p. 370). The trade could bring 500% profits for the maritime merchants.

In the Kingdom of Benin, located in what is now Nigeria, African-made ivories and bronze castings depict Portuguese merchants among the agencies emanating from the water, associated with the god Olokun, “ruler of the seas and provider of earthly wealth”, and the imagery of these foreign traders appeared on royal art, including brass plaques, bracelets, and masks, alongside the “denizens of Olokun’s world (mudfish, crocodile, pythons, and the like) . . . and royal figures of the Benin court. The image of the Portuguese thus, became an integral part of a visual vocabulary of power and wealth” emanating from the seas (Ben-Amos 1995, p. 37). See Figure 8.

This is the world that the Régis brothers entered with their cowrie shells. The firm did business with slave traders, “supplying slave markets such as Ouidah and Benguela with the necessary goods,” which included cloth, guns, and cowrie shells (Soumonni 1995, p. 84). Historian Elisée Soumonni, who wrote his dissertation, *Trade and Politics in Dahomey, with particular reference to the House of Régis, 1841–1892*, argues that it was through this international trade that the firm became “one of the most respectable houses in Marseille” (Soumonni 1995, p. 85).



**Figure 8.** Cast bronze figure of a Portuguese soldier from the 17th century in Benin City, Edo State, which was located in modern-day Nigeria. Statues such as this one were often kept on royal altars or displayed on the roof of the royal place in Benin City. Portuguese slave traders brought luxury goods from the sea, and were seen to be connected to Olokun, the god of the sea. Image courtesy of the British Museum.

#### 4. Ouidah: Contested Waters

As I began to talk with family members about our African past, my cousin Jean Régis, Henri's son, encouraged me to read *Les Passagers du Vent*, a five-volume graphic novel about the slave trade from Ouidah to Saint Domingue, created by François Bourgeon (1994). The novels are narrated by a young French woman, Isa, who chronicles the cruelty she witnesses on the ships, as well as on land, in Dahomey and in Saint Domingue, for an abolitionist publication:

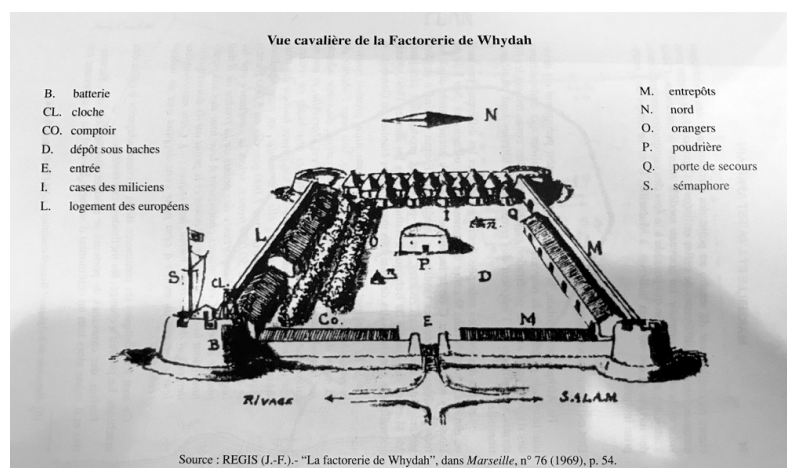
As a young woman who is liberated, her perspective on the status of slaves is the same as her perspective on women . . . [She] holds the discourse of our eighteenth-century philosophers but her gaze on the lives of African people is more like that of a contemporary ethnographer.

(Tamson 2001, p. 89)

Set in 1781–1782, on the eve of the French revolution, the novel opens with detailed drawings of the slave ship, including its “*parc aux hommes*” where enslaved people were transported. While it is a work of fiction, the graphic narrative is carefully documented, with archival drawings of slave ship and the Fort in Ouidah reproduced from the French Archives Coloniales. See Figure 9.

The blending of fiction and documentary evidence, and a story line revolving around real historical figures, such as King Kpengla, Yovogan—known as the “chief of the whites”—and Olivier de Montaguère, creates a compelling narrative that is disturbing in its faithfulness to the violence of the trade. Some of the drawings, such as those depicting the treatment of captives in Dahomey and enslaved people aboard the ship, are unflinching. As the ship's doctor inspects the bodies of the enslaved, he checks their teeth as if they were horses prior to purchase, an examination said to screen out those who might spread sickness aboard ship. In a holding pen, women are chained to columns, iron rings around their necks, their hands tied behind their backs. A young woman is forcibly taken from her child to serve as a wet nurse for Isa's friend Mary. As the human merchandise is boarded, a woman jumps overboard, eaten by sharks. The next frame shows Isa standing next to the

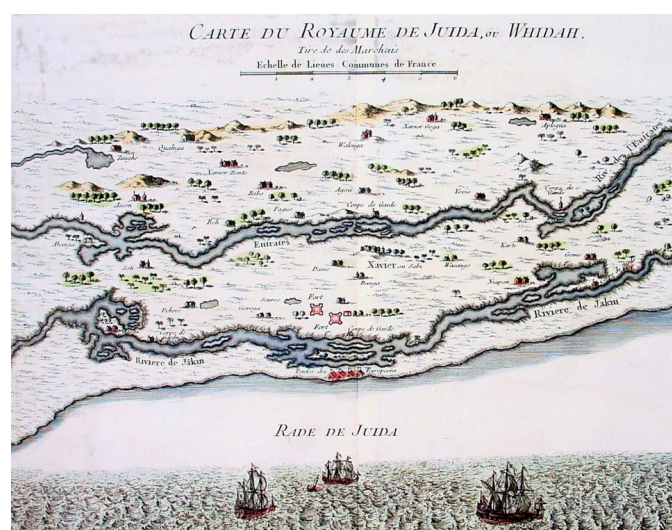
Captain “Quelle horreur!” exclaims Isa. “What a waste,” responds the Captain (Bourgeon 1994, T.4, p. 45). During the crossing, Isa witnesses the force-feeding of the enslaved with a speculum. Later, when a slave insurrection is brutally put down, the ringleaders’ bodies swing from the mast as examples. One review characterized Bourgeon’s work as animated by “un devoir de memoire” (a duty to memory) (Tamson 2001, p. 88).



**Figure 9.** A drawing of the Fort in Ouidah by Jean-François Régis, grandfather of Helen Régis, from his self-published family history. Image courtesy of the Régis family.

Of the nearly two million Africans who were trafficked across the Atlantic from the port of Ouidah, only two published narratives record the experiences of the enslaved: *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* (Law and Lovejoy 2007) and *Barracoon*, the life story of Oluale Kossola (Cudjo Lewis) recorded by Zora Neale Hurston near Mobile, Alabama in the 1920s (Hurst 2018; Law 2004, p. 16). Kossola’s story is unusual, writes Deborah Plant: “It is a kind of slave narrative in reverse, journeying backward to barracoons, betrayal, and barbarity. And then even further back, to a period of tranquility, a time of freedom, and a sense of belonging” (Plant 2018, p. 130).

In Dahomey, the royal family’s court was located in Abomey, two days’ journey inland from Ouidah. A long-held taboo prevented them from even setting eyes on the ocean. Like the Régis brothers, who never traveled to Ouidah themselves, they did not witness first-hand the departure of so many people across the Middle Passage. See Figure 10.



**Figure 10.** “Carte du Royaume de Juha or Whidah,” from Abbé Provost’s *Histoire Générale des Voyages* (1746–1759).



Within the monarchy, a great deal of power was given to the Ahosi. Known as “wives of the leopard,” they were technically married to the king of Dahomey, but in practice, held a wide array of administrative and diplomatic roles—making policy and holding political and ritual functions in addition to serving as warriors (Bay 1998). According to Edna Bay, their betrothal to the king enacted important alliances between family groups and the kingdom and were thus central to holding the polity together. European colonists and travelers’ orientalist distortions referred to the Ahosi as “amazons” (extrapolating from Greek myth) and “concubines” of the king (Monroe and Janzen 2014).

In 1793, Archibald Dalzel published an influential narrative of the Dahomean court’s Annual Customs, a ritual where gifts were exchanged between the king and his subjects, as well as foreign merchants from France and other European empires (Dalzel 1793). At the event, offerings were made to deities and ancestors, including the sacrifice of war captives. In accounts published by slave traders, the Customs were sensationalized to justify the slave trade: better to be sold into slavery they argued, than to be killed in Abomey. The deaths were religious and political acts. Offerings carried messages to the royal ancestors and “their blood provided nourishment for the deities” (Bay 1998, p. 66). Edna Bay explains:

In a society where wealth was measured in terms of the number of dependents under a person’s control, human sacrifice signaled the greatest possible expenditure of wealth. It also signaled military power and threat to Dahomey’s neighbors, for those who were sacrificed were captives of war.

(Bay 1998, p. 66)

The actual number varied, but reliable sources are scarce, with foreign observers exaggerating or minimizing sacrifice to serve their purposes. For example, Bay suggests that British observers reported that fewer were sacrificed during Gezo’s monarchy as evidence of their positive influence and diplomatic success with the kingdom:

Larger numbers might be dispatched, paradoxically, in very good or very bad years, as thanksgiving for a well-fought war or especially abundant harvest, or alternatively, as a plea for aid, particularly in a crisis.

(Bay 1998, pp. 265–67)

In 1797, King Adandozan took the throne, and Ouidah continued to be one of the busiest slave-trading ports in all of West and Central Africa. Atlantic powers, however, began to shift. Britain outlawed the international slave trade in 1807, and in 1815, France reluctantly agreed to sign the treaty of Vienna, committing to its abolition (Soumonni 1999). A few years later, in 1818, the Brazilian slave trader Francisco Felix de Souza supported the overthrow of the Adandonzan regime by Gezo (1818–1858). See Figure 11.

In exchange for his help, the new king appointed de Souza as his delegate in the city, representing the monarch in overseeing the commerce in Ouidah. Nicknamed “Chacha,” de Souza traded on behalf of the king and was the chief intermediary between the king and European traders (Soumonni 1995, p. 78). In the midst of the international debates about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Gezo encouraged European firms to compete with each other in his kingdom to keep them off-balance and maintain Dahomean autonomy (Soumonni 1995, p. 79).



**Figure 11.** A lithograph of Gezo, King of Dahomey from 1818–1850, by Frederick E. Forbes, published in 1851 in London by Longman & Company. Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

In 1843, la Maison Régis established ties to the royal family through their agent Andre Brüe, who traveled inland to Abomey with de Souza and was introduced to King Gezo in court (Masson 1906, p. 376; Brüe 1845). According to Masson, Gezo would have expected a new French agent to bring gifts such as “cloth, verotterie (glass beads), powder, and arms” (Masson 1906, p. 376). In this diplomatic exchange, Gezo agreed to allow the Régis firm to take over the former slave trading fort in Ouidah and turn it into a palm oil *factorerie*. In explaining how the family acquired the former slave fort that had been abandoned, my grandfather writes:

*La Compagnie Royale des Indes y faisaient escale et le fortin qu'elle avait construit près de la plage, abandonné depuis la Révolution, servit de base à nos opérations commerciales.*

The Royal Company of the Indies would harbor (or stopover) there, and the small fort they had built near the beach, abandoned since the [1789] Revolution, served as the base for our commercial operations.

There were certain preconditions for the firm reoccupying the fort. As Elisée Soumonni explains:

the condition was that the factory should not be involved in the slave trade; and as a private firm it could not hoist the French tricolor flag unless it was laced with white.

(Soumonni 1995, p. 84)

That is, there was to be a distinction made between the French nation and la Maison Régis, although the firm and its agents repeatedly blurred the lines. According to Jean-François's family history, la Maison Régis was precariously caught between the Dahomey Kingdom and the Portuguese slave traders:

Our agents on one hand had to deal with the blood thirsty warrior King Guezo, to whom it was necessary to give continual presents to work in peace, and on the other hand to look out for the contagion of the great Portuguese trafficker Souza, specializing in the slave trade.

The palm oil they purchased from Dahomean sources was produced by enslaved people. The majority of the workers at the factory itself were “repurchased slaves” who were indentured to work at the Fort for ten years, per arrangement with King Gezo. Slavery and the “legitimate” trade in palm oil coexisted and any profits from palm oil were inextricably tied to bondage, the labor of unfree, indentured, or contract labor, and commerce with slave traders. Soumonni’s research into my family goes into more detail:

Despite suspicions and accusations, the reoccupation of the old French fort of Whydah was not intended to revive the slave trade, but the Régis factory did operate within the framework of that trade, with the support of the King’s agents, and did therefore also contribute to making the trade in palm oil compatible with the continued export of human beings during the period under discussion.

Supervising their trade in Ouidah from Marseille, the Régis brothers were entirely dependent on the reports of their own employees and those they received from other observers: naval officers, missionaries, and competitors. Because the British were consistent antagonists to the French on the coast, Jean-François takes any of their reports with more than a grain of salt. However, Elisée Soumonni, who consulted British archives as well as French ones in his dissertation on the Régis firm, was more convinced:

To the British (traders, naval officers, explorers, etc.), the French factory was not only encouraging the slave trade but actively engaged in it. This belief was based partly in day-to-day observations: inside the factory gallons of palm olive oil co-existed with slaves.

(Soumonni 1995, p. 84)

My grandfather attributed the accusations against the Maison Régis to “les méfaits de la jalousie et de la calomnie marchant de pair” (the ill effects of jealousy and calumny working in tandem) (Régis 1941, p. 26). Calumny is also slander, a false accusation which attacks the reputation or the honor of someone. He suggests that it was competitors in shipping and commerce who either wanted to displace the Régises or “justify their own inertia” (Régis 1941, p. 28). Here I translate extensively from my grandfather’s account of how the firm navigated the slave trade after they reoccupied the fort:

The “delicate question” had been anticipated in the formal arrangement that was agreed upon before the Régises were authorized to take up the Fort in Ouidah. The commanding officers of the French navy which was surveilling the coast and protecting our navigation knew all the voyages of the ships of the “Maison Régis” and would not have failed to report any “reprehensible transports” if they had occurred.

The first agent in Ouidah was Capitaine Provençal . . . who respected the moral directives he was given. [ . . . ] His successor, Brüe, a descendant of the famous Andre Brüe, who was the most active pioneer of the French colonization of Senegal from 1697 to 1720, also seemed to merit the confidence of his employers.

But in 1846, Captain Blanchély, having become the director of the factory, was obliged to reveal diverse misdeeds (fautes) of his predecessor and notably illicit operations realized on his own account. This report provoked considerable emotion among the Régises and motivated a redoubling of vigilance on their part in the selection and the oversight of their representatives (“mandataires”).

That same year, in correspondence published in *Le Journal de Débats et le Moniteur*, adversaries of the Régises reproached them of having a commercial monopoly and of realizing exaggerated profits but didn’t dare go so far as to speak of the



slave trade. The reply was proud and vigorous: there was no monopoly other than that of daring and perseverance; as for the profits, these were nothing more than the counter part of the expenditures required and the sacrifices made in the early years.

The Capitaine de Corvette de Monléon put it best when he wrote, in 1844, “Licit commerce in Ouidah only began with the Maison Régis’ establishment of the palm oil factory.”

L’Abée Pierre Bouche, a former missionary, in his book entitled *The Slave Coast and the Dahomey*, makes it clear: “only in 1842 did legal commerce begin in Whydah (as opposed to the slave trade). The honor of taking the initiative in this commerce goes to a Frenchman, Mr. Victor Régis, de Marseille.”

(Régis 1941, p. 29)

In listing agents with considerable experience in the French empire that the family business employed, my grandfather writes that La Maison Régis lets Captain Brüe go because of his illicit involvement in the slave trade, and quotes a turn of the century historian Paul Masson’s *History of Marseille and French Colonization* (1906), which explained the fall-out between the brothers:

l’émotion fut vive chez les Régis. Il fut question d’abandonner Ouidah

Emotions ran high in the Régis household, and there was talk of abandoning Ouidah.

(Masson 1906, p. 371).<sup>5</sup>

Yet only one brother left. Louis was 36. He had just had his first child, Joseph, from his marriage with Lucie de Roux. The firm sold the schooners (goélette) which were involved in the “commerce de la troc” (commerce between the Guinea Coast and Brazil). Beginning 1 January 1848, Victor took the helm of the firm alone.<sup>6</sup>

According to Jean-François, when Louis split from Victor they never worked together again. My grandfather attributes it to an economic crisis that was brought about by the Revolution of 1848 and difficulties encountered in selling their products:

The revolution of 1848 caused a serious crisis in colonial affairs. Some of the products were not selling and this made an impression on Louis Régis who pulled out of the association. He had planned to pursue the “paternal industry of Bonnets de Tunis (Fezes) and to take an interest in properties he had acquired in the eastern suburb of Marseille.

With Louis’ departure, my grandfather’s account of Ouidah ends, but the historical record of the Maison Régis continues. The public record supports the possibility that Louis Régis left the successful firm because the controversy around the slave trade was growing. For instance, on 6 December 1848, the French botanist Christophe Colomb (a pen name), who lived in Dahomey for two years (1847–1849), wrote to the Minister of Trade, accusing “the firm of Régis of openly trading in slaves” (Soumonni 1995, p. 85).<sup>7</sup> According to Soumonni, “he renewed his accusations on several occasions, notably in 1850, when a ship belonging to Victor Régis, *L’Écureuil*, was sold to Portuguese slave traders for the purpose of slave trading” (Soumonni 1995, p. 85). Consequently, Victor Régis’ home in Marseille was raided by the police. Although no evidence was found, the prosecutor said that Victor Régis was generally regarded as a slave trader. In the historical record, Régis justified his sale of *L’Écureuil* to Portuguese slave traders by saying that it had been based in Gabon, where his firm traded in ivory. He’d had to sell the ship when the ivory trade collapsed (Soumonni 1995, p. 85). His reputation as an upstanding businessman was supported by the French Minister of Agriculture and Trade.

### 5. La Factorie

After Louis left the family business, Victor Régis continued to administer the factory at Ouidah from a distance. In many ways, it still operated like a fort. Paul Masson describes the organization of an African militia with uniforms sent by Régis and the European staff of the factory serving as officers. “The agent had orders to organize exercises [or drills] two or three times a week and a parade on Sundays. From time to time, after the maneuvers, a fête was given for the inhabitants of the French fort; a baril of *tafia* [a kind of rough liquor] was distributed and the dances extended throughout the day” (Masson 1906, p. 373). Masson suggests the residents benefitted from protection from Dahomean authorities and the population of the fort, a village known as the Salam Français, grew from 800 in 1852 to 1200 inhabitants in 1856. “As a result of an agreement with King Gezo, residents were declared free and exempt from military service” (p. 374). The African settlement near the fort itself grew into a neighborhood, one of several such neighborhoods of Ouidah defined around trading establishments: Portuguese, French, British, Brazilian, and African (Law 2004, see also Burton 1864; Brüe 1845; Trichet 2001).

Dahomean women had been central in the palm oil industry, particularly in processing the kernels into oil, transporting it, and selling it in the markets (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1971, pp. 117–18). However, as the trade in palm oil grew, family farms were superseded by large plantations which were increasingly controlled by men, including many who had previously been major slave traders in Ouidah (Law 2004). British antislaving patrols cut off trade goods Brazilian slave traders needed to exchange for enslaved people, and through the palm oil trade, they were able to acquire those goods through “legitimate” means.

In 1850, Victor Régis wrote to the French Minister of the Navy requesting permission to negotiate directly with the King of Dahomey to increase the agricultural productivity of the region which was limited only by a shortage of labor. The residents of the French “Salam” adjacent to the factory were already occupied and the “Dahomean warriors despised agriculture.” Régis asked for permission to “repurchase” (or redeem) enslaved people from the king and to assign them to work for the *factorerie* for a period of ten years, after which they would be freed and would share the same status as other residents of the Salam (Soumonni 1995, p. 36). Régis argued that his use of forced labor could “inaugurate agriculture in this part of Africa,” by inspiring Dahomeans to use their own slaves to work their fields.<sup>8</sup> This shift, he continued, could possibly lead to the reduction of lives lost to human sacrifice, and could eventually bring an end to the slave trade entirely: “To concentrate slavery in Africa,” he wrote “is to prepare the way for the emancipation of the race” (Masson 1906, p. 380).

Victor Régis’s argument, preposterous today, must have sounded reasonable to the Minister of the Navy as he was given permission to go ahead with his plan. In 1851, France obtained an “embassy” to Dahomey in the person of Auguste Bouët, brother of the admiral Bouët-Willaumez. On behalf of the government, Bouët brought the following modest gifts, “Two howitzers (*obusiers*), a pair of pistols, a large tent (*tente arabe*), and flags” (Masson 1906, p. 376). On 1 July 1851, Gezo signed the Treaty of Commerce and Friendship. As Soumonni explains, “the Franco-Dahomean treaty had an immediate and negative impact on Anglo-French relations” (Soumonni 1983, p. 115).

The meeting began an elaborate gift exchange between France and the Kingdom of Dahomey which Victor Régis supervised through his agents. Gezo explained he was impressed with Napoleon’s exploits in Crimea and asked for a portrait of the emperor in uniform, and one of the empress and the emperor together. He also requested an assortment of flags: a large tricolor flag made of silk, trimmed in gold fringe, with an elephant in the middle of the white field, embroidered “To the King of Dahomey,” as well as three other wool flags for his ministers and 30 other smaller cotton flags for the provincial chiefs. Régis added to this *envois* a collection of large framed colored lithographs, representing battles from both imperial reigns to better illustrate the superiority of France.

Britain perceived the treaty as a threat to their interests in West Africa, and in 1851 blockaded the port of Ouidah to pressure Gezo to abolish the slave trade in his kingdom, which outraged Victor Régis. He saw their “principal objective . . . was not to persuade Ghezo to give up slave trading and human sacrifice, but rather to secure privileges for British traders in Dahomey.” Soumonni summarizes Victor’s point of view: “the message was clear: the main target of the British was Ouidah and his own factory there” (Soumonni 1995, pp. 51–52). He complained bitterly to the French Minister of External Affairs, urging him to secure a rapid end to the stand-off. The blockade, however, lasted almost six months, and was only lifted after Gezo, conscious of the damage being done to his economy, agreed to sign a treaty that pledged to end the exportation of slaves.

The exchange between France and Dahomey continued. In 1856, Gezo decided to have two of his sons educated in France, one of whom was said to be Victor’s godchild (Coty and Richard 1986, p. 155). Intimately connected to the royal family, Régis wrote to Napoleon III to relay the request. The French Government agreed, and sent Commander Vallon to Abomey, accompanied by the Agent Vidal who brought presents for the king:

[Gezo] had manifested the desire to see the Christian fetishes, for whom he had great admiration. Vidal, thus, with great pomp, carried seven life-sized statues made of plaster, violently colored, representing God, Saint Paul, Saint Laurent, Saint Etienne, Saint Roch, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Bernard. It isn’t clear what inspired this eclectic choice (1906, pp. 378–79).

On Gezo’s order, the greatest honors were given to these “fetishes” (that is, religious statues) during their journey from Ouidah to Abomey, where the saints’ attributes and powers were explained to him.<sup>9</sup> In order to remember their names, the King appointed seven of his subjects with the task of remembering them or risk the most severe punishments. In 2007, La Maison Régis’s contributions to the artistic genealogies of Dahomey were discussed by anthropologist Sally Price (2007). Drawing on the work of Suzanne Preston-Blier on bocio power-figures, Price points out that these life-sized royal statues were part of a longstanding intercultural exchange between Europe and Africa, and they were likely influenced by examples of European religious art which made its way to Dahomey. She specifically cites, as potential influences, the life-sized religious figures that were brought to the Kingdom by French merchants in the 1850s. In this way, Victor Régis, through his agents, contributed to the growing iconography of Dahomean monarchy.

In 1857, the French commander and his agent accompanied two of Gezo’s sons to the coast of Dahomey, where they broke the family taboo of looking at the ocean before embarking on a ship to France. On February 16th, “the sons of a friend of His Majesty the Emperor” enrolled in school in Marseille. Writing five decades later, Masson reports, “Many Marseillais remember their friends, Badou Guéso and Badou Roussou” (Masson 1906, p. 379).

In return for helping his sons arrive safely, Gezo tasked Régis’s agents with sending gifts to Napoleon III, which included cloths designed and embroidered by the “wives of the king,” Dahomean flags, and diverse specimens of Dahomean civilization gathered by his generals (Masson 1906, p. 379). A close examination of these appliqued cloths from Abomey suggest that the artists were using imported cloth, some of it from France, in the making of flags narrating the prowess of Gezo, which gives us an opportunity to see how the palace workshops visually interpreted Dahomean culture. The use of imported cloths in these artworks, their use in diplomatic exchanges between the French empire and the Dahomean kingdom are suggestive of complex dynamics of appropriation. Working in or near the royal palace in Abomey, the artists who made these flags were freely incorporating imported and locally manufactured cloth to paint these images. In a way that like the 16th century bronze plaques representing Portuguese soldiers in the neighboring Kingdom of Benin, they reflect some of the sources for royal power came from overseas trade (Ben-Amos 1995, p. 37). In the exchange of flags between France and Dahomey neither is intimidated by the other’s show of power, and Gezo does not seem to be concerned that France will threaten his own. See Figures 12 and 13.





**Figure 12.** This flag, of appliqued cloth, silk and cotton, was among the gifts collected by Régis agents in Dahomey in 1856 for Napoleon III. It may have been the product of the workshop of Hantan et Zinflou families. Musée du Quai Branly's caption says that "this scene represents the exploits of the young Prince Gakpe, future King Ghezo, seizing a buffalo with his hands, the origin of his epithet (nom fort) and his principal emblem, the buffalo". Considered one of the fiercest animals in Africa, they are responsible for the deaths of hundreds every year. The connections between African kings and animals are common both in origin stories and epics like *Sundiata* with its fantastic stories of shape-shifters, hunters, sorcerers and diviners, and in royal art depicting a ruler in terms of the strength, agility, wit, or violence against adversaries. In one account "a buffalo left the forest, entered Abomey and stirred up panic. Only Gezo had the courage to meet it; tak-ing it up by a horn, he turned it over and trampled it to death" (Adams 1980, p. 36). A figure on the left, carrying a decapitated person overhead, is wearing shorts and a vest made of Provençal cloth, with vertical stripes alternating with small flowers. Similar cloth can still be found in shops in France today. Image courtesy of the Musée du Quai Branly.



**Figure 13.** In this flag, a woman on the left is shown fighting a lion with her bare hands, a fist raised over head to deliver a final blow. The lion is on his back on the ground with his tongue sticking out (suggesting death). Two other women, armed with rifles and sabers, are depicted in identical poses, in the midst of cutting off the legs of their enemies, who are depicted in dark blue-black skin tone, in contrast to the reddish brown of the Dahomean warriors. The women warriors wear white bonnets with a lizard blue symbol and white scarves or adornments which could be strings of cowrie shells. Their tunics are appliqued with a print cloth, blue and brown plaid. A stripe of blue flowered print runs vertically down the right edge of the scene, bisecting the enemy figures vertically at the waist. This placement seems deliberate. Are they being shown as crossing a blue line, perhaps crossing the water? In which case, the warriors are capturing them, rather than killing them, perhaps binding them at the ankles to prevent their fleeing. The lion may represent the kingdom of Oyo or another neighboring kingdom with which Abomey was at war. Cotton and silk, 338 × 185 cm. 71.1930.54.912 D Image courtesy of the Musée du Quai Branly.

In the years that follow, the Maison Régis dramatically increases palm oil production with the support of the King. In 1847, the Régis brothers had made 400,000 francs. In 1854, Victor had brought in 1,000,000 (Masson 1906). It is during this era that the name Régis takes on more prominence in Marseille. In a history published by the Chamber of Commerce, Victor Régis is considered one of the most influential and wealthiest maritime merchants in the city (Coty and Richard 1986, p. 150). To put this in context, Marseille in 1870 is the fourth largest port in the world (by tonnage) behind London, Liverpool, and New York (Coty and Richard 1986, p. 45). In 1855, Victor won a gold medal at the first Universal Exposition for the collection he sent from the various *comptoirs* (trading posts) (Masson 1906, p. 375). In the 1860s, Victor Régis had enough wealth to build the Grand Hotel de Noailles in Marseille. On its central façade, holding up the pediment of the building are the heads of two African women, crowned with fruit. Floating above them is the figure of Mercury, the patron god of commerce. See Figure 14.



**Figure 14.** The Grand Hotel de Noailles in Marseille, which was built by Victor Régis in 1862. Photograph courtesy of the Régis family.

Nowhere else in Marseille are African women represented in the city's architecture, though such *mascarons* are widespread in Nantes and Bordeaux—the two cities regarded as French ports of the slave trade (Santacrocce 2015). And this remarkable design goes unmentioned in many public descriptions of Marseille's nineteenth century architecture and contemporary tourist sites. In 1862, when he built the hotel on the grandest avenue in Marseille, Victor was telling the world where his wealth came from—it came from African women.

## 6. Exile in Martinique

In 2001, I travelled to Martinique to visit my cousin Stéphane, the son of my father's older brother, Camille. Stéphane had been living in Martinique for years, where he established his business and married into a local family. He told me many of his neighbors were named Régis—the woman who ran the grocery store down the street, his accountant, and many others. I asked why was the name so common in Martinique? He told me that he heard that newly arrived Africans were given the name from the ship owners, which is documented in the life work of Bernard David (1921–1998), a Catholic priest who served in Martinique for over 40 years, learned to speak and write in Creole, and began researching the history of the population, drawing extensively on baptismal records and archdiocesan archives, which he also helped to preserve.



Much of his work was based in the town of Diamant, where people had a passion for history, which he wanted to support. Researching baptismal records, he began to help them pull together pieces of the puzzle that would help “them to develop as a person and to be proud of their history and culture” (David 2020). In his research he found that in the 19th century, 25 percent of the local population had been born in Congo. In 1978, he published *Le Mémorial Martiniquais* (David 1978), where he explained that although slavery had been abolished in the French Antilles in 1815, it still continued until 1830 before other forms of forced labor were introduced. See Figure 15.



**Figure 15.** “French free emigrant on his way to the Barracoon of M. Régis.” A drawing made by Lt. Henry Hand of the British Navy that accompanies a letter to his commanding officer (8 September 1858). Image courtesy of The National Archives, London, (FO 84/1070).

After a number of years of implementing its “free laborers” scheme in Dahomey, the Régis firm expanded the scope of its enterprise to Central Africa in 1857. According to David:

A treaty was signed on March 14 with M. Régis of Marseille. The latter is a merchant who was solidly implanted on the African coasts . . . . In Angola, he has other establishments which he is in the process of abandoning to establish himself on the shores of the Congo.

An establishment is rapidly installed at the mouth of the river, on Banana Inlet (*à la Crique Banane*), with recruitment centers in M’Boma, at the end of the estuary, in Punta da Lhena, half-way between the two, and farther north at Loango.

How did the operation unfold? In fact, the slaves were purchased from caravans which brought them from the interior.

(David 1978)

In a survey of 2500 people who were brought to Martinique, the chief of the naval division found that two-thirds had been born into slavery while others were sold for minor crimes committed by family members. Only three came from military expeditions. David explains the mortality rates were high:

From 6 July 1857 to 6 August 1862, in five years, ten thousand five-hundred and twenty-one Africans were introduced to Martinique aboard 24 ships. The poor organization at the beginning, the poor health status of numerous *engagés*, and especially the disastrous conditions on board the overfull vessels (*vaisseaux*

*surchargés*) where passengers literally suffocated, lacked necessary medicines, and refused to eat the unfamiliar food, which rice was for them—these factors explain the drama.

Enteritis and dysentery caused many deaths. The officers of the Naval Division did not have authority over the accommodations (*aménagements*) aboard the ships; their protests nonetheless brought Régis to modify the conditions of transport; the percentage of deaths (the mortality rate) fell from ten percent to three percent during the final voyages; it was no less tragic for crossings lasting from four to five weeks.

(David 1978)

In a letter to Napoleon III in 1857, Victor justified the transportation of people by saying, “we deliver slaves to make them citizens.” He went on to argue:

Slavery is a very ancient and widespread practice in Africa which could only be abolished by taking over the whole continent and imposing civilization upon it.

(Soumonni 1995, pp. 86–87)

After their ten-year contracts were up, they were theoretically to receive passage back to Africa. But there are no records that such repatriation ever occurred. Instead, a strong Congolese community developed in Martinique around the same time as others arrived from India and China. “In the second half of the nineteenth century, 37,008 *engagés*, contracted indentured workers, arrived on the island: 25,509 from India, 10,521 from Congo, and 978 from China” (L’Étang 2003). The impact of their presence must have been huge, as a demographic sketch reveals:

In 1848, on the eve of abolition, Martinique had 121,130 inhabitants (9542 whites, 38,729 free people of color (“*affranchis*”), and 72,859 enslaved people. [ . . . ] The arrival of 37,000 people meant an increase of the population by 30 percent.

(L’Étang 2003)

This demographic shift can be compared to the growth in the population of New Orleans after the Haitian Revolution, which had a huge cultural impact. In Martinique, “those from Congo alone represented a 10 percent increase in the population of the island”.

(L’Étang 2003)

The scholarship on the experiences of the Congolese brought to Martinique by the Régis firm has used terms such as free emigrants, indentured laborers, forced indenture, voluntary contract workers, recruits, repurchased, ransomed, or redeemed slaves. Collectively, their experiences have been called forced migration, deportations, displacements, and slavery by another name. The massive human trafficking operations that Victor participated in existed somewhere between the slave trade and voluntary emigration, and the experiences of those who arrived to work on Caribbean plantations were something between freedom and the forms of bondage that existed prior to abolition in 1848 (for vastly different perspectives, see Masson 1906; Balesi 1978; Caty and Richard 1999; Northrup 2002; Schuler 1980; Flory 2015; Fredj 2016). Which was it—a forced deportation or a free emigration?

As David Northrup suggests, part of the confusion comes from the comparison of the three distinct recruitment schemes intended to provide contract laborers to the French Caribbean from Africa, India, and China in the mid-nineteenth century. It would seem that in the latter cases, the “emigrants” were free upon signing their contracts, while this was not the case for those signing contracts in Africa—they were in bonds when they boarded the ships and only became free when they signed their contracts. Newly ransomed slaves had to reckon with the debt to those, like Victor Régis, who purchased their freedom. They could stay and work off their debt on the African continent or they could migrate to the Caribbean to do so. This was presented in rosy terms to the “recruits,” few of whom elected

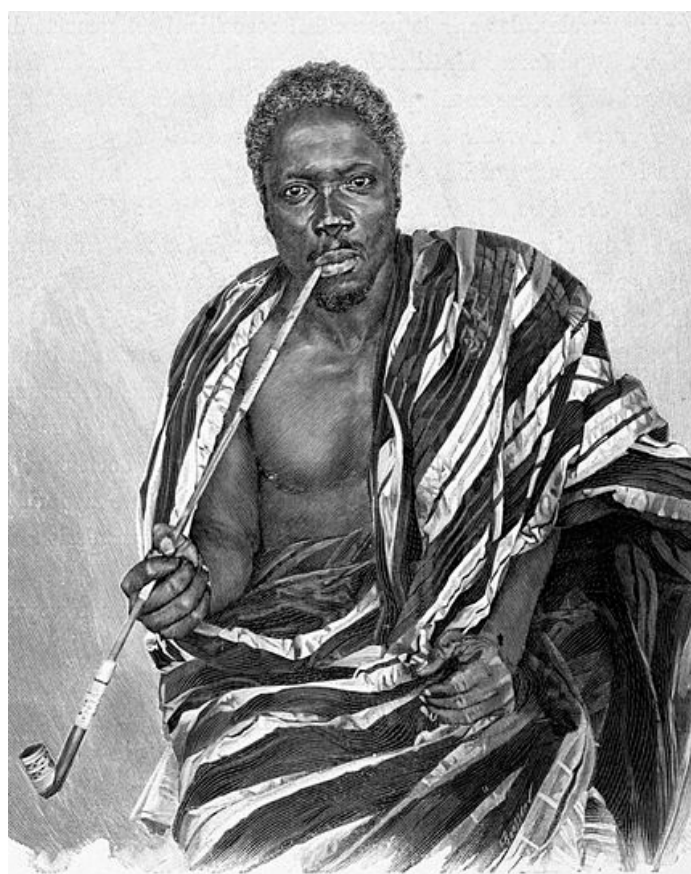


to stay to work in coastal factories. The international debates about these laborers reflects longstanding French–English competition for Empire fueled by labor needs of powerful planters. As Charles Balesi argues, “Beyond the actions of French and English sailors were the interests of the sugar industry in each country, and it was economic interests which kept the issue of forced labor alive, not only in the *vieilles colonies*, but in the plantations of Africa proper . . . into the 1930s” (Balesi 1978, p. 78).

Thanks to the work of Bernard David and others such as Richard Price (1998) and Céline Flory (2015, 2016), the legacy of the “free emigrant” scheme is well known among Atlantic historians and in Martinique, but it was not passed down to me in the oral history of my family (Price 1998).<sup>10</sup> It was left out of my grandfather’s written account of the foundational role of the Régis firm in establishing a colony in Dahomey. If it were not for my cousin Stéphane, who was willing to look at the full history of la Maison Régis across the Atlantic and Caribbean, and Jean, who first told me of meeting Régis “cousins” in the Caribbean, I might not have known about it.

## 7. Béhanzin

One of the most well-known connections between Martinique and Dahomey was documented in postcards of Béhanzin, the last king of the autonomous Kingdom of Dahomey, that circulated in France when he was defeated by a French military intervention and forced into exile in Martinique. See Figure 16.



**Figure 16.** A postcard of Le Roi Béhanzin, the last king of Dahomey. Richard Price’s historical ethnography, *The Convict and the Colonel*, includes it as part of a submerged history involving a visionary artist, anti-colonial resistance, voter suppression, and the descendant community of Africans imported from Congo after emancipation. Maryse Condé has reimagined Béhanzin’s legacy in her historical novel *Les derniers rois mages* (Condé [1992] 1997). This image is part of a global circulation of postcards that simultaneously romanticized defeated Africans and Indigenous people and gloated over European triumph, and white supremacy. Public Domain.

Led by General Alfred Amédée Dodds, the French military conquest inaugurated the start of the colonial period that lasted until the independence of Dahomey in 1960, renamed the Republic of Benin in 1975. During the conquest, many objects were taken from royal palaces and shipped to France, where they eventually joined collections in the Musée du Louvre, the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (later, Musée de l’Homme) and eventually Musée du Quai Branly. Among the objects recently singled out for repatriation to Benin are several royal sculptures taken by General Dodds as spoils of war, including “Homme-Requin,” which was said to depict King Béhanzin (Sarr and Savoy 2018, p. 52; Halima 2020). See Figure 17.



**Figure 17.** This anthropomorphic royal statue from Dahomey, carved by Sossa Dede between 1889 and 1892, is often labeled “Homme-Requin” (Man-Shark) and thought to represent King Béhanzin. Image courtesy of the Quai Branly Museum, Paris.

According to Suzanne Preston-Blier (2011), two years before the invasion, Dahomean women warriors embarked on a tour as part of the French colonial propaganda machine. Like the American Indian warriors performing in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show after their defeat by the US Cavalry, they were displayed and incited to perform, and thus made a mark on the public imagination—albeit a distorted one. See Figure 18.

In 1906, Marseille hosted the Dahomeans during their Exposition Coloniale, a sprawling installation with over 50 palaces and pavilions (including the Palais d’Afrique, Palais de Madagascar, the Pavillons des Forêts d’Algerie and the Palais du Tonkin). Spread out over 30 hectares, it took over open field used for military training on the edge of the city, the site of the future Parc Chanot. Between April and November, 1.8 million visitors attended the event. The exposition was so successful, they hosted another one in 1921. See Figure 19.





**Figure 18.** A postcard from the Crystal Palace in London in 1893 showcasing women warriors from the Kingdom of Dahomey. Public Domain.



**Figure 19.** A poster for the Exposition Coloniale in Marseille in 1906 by David Delpianne, courtesy of the Regis family.

By hosting this exposition, Marseille “sought to confirm its preeminence as the economic capital of the colonial empire” (Morando 2004, p. 244). Hundreds of thousands of free admissions were distributed to students (from grade school to high school and college), military, and to conference participants in the Congrès Colonial timed to coincide with the exhibition. Erudite volumes were published praising the colonial project. Historian Paul Masson, who was commissioned to write about the role of Marseille in French colonialism for the exhibition, wrote extensively about Victor Régis as a major instigator in the French colonization of Dahomey and an advocate for a greater French presence in what is now Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Gabon, the Congo (Brazzaville and Kinshasa) and Angola (Masson 1906).

On his way to Algeria, where he lived out the remainder of his life in exile, Behanzin famously visited the exposition. My grandfather would have been in his early teens, and the memory of the Dahomeans visit stayed in residents of Marseille’s consciousness. Tante Françoise told me that, as a young man and a *collégien*, my grandfather was nicknamed “Béhanzin” as he was known to smoke a pipe and walk around with a scarf thrown over

his shoulder. Perhaps his friends sought to bring him down a notch with the epithet. What could be more ridiculous? For a French teenager to be named after a deposed African king at the height of enthusiasm for the colonies was to make fun of both the student and perhaps what they knew of our family history.

### 8. Sankofa Time: Travel to Ouidah

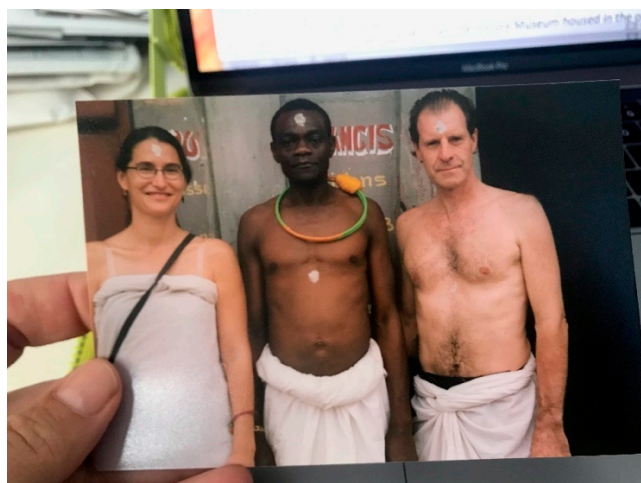
Friendships, like any community, can make you ashamed, or give you the strength to take on subjects others would leave alone. Throughout my career as a cultural anthropologist, my interest in tracing my family's African history was supported by conversations with friends and colleagues who were developing transnational research projects that included critical family histories and auto-ethnography (Rahier 2003; Smith 2003; Jackson 2008, 2012; Asher 2009; Vergès 1999). As a white scholar who was deeply engaged in studying racialized struggles over public space, cultural heritage, and commerce in New Orleans, I often reflected on how my own identity shaped my work (Regis 2002, 2013). Felipe Smith wrote of the disorientation of growing up as the child of Honduran immigrants in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans, a neighborhood where the dominant social group were endogamous Afro-Creoles. He explains how he pieced together the complex maritime histories connecting New Orleans with La Ceiba and the West Indies through banana trade and union-busting through importing immigrant labor, figuring out why his own parents spoke Spanish but didn't look like other Central Americans in the city. Jean Muteba Rahier explored his own family histories in the Belgian Congo and the shifting identities imposed on him in Belgium, Paris, Ecuador, and the US and Congo. Françoise Vergès took on French colonial histories in Reunion, Martinique, and Indochina to consider creole cultural formations and her own family history through a postcolonial lens. If whiteness is built on the erasure of ethnic identities, that erasure is part of what cuts us off from our entangled histories and from parts of our own humanity (Ignatiev 1995; Segrest [1994] 2019). Reconnecting with and excavating our families' entanglements with empire, settler colonialism, slavery, and diaspora gave us an opportunity to work side by side—to work towards other futures.

In 2001, Elisée Soumonni, the historian at the University of Benin whose research introduced me to critical histories of La Maison Régis, invited me to attend a conference in Porto Novo, Benin and join in the international conversations around the scholarship on the slave trade in West Africa. At the time, my friend Antoinette Jackson was in the midst of researching the transatlantic histories of the Kingsley Plantation in Florida (Jackson 2012). The Kingsley multiracial family may have had connections to King Gezo through a British naval officer, Lord George Russell, who married one of his daughters, and lived in Florida as well (Jackson, personal communication). Before I departed, she asked me to look out for any other connections and gave me one of her poems, "Sankofa Time," which I read as I flew across the Atlantic Ocean (Jackson 2020).

I arrived in Cotonou with my colleague, Peter Sutherland, a few days before the conference. Peter planned to connect with Basile Adoko, a Vodun priest, as part of his studies of pilgrimage retracing the routes of the slave trade by members of the African Diaspora and Afro-Buddhist devotees, who were "walking the Middle Passage in reverse" (Sutherland 1999). They organized a ceremony, and I participated with members of Adoko's household. See Figure 20.

Murals on the wall depicted Nana Ceria, a siren goddess brandishing two large pythons reminiscent of Mami Wata. I took in the ceremony, my head spinning from the singing, kola nuts, and jet lag. When it came time for our Ifa readings, we were invited to pose a question. I explained, "There is work that I want to do dealing with my family history. Will my relatives be able to accept it?" The pattern thrown revealed an answer: Yes, they can accept it.





**Figure 20.** Helen Régis, Basile Adoko, and Peter Sutherland dressed to enter the Vodun shrine in Cotonou. Photograph courtesy of Helen Régis.

In Porto Novo, I was introduced to other colleagues as “de la famille Régis”—a prominent name in colonial archives around West Africa was now embodied in front of them. Kristen Mann told me she had seen documents about the Régis firm in her research on Lagos. Another scholar, Fabio Viti told me they appeared in archives in Lisbon. Although I presented a paper where I began to grapple with the connections between my personal genealogy and global histories, I had come mostly to learn from scholars such as Edna Bay (1988) and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, a pioneer of feminist African history, who had documented the work of women in the palm oil trade, and whose work I had long admired (Régis 2001). It was here that I also met the descendants of Francisco Felix de Souza, the Portuguese slave trader and intermediary known as Chacha, that La Maison Régis worked with in Dahomey.

After the conference was over, I traveled to Ouidah. *La factorie* run by la Maison Régis no longer exists. Around town, there were no public acknowledgements of its dominant role in the city. There was, however, a square named Place de Chacha, and a History Museum housed in the old Portuguese fort run by one of his descendants, Martine De Souza. Like many members of the Afro-Brazilian “Agouda” community, her family includes both descendants of slavers and locally enslaved Africans, as well as repatriated Afro-Brazilians (Araujo 2010; Rush 2011; Law 2004; Sutherland 1999, 2002). Martine introduced me to Mr. Justin Fakambi, a historian of Ouidah who has published several volumes on the community’s urban history, including *La Route de L’Esclave*. His home was decorated with portraits of leaders of the Haitian Revolution—Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Baptiste Dessalines—and a framed portrait of a human captive caught in a net. There was also a framed poster, with the slogan “L’Union Fait La Paix, Nicéphore Soglo,” promoting multiparty democracy in Benin. When we met, he said the historical consciousness of the slave trade was eroding in his country: “The future generations will not even know there was such a thing as slavery!”

Ouidah had an uncanny mix of historic architecture and new construction that included ambitious hotel projects planned for the tourist boom that was expected to follow on the Slave Routes Project.<sup>11</sup> The tourism had not materialized on the scale developers had hoped. The waterfront area, a few miles from the town of Ouidah proper, was quiet and peaceful. At my guesthouse, Le Jardin Bresilien Auberge de la Diaspora, I could listen to the waves coming in from the ocean. In the morning, I watched men harvesting coconut palms, and wrote in my journal:

Such a peaceful scene in a site of such horrific history. La Mer, L’Ocean, La Plage. This could be a resort town except that it is also a holocaust site . . . I wonder to whom the harvest goes, who owns the grove itself, so close to the beach, and

whether the harvesters are paid in kind or in cash. I think of the palm oil trees and the disputes during the early colonial period over whether the palm tree plantations near Ouidah could be appropriated (expropriated) by the French, who argued that Dahomeans had no sense of private property and that all public lands post-conquest should belong to the French.

Clouds have returned now with their coolness and I am thinking of walking up the road to Ouidah in the fresh morning air. Walking upstream, that is, as the French agents must have done. Against the grain of the captives and the logic of pilgrimage.

Yesterday, walking on the Ouidah beach, I found bits of pipe, dishware, and one cowrie. Fabio then saw a fetish and decided the cowrie must have come from there. He gently placed the cowrie back next to the object—a mound of clay with chicken feathers sticking out of it.

Ancestor cults rely on the progeny to keep their memories alive. I had hoped to find traces of the Regises in Ouidah in the landscape or in oral histories. But I was disappointed. “Ouidah is a cemetery town”, said the historian Robin Law. And that echoed my feeling in being there. Alain Sinou (1995) calls the city a “necropolis.” In each of my visits, I came across a funeral procession. One of them with egungun masquerades, another a brass band. Sinou explains that Ouidah went into economic decline during the colonial and post-colonial era. In each successive generation, people have had to leave Ouidah to move to Porto Novo or Cotonou to get an education or make a living. People return to Ouidah for festivals and family gatherings, but they never move back permanently. It remains an important religious center and site of memory. See Figure 21.



**Figure 21.** The Middle Passage N°7/18 from the “Black Ocean” series by William Adjété Wilson, 2009. Cloth applique 67” × 39”. Wilson, a French artist based in Paris, who is of Beninese and Togolese origin, worked with artisans in Abomey, Benin on a series of eighteen fabric panels that “bear witness to the richness of African culture” as well as “the infamous triangular trade.” (Recker 2009; Wilson 2009, see <http://www.williamwilson.fr/en/black-ocean.fr> (accessed on 18 August 2020)).

During this trip, I thought of what Ouidah would continue to represent for my family, and my broader community of friends, scholars, and artists who have devoted their lives to understanding and sharing this history. Departing the coastal city, I thought I would certainly be back soon, but it has been almost 20 years, and I have not returned. In 2018, *The Washington Post* published an article about the city’s reckoning with its history, which reported that descendants of the Chacha opposed the renaming of Place de Chacha—said

to be the site of a slave auction—and mention of their ancestor’s involvement in the slave trade in a new museum. Moise de Souza explained, “It’s the reputation of our family. We don’t want to be known for this dirty thing” (Sieff 2018). But the consequences of our families’ pasts are still part of people’s everyday consciousness:

The memory of slavery emerges here in large and small ways. In the 2016 presidential election, one candidate, Lionel Zinsou, angrily pointed out in a televised debate that his opponent, Patrice Talon, who is now president of Benin, was the descendant of slave merchants. In villages where people were abducted for the slave trade, families still ask reflexively when they hear a knock on the door whether the visitor is “a human being” or a slave raider.

(Sieff 2018)

The Régis family was far away from the embodied terror of the slave trade. The habitus that my grandfather and father, an officer in the French army who also wrote a memoir, may have passed down is a desire—even a compulsion—to write. And while their writings included many silences, the fact that we do have multiple generations of written accounts of our ancestors’ involvement in Dahomey creates another “devoir de memoire” (duty to memory). While doing this research has enabled me to connect some of the fragments in our family story and deepen the dialogue about the intersections with African Diaspora history and colonial memory, I am left with questions: How did Louis and Victor really part ways in 1848 and why would Louis leave such a hugely profitable business venture? How did their brother Pierre (known as “l’Africain”), live in Senegal and did he have a family there? How did the women in the family—the wives and daughters of Victor and Louis—perceive the family’s maritime commerce? What were the lives of the African indentured workers in Martinique and Guadeloupe really like and how is the involuntary “free emigrant” scheme being reimagined today by its descendants?<sup>12</sup>

As I worked on revising this article, I found a print-out of an email that Antoinette Jackson wrote to me before my trip to Benin. In it, she writes about the importance of connecting shared histories that redistribute the known and the unknown:

It is funny how you have concrete information on—what in many ways is a not so pretty aspect of your family’s past in relation to the African Diaspora experience while I am trying to connect via memory or ancestor messages to some link that will tell me anything about my family lineage before, during, and after the diaspora experience. To me the diaspora is a hope, a space with lots of relevance and importance and meaning. It contains many treasures about who I am but few maps that mark a spot for me, so for now, and maybe it is as it should be . . . I incorporate it all, yours, mine, and everyone else’s diaspora inroads and laugh and cry and rage. After all, it is all part of the same story and one day all the pieces will be reconstructed and we can all move on.

(personal communication, November 2001)

In seeking to piece together fragments of my family story, I found that artifacts—prints, paintings, a bronze bell, and African women sculpted into a hotel façade—can be as revealing as documents, letters, and published histories. As Rosalind Shaw put it, “there are other ways of remembering the past than by speaking of it” (Shaw 2002, p. 2). The stories told to me by my Tante Françoise about her father’s nickname and Oncle Henri about the bronze bell opened up avenues and illuminated connections obscured by formal narratives. While palm oil, a major ingredient in Marseille’s celebrated soap-making industry, was central to my grandfather’s account, cowrie shells were barely mentioned. Family members encouraged me to go further, with photocopied articles, book chapters copied down and shared in emails, comic books, and guided walks that pointed me in fruitful directions. In this way, artifacts anchor family stories, which, together with the published works of professional historians, have made it possible to piece together fragments of African and African Diaspora histories with the heritage of maritime commerce in Marseille.

## 9. Coda

As this article was going to press, my uncle, Henri Régis wrote to me, explaining how the bronze bell from Ouidah came to be back in Marseille.<sup>13</sup> After reading this article, he remembered: “Two generations later, Paul Borelli-Plagnol would build two houses which communicated through their gardens: the property of 108 Rue Sylabelle in fact extended to Rue Edouard Delanglade. Along the wall bordering these properties, there were logs of Ebony and Eucalyptus brought back from Cameroun. I remember playing there as a child with my cousin François Borelli and still remember the scent of these exotic woods. Paul had in fact contributed to the construction of the rail road line which ran along the interior, parallel to the coast all the way to Ouidah. He is the one who found and brought back to our grandfather the bell, which was cracked during the fire at the fort.”

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Note on Translation and Spelling:** All quotes from French language sources are my translation unless otherwise noted. Some names are spelled in the historical record multiple ways. For instance, the king of Dahomey that my family corresponded with is referred to as both Guezo and Gezo, and the coastal city where the slave fort was located is written both Whydah and Ouidah (with many



variations in archival sources). Following the spelling used in the Republic of Benin today, I use Gezo and Ouidah, except when quoting source material.

### Appendix A. Notes

1. Nathalie [Rachlin](#) (2014, p. 48) explains why residents of Marseille look out to sea. A note from my cousin Jean questions the implicit geographical determinism of this description: “The residents of Marseille have long thought of themselves as different and independent from the rest of Gaul (later France). ‘Massaliotes’ were sailors and Greek merchants”. He continues: “The Greek origins of Massilia, a city founded by Greeks from Phocée, who had an elaborate Hellenic culture, led the residents (Massaliotes) to feel that they were very different from their neighbors, the «Gauls» and later, latinized Gallo-Romans. The occupation of Gaul and ‘Provence’ by Caesar, which excluded Marseille and had its administrative center in Arles, further reinforced this separation.” Critical scholarship on Marseille’s exceptionalism, its post-industrial reinvention as a cosmopolitan city, center of “cultural creation,” and European capital of culture has built on renewed engagements with its social, cultural, and economic history ([Cohen 2020](#); [Daumalin 1992, 1999](#); [Gastaut 2003](#); [Suzanne 2007](#); [Riesz 1995](#); [Témime 1985, 1995, 2006](#)).

2. *Brown-hair, brown-eyed*. Claudia Rankine has explored the dominance of blonde aesthetics in the United States in connection to white supremacy. Without discounting the view that sometimes, going blond can feel emancipatory and many think it “just looks better” Rankine interrogates the association of blondness with power and wealth (p. 297). She cites the work of journalist Christina Cauterucci: “Just 2 percent of the world’s population and 5 percent of white people in the US have blond hair, but 35 percent of female U.S. senators and 48 percent of female CEOs at S & P 500 companies are blond. Female university presidents are more likely to be blond” (Cauterucci in [Rankine 2020](#), p. 281). Because most people who are blonde as children grow up to have brown hair, blonde preference also infantilizes women, and is thus “both a racist and sexist phenomenon” (Jennifer Berdahl in [Rankine 2020](#), p. 283) See especially her essay: “Complicit Freedoms” pp. 268–305.

3. *Demolished because of the resistance networks it harbored*. My cousin points out that the situation was more complicated. “The order came from Himmler, and it was precipitated by attacks against Germans, but the execution was carried out by French police, gendarmes, and gardes mobiles. Further, there had long been a plan to redevelop the neighborhood, which contained the red light district and notorious criminal element, but was also home to many working class families and immigrants who worked in the port. Some French collaborators were enthusiastic collaborators who joined with the Nazis to ‘purify the canker of Europe’” (personal communication, 30 December 2020).

“The night of January 22 to the 23rd, the neighborhood was surrounded, and 40,000 people were ‘controlled’ (had their papers checked), 6000 were arrested, and 1642 were delivered to the gestapo. Among them, 670 Jews were directly deported to Sobibor and Auschwitz. Not a single criminal was arrested. Two of the most notorious mafia leaders, Carbone and Spirito, had been warned. They joined the Gestapo in Paris. 27,000 persons were evacuated. Those who had family in town were able to join them, others who had no family to take them in, were taken to a camp in Fréjus and of those 1500 were deported (see Lucien Maillard, *Marseille sous L’Occupation*).”

4. *Some went underground to join the maquis*. World War II looms large in the family’s collective memory and I received many elements from family on this subject—it deserves its own article. Several family reviewers requested that I clarify that there were other ways to fight at that time (and several family members died). In my grandfather’s second family history, he explains that he was mobilized as a ‘captain in the 157 regiment on 24 August 1939, first as an “adjoint au commandement du Ile Groupe, puis faisant fonction de Commandant”’ ([Régis 1961](#), p. 15). He did not need to write what every French person knew. The defeat was as rapid as it was shocking. He writes: “The long period of trials undergone by France after the armistice was especially marked after the occupation of the

Southern zone by the Wehrmacht. Severe food restrictions [and shortages], requisitions, and forced labor weighed heavily on families with several adolescent males. The winter of 1943–1944 was the worst for these families” (Régis 1961, p. 15).

5. *Paul Masson*. My grandfather’s 1941 account cites Paul Masson 1906 as a major source. His monograph, being intended primarily for family, was not footnoted. But Masson also frequently cites family archives to which he had access, so that some turns of phrase were traded back and forth between Masson and his Régis family consultants, who were members of the generation before my grandfather. It is not always clear whether Jean-François Régis is pulling from Masson, from family documents, or oral tradition, but the similarities in phrasing are there. Masson cites Régis family archives on several occasions, notably with respect to the free emigration projects as early as the 1843. It’s unclear where exactly such archives were located or whether they survive to this day.

6. In his correspondence with other historians, my grandfather insists on the clear separation between the family’s involvement in Africa prior to 1848 and Victor’s business dealings subsequent to the separation (see Régis 1943; Lacroix 1943).

7. *Christophe Colomb*. This is not the same “Christophe Colomb” as the pioneer of bande dessinée (comics) in France, Marie-Louis-Georges Colomb (1856–1945), who also used it as a pen name. The dates just don’t match up. The French traveler and naturalist who spent two years in Dahomey (June 1847–September 1849) sent his accusatory letter to the Minister of Trade on 6 December 1848—eight years before his namesake was born (See Soumonni 1995, p. 84). I am not aware of any kinship relation between them.

8. *Victor Régis claims to “inaugurate agriculture in this part of Africa.”* It is not possible to refute every erroneous statement about African people made by Victor Régis here, but it must be noted that the claim “to inaugurate” agriculture is a wholesale misrepresentation. According to Soumonni, every Dahomean person was engaged in farming—with the exception of a few, such as soldiers and the palace elite.

9. *Fetish*: Both contemporary and colonial misunderstandings of the ‘fetish’ are considered in MacGaffey and Harris (1993), Pels (1998), Price (1989) and Matory (2018).

10. *Thanks to the work of Bernard David and others*. As this article was going to press, I received a copy of the book by Céline Flory (2015) which profoundly illuminates, documenting in blistering detail, the conditions of recruitment, transport, and labor for African “immigrants” to the French Caribbean (see also Flory 2016).

11. *Slave Routes*: A growing body of scholarship considers the fraught situations in which pilgrims from the Diaspora meet African people as custodians of historic sites associated with the slave trade, with varied understandings of the political, economic, and moral stakes in what Kamari Clarke (2004, p. 112) calls the “heritage economies” of slave route tourism (Araujo 2010; Bruner 1996; Ciarcia 2008; Forte 2009; Gates 1999; Hartman 2007; Holsey 2008; Rush 2001; Sutherland 2007). I have learned a great deal from Jacqueline Nassy Brown (2000, 2005), Randy Matory (2005), Kamari Clarke (2004) and Bayo Holsey (2008) and Paul Gilroy (1993) foundational *Black Atlantic*.

12. Other important questions concern public reckoning with colonial history, slavery and the slave trade, a process which connects to current debates about monuments, memorials, reparations, and the teaching of history (Le Monde Diplomatique 2005; Guillet 2013).

13. Alain Sinou explains that much of the fort burned down in 1864 and the remaining buildings were demolished in 1908 by the French colonial administration. In the 1950s, the former gardens of the fort were refurbished into a public square, now flanked by “symbols of the ‘modern’ colonial state: a post-office, a cultural center” (Sinou 1995, pp. 96, 152).

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