MADIKI LEMON, THE "ENGLISH CAPTAIN" AT OUIDAH, 1843–1852: AN EXPLORATION IN BIOGRAPHY

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I

The history of the commercial entrepôts on the Atlantic coast of West Africa in the pre-colonial period is far from being a neglected topic, but has attracted considerable academic research.[1] The potential value of a biographical (or prosopographical) approach to the social history of such coastal communities has also long been recognized, the classic pioneering example being Margaret Priestley's study of the Brew family of Anomabu, on the Gold Coast (modern Ghana), founded by the locally settled Irish slave-trader Richard Brew (died 1776).[2] The case of the Brews, however, presents exceptionally favorable conditions for the reconstruction both of individual biography and of collective family history, in that the founder was literate and generated a considerable corpus of written records which survives to the present, while for subsequent generations of the family the early establishment of an institutionalized form of British proto-colonial administration on the Gold Coast also yielded relatively abundant documentation.

[1]See e.g. Robin Law, and Silke Strickrodt (ed.), *Ports of the Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra)* (Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, Occasional Paper 6, 1999).
[2]Margaret Priestley, *West African Trade and Coast Society: A Family Study* (London, 1969).

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Elsewhere on the coast, and more particularly for individuals and families lower down the social scale, the amount of evidence available is likely to be much more limited and fragmentary. The present article represents a tentative attempt at a biography of a person of much lesser eminence than Richard Brew or his descendants, which may therefore be regarded as a venture into the field of subaltern history.[3] To the extent that it also concerns someone who generated no documentation of his own, but whose life has to be reconstructed from incidental references in the records of the external agencies with whom he had dealings, it is also conceived as a methodological exploration of the possibility of extracting an African voice and perspective from European (and Eurocentric) sources.

The present study originated as a by-product of earlier research on the social history of Ouidah, a coastal town in the modern Republic of Bénin;[4] and its more recent revision has been stimulated by work currently in progress on an edition of the journals of Louis Fraser, who served as British vice-consul to the kingdom of Dahomey, resident in Ouidah, in 1851-2.[5] In the pre-colonial period, Ouidah was the principal Atlantic "port" of Dahomey, and hence a major supplier of slaves for export to the Americas, and from the 1840s also of palm oil as a raw material for European industry. One of the objectives of my earlier research on Ouidah was to explore the possibility of correlating information from two categories of source material: oral traditions of families which exist in the town at the present,[6] and contemporary European accounts, mainly relating to the conduct of the export trade. Through this combination of source material, it proved

[3]An earlier version of this paper was presented in the Panel on "Borderline Biographies," organized by Silke Strickrodt and Achim van Oppen, at the joint conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD) and the Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS), at Freiburg/Basel, 14-17 May 2008.

[4]Published principally in Robin Law, *Ouidah: The social history of a West African slaving 'port' 1727-1892* (Oxford, 2004).

[5]These journals are in the National Archives, London [hereafter, TNA], FO84/886 (and subsequently cited as "Fraser, Journal"); the projected edition will be published in the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* series of the British Academy.

[6]Local oral traditions are synthesized by Casimir Agbo, *Histoire de Ouidah du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Avignon, 1959); these have been supplemented by my own fieldwork in Ouidah conducted between 1994-2001.

possible to trace the histories of some Ouidah families, especially those prominent in overseas commerce, back to the nineteenth and in some cases even into the eighteenth century. This article relates to a member of one such family, called Lemon. This is nowadays a very prominent family, not only locally in Ouidah but in the wider national arena of the Republic of Bénin: a senior member of it at the present, Idelphonse Lemon, has been a leading civil servant and politician, serving for example as a Minister in the democratic transitional government of 1990-1991, and an unsuccessful candidate for the Presidency of Bénin in the election of 1991. In the nineteenth century, however, it belonged to the lower echelon of the Ouidah elite.

II

The commercial prominence of Ouidah was reflected in the existence of fortified posts belonging to the three principal European slave-trading nations, the Portuguese, English and French, each of which formed the nucleus of a quarter of the town. Although only the Portuguese fort survives nowadays as a recognizable building, the quarters of the former English and French forts also retain their identities to the present. The "English" quarter is more commonly called nowadays by its indigenous name, Sogbadji. Several of the families which live in Sogbadji today recall their descent from persons who were employed in the English fort during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: for example, the Midjrokan family, descended from a man who was recruited by the fort as "linguist" (i.e. interpreter) in 1767, and the Cocou family, descended from a canoeman from the Gold Coast, who became "boatswain" or head canoeman of the fort in 1781.[7]

The Lemons are another Sogbadji family whose traditions recall a connection with the former English fort.[8] The family claims to be descended from an English man, who married a local woman, from a

[7]Law, *Ouidah*, 74-5.

[8]See Agbo, *Histoire*, 188-9; additional information was obtained from an interview with a senior woman of the family, Lemon Sika, 9 January 1996.

leading indigenous family of Sogbadji.[9] It also claims to have held the hereditary "guardianship" of the English fort—an alternative name (or nickname) of the family is, in fact, "Glessihounto," meaning "English Captain" (or "Captain of the English"). This latter claim relates to the period after the abandonment of the fort by its official owners, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, in 1812. The ancestor of the Lemon family, according to an account recorded in 1849, was "an English corporal of the fort in Governor James' time"—i.e. Frederick James, the last official governor of the fort, serving in 1807-1812.[10] Comparison with contemporary evidence indicates that this English ancestor was a man called Raymond (whence, apparently, the name "Lemon") Cullie, who was recruited into the fort garrison, initially as a drummer but shortly afterwards promoted to the rank of gunner, in 1779.[11] This man was still listed among the personnel of the fort down to its abandonment in 1812, though whether he then left Ouidah or remained behind is unclear. It was evidently this man's African son who was then (or perhaps subsequently) appointed governor of the fort by the king of Dahomey.

Unfortunately the traditions current in the family nowadays appear to preserve only a highly telescoped version of its genealogy, counting only four generations from the original Lemon to the modern politician Idelphonse—which would implicitly place the former's life no earlier than the second half of the nineteenth century.[12] It is clear from contemporary European sources, however, that there were an additional two or three generations which have been forgotten in the traditions. In particular, English sources identify by name two additional heads of the family: Mark (or, in a Dahomianized form, "Madiki" or "Madaki") Lemon, who is said to have been a grandson

[9]The Zossoungbos, who claim that their ancestor was the founder of the quarter.

[10]F.E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans, being the Journals of two missions to the King of Dahomey and residence at his capital in the years 1849 and 1850* (London, 1851), i, 53-4. For James, see I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours 1708-1818* (Cambridge, 1967), 219.

[11]Law, *Ouidah*, 162.

[12]Idelphonse's grandfather, named as John Peter Lemon, is represented as the son of the original Lemon.

(or great-grandson) of the original "Corporal Lemon,"[13] and who is attested between 1843-1852; and Madiki's son John Lemon (or John Madiki), attested between 1859-1864. In the traditions current nowadays, in so far as the activities of these persons are remembered, they seem to be attributed to other members of the family, especially the founding ancestor, the first Lemon.

III

Of these two nineteenth-century Lemons, the one whose activities are best documented is Madiki, who is mentioned by a series of British visitors to Dahomey over several years: most of these were government officials, engaged in missions to persuade the reigning king, Gezo, to accept a treaty for the abolition of the slave trade, but they also included a Christian missionary and an explorer in the service of the Royal Geographical Society. Although Madiki Lemon himself seems to have been illiterate,[14] and in any case left no written records of his own,[15] so that we perceive him necessarily through the eyes of others, the information on him seems sufficiently substantial, not only to offer some sense of him as an individual personality, but also to enable an understanding of his position within local Ouidah society, as well as in relation to the Dahomian political authorities and the British.

The first British observer to mention Madiki Lemon was the Methodist missionary Thomas Birch Freeman in 1843, who named him (as "Madaki") as one of two "guides and interpreters" assigned to him by the Yovogan, or Dahomian viceroy, of Ouidah for his journey to visit king Gezo at his inland capital Abomey;[16] the other being

[13]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 53-4, says he was "the grandson" of "Corporal Lemon," but in ii, 73, that the latter was his "grand or great-grandfather."

[14]This is inferred from the fact that in some letters written on behalf of the Dahomian authorities, although Madiki is referred to as the "interpreter," he did not sign as a witness: TNA, FO84.886, George Prior, for Yovogan of Ouidah, to Queen Victoria, 31 April 1851; FO84/858, Mehu, for King of Dahomey, to Queen of England, 7 September 1851.

[15]The Lemon family nowadays state that they possess no papers relating to their earlier history.

[16]Rev. Thomas B. Freeman, *Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku and Dahomi, in Western Africa* (London, 1844), 250.

Gnahoui ("Niawi"), the king's official interpreter for the English language.[17] Madiki apparently also accompanied, presumably again as interpreter, a second British visitor, Brodie Cruickshank, an official of the British administration on the Gold Coast, who undertook a mission to Gezo in 1848.[18]

Another visitor to Dahomey, the Scottish explorer John Duncan in 1845, also met a person whom he understood had been appointed "Governor" of the English fort in Ouidah by king Gezo, who traveled with him to Abomey to introduce him to the king.[19] But this man is not named, and is described as already "old" in 1845: it therefore seems likely that this was not Madiki, but more probably his father, the son of the original Lemon. Madiki himself, however, had succeeded to the post of "Governor" of the English fort by 1849, when he is recorded as serving in this capacity by a British naval officer, Lieutenant F.E. Forbes, then visiting Ouidah.[20] Madiki acted as interpreter to Forbes on two missions to king Gezo at his capital, in that and the following year.[21] He is likewise recorded as interpreting for a locally based British merchant, in writing a letter on behalf of the Yovogan of Ouidah in April 1851.[22] He is also frequently referred to (although no longer described as "Governor" of the English fort) in the journals of vice-consul Louis Fraser, covering the period between July 1851 and March 1852, in particular accompanying Fraser, and

[17]For whom, see Law, *Ouidah*, 105, 175-6.

[18]This is not recorded in the original records of Cruickshank's mission, but retrospectively by Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 55 (referring anonymously to "my interpreter," but it is clear from other references that this is Madiki Lemon).

[19]John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 and 1846* (London, 1847), i, 140, 216-7. Duncan contradicts himself, stating in the first of these passages that this man was appointed by the King, but in the second that he had "created himself governor." However, the King himself later confirmed that it was he who "kept" the governor at the fort: ibid., ii, 269.

[20]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 53-4.

[21]Ibid., i, 48, 53, 86; ii, 176. See also House of Commons Parliamentary Papers [hereafter HCPP], Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1850/1, Class A, inclosure 2 in no. 220, Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, entry for 4 July 1850 (giving the name as "Mudiki").

[22]TNA, FO84/886, George Prior, for Yovogan of Ouidah, to Queen Victoria, 31 April 1851 ("Madakie").

serving as interpreter, on missions to the king at his capital in August-September 1851 and in January and February-March 1852.

It is not known how long after 1852 Madiki survived. The records of the British Methodist Mission which operated in Ouidah from 1854 onwards do not mention him, apart from a passing allusion in 1855 to his house, which need not imply that he himself was still alive.[23] He was presumably dead by 1859, when his son John Lemon is first documented as serving as "Commandant [...] of the English Fort."[24]

IV

Of the successive British accounts which mention Madiki Lemon, the journals of vice-consul Fraser in 1851-1852 are by a large margin the most informative. Whereas Madiki is mentioned by Freeman in 1843 only once, and by Forbes in 1849-1850 only half a dozen times, his name occurs over fifty times in Fraser's journals over a period of only nine months. Fraser's account provides a wealth of detailed information on Madiki's role as an intermediary between the local Dahomian authorities and himself as British vice-consul, serving as interpreter (in a broader cultural, as well as a narrowly linguistic sense), adviser (especially on questions of Dahomian court etiquette), and supplier of services to him. Indeed, one of the most frequently recurring phrases in Fraser's journals is "Madiki says..." In the process, Madiki's personality (or at least Fraser's perception of it) comes out quite vividly—on one occasion, Fraser even purports to report Madiki's own words (in pidgin English) *verbatim*.[25] The explanation for this higher visibility of Madiki (and other African

[23]Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London: Thomas Birch Freeman Freeman, Cape Coast, 20 July 1855 (quoting letter of Joseph Dawson, Ouidah, 20 June 1855), referring to "that large tree on your left [i.e. on leaving the English fort], going to Madarker's house."

[24]WMMS Archives, William West, Cape Coast, 6 June 1859 (at Ouidah, 5 March 1859).

[25]Fraser, Journal, entry for 7 August 1851 (explaining difficulties in recruiting porters for Fraser's journey to Abomey), "It no my fault," "People no savvy [i.e. understand]."

intermediaries, notably the king's interpreter Gnahoui) in Fraser's account is perhaps that his journals, unlike those of Freeman, Duncan and Forbes, were not written with a view to publication. They therefore preserve a more complete sense of his day-to-day interactions with, and by implication his dependence upon, African assistants in dealing with the Dahomian authorities and the wider local society; the published accounts, in contrast, have largely edited out the role of Madiki and other African assistants, in order, it may be suggested, to emphasize the author's own pre-eminent agency.

In Fraser's journals and other British accounts, Madiki Lemon appears most often in the role of "interpreter," translating between the local language, Fon, and English in audiences with the Yovogan at Ouidah and the king at Abomey. This, however, may give a misleading impression of his position and status, since as titular "Governor" of the English fort, he was certainly a more important figure than a mere "interpreter." His prominence in the practical business of translation at this time was probably due to particular contingent circumstances. It was, in fact, the Midjrokan family, mentioned earlier, which held the hereditary position of "fort interpreter," as was explicitly noted by F.E. Forbes in 1850; but, as Forbes further observed, owing to the long hiatus in the British presence at Ouidah after 1812, the current head of this family had become "unaccustomed to the work, and, although a respectable man, was a bad interpreter."[26] The role of interpreter thus fell by default to Madiki Lemon, in whose family knowledge of the English language had evidently been more effectively preserved.

However, precisely what the position of "Governor" of the English fort involved by Madiki Lemon's time is unclear. The appointment of an indigenous "Governor" was explicitly conceived by king Gezo as "temporary," pending the official reoccupation of the fort by the British which he consistently sought.[27] The situation was complicated by the fact that in 1838 a British merchant based on the Gold Coast to the west, Thomas Hutton, who was engaged in trade for palm oil, had established a factory in the English fort, which his

[26]Forbes, *Dahomey*, ii, 177.
[27]As Gezo told Duncan in 1845: *Travels*, ii, 269.

agents continued to occupy down to 1851.[28] In 1845 the indigenous "Governor" (probably Madiki's father, as noted earlier) was nevertheless also still resident in the fort, now sharing it with Hutton's agent.[29] By 1849, however, this was perhaps no longer the case. In August 1849 John Duncan had returned to Ouidah, now in the official capacity of British vice-consul, and also took up residence in the English fort; but it was noted that Hutton's agent still claimed "property" of the fort and retained the key to it, and had assigned the vice-consul inferior accommodation in it.[30] Although arguments from silence should always be advanced only tentatively, it seems significant that no reference is made in this context to any claims of the Lemon family.[31] It may be that their claim to control of the fort had lapsed with the death of Madiki Lemon's father. Current family tradition recalls the loss of the key of the fort, which it is said was thrown into a latrine on the death of John Peter Lemon, who is remembered as the son of the original Lemon, but was in fact head of the family in the early twentieth century.

It is clear that king Gezo understood that Hutton's agents were private individuals, rather than agents of the British government, and so did not regard them as having taken over the position of "Governor" of the fort.[32] When Louis Fraser arrived to fill the vacant vice-consulate in July 1851, however, he was explicitly recognized by the local Dahomian authorities as "Governor" of the English fort.[33] Whether this implied that Madiki now lost his position as "Governor," or he continued to serve as a sort of indigenous counterpart of the European "Governor," is not made clear: but the latter sort of duality of office would certainly have been entirely consistent with

[28]Law, *Ouidah*, 204.

[29]Duncan, *Travels*, i, 140, 216.

[30]HCPP, Slave Trade 1849/50, Class B, incl. 9 in no. 9, Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, 7 October 1849, in Forbes to Commodore Fanshawe, 1 November 1849.

[31]And conversely, in later listing Madiki's properties, Forbes does not mention the fort: *Dahomey*, i, 129.

[32]In 1850 he explicitly requested that "some person should be sent as governor to the fort at Whydah:" HCPP, Slave Trade 1850/1, Class B, incl. in no. 9, King of Dahomey to Queen Victoria, 4 July 1850.

[33]Strictly, as "Governor of English Town [i.e. Sogbadji quarter]": Fraser, Journal, 23 July 1851.

Dahomian political conceptions.[34] However, even after Fraser's arrival Madiki clearly still exercised some degree of authority over the personnel of the fort, if not indeed over the inhabitants of the "English" quarter of Sogbadji more generally.[35] This aspect of his position is, however, seldom explicitly recognized in the British accounts, apart from a casual reference in Fraser's journal, in connection with Madiki's organization of the recruitment of porters to accompany the vice-consul on a journey to the royal court at Abomey, to the "despotic power" which he assumed over the fort servants.[36]

F.E. Forbes in 1850 noted that Madiki "consider[ed] himself a rich man," having a "large inclosure [i.e. compound]" in Ouidah itself, together with "a large plantation" in the countryside, and owning ten slaves.[37] To put his wealth into perspective, the king's interpreter Gnahoui owned "upwards of a thousand slaves," and no less than seven estates, at Ouidah, Abomey and various places in between.[38] In 1850 Madiki had lately built a large house, evidently in Brazilian style, apparently (since it was reportedly thirty feet high) in two stories, and with verandahs, which he leased to Forbes during the latter's visits to Ouidah.[39] Presumably, this was the house which the Methodist missionaries mentioned in 1855, as noted earlier. Unfortunately, it no longer survives.[40]

As Forbes also explicitly noted, Madiki was considered locally (and considered himself) to be a *yovo*, or "white man."[41] As such, he

[34]See Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville VA, 1998), 177-8, 239-41, for the "doubling" of senior officials by women of the palace and by male members of the royal family under Gezo.

[35]Local tradition maintains that the hereditary headship of the quarter belonged to the Zossoungbo family, into which the original Lemon had married: Ago, *Histoire*, 188.

[36]Fraser, Journal, 7 August 1851.

[37]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 129

[38]Ibid., ii, 175-6.

[39]Ibid., i, 129-30.

[40]Family traditions recall the former existence of a "storey house [*maison à l'étage*]," which is said to have been built by the founder of the family, the first Lemon (here presumably conflated with Madiki).

[41]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 129.

enjoyed the privileges (or courtesies) commonly extended in Dahomey to Europeans—being permitted, for example, to travel in a hammock (otherwise, a privilege of the "caboceers," or senior officials),[42] and to sit on a chair in the presence of the king (more narrowly restricted to Europeans).[43] European visitors, such as Fraser, tended to be dismissive of the claims of persons of mixed ancestry to be regarded as "white men."[44] Biologically, indeed, Madiki was only one-quarter (or perhaps one-eighth) "white";[45] but in Dahomey the term *yovo* was constructed in cultural rather than narrowly racial terms. Madiki was "white" not only because of his European ancestry, but because he spoke English, presumably wore European-style dress,[46] and more generally affected European customs.[47]

It is not clearly recorded whether Madiki's espousal of European culture extended to observance of the white man's religion, Christianity, though this is perhaps implied by a remark of Forbes, that he scorned the indigenous Dahomian religion—"pretends to despise belief in fetish," in Forbes' own loaded language. However, Forbes also noted that Madiki did observe the local custom of making ancestral sacrifices at the beginning of the year, "set[ting] a table to his ancestors," at which they were supposed to partake of the food offered.[48] In this, however, he was not any different from other Christians in Ouidah at this period, including the Brazilian communi-

[42]Ibid., i, 53. Likewise his father in 1845: Duncan, *Travels*, i, 216.

[43]Fraser, Journal, 17 and 20 August 1851. In 1845 also Madiki's father, as well as Duncan himself, was excused from the normal requirement to prostrate upon greeting the King: Duncan, *Travels*, i, 221.

[44]Fraser stated that there were only 7 "white men" in Ouidah, with himself by implication the only British one (the others being two French and four Portuguese), most of the Brazilian merchants there being "mulattoes." Evidently he did not regard Hutton's agents as "white men," presumably because they also were of racially mixed ancestry: see the Appendix to his Journal for July-September 1851, on "The Fort."

[45]According to whether he was a grandson or great-grandson of the original "Corporal Lemon."

[46]In 1845 Madiki's father had worn "an old worn-out gambroon [twilled woollen] coat of English pattern": Duncan, *Travels*, i, 216.

[47]Likewise, Forbes noted that returned former slaves from Brazil and Sierra Leone, although of purely African biological descent, "are considered white men": *Dahomey*, i, 24.

[48]Ibid., ii, 73.

ty, comprising both returned former slaves of African origin and descendants of Brazilian slave-traders by local women, who professed to be Roman Catholics but simultaneously indulged in local religious practices.[49]

V

On Madiki Lemon's personal qualities, the British sources are not entirely consistent. Freeman in 1843 described him as "intelligent," but this perhaps referred only to his knowledge of the English language.[50] F.E. Forbes in 1849 also described him as "an efficient interpreter;" but on his second mission to Abomey in 1850 was somewhat more qualified in his praise, describing Madiki as "simply useful, that, in interpreting with the other, if Narwhey [Gnahoui] gave a wrong version, the king would at once detect it," and regarding another man, a liberated former slave recruited at Fernando Po called John Richards, as "the most useful of our interpreters."[51] Fraser later was even less impressed: he records that on his first mission to Abomey in August 1851, in transmitting official British government letters to king Gezo, he "rendered them as near as I could into Madiki's English, which is no joke, and then he interpreted, as well as he could, I suppose," and later observed more generally that "Madiki understands very little English." In the subsequent mission of January 1852, at the initial audience with the king, when an official letter was again presented, Fraser recorded that at first both Madiki and Gnahoui "tried" to translate it, but by implication failed, and the translation was eventually done by a Portuguese and a Brazilian trader, the first of whom translated from English into Portuguese and the second from Portuguese into Fon.[52] In the later stages of these negotiations the mission employed as its main interpreter a different person, Joseph Peter Brown, an African from the Gold Coast employed as an agent by the merchant Thomas Hutton,

[49]Law, *Ouidah*, 186-7.
[50]Freeman, *Journal*, 250.
[51]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 48; ii, 176-7.
[52]Fraser, Journal, 20 August and 4 September 1851, 8 January 1852.

who had the advantage of knowing Portuguese, as well as English and Fon.[53]

F.E. Forbes, although finding Madiki "useful" as an interpreter, was otherwise dismissive of his intellectual abilities: "a poor simple-minded man," "too big a fool to be a rogue, but simple as the untaught child."[54] But Fraser, again, was more negative, describing Madiki as "this rascal;" "there does not appear to be a species of roguery but what this man is mixed up in [...] how Forbes can say he is too simple to be a rogue I know not."[55] Fraser's complaints appear to have related particularly to Madiki's alleged uncooperativeness in securing porters and to his overcharging for goods bought in the market. Fraser made similar complaints, however, about most of the Dahomian officials he dealt with, including in particular the king's English interpreter, Gnahoui. Perhaps this owed more to Fraser's paranoia than to any real malevolence on Madiki's (or Gnahoui's) part.

The meticulous detail of Fraser's journal, in fact, provides several instances where his complaints of Madiki's supposed stupidity or duplicity can be interpreted, if read in the light of a fuller knowledge of Dahomey than Fraser himself possessed, as demonstrating rather his own impatience, arrogance and incomprehension. On one occasion, for example, when Madiki told him that certain men observed in a ceremonial procession were "the king's sons," Fraser scornfully remarked that "this could not be correct, as some of them appeared quite as old as the king himself;" but Madiki was evidently merely translating literally the Fon term *ahovi*, "king's child," which was applied to descendants of earlier kings, as well as children of the king currently reigning.[56]

[53]The naval officer T.G. Forbes (to be distinguished from the F.E. Forbes who visited Dahomey earlier), who accompanied Fraser on this mission (and indeed, took the leading role in it) observed that "without Mr Brown [...] nothing would have been done: he speaks English, Portuguese, Dahomey, Ashantee, Fantee, and all languages along the Coast, and was able and did detect several times the Portuguese misrepresenting things to the King": TNA, FO84/893, Commander T.G. Forbes to Commodore Bruce, 18 January 1852.

[54]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 54; ii, 176.

[55]Fraser, Journal, 7 August 1851.

[56]Ibid., 20 August 1851.

On other occasions, tensions between Fraser and Madiki arose over the former's reluctance to comply with local customs.[57] Several such problems arose, for example, on Fraser's initial visit to the capital Abomey in August-September 1851. When approaching the city gates, he was instructed that he had to dismount from the hammock in which he was being carried, but initially refused, suspecting that he was being required to defer to a local "fetish;" Madiki explained that it was rather "on account of [it] being the King's place" (i.e. the city gates were regarded as having the same status as the royal palace), which Fraser dismissed as "one of Madiki's lies," but in fact the latter was probably correct on this point.[58] On another occasion, he had a quarrel with Madiki, when the latter tried to persuade him to acquire a personalized cane, to send to the king to accompany messages sent, according to local custom, as earlier British visitors had done, but Fraser insisted on "his own plan" of sending a visiting card instead. He also gave offence, in some way not clearly explained, in connection with his hat (perhaps keeping it on in the king's presence), provoking Madiki to offer him "a lesson in etiquette, respecting my hat," which Fraser dismissed with the observation that "I had worn hats longer than any one in their country, and trusted I knew the use of them." On another occasion, he refused to pay transit duty on goods sent to the coast, insisting that "my people and myself should pass free at all times;" Madiki responded, it may be supposed in some exasperation, that other Europeans had raised no difficulty, "it was not the king's palaver, it was only what my predecessors had done."[59] Fraser was in fact explicitly determined to flout the local norms of etiquette and diplomacy: as he declared on another occa-

[57]A similar issue arose in 1845, when Duncan prevented Madiki's father from preceding him in greeting the King, in the belief that this was an attempt to imply that "he was my superior, and that I was merely an escort": *Travels*, i, 216. But in fact, Dahomian officials normally processed in reverse order of seniority, as was noted later by Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (London, 1864), i, 141, 208.

[58]Fraser, Journal, 16 August 1851. Burton later likewise understood that he was required to go on foot at the city gate "as if it were part of the King's palace": *Mission to Gelele*, i, 289-90.

[59]Fraser, Journal, 12, 20, and 23 August 1851.

sion to Gnahoui and other Dahomian officials, "I had not come to follow their custom, but to shew them English customs."[60] Fraser was, it is clear, an impossibly bad diplomat, who brought most of his difficulties upon himself—indeed, king Gezo eventually refused to deal with him, and he was formally censured by the Foreign Office for the "overbearing demeanour" which he adopted towards the Dahomian authorities.[61]

Fraser also tended to assume that Madiki was colluding with the Dahomian officials to obstruct him in his vice-consular duties, and indeed that his primary loyalty was to the Dahomian state, rather than (as Fraser thought it ought to be) to Britain, complaining that "Madiki [...] only tells me, just what suits the King."[62] While this also may owe something to Fraser's paranoia, there was perhaps some more substance to this latter perception. F.E. Forbes earlier had also observed that Madiki "hold[s] the King of Dahomey in the light of a god."[63] The question of where Madiki's primary loyalty lay came out into the open when Fraser received at Abomey a letter from the ruler of Abeokuta to the east (with which Dahomey was currently at war), which asked him, among other things, to supply information on the Dahomian king's intentions—thus laying Fraser open to the accusation of serving as a spy. In transmitting the contents of this letter to king Gezo, Fraser tried to conceal this potentially compromising passage, but the subterfuge was too transparent to succeed. At a critical point, Fraser's intended duplicity was undermined by Madiki, who was serving as interpreter, and who "said something about my not having read it all."[64] Since Madiki is presumed to have been illiterate, and therefore could not have read the letter himself, presumably he had noticed that Fraser had "skipped" a passage in his translation of it. The episode seems eloquently revealing of the liminality of Madiki's position. Although he was considered a Englishman in

[60]Ibid., 16 August 1851.
[61]HCPP, Slave Trade 1852/3, Class B, no. 1, Earl of Malmesbury to vice-consul Fraser, 19 April 1852.
[62]Fraser, Journal, 4 September 1851.
[63]Forbes, *Dahomey*, i, 54.
[64]Fraser, Journal, 6 September 1851.

Dahomey, Madiki's English identity evidently did not extend to observation of that proverbial duty of the diplomat, "to lie for one's country."[65]

VI

E.P. Thompson, in his classic study of working-class radicalism in early nineteenth-century England, famously defined his purpose as to "rescue" his subjects "from the enormous condescension of posterity."[66] For Madiki Lemon, and others like him, who are known principally through the writings of the transient European visitors whom they assisted, it is rather the condescension of these contemporary observers from which they require to rescued—in terms of historical methodology, an issue of detailed critical analysis of sources rather than of synthetic interpretation. The European accounts which form the principal sources for Madiki's biography are evidently marked both by blatant cultural and racial prejudice, and by shallow understanding of the local political and social context. Nevertheless, as this study has sought to illustrate, when read against the grain, they can fruitfully be drawn upon to illuminate both the critical role which a person such as Madiki played in facilitating interactions between European visitors and the local African society, and the nature and basis of his status within the latter. Madiki's case also serves as a poignant illustration of the ambiguous position in which he found himself, as a person of mixed Afro-European ancestry and cultural identity, of being considered a European by the local Africans but an African by Europeans.

[65]This aphorism is attributed to the English diplomatist and poet, Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639).

[66]Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), Preface.

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