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The Bars and Sidewalks of Disillusion: Cotonou Prostitution Dissected Multidisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

The phenomenon of prostitution is in full swing in Benin, especially in Cotonou and its surroundings. However, few sociological studies have been carried out on this subject. To compensate for this rarity, we have produced, through this paper, an x-ray of prostitution in Cotonou. In Benin, prostitution being the result of the colonial desacralization of women, seems to be part of a vindictive and supra-venal logic. The prostitute, in Cotonou, seeks in the illegitimate paths of sex work a legitimate honor... What is the price to pay to regain this honor? The various ethnographic surveys that we conducted with around thirty "beauties of the night", in the "bars" or the "red zones" of Cotonou and its surroundings, reveal anyway the mixed impacts of prostitution activity on the emancipation of the prostitute.

Keywords: *Beauties of the Night, Sex work, Ethnographic surveys, Prostitute, Red zone, Bars*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of prostitution continues in Benin, despite the proliferation of prohibitive state measures. On October 24, 2021, around 50 refractory prostitutes were arrested in Cotonou by the Beninese police as a sign of deterrence. And yet, despite its flagrant social scope, the world of prostitution in Benin remains almost unexplored by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. The smallness of the scientific literature relating to Beninese prostitution is the main reason that led us to carry out this work.

From our point of view, the societal debate on the issue of prostitution is dominated by two major approaches: abolitionism and regulationism. On the one hand, abolitionism, whose origins go back to eighteenth-century English feminism, is limited to a "moralist", "miserable" and "victimist" reading of prostitution; on the other hand, regulationism, which appeared in the 19th century, decriminalizes the client, makes the prostitute feel guilty while "a-moralizing" her activities. The weakness of these two approaches lies in the social *iconoclasmbilization* or the weakening of axiological neutrality, the compass of post-patristic science.

Abolitionist works—notably those of Mayer (2011), Guienne (2006), Pryen (1999), Bourdieu (1994), Becker (1963), Jobin (2001), Barry (1986), Falade (2016), make the phenomenon of prostitution elusive by their disproportionate clinging to moralism and intolerance. Indeed, Pryen considered prostitution as an activity incompatible with human dignity

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(Pryen 1999), while Cesare Lombrose (1893) criminalized it by stating that “prostitutes are closer to the male than to the ‘honest woman’ and that ‘born prostitutes’, marked with the phylogenetic characteristics of ‘primitive woman’, are biologically degenerated” (quoted by Pryen, 1999). Brochier defines it as the fact of establishing “relationships with other people whose logical outcome is a sexual act, with the aim of obtaining short-term remuneration” (Brochier, 2005). For Bell, prostitution is “any form of sexual interaction in exchange for some form of payment” (Bell, 1994).

Abolitionist researchers and regulationists meet theoretically, insofar as they all make money the purpose of prostitution. The example of the regulatory ethnologist Tabet could justify our position. According to the latter, prostitution refers to “sexual relations between men and women involving an economic transaction” (Tabet, 1987).

Although the works of abolitionist and regulationist authors are sociologically relevant, they do not nevertheless make it possible to identify the complexity of the prostitutional reality in Cotonou, strongly marked by a supra-venal logic. The general objective of our paper is to examine the motives of prostitution in Cotonou, the techniques for circumventing social labeling used by prostitutes, their expectations and their disappointments.

In the Beninese collective imagination, prostitution would be considered a pernicious practice, a form of moral depravity. In Benin, the abolitionist vision is acceptable and accepted, due to the predominance of traditional anti-prostitution values. However, prostitution is still rampant there, and brothels continue to proliferate in Cotonou. How does this “profaning and anti-traditional practice” then manage to survive in a country strongly attached to ancestral or cultural pornophobic traditions? What are the origins and causes of the exponential rise of prostitution in Cotonou and its surroundings? Is there a relationship between colonization and the spread of sex work in Benin? What becomes of women in the world of prostitution in Cotonou?

Our general hypothesis is to link prostitution in Cotonou and its surroundings with the female need for a better life based on honor. We have set our sights on the city of Cotonou to carry out our surveys because of its plurality and because it is home to almost a third of the prostitutes listed in all of Benin. The innovative aspect of this article lies in the establishment of the supra-venality of prostitution activity in Cotonou and its surroundings. Our work has four main parts articulated around the methodological organization of our research, the precolonial and colonial situation of women in Benin, the effects of their socio-family minoritization and the issues of prostitution.

1.1. Methodological Framework

The methodological framework includes the techniques used to collect the information and materials used for the construction of this work, the difficulties of the field and the mapping of the anchoring places of prostitution in Cotonou and its surroundings.

1.1.1. Front Door and Respondents

Our access to the land was made possible by a connoisseur named Medegnon. This is a former security guard who worked for seven years in a bar in Godomey. He directed me to bars, indicated areas of affluence for prostitutes. My investigations allowed me to discover that male prostitution is almost non-existent in Benin. This is why the interviewed population is essentially female.

Our study is limited to a representative sample of 30 girls. These respondents are mostly in their thirties and work in “bars” or in the open air (sidewalks). Twenty-two of them declare having taken the prostitution route in order to recover their “tafT₁ susudji” (fon-gbe expression: trampled honor). The latter are all Beninese and represent 73.3% of the population surveyed. Furthermore, the remaining eight other respondents are under the age of 25 and are all Nigerians. The cause of their choice would be strictly economic, unlike Beninese women who, *pistanthropobics*, would be mainly mobilized by a “supra-venal” objective. How was the field experience?

1.1.2. Conduct of the Experiment: Methods and Obstacles

The world of prostitution in Benin is very complex, due to the versatility and constant oppression of prostitutes. The latter must constantly adapt to the times, comply with the demands of customers, the injunctions of their masters, the instructions of the bars in order to be able to survive. A submission ritual would sometimes be required before obtaining the work permit. The postulant swears loyalty to the “boss” and to keep the secrets of her job forever.

Having taken an oath not to reveal anything to the “outsider”, some sex workers would have used doublespeak during our interviews for fear of not probably perjuring themselves. To grasp the reality of the world of prostitution in Benin, it is up to the sociologist to cultivate patience and vigilance. Thus, the special context of our field led us, as

Vahabi did through his research on Iranian exiles, to “[...] exercise caution and dynamism to grasp the characteristics of the situation [...]”. (Vahabi 2009)

Vahabian caution enabled us to dodge attempts at manipulation and camouflage by some of the respondents. The major difficulty encountered in the field is the reluctance of many respondents to break the omerta. However, our discretion, our patience and our tolerance allowed us to overcome the obstacle of the law of silence.

To be able to collect our information, we carried out an ethnographic work extending over six months (June 2020 to December 2020) and taking place in two stages:

At first, we explored the field while adopting an empirical-inductive approach. Without starting hypothesis and without questionnaire, we went to the places of anchorage of prostitution and from our exploratory surveys emerged a new vision of Beninese prostitution.

In the second moment, we returned to the field, questioned the prostitutes using life stories and carried out important observation work. Life stories are forms of individual biographies invented by Chicago researchers. These “were the first to investigate the biographical materials of individuals, families or communities, to follow the moral careers of gangsters, thieves and prostitutes, to report on the lived experiences of disadvantaged populations.” (Mesure and Savidan, 2006) (our English translation)

In the field, we accomplished all the tasks defined by Henri Peretz in his concept of direct observation. According to the latter, the researcher resorting to such observation has “no intention of diverting the action from its ordinary unfolding or of involving the participants in acts foreign to their own perspective. He will observe without proposing to the participants any design or project and, if he himself participates in the action, he will adopt one of the usual behaviors in this environment. The observer must be reserved, not overdo it and have understood what he can do. Thus the one who participates in the action has learned to play such and such a role and how one can play this role”. (Peretz 2004) (our English translation)

Our observation work helped us to x-ray the Cotonou prostitution world, to discover the arrogance of some customers and the ambivalence of the bosses. The latter are pimps working with a raised visor and with complete impunity, even though pimping, defined by Article 3 of Law 2011-26 of January 9, 2012 as “the activity of someone who promotes the debauchery of others by acting as an intermediary, thereby benefiting from the fruits of this activity” (our English translation), is illegal in Benin.

Our interviews were conducted in Fon-Gbe and in French, in the absence of the “bosses”, to avoid hampering the sincerity of the people interviewed. Our conversations were recorded using a tape recorder. One of them was even filmed, with the authorization of the respondent. We have noticed that almost all of the people questioned are wary of strangers, fearing to fall into the traps of phantom customers often hired by bosses to test their discretion.

The observation was mutual. While we observed them carefully, the girls observed in turn observed our every move. Observation allows them to protect themselves, to position themselves, to simulate a behavior favorable to the reputation of the bar, the boss, to their professional flowering.

“If, for the ethnologist, the initial activity consists in carrying out observation, for those who sell sexual services, observation is part of the “secondary skills” acquired (Proth 2002) which allow them to survive and to last on the sidewalk, to anticipate aggression or to know very quickly how to seduce. In one case, the necessity of the field is a methodological requirement underpinned by theoretical debates; in the other, the observation stems from the use of the bodies and their location. This shared observation makes prostitution an atypical field, and this atypicality was not without consequences, especially at the beginning of the research.” (Deschamps 2008) (our English translation)

The importance that prostitutes give to observation shows irrefutably that prostitution would also be the place of eternal learning, reflection and perpetual adaptation. In which places was this work of observation and questioning carried out?

1.1.3. Presentation of the Survey Sites

Our surveys were carried out mainly in Cotonou, then at the eastern entrance to Godomey. Cotonou is the epicenter of economic activities in Benin. It is a port city, with an area of 79 km². The population of Cotonou is estimated at 679,012 inhabitants (UN, 2013). In Cotonou, there are three main areas where prostitution is anchored, and we carried out surveys there: Jonquet, Gbégamey and Mèntonin (Figure 1).

Jonquet is the district where the first bus station of the Cotonou capital was established. It is not far from the vast Dantokpa market. It is the first bastion of Beninese prostitution with its many brothels. The pass costs less (1500 FCFA) in Jonquet than in other “hot spots” due to the overabundance of sex workers in this place.

In Gbégamey, as in Mènontin, there is a strong presence of prostitution. The sexual exchanges between the clients and the “beauties of the night” take place in hostels fitted out for this purpose. From 9 p.m., girls solicit on the esplanade of the Stade de l’Amitié, in the Mènontin area. Moreover, in Gbégamey, they generally wait for their customers a stone’s throw from the Place Bulgaria-Bourse du Travail. The pass costs about 2500 FCFA in Gbégamey and Mènontin. “Prostitution by throwing the headscarf” is practiced there. It is, according to Gbagbo, the fact by which “girls sometimes sit, sometimes stopped at the edge of the road, to hail the passing customer.” (Gbagbo 2009) (our English translation)

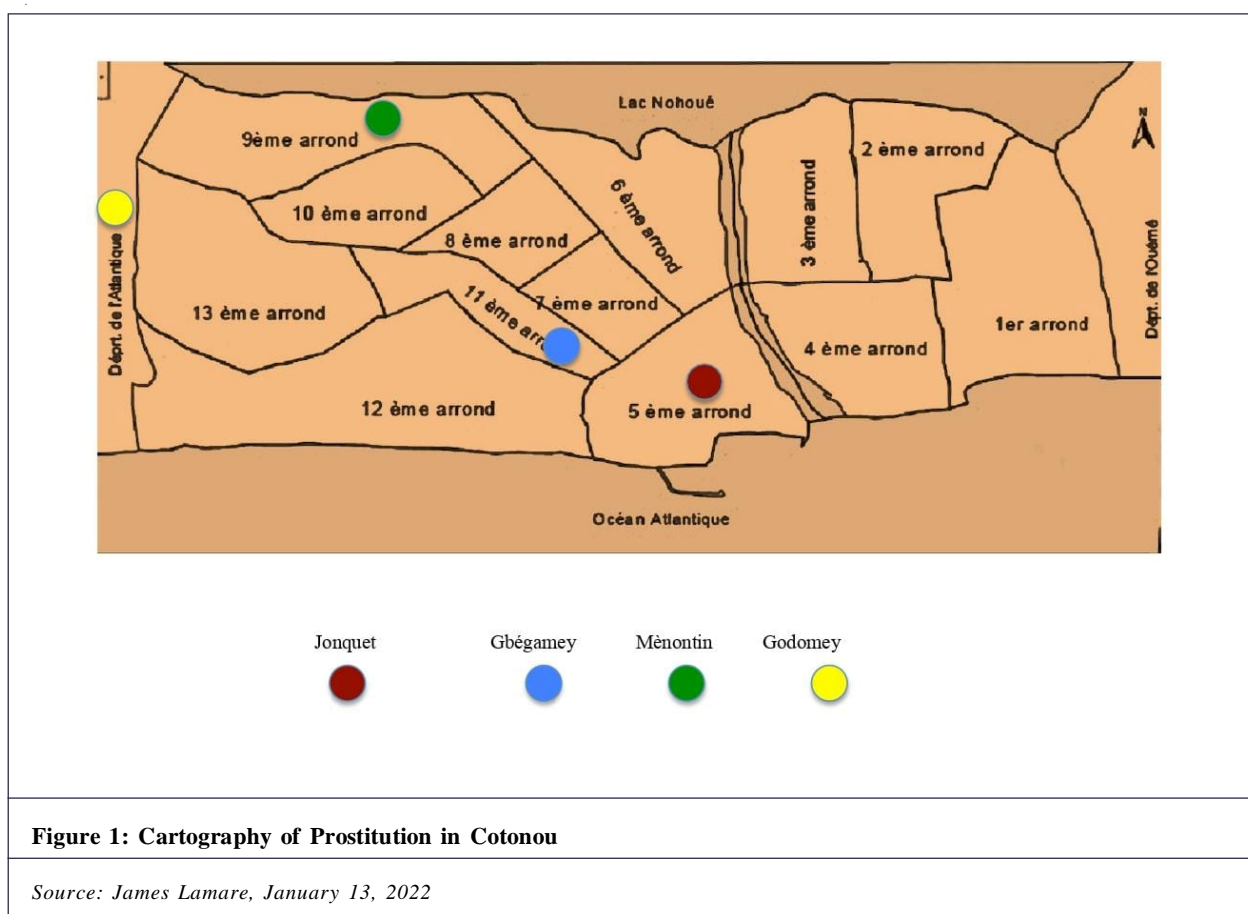
The presence of sex workers around hostels or in bars is very profitable for their owners. Many men, “voyeurists” prefer to consume in prostitute bars.

In Godomey, many prostitutes gather not far from the CEG-Godomey, along the road leading to the interchange, from 6 p.m. There are others who officiate in bars. The pass costs about 2000 FCFA. It is cheaper during the day because of the scarcity of customers.

Innkeepers and pimps are the drivers of prostitution in Cotonou. They establish the physical space and the psychological conditions favorable to the sustainability of the phenomenon. It is important to note that a form of indefinite prostitution which is done by telematic means, is nowadays spreading throughout the territory of the Republic of Benin.

Beyond its incessant intensification, prostitution is not socially accepted in Benin. It is just tolerated. Prostitutes are stigmatized and considered, in the collective imagination, as beings bewitched by demonic spirits: *alannuwatòlè* (Fon word meaning “daemons”).

In these circumstances, it is interesting to question the historical and socio-psychological motives of their choice of prostitution.



2. The Precolonial and Colonial Situation of Women in Benin: Historical Overview

The study of the precolonial and colonial situation of women in Benin makes it possible to determine the causes of their representational decline and the historical motives of the current proliferation of prostitutes in Cotonou and its surroundings.

2.1. Women in Pre-colonial Benin

The representation of women in Beninese popular traditions has always been imbued with sacredness before French colonization. In pre-colonial black Africa, the woman was considered as the “pillar of socio-family life”, and not as an inferior being condemned to do domestic work for the benefit of men. Never having been reduced to the “state of guardianship¹”, it was the symbol of courage, of honor, the channel by which the *Mawu*² meets the *Gbetò*³. Bugain wrote:

“In traditional African societies, women play a preponderant role in all areas of social life. The importance of this role is, moreover, inherent in the matrilineal or attenuated patrilineal societal structures which overlap in a dialectical duality. In these, African women participate fully in the management of public affairs and in development.” (translated by us: Bugain, 1988)

Among the Fon⁴, she is nominally referred to as *Nyonnũ* (*Nyon-nũ*). Literally, *Nyonnũ* (*Nyon-nũ*) means “good thing”. Therefore, a woman is a sacred being whose vocation is to sow good, to harmonize society, to establish peace and justice in it.

In pre-colonial black African communities, women led families, transmitted the lineage. In Central Africa, particularly in the Congo, it was responsible for the survival of tribes and associated with the transforming force (Bádéjo, 1998). If in the Christian cosmogony, the woman is reduced to the level of a Pandora’s box or a creature responsible for the misfortune of humanity⁵, however, it embodies benevolence in African religious traditions (*nyonn*), notably among the Fon.

Beninese society is “traditionally feminist”. It opposes the logic of commercialization of the female body. She is so attached to the sacralizing vision of women that throughout Benin the prostitute is generally called “beauties of the night.” The Fons, in particular, call it “*agalètò*” (aga= up; lè= the; tò= father). This designation expresses the inalienability and eternity of the greatness of women, beyond moral excesses. “*Agalètò*” (aga= up; lè= them; tò= father) refers to the idea that the woman surpasses the father, retains a certain superiority over the man, outside of all social relegations.

Before the Western onslaught of black Africa, women were not struck by any image deficit in Benin. Political, economic and religious powers (Queen Tasi Hangbè, 1708-1711) were concentrated in her hands. The woman was responsible for guaranteeing peace, security, defending the interests of the community. She was venerable and revered. Its progressive de-venerabilization is the result of a ferocious multi-secular and racialist campaign led by European countries, morally and theologically justified by the Roman Catholic Church: colonization. This was preceded by a movement of continental *de-gbètòrisation* baptized *filhamento*⁶. We are now going to study the social situation of Beninese women during the colonial period.

2.2. Women in Colonial Benin

At the end of the 15th century, the Portuguese settled in Daxomè and built Fort San Jorge del Mina there in 1482, which was confiscated by the Dutch in 1637 (Péhault 1964). From 1670, France began to settle violently in Ouidah to better organize the “slave trade” and destroy the unity and harmony of the neighboring African kingdoms. After the signing of the 1885 agreement with England and Germany, the French invaders began, as early as 1892, under the command of Colonel Dodds, an infernal campaign against the King of Abomey, *Gbè-hin-azin* (1889-1894) who categorically opposed colonization (Péhault 1964) or the “slave trade”. This devastating two-year conflict ended with the fall of the king and the dissolution of the *Minon*.

The group called *Minon*⁷ (Alpern, 1999) was created by King Aho Houegbadja (1645-1685) and structured by Queen Tasi Hangbè (1708-1711). Composed of four thousand women (Péhault, 1964), it was an elite unit of the army of Abomey.

¹ In his pamphlet entitled “Was is Aufklärung? Emmanuel Kant defines the notion of “state of guardianship” as “the inability to use one’s understanding without being directed by another. (Kant, 1991)

² A word from the Fongbe language meaning “the Inaccessible.”

³ Fongbe word meaning “Man.”

⁴ The Fon are the most representative ethnic group in Benin. According to the 2002 census, they constitute 39.20% of the national population. They are followed by the Adja who represent 15, 20%. (cf: *National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis, Department of Demographic Studies*. 2004. Cotonou, 115.)

⁵ The book of Genesis (Gn.), in the Bible, describes the woman as the one through whom evil entered the world, that is, the source of “original sin” (Gn. 3, 1-12).

⁶ According to Lokossah, “this captive production technique was the one initially used by the Portuguese when they inaugurated the slave trade in Africa in 1441: (...) they would attack the local populations by surprise, capture them and bring them back to Portugal (Logossah, 2012).

⁷ In fongbé, the word *Minon* means “our mothers.”

On October 26, 1892, most of these valiant women who fought for freedom and justice were brutally murdered in a bloody war by slave-holding France.

The social degradation of the image of women in Benin, initiated with the murderous invasions of the 15th century, would have reached its climax with this massacre of October 26, 1892 perpetrated by expansionist France on women embodying Aboman feminism.

“The market society, which appeared in Africa following colonization, exacerbated the destructa luring of previous social and sexual relations. African men and women see themselves incorporated into the international division of labor as suppliers of raw materials and also as consumers. Women are particularly solicited and invited to drink. Colonial and then neo-colonial schools will socialize boys and girls asymmetrically, predisposing each and everyone to conformity to dominant social and sexual roles.” (trad: [Bugain, 1988](#))

French colonization dispossessed the Beninese woman of her everything. It snatched from it its freedom, its dignity, its mythism, its sacredness and its financial autonomy attested for millennia to expose it to a certain “prostitutionalization”. Moreover, in the 18th and 19th centuries, while women in Africa occupied the prestigious functions of queens, bridges between their offspring and spiritual traditions, defenders of community dignity, in Europe they were still invisible. In 1869, the British economist and utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill described the social situation of European women thus:

“Not long ago in Europe a father had the power to dispose of his daughter, to marry her off at his own will, regardless of her feelings. The Church remained faithful enough to a superior morality to require a formal yes from the woman at the time of marriage; but that in no way proved that the consent was not forced; it was quite impossible for a young girl to refuse obedience if the father persisted in demanding it, unless she obtained the protection of religion by a firm resolution to take monastic vows. Once married, the man once (before Christianity) had the power of life and death over his wife. She could not invoke the law against him; he was his only judge, his only law. For a long time he was able to repudiate her, while she did not have the same right against him. In the old laws of England, the husband is called the lord of his wife, he was literally considered her sovereign, so that the murder of a man by his wife was called treason (low treason for the distinguish from high treason) and was avenged more cruelly than the crime of high treason, since the penalty was to be burned alive.” ([Mill, 2002 \(1869\)](#)) (our English translation)

In Europe, the reversal of maternal rights, according to the philosopher Engels, was the great historical defeat of the female sex: “Even at home, it was the man who took the helm; woman was degraded, enslaved, she became a slave to the pleasure of man and a simple instrument of reproduction.” ([Engels, 1983](#)) (our English translation)

The European colonists had propagated and imposed in the African kingdoms and the colonized territories this degrading vision of the woman described by Mill and making of her a submissive being, alienated and deprived of the freedom of choice, of her capacity for action. In the West Indies and the United States, throughout the colonial period, the social conditions of black women were indeed very precarious. “(...) Their body did not belong to them. Any master could abuse it. (...) On the plantations of Louisiana, the “tisanière” was a young slave in charge not only of bringing the “tisane” (night refreshment) but also of enhancing the rest of the guest.” ([Tardo-Dino, 1985](#)) (our English translation)

The European misophobia denounced by Mill, practiced in the French, Portuguese and Spanish colonies of America, was transplanted to Africa. One of the roles of colonization is also to strip the African woman of her privileges and subject her to a machisto-capitalist system. If Gbagbo, in his reflection on the influence of urban reality on Ivorian women converted into prostitutes, told us that Ivorian prostitution “seems therefore to arise from the emergence of new values, identities or social tendencies which now occupy center stage” ([Gbagbo, 2009](#)), we remain convinced that prostitution in Cotonou is nonetheless a result of violent Western acculturation.

Colonial vulnerability laid the foundations for the inferiorization of Beninese women. “From a political and legal point of view, the inequality of the sexes is confirmed by canon law; the colonial state reinforces the male head of the family and no longer spokesperson for the clan. This legitimizes the patriarch in his desire to impose himself on his wife and offspring; the latter therefore becomes the interlocutor and the accredited representative of power” ([Bugain, 1988](#)).

Because of colonization, the African woman who was once warrior (the case of the Minon mentioned above), queen (the case of Queen Tasi Hanbè), owner, president of family structures, is transformed, under the rule of a master French, in a sexual toy in charge of carrying out the domestic works, to work without remuneration nor respite on behalf of the colonial system.

In the West Indies, as in all the other territories enslaved by France, a classification has been established to separate women: garden women, women in large huts... Tardo-Dino has indeed revealed:

“The women of the garden were relatively favored. Very rarely, with recruitment helping, a commander in exchange for a little extra food, an hour’s rest or the cancellation of a punishment knocked them into pieces of cane. The prettier, more refined slaves of the big hut were, owing to promiscuity, the prey of their master. Often daughters of servants, they were initiated very early, sometimes brutally, by their master or his son (former playmate) or by some passing guest whom one wanted to honor.” (trad: [Tardo-Dino, 1985](#))

Thus, slavery and colonialism have largely impacted the status of women and played a major role in their prostitution.

“The colonizers, whether military, civil administrators or missionaries, approached Africa not only with the prejudices attached to this continent but also with the stereotypes categorizing the sexes in Western society. The colonial administrators contented themselves with projecting metropolitan realities or casting a condescending gaze on African women, whose fate would a priori be less enviable than that of their European counterparts. Western and male prejudices therefore combined to attribute to colonized women an inferior legal status from the outset.”([Goerg, 1997](#)).

3. The Socio-familial Minorization of the Postcolonial Beninese Woman and its Effects

The reduction of the post-colonial Beninese woman to the state of guardianship has great individual and social consequences which will be discussed above: desertion, self-exclusion, exclusion, resistance, prostitution...

3.1. Socio-family Minoritization and its Implications

The colonial desacralization of Beninese women has created and increased the possibilities of their minorization. The sexist and macho colonial morality, after the proclamation of the Independence of Benin on August 1, 1960, survived socially and eclipsed the pre-colonial female predominance. The post-colonial Beninese woman would have had to face a real situation of systematized actionable incapacity, a form of chronic “state of guardianship” socially normalized but legally condemned.

In Cotonou, the guardianship of women is not only an instrument of action control, but also a loyalty tool. In Benin, once highly respected women have lost their dominant social role since the invasion of French settlers in the 18th century. They are victims of all kinds of physical attacks, psychological torture and spoliation.

The minoritizing attitude of men towards women is also contrary to the texts of the laws in force in the country. Many government measures have been officially taken recently to be able to stem violence against women ([DGFAS, 2019](#)).

The *minoritization* of Beninese women has created a culture of social mistrust towards them, leading to a massive masculinization of the national political-administrative sphere. From 2003 to 2018, the arithmetic average of women appointed to the Constitutional Court is 28.57%, while that of women elected to the National Assembly from 2003 to 2016 is 8.83% (Tables 1 and 2). A government appointment is subject to categorical or individual judgment, while an election to public office depends on the popular confidence expressed in the vote. In view of the comparative example above, we believe that the gap between the percentage of women appointed to the Constitutional Court and that of women parliamentarians testifies to a social fear of institutional feminization.

The social minority of women has had an impact on their family and individual situation. In Benin, being a minority means not having the trust of the other, not trusting yourself. Minorization, in some cases, means the deprivation of any

Table 1: Distribution of Women and Men in State Institutions

National Assembly (Mandate)	Man	Woman	Total	% Woman
2003 – 2007	77	6	83	<u>7.23</u>
2007 – 2011	74	9	83	<u>10.84</u>
2011 – 2016	76	7	83	<u>8.43</u>

Source: *Status of Women in Benin in 2013, UNDP, p. 2.*

Table 2: Distribution of Women and Men in State Institutions				
Constitutional Court (Mandate)	Man	Woman	Total	% Woman
2003-2008	5	2	7	28.57
2008-2013	5	2	7	28.57
2013-2018	5	2	7	28.57

Source: Status of Women in Benin in 2013, UNDP, p. 2.

right to work or higher education. The efforts made by some women to achieve academic excellence are not always appreciated by their male partners if we refer to some respondents.

“Here, you know, even if you move mountains there, there are men who don’t care. They don’t like their wives to evolve too much in terms of the intellectual side. Otherwise, trained women rarely accept the oppression of their men. Me you see in this bar, I have a degree in literature. I’m not just anyone, and that’s why I didn’t accept to swallow anything when I was at home.”(translation)

In Benin, the intellectual rise of some women makes their partners or spouses feel insecure. In the 19th century, a similar observation of the terrifying nature of educated women was noted by Stuart Mill in Europe: “Women who read, and even more so women who write, are, in the current state, a contradiction and a element of disturbance: it was wrong to teach women anything other than to fulfill their role of odalisque or servant well.” (trad: Mill, 2002 (1869))

The objective of the man who minorizes the woman is not, according to some interviewees, only the lowering. Behind the latter would hide a desire for impoverishment. The repression of female material independence produces a dependency translated into loyalty, if we refer to the declaration of respondent BBB, in fon-gbe:

“Tcho bɔ nā dʒɛ azɔ wadji dɔ fiɔ, oun non wà nti a. Bonu nã hɔ atchonmon alo bisapou yaya ɔ, asoutche wɛ oun non bi ɔ akwɛ. Hwenin nouon homin non hwin tahoun bɔ yin on oun non dii min é do ganho ɔ. Eye wɛ do noubi, bo non blo noubi loɔ min do nan gou hodé. Aman sin do afɔgbé noun sounou dé do adɔ twé hin (...).⁸”

Socio-familial minorization implies, roughly speaking, the infantilization of women by their spouses or partners, the repression of their independence and their impoverishment so that they become controllable and faithful, social indifference. However, although socially uncontested, the socio-familial minorization of women in Benin carries in itself the seeds of its contestation because of its extreme oppression.

3.2. Anti-minorization Resistance to Prostitution

The minorization of Beninese women is likely to lead to a double marginalization illustrated by the life story of a prostitute, Madame YYY, interviewed in Godomey: a self-marginalization expressed by voluntary desertion and an exogenous marginalization expressed by exclusion of the family universe. This double marginalization is often the expression of the refusal of submission and the parasitism of women.

Indeed, Mrs. YYY was born in the South of Benin, in 1990. She was a hairdresser, before embarking on the prostitution path. She has four children, including a fifteen-year-old girl, a student at a college in Cotonou. She speaks good French and describes herself as a victim of male oppression and misunderstanding. An intelligent student, in the year 2005, when she was a minor of fifteen, she was impregnated by a forty-year-old man, in full view of the moral and political authorities of her neighborhood of residence.

These types of cases relating to the register of misappropriation and sexual exploitation of minors are very frequent in Benin. According to a study carried out by UNICEF, the phenomenon of the sexual exploitation of minors is very common in Central and West Africa (UNICEF, 2015). Seignon thinks that “ in Africa, the sexual exploitation and prostitution of minors are taking on worrying proportions. The Republic of Benin is not spared. In fact, for several years, minors have been thrown into the streets consciously or unconsciously and engaged in the sex trade, sometimes unaware of the short, medium and long-term consequences that could irreparably compromise their sexual future and

⁸ You know, before I started working here, I didn’t do anything...Even to buy an *atchonmon* or a bottle of *bissap*, I asked my husband for money. Him, he felt proud at that time, but I felt like in a prison. Since it is he who does everything, who gives everything, we owe him everything in return: blind obedience. You can’t fool the man who manages your belly (...).

even their vital future.”(trad: Seignon, 2009)

Totally disinterested in school activities and to avoid ridicule from her classmates and teachers, Mrs. YYY finally moved with her husband to northern Benin. She declares to have attracted enormously, by her silhouette, the wealthy men of the North. She worked in a hairdressing salon when her husband decided to forbid her any professional activity, claiming that her popularity would harm their marital union.

Mrs. YYY is finally forced to stay encased every day. Impoverished, treated like a “doormat”, she told me, by an overbearing and jealous husband, she ended up freaking out and then separated from him. Then she returned to Cotonou with her four children. For five years, she has worked in a bar in Godomey as a prostitute.

Mrs. YYY marginalizes herself to respond to the possible marginalization of her socio-family environment. Her preventive marginalization is both qualitative and quantitative (Rioux, 1998), insofar as she symbolically and distanced herself from a space structuring her life: the home.

Despite the ups and downs of her work as a prostitute, Mrs. YYY declares that she wants to continue to perform it because it would contribute to the restoration of her honor, her dignity plundered and soiled by the impoverishment of a husband encouraging parasitism. This leads us to relativize the abolitionist position according to which “prostitution is not an activity compatible with human dignity (...)” (translated by us: Pryn, 1999)

“I don’t even know why I made this choice among so many others. No girl can deliberately choose to lead this life of pain. It’s not easy huh!!! You have to have the courage of Zangbèto to be able to do this humiliating job. Here, we receive everyone, and we have no choice. The madman, the drunk, the thief, the dirty people, the clean people, the poor, the rich come. We fuck with everyone, once he has money. I do not encourage any girl to prostitute herself. By sleeping with everyone, you can catch all kinds of infections...I had to do this myself so that my daughter would never do this in her life. I sacrifice myself here for my children. Because, after our separation, the father of the children does not send anything for them the month. I have to fend for myself, in Cotonou, to be able to educate and take care of my children. Besides, there is my family who denigrated me, who called me a whore in my absence for having had my first child at fifteen and leaving school. It must be said that I was very brilliant too, always major or second in my class. But my family’s problem is because I was poor. Once I start working here, in the bar, they start respecting me. I often go to see them in the village. I bring them clothes, new loincloths, money. Today they are silent. My children’s dad can’t say anything because they go to school, they eat well... If I had continued to do people’s hair, I wouldn’t be able to do all that. Money is good huh..! But he doesn’t make the girls here happy. We make money, but we feel dirty. This is why, in my room, I purify myself after each intercourse. You also know that I am a Christian, no (...) Look at my rosary, then the tattoo on my left arm, it’s the cross of Christ (...) Finally, I must tell you that I made this choice, not because that I really love her, but out of necessity. This is why today, I do everything to leave this voice and earn my living differently. I’m saving, and then I’m going to leave here so as not to end up crazy what...”(translation)

Defying her husband who oppressed her and her family who vilified her remains the fundamental reason that pushed Mrs. YYY to engage in a “bar”. Prostitution would also be a calculated choice, an escape, a strategy intelligently implemented to construct or reconstruct oneself symbolically, psychologically. It would not essentially be, contrary to Barry’s assertion, “another form of rape” (Barry, 1986).

The state of guardianship or minoritization contributes to the feminization of poverty in Benin (Attanasso, 2004). Its contestation by women leads to their self-exclusion or exclusion from the family sphere. However, this exclusion seems to be transformed into a factor of emergence by some of them. The choice of prostitution emanates from a resistance strategy. And prostitution, even by increasing tenfold the possibilities of social splash and psychological annihilation among women, would open the way to personal reconstruction for them. However, would it allow women to regain the honor sought?

4. The Stakes of Prostitutional Practices and the Price of Honor Sought

More than 90% of the prostitutes surveyed would be looking for an allegedly snatched honor. What is the meaning of this honor in the Beninese cultural context? What are the consequences of pursuing it?

4.1. An Anti-traditional Honor

Among the Fon, an ethnic group from which almost all the prostitutes interviewed come, humanity is a privileged emanation of divinity. Man is defined, not according to his material possessions, but rather by his freedom of expression and his harmony with the uncreated Being. This harmony is realized through the symbiosis of man with the cosmic entities.

In the cosmogony of the Fon of Benin, the Word-Man-God triad attests to the immeasurable attachment of man to the logos and to the divine: Gbe-Gbetò-Gbedotò. The Gbe is the word, the logos, the language. The Gbetò is Man, it is the living being with the logos as the fundamental principle of his humanity. The Gbedotò is the uncreated creator. Gbetò is inseparable from Gbe. He is a being in Gbe. So, humanity is attached to the Gbe. When a man can no longer enjoy freedom of expression in a group, that is to say when he is deprived of his Gbe, he ceases to exist. He also loses his humanity in this deprivation of the Gbe. (translated by us: Lamare, 2020)

Human dignity and reputation among the Fon are subordinated to *Ma^lwu*, to *Gbedotò*. The honored, respected man is not the “Gbetòdo” (the possessing man), but it is the man who clings to the principles of *Gbedotò*. The desire to avenge their honor and give the impression of success leads the Beninese women surveyed to break with their ethnic traditions.

This honor fetishized by the *agalètòlè* here supposes the freedom to be and to have. It is seen from a strictly “human” angle and evacuates any culturo-divine dimension. Their vision of honor would be a form of reversal of the sense of humanity in the *Weltanschauung* of the Fon. The decision to prostitute themselves, however, creates a powerful, unconditionally uncompromising enemy: society. How then do they deal with the pressures of sex work and those of society?

4.2. Bad Weather in Refreshment Bars and Sidewalks

The need to reclaim a “sequestered honor” leads women to resort to the prostitution strategy. This would however be a “complicated and complicating” technique, according to the revelations of Mrs. K, a worker based in Mènontin and offering her services in the open. Even in the rainy seasons, she is not absent. Despite the condescension of local residents and the violence of some chipped customers, she does not back down. Her life and that of her children would be on the sidewalks. In April 2018, she was even stabbed by a client dissatisfied with her services and who wanted a refund at all costs. This event happened in Jonquet, a disreputable district of the capital of Cotonou. Following this tragedy, she settled in Mènontin.

The behavior of customers, according to several respondents, linked to their age or their material situation. Certainly, some honor sex workers; nevertheless, others insult them by calling them filthy whores. According to Jobin, “(...) the appellations used to designate women who engage in prostitution such as prostitute, whore, whore (...) consist of labels exclusive to the sexual behavior of women” (Jobin, 2001). Depending on whether he is old or young, poor or well-to-do, the client seems to be destined to be “courteous” or “disorganized”. (translation)

“(...) There are good customers, they come mainly in the evening, around 7 p.m. until 10 p.m. It’s mostly old people, or those who have a good job in life, but who don’t have a wife or who have problems at home. They buy us drinks and give us gifts. But, there are also young thugs who come at night and who are often very vulgar. They smoke, make noise. This is why the boss put several security guards in the bar (...). Frankly, it is a very hard job.” (translation)

The immeasurable attachment to honor exposes the “beauties of the night” to the experience of a veritable Stations of the Cross which does not, however, water down their unbridled desire to rebalance local relations between women and men, and their desire to rehumanize by regaining freedom of expression and action.

Beyond the complications caused by the fury of certain customers and the humiliations of those around them, many bar workers also face the outrageous rigor of the bosses. The excessive severity of the latter weakens them further. It becomes difficult for them to decline the riskiest proposals of those who frequent the “refreshment bars” for fear of becoming insolvent or of being deregistered. Among these propositions, let us quote the sexual relations without condom, the practices *scatophiles* and *urophiles*.

“It is because of the boss that we are suffering here. Here, we pay 5000 francs per day for the room. Even if you are sick, even if your father is dead, you have come and gone, you will pay. Not a day ago we will say: there is no money. You have to pay without forcing. If you came, you found 5000, you have to give him the 5000 and go home. He loves money too much and is ruthless... What’s good about him is the little advice he gives girls about using condoms. Otherwise, after that, it’s zero (...). He does not understand us. Of our miseries, our sufferings and our humiliations he does not care. The last time, I came to work without eating, because I had no money. I had paid the previous day my rent and the schooling of my children. As I had found only three customers at 1500 francs for the night, therefore, I did not have the 5000 to be able to pay at the start. The boss insulted me, while

I always pay on time. Because of the arrogance of the boss, we are forced to do what we should not do. You imagine, a client comes, he offers you 10,000 francs for a pass that generally costs less than 2,000. He asks for sex without a condom, how do you do it? You do not have a choice (...). And above all, if you haven't had a client that day, you just have to take your money and fuck with him. It has happened to me several times here (...). But I don't know if I got AIDS because I haven't had a test for 10 years. And the boss doesn't ask for that either. He just tells us to protect ourselves, and brings us boxes full of condoms every Sunday." (translation)

In Cotonou, the prostitute recruited in the bar would have neither individual nor social power. This would be due to the fact that she is unable to define her relationship with the client, then she is socially isolated. There is no group of sex workers in Cotonou. Isolation exacerbates the vulnerability of the prostitute vis-à-vis the client and the boss.

Pimps or bosses behave ambivalently. They pretend to protect prostitutes by giving them advice, even as they parasitize them. They not only exploit the girls they hire, they also prevent them from externalizing their pain or risk being fired or hunted down. Silence is the prostitute's compass. Any relatively long communication between a client and a sex worker within the confines of the "bar" is monitored. Life in the bar involves drowning in subordination to bosses versed in the art of gagging and manipulation:

"(...) He forbids us to talk about the functioning of the house to strangers. He's very strict on that, otherwise we'll kick you out! Here, either you accept or you leave. That's why I'm taking you into my room so I can talk well." (translation)

More than 90% of the prostitutes questioned would have regretted taking the prostitution route because of the difficulties encountered in the field. This regret linked to the fact that they have not been able to obtain the hoped-for satisfaction, rocks some of them into incontinent hysteria. The harsh working conditions shattered their expectations by making them frustrated. Their frustration is relative, insofar as it supposes "a state of tension, an expected and refused satisfaction, generating a potential for discontent and violence." (translated by us: definition formulated by Ted Gurr, quoted by Neveu, 2005)

"When you're not in it yet, you think it's going to make easy money and lots of money. But once you get home, you understand that it's the hardest work (...). I don't even need to explain to you then what the girls endure who are on the side of the track, not far from there, going towards the Godomey interchange (...). I had worked there for two days, before finding a place in the bar here. Over there, there is no joy, huh (...). We really start work around 11 p.m. You work under the humidity of the night. Customers fuck you, and refuse to pay. There are many more Nigerian girls there. Some pay guys to ensure their safety (...). Anyway, I know Mwu will help me get out of here. I pray for this everyday." (translation)

Life's bad weather and disappointments do not cause *agalètòlè* to lose their faith in *Ma^Lwu* (God). They remain convinced that they are placed under his protection and are only waiting for his intervention to get a better job. The moral suffering endured by women is more acute than the physical suffering they experience during sex with "malicious" clients. Not only do prostitutes in Cotonou live in eternal embarrassment to reveal themselves to others, they also lose possession of their bodies.

"With clients, it is not always easy. What you yourself don't want to do, that's what they force you to do. We are obliged, because the customer pays. There are customers who come just to hurt me. They insult you, they're drunk, they're not too clean, and you have to deal with them all. It's a bit repulsive. Here, the girls suffer. That's why I don't want to stay here anymore. Then my children grow up. Every day, they ask me what I do for a job, and I have to lie by telling them that I work as a simple waitress in a bar. If I don't leave this place as soon as possible, they may find me one day..." (translation)

The uncontrollability of oneself, in most cases, transforms the prostitute into a true being-for-others who must eternally camouflage or lie in order to survive. According to Sartre, *being-for-others* is a prisoner of the gaze of the other. "It is enough that others look at me for me to be what I am" (trad: Sartre, 1943). The other makes self-contradictory. The encounter of the prostitute with the other, an unstoppable encounter, since to prostitute is to go towards the other, depersonalizes it by othering it.

We have met sex workers who, unable to assume their choice, isolate themselves, hoping to be able to find comfort in their self-marginalization. One of the major effects of prostitution in Cotonou is the self-exclusion of the prostitute. This self-exclusion with desocializing effects shows that the activity of the "beautiful of the night" is not considered by her as a profession, but is preferably part of a circumstantial order. "Professional prostitution is sometimes described as a lifestyle choice, and professionals as independent, self-employed. They have the particularity here of being owners,

independent, and therefore of being their own boss...or at least relatively free from the constraint of a third party” (trad: Mayer, 2011).

In Benin, while the prostitute sees herself as an anti-macho activist, she is socially considered a “non-criminal deviant” (Jobin, 2001) because of her courage to expose herself, against the common hypocrisy, on the sidewalks, in vons or refreshments for a sexual purpose. Prostitution is seen, from a social point of view, as a path of guilt where the client is cleared and the prostitute condemned. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, reports Coderre and Parent, described the situation of clients as follows: “they seek the services of prostitutes but it is on the latter that moral judgment falls, it is they who are designated as debauched, depraved, while defending the respectability of clients (Coderre Parent, 2001).

Under these asymmetrical conditions, the prostitute would have had to exclude herself in order to be able to survive. His self-exclusion would result from a certain paralyzing appropriation of a negative social self-image. But does this self-exclusion suppose an implicit acceptance by the night beauty of social labeling?

4.3. Self-segregation as a Refusal of Social Labeling

In Cotonou, in order to be able to face social labelling, prostitutes resort to self-help. In other words, they stand out from conformist society in order to be able to invent respect, reinvent dignity. The life of the workers surveyed begins in the bar and ends in the bar, even that of the girls who live outside the bar. “The prostituted woman makes deviance from prostitution a way of life and organizes her identity from her so-called deviant behavior”(Jobin, 2001).

The self-segregation observed among prostitutes results from a certain *homophilia of values* (Kling, 1967) which supposes, according to the American sociologist Robert Merton (1954), an establishment of links between individuals or groups based on moral, physical, cultural resemblance... Self-segregation is a kind of technique of exclusive solidarity used to neutralize exclusion.

Some girls, especially Nigerians, only leave the physical space of the “bar” when they want to carry out an important transaction: shopping, transferring money to their country of origin. Withdrawal exposes prostitutes to depression. In other words, self-segregation has deleterious effects on the health of sex workers and remains incapable of alleviating their disappointment.

4.4. Results

The persistence of a colonial mentality linked to the devaluation of black women plays a major role in the rise of prostitution in Cotonou and its surroundings. In Benin, colonialophilia remains a real obstacle to the application of laws on the emancipation of women (Law of 2011-26 of January 9, 2012).

Admittedly, minoritization, through its impoverishing effects, exposes Beninese women to prostitution; however, field experience has shown us that prostitution is not always the result of material poverty. It can also be the daughter of a representational insignificance. The Beninese women’s choice to prostitute themselves is the result of the fed up, the consequence of an allergy to irresponsibility and dishonor.

The amplification of the prostitution phenomenon in Benin reflects the accelerated dislocation of families, insofar as most of our respondents declared that they had begun to prostitute after a legal separation or a divorce. They seek legitimate honor in the illegitimate paths of sex work. Deceived, however, by pimps, labeled by the socio-family world that they aspired to satisfy or defy, the “beauties of the night” finally find themselves immersed in total instability.

Despite its programmed repression and desacralization, women still remain the channel for transmitting educational and community values in black Africa. What is above all the strength of the African women is their ability to resist, despite her socio-political minority, against all situations likely to weaken her autonomy or her honor. Falade wrote to this effect that African women “are in all the fights for access to the essential needs of the populations. Even if at the cost of multiple efforts, some have managed to acquire their “autonomy”, the vast majority vegetate in socio-economic precariousness which constitutes a barrier.” (trad: Falade, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, in Benin’s collective imagination, prostitution is a post-colonial practice that opposes traditional values and devalues, through its commodification, the female body “socially constituted as a sacred object” (Bourdieu, 1994).

In the light of the multi-monthly ethnographic surveys that we have carried out in Cotonou and its surroundings, this activity is not just a simple means of material acquisition. Beyond the possibility of material gain it offers, there would be an opportunity for psychological or representational reconstruction.

If almost all Beninese women interviewed during our fieldwork are looking for some kind of “trampled honor” (tafo jusudji), prostitutes from Nigeria are rather strictly venalistic. Prostitutional venalism would be considered by the American socio-psychologist Gail Pheterson as “the sacrilege par excellence” (Pheterson, 1993).

For today’s Cotonou’s prostitute, honor is a symbolic wealth that takes precedence over money. He is the finality of his prostitutional choice. It is the motive for the establishment of his mechanisms for circumventing “family” repression: flight from the marital home, divorce, commodification of his body.

The passion for honor is a passion for being socially considered, accepted, reintegrated into the socio-family fabric. This X-ray confirms the initial hypothesis that Cotonou prostitution is linked to the search for a better life based on honor.

Thus, the “fuckdromisation” of some alleys and bars in Cotonou and its surroundings is the result of the rejection of an implacable masculine dominationism forged by the fear of the freedom of others and rooted in a European-colonial vision of female. Despite the bad weather on the sidewalks and bars, the *agalètòlè* find it difficult to turn around due to the dissatisfaction of their expectations. “Once prostitution is seen as part of the solution for women, it becomes difficult for them to see other parts of the solution for several reasons, including the integration of the image and life of a prostitute.” (trad: Jobin, 2001) Thus, the impacts of prostitution on Beninese prostitutes in Cotonou remain mixed.

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