It is forty years since my first book, *West African Religion*, was published in 1949, though I had arrived at Porto Novo in Dahomey sixteen years earlier. The editor has asked me to sketch something of the background to the book, which I shall try to do without too much use of the personal pronoun.

In those mid-colonial days communications between West African territories under British and French rule were not easy, and there were suspicions of political manoeuvres on both sides. France and Britain had carved out colonies like slices in a cake, often taking rivers as frontiers though they were natural means of access. British visitors to Dahomey often took Elder Dempster passenger ships to Lagos and then there was the problem of getting through to Porto Novo on the French side. There were no railways along the inter-colonial coastline, but only northwards into the interior of each country. There were no lateral roads, and the construction of international highways had to await the coming of the allied armies after the landings in north and west Africa during the Second World War. Air services were almost unheard of. There were a few paths through forest and swamp, but they were not suitable for motor traffic. The principal route was by launch (petrolette) along the creeks or lagoons.

This launch service between the British and French colonies was run by Germans, the Woermann Line of Hamburg. In their Lagos office in 1933 there was already a picture of Adolf Hitler on the wall, either from conviction or prudence, since he had just come to power in Germany. The launch went from Lagos to Porto Novo with a swastika flag hanging limply from the stern, fortunately not with a Nazi but a Nigerian captain.

After passing Badagry, then a small market and staging post, the launch arrived at the frontier, often late in the evening and it would have to anchor in mid-stream and expose its passengers to the bites
of countless mosquitoes. The frontier was marked by two hulks, dilapidated British and French house boats, moored a hundred yards or so from each other and looking desolate. Only during daylight hours were launches and canoes allowed to pass, officially, with examinations of passports and cargoes, and eventually permission was given to proceed along the lagoon to Porto Novo, administrative capital of Dahomey.

The French had conquered Dahomey in 1894 and enlarged its boundaries to include much territory that had not belonged to the ancient kingdom of that name. Da-homé, 'the belly of Dan', the python, had flourished for hundreds of years with its capital inland at Abomey. Archibald Dalzel in *The History of Dahomy* (1793) put the foundation of Abomey in 1625, with a good deal of legend and conjecture. Certainly for hundreds of years this inland kingdom had flourished, eventually with a coastal outlet at Ouidah (Whydah). The French gave the name Dahomey to land under their rule which stretched as far north as the river Niger, though it is curious that they retained the English spelling with 'y' ending. After political independence in 1960 the Republic of Dahomey followed from the French colony, but a change of name was made in 1975 when it became the People's Republic of Benin. Regional rivalries between Abomey and the seaport of Cotonou were responsible for this abandonment of the name Dahomey, but it seems a pity that a title was taken from the Gulf of Benin whereas the quite different city and ancient kingdom of Benin were hundreds of miles away to the east in Nigeria.

It was anomalous that Porto Novo should have been chosen by France as capital of their colony called Dahomey, since this town had often been in conflict with Abomey and its origins were different. Although probably related to the peoples of Abomey and Allada, Porto Novo also had links with the Yoruba of Badagry and Ketu and indirectly with Oyo. The name Porto Novo came from the Portuguese for 'new port' and it had once been a slaving centre, on or nearer the sea coast, though it was silted up and separated from the sea by wide sand banks. The town is said to have been founded about 1600, the Allada immigrants from the west calling it Hogbonu, and the Yorubas from the east naming it Ajashe (see A. Akinđélé and C. Aguessy, *Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire de l'ancien royaume de Porto Novo*, 1953).