HUMAN SACRIFICE IN PRE-COLONIAL WEST AFRICA

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Until quite recently, the subject of human sacrifice formed a central element in European images of black African societies.[1] The earliest Europeans to visit West Africa, from the fifteenth century onwards, do not appear to have reacted very violently to the killing of human victims considered merely as a spectacle, no doubt because what they saw in West Africa was hardly more horrific than the public executions and tortures commonly practised in their own societies,[2] but since their perceptions of their own identity were strongly bound up with the Christian religion they often stressed the practice of human sacrifice (and more generally, of animal sacrifice) as being one of the more obvious religious differences between Africans and themselves.[3] With the secularization of European values and the humanitarianization of European mores from the seventeenth century onwards, human sacrifice came to be objected to more on moral than on religious grounds: it still served to define the differences between European and African societies, but these differences were seen as cultural rather than religious, and Africans were now defined as savages rather than as pagans. This emphasis on human sacrifice as an index of African barbarity seems already evident in the great geographical survey of Africa by the Dutch scholar Dapper, published in 1668, which dwells

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1. Cf. V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European attitudes to the outside world in the Imperial Age* (revised edn, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 214–5. The issue of human sacrifice is, however, surprisingly neglected in the classic study of Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British ideas & action 1780–1850* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1964).

2. Even in the nineteenth century, some of the more sensitive European observers could see parallels between West African human sacrifices and European customs. Richard Burton, visiting Dahomey in the 1860s, drew attention to public executions (which continued in Britain until 1868), observing that 'A Dahoman visiting England but a few years ago would have witnessed customs almost quite as curious as those which raise our bile now': Sir Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (ed. C. W. Newbury, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 233. Another visitor to Dahomey in the 1870s asked, equally pertinently, 'How long is it since human crania were to be seen on Temple Bar': J. A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is* (Chapman & Hall, 1874), p. 193.

3. For an especially explicit intance, see the account of human and animal sacrifices in Benin in 1603, in 'Andreas Josua Ulsheimer's Voyage of 1603–4', in Adam Jones (ed.), *German Sources for West African History 1599–1669* (Fritz Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 24.

frequently and sometimes in lurid detail on the practice of human sacrifice in several West African societies.[4]

This emphasis on human sacrifice was further encouraged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the exploitation of the issue for polemical purposes, to justify first the Atlantic slave trade and later the European conquest of Africa. The connection between human sacrifice and the defence of the morality of the slave trade was already being made in the 1730s, when an English apologist argued that if slaves were not exported from Africa, they would merely be sacrificed: 'It is evident that abundance of Captives, taken in War, would be inhumanly destroyed, was there not an Opportunity of disposing of them to the Europeans. So that at least many Lives are saved, and great Numbers of useful Persons kept in being'.[5] This claim, which of course provided a very convenient humanitarian argument in favour of the slave trade to set against the more obvious humanitarian arguments against it, subsequently became a commonplace of anti-abolitionist polemic.[6] It achieved its most sophisticated elaboration in the history of Dahomey by the Scotsman Archibald Dalzel, published in 1793, with its continual stress on Dahomey's inherent militarism and practice of human sacrifice on an extravagant scale.[7] According to Dalzel, Dahomey was engaged in continuous wars which necessarily produced a supply of war captives, who traditionally had simply been put to death: the slave trade gave the kings of Dahomey the option of selling rather than killing their captives, and so saved life.[8] Even after the abolition of the overseas slave trade in the early nineteenth century, similar arguments were used to defend toleration of the continuation of slave-dealing within Africa.[9] At the end of the nineteenth century, the European colonial conquest was likewise often justified on the grounds that it put an end to the practice of human sacrifice. Detailed studies of the background to the French expedition against Dahomey in 1892 and the

4. Olfert Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1668).

5. William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea & the Slave Trade* (1734, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1971), p. 160; cf. also p. 158.

6. See e.g. Malachy Postlethwayt, *The National & Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered* (1746, reprinted in vol. II of Malachy Postlethwayt, *Selected Works*, Gregg International Publishers, Farnborough, 1968), pp. 4–5; Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy, an inland country of Guiney* (1789, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1968), p. 160.

7. Archibald Dalzel, *A History of Dahomy, an inland kingdom of Africa* (1793, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1967). For the background and polemical purpose if this work, cf. I. A. Akinjogbin, 'Archibald Dalzel: slave trader & historian of Dahomey', *J. of African History*, 7 (1966), pp. 67–78; Loren K. Waldman, 'An unnoticed aspect of Archibald Dalzel's *The History of Dahomey* [sic]', *J. of African History*, 6 (1965), pp. 185–932.

8. Dalzel ingeniously cites the even greater incidence of human sacrifice in Mexico, to illustrate the extremes to which the matter might be taken in the absence of the allegedly moderating effects of an export trade in slaves: *History of Dahomy*, p. 25.

9. See e.g. Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (1853, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1966), vol. II, p. 246.

British expeditions against Asante in 1896 and Benin in 1897, for example, have demonstrated how grossly exaggerated reports of human sacrifices in these societies were employed to justify the use of military force against them.[10]

Modern historical writing on Africa, in contrast, has seldom made any serious attempt to confront the issues raised by the phenomenon of human sacrifice: Elizabeth Isichei, one of the few to have made the attempt, speaks not unfairly of a 'conspiracy of silence'.[11] The reasons for this reticence are clear enough. Modern historical writing on Africa, developing from the 1950s in parallel with the process of political decolonization, had as one of its prime concerns the demonstration that African societies have a respectable history, which in practice has often meant showing that the character and historical experience of African societies were as similar as possible to those of Europe. This concentration upon the similarities between African and European societies can be seen not only in crudely polemical or popularizing accounts, but also in substantial works of sophisticated scholarship, perhaps the most outstanding example being the monumental study of nineteenth-century Asante by Ivor Wilks, which systematically and explicitly sets out to describe and interpret Asante society in terms of categories transferred from the European experience.[12] Clearly an approach stressing similarities between African and European societies is not easily able to accommodate the phenomenon of human sacrifice, which has not been practised in European societies in recent periods.[13] Wilks makes an interesting attempt to assimilate the practice of human sacrifice in Asante to a recognisable European custom, by arguing that what European visitors to Asante interpreted as sacrifices were really

10. For the case of Dahomey, see esp. Véronique Campion-Vincent, 'L'image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890–1895): les sacrifices humaines', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 7, 25 (1967), pp. 27–58. For Asante, see esp. Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: the structure & evolution of a political order* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 638–9, 642, 645, 718; Thomas J. Lewin, *Asante before the British: the Prempean years, 1875–1900* (Regents Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1978), pp. 180–2. For Benin, see esp. Robert Home, *City of Blood Revisited: a new look at the Benin Expedition of 1897* (Rex Collings, 1982), pp. 50, 102–4: P. A. Igbafe, 'The fall of Benin: a reassessment', *J. of African History*, 11 (1970), pp. 385–400.

11. Elizabeth Isichei, 'The quest for social reform in the context of traditional religion: a neglected theme of West African History', *African Affairs*, 77, 309 (1978), p. 469. An even more robust condemnation of the general neglect of unsavoury features of pre-colonial African societies is offered by Milan Kalous, *Cannibals & Tongo Players of Sierra Leone* (The Author, Auckland, 1974), who observes (p. ix) that 'In failing to condemn, fully and loudly, some of the "traditional" customs which for an ordinary European or American would simply (even if he can find similarities in the history of his own country) be crimes, this historiography of course must side with the traditional ruling groups'.

12. See esp. Wilks, *Asante*, p. xiv: 'I have been concerned less with those aspects of Asante society which are unique to it, and more with those aspects which it has in common with other complex societies, whether on the African continent or elsewhere'.

13. The reference by Isichei, 'Quest for social reform', p. 470, to 'the human sacrifices of Hiroshima, or Vietnam', seems unhelpful: it may be of some polemical value, in undermining assumptions of European moral superiority, but fudges the crucial historical issue of why this particular form of socially sanctioned murder survived longer in Africa than in Europe.

no more than public executions.[14] More commonly, historians have contented themselves with the valid but limited point that the scale of human sacrifice in African societies was much less than conventionally supposed, or simply ignored the problem altogether.

Very few historical studies of particular West African societies have attempted any detailed study of human sacrifice.[15] In general histories of West Africa, the issue has commonly been neglected, and those few which do treat the question seem to be concerned to explain away the phenomenon of human sacrifice rather than truly to explain it. The principal attempt to deal with the place of human sacrifice in West African history is Basil Davidson's treatment of the issue, originally published in 1961;[16] Elizabeth Isichei's various discussions basically elaborate Davidson's ideas.[17] The general Davidson/Isichei line is that human sacrifice in traditional West African societies was a relatively benign institution, limited in scale, genuinely expressive of religious or filial piety, and often involving victims who went voluntarily to their deaths. The nastiness of human sacrifice in some West African societies in recent times, which they feel unable to deny, they attribute to the corrupting and distorting impact of contact with Europe, above all to the influence of the Atlantic slave trade.[18] The weakness of this approach seems to me that it sees the problem of human sacrifice in essentially moral terms. Human sacrifice is seen as self-evidently wicked, and therefore not congruent with the essentially sympathetic picture of pre-colonial West African societies which these authors seek to project. The problem of human sacrifice is therefore both minimized and externalized, reducing the moral guilt and transferring it as far as possible onto non-African societies. However, the problem of human sacrifice is not, for us today, a moral question but a historical one: we should be seeking, not to condone or condemn, but to explain. This article is an attempt to understand the role played in West African societies

14. Wilks, *Asante*, esp. pp. 592–5.

15. Of considerable value, however, are the studies of Dahomey by Susan Hargreaves, 'An Ideological Interpretation of Dahomean Politics 1818–1864' (M. A. dissertation, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1978), and by Catherine Cocquery Vidrovitch, 'La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: historique & essai d'interprétation', *Annales: E.S.C.*, 19 (1964), pp. 696–716; the studies of Benin by James D. Graham, 'The slave trade, depopulation & human sacrifice in Benin history', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 5/18 (1965), pp. 317–34, and by A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin & the Europeans 1485–1897* (Longman, 1969), esp. pp. 247–50; and of the Igbo by Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People & the Europeans: the genesis of a relationship—to 1906* (Faber, 1973), esp. pp. 47, 56–8, 158–9, and id., *A History of the Igbo People* (MacMillan, 1976), esp. pp. 26, 47.

16. Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: Africa & the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2nd edn 1968, reprinted by Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980), pp. 224–5, 236–8.

17. See, in addition to the works cited above, n. 15, Elizabeth Isichei, *History of West Africa since 1800* (MacMillan, 1977), p. 11; id., 'Quest for social reform', p. 469.

18. Davidson also suggests the unintended influence of misunderstandings of Christian missionary propaganda, with its emphasis on the central symbol of the crucifixion: *Black Mother*, pp. 153–4.

by the practice of human sacrifice, and the reasons for the continuing vitality of the institution down into quite recent times.

Conceptual problems

Any study of human sacrifice has to begin with the recognition that the concept of 'human sacrifice' is far from being unproblematic. The category is in fact one of considerable ambiguity and difficulty. The primary meaning of the term 'sacrifice' is evidently the killing of people (or of animals) as an offering to a deity, as an act of worship or propitiation. The term can perhaps uncontroversially be extended to include the practice, common in pre-colonial West Africa, by which people were killed not so much as offerings to a deity, but in order to carry messages to the deity on behalf of the sacrificing community.[19] And there also seems no great difficulty in including under the rubric of 'human sacrifice' the practice, also common in West Africa, of killing someone as a substitute for a sick person, to preserve him from death, since the rationale of this practice appears to be that the sickness is caused by a deity or spirit, who is placated by the offer of a substitute, and the practice can therefore be seen as a special form of propitiatory sacrifice.[20]

Some difficulty arises, however, when victims were killed for the benefit not of gods, but of deceased humans. In West Africa, funerals often involved the killing of people to serve as attendants of the deceased in the afterlife, a practice of course predicated on the common assumption that life after death would be essentially similar to life on earth. In addition, supplementary killings might take place at regular commemorative ceremonies, to swell the retinues of the dead or to carry messages to them. It is clear, in fact, that most of the 'human sacrifices' offered in pre-colonial West Africa were offered to deceased humans rather than to gods.[21] It might be questioned whether such killings can properly be classified as 'sacrifice', since they do not seem strictly to involve worship or propitiation.[22] But since the dead were commonly believed to exercise an influence over the world of the living, and offerings to them clearly had among their purposes that of securing the beneficence and assistance of the dead for the living, it seems reasonable to retain the term 'human sacrifice'

19. For a discussion of this practice in a particular West African society (the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria), see E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief* (Longman, 1962), p. 119.
20. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–9.
21. Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (2nd edn, Epworth Press, 1961), pp. 71, 126.
22. Cf. id., *African Traditional Religion* (3rd edn, Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 62. For the vexed question of whether ancestors in Africa were 'worshipped', or whether the veneration of ancestors needs to be distinguished from the worship of gods, cf. e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 63–6; Idowu, *Olodumare*, pp. 191–2.

for such killings. 'Human sacrifice' could then be more loosely defined as the killing of people in order to secure the favour of supernatural beings.

A practice which, however, it seems necessary to distinguish from human sacrifice is that of ritual cannibalism, that is, the killing and eating of people for magical or ritual rather than merely for food purposes. In central America, it appears that the bodies of people sacrificed to the gods were normally eaten, and an attempt has been made to interpret the exceptional scale of human sacrifice in Mexico as a system for the distribution of human meat, in societies lacking abundant supplies of animal protein.[23] In Africa, however, although the carcases of animal sacrifices were commonly eaten, it does not appear that it was normal for the bodies of human victims to be eaten, and cannibalism and human sacrifice have to be regarded as distinct phenomena.[24] Forms of ritual cannibalism existed in precolonial West Africa, but the practice was much less common than that of human sacrifice. One form was the eating of the bodies of enemies killed in war (or parts of their bodies, especially the hearts), in the belief that this enhanced the eater's own military prowess: this form of cannibalism was especially associated with the Ijo of the Niger Delta area.[25] In some other cases, ritual cannibalism was practised by so-called 'leopard societies', secret societies whose members simulated the activities of leopards and met in secret in the forest to kill and eat human victims: such societies were especially strong, in West Africa, in the area of Upper Guinea, that is modern Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast.[26] These forms of cannibalism are clearly conceptually distinct from human sacrifice, inasmuch as their rationale was that the participants supposedly benefited directly, by an access of magical power, from the meal, rather than that the killing and eating of the victim secured the favour of any deity or ancestor. They should be classified as a particular case of the widespread African belief in 'medicines', that is material substances containing innate magical power,[27] rather than as having anything to do with worship or sacrifice.

Also clearly distinct from human sacrifice, though also very common in West Africa, is the execution of witches, or more accurately the death of witches through trial by ordeal, commonly administered in the form of

23. Marvin Harris, *Cannibals & Kings: the origins of cultures* (Collins, 1978), pp. 99–125.
24. Cf. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 88.
25. The eating of slain enemies by the Ijo was already noted in the seventeenth century: Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 509. For a later account making explicit the rationale of this practice, cf. T. J. Hutchinson, *Ten Years' Wanderings among the Ethiopians* (1861, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 60–2.
26. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, pp. 134–5; cf. also Kalous, *Cannibals, passim*. Canibalism was already noted on the 'Grain Coast' (i.e. modern Liberia) in the seventeenth century: Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 429.
27. For the concept of 'medicine', cf. e.g. Monica Wilson, *Religion & the Transformation of Society: a study in social change in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 34–5.

poison. This practice is easily confounded with human sacrifice, since it tended to occur on a large scale in the context of funerals, when there were suspicions that the deceased had been killed by witchcraft. But since it involves punishment for a supposed offence, rather than killing for a religious or ritual purpose, it is evidently conceptually distinct from human sacrifice. It is also likely to affect a different range of victims, and variations in its incidence may have to be explained by other factors than those affecting human sacrifice.[28]

A further conceptual difficulty is that the term 'human sacrifice' naturally connotes the idea of *killing,* with the implication that the victim was passive, even if not actively uncooperative. But often, especially in the case of the deaths of wives and attendants of the deceased at funerals, we are dealing rather with *voluntary* suicides. In some cases, indeed, it is reported that people actively disputed for the honour of accompanying a deceased king into the afterlife.[29] This is still best classified as 'human sacrifice', since such voluntary suicides in effect merely involved the internalization of the expectations of society, and were voluntary only in a formal sense. Often, indeed, those expected to commit suicide on the death of a king were the occupants of specified offices, rather than strictly volunteers.[30] In any case, given the sanction of public disapproval, it is in practice very difficult to distinguish between reluctant and cooperative victims.

A final difficulty is that the people killed as human sacrifices were often selected for this role for non-religious reasons. Specifically, many of the people sacrificed in West Africa were criminals, who had been sentenced to death but preserved to be killed at the major religious festivals. This point has been highlighted in the case of Asante by Ivor Wilks, who, as noted earlier, writes consistently of 'public executions' rather than of 'human sacrifices', arguing that the latter term represents a misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation by unsympathetic European observers.[31] A similar point could be made with regard to some other West African kingdoms in which condemned criminals formed the dominant or at least a major element among the human victims offered as sacrifices, such as Benin and Dahomey. Wilks was, in fact, anticipated by

28. For a study of the dynamics of witchcraft trials in a particular West African society (which, however, perhaps understresses the different roles played by witchcraft ordeals and human sacrifice), cf. A. J. H. Latham, 'Witchcraft accusations & economic tension in pre-colonial Old Calabar', *J. of African History,* **13** (1972), pp. 249–60.

29. For example, in Benin: Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge,* p. 502.

30. For examples in Asante and the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, see T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (1819, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 288–91; Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (1921, reprinted by Church Missionary Society, Lagos, 1966), pp. 55–6.

31. Wilks, *Asante,* pp. 592–5.

Richard Burton, visiting Dahomey in the 1860s, who observed that what were commonly taken as human sacrifices 'are, in fact, the yearly execution, as if all the murderers in Britain were kept for hanging on a certain day in London'.[32] This interpretation, however, is not altogether satisfactory. First, it is clear that the killing of criminals at the major public ceremonies had religious as well as purely religious purposes. In the case of Asante, Wilks acknowledges that executed criminals were believed to form a 'servile class' in the afterlife,[33] and in Benin and Dahomey sacrificial victims, even if criminals, were clearly regarded as offerings or messengers to gods or deceased kings. Moreover, it is quite clear that not all those sacrificed were in fact criminals. In Benin, there are references to the sacrifice of slaves and war captives as well as of criminals, and it is reported that if there were not sufficient criminals held in the gaols to make up the conventional number of sacrifices additional victims were seized for trivial offences in the streets of the city.[34] In Dahomey, there is abundant evidence that war captives as well as criminals were sacrificed.[35] In Asante also, there is evidence for the sacrifice of war captives,[36] and the recent study of that kingdom by Thomas Lewin has shown that inhabitants of the capital other than criminals were often seized for sacrifice, especially slaves and foreigners.[37] Lewin, still seeking to avoid the term 'human sacrifice', calls these instances 'ritualized killing without trial', which does not seem an obvious improvement on the more familiar designation preferred in the present article.

These various conceptual problems may all seem amenable to satisfactory resolution. The conceptual ambiguity of the term 'human sacrifice', however, does present enormous difficulties in the interpretation of the contemporary European accounts which our principal sources for the history of human sacrifice in West Africa. European observers undoubtedly, through ignorance or malice, often interpreted as human sacrifices killings which were really of a different character—for example, judicial executions, witchcraft ordeals, or even political terrorism. European sources therefore unquestionably give a greatly exaggerated impression of the incidence of human sacrifice in West Africa, and have to be used with the greatest caution.[38]

32. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1865 (3503–I), Vol. LVI: *Correspondence . . . relating to the Slave Trade, 1864*, item 19, Consul Burton to Earl Russell, 23 March 1864. Burton also refers, however, to 'real sacrifices' made in secret.

33. Wilks, *Asante*, p. 593.

34. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 503.

35. Cocquery-Vidrovitch, 'La fête des coutumes', p. 706.

36. Se e.g. J. K. Fynn, *Asante & its Neighbours 1700–1807* (Longman, 1971), p. 50; Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (1824, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 117, 141, 233.

37. Lewin, *Asante*, pp. 62, 64–5.

38. Cf. Isichei, 'Quest for social reform', p. 470.

The incidence of human sacrifice

It is clear that the practice of human sacrifice was widespread in West Africa in early times. Early Arabic sources relating to West Africa make occasional references to it. The earliest seems to be by Ibn Hawqal, in the tenth century, who refers vaguely to the sacrifice of female slaves at the funerals of wealthy men in West Africa, mentioning specifically the kingdom of ancient Ghana.[39] In the eleventh century, al-Bakri gives a much more detailed account of royal funerals in Ghana, which involved the burial (apparently alive) of personal servants of the king in the royal grave.[40] In the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta refers to human sacrifice at the funeral of the king of Gobir, in Hausaland, involving the burial alive of friends and servants of the king and of children contributed by the leading families of Gobir: he tells the story of a foreign Muslim, resident in Gobir, whose son was seized for sacrifice on the king's death and released only upon payment of large ransom.[41] The Egyptian scholar al-Suyuti, in a letter of the 1490s, refers, again with reference to Gobir, to the practice of substitutionary sacrifice, the killing of slaves by sick people in order to save themselves from death: unsurprisingly, al-Suyuti condems this as 'inspirations of the Devil . . . acts which lead their perpetrators into Unbelief', recommending the manumision rather than the killing of slaves as a more efficacious means of securing divine favour in such circumstances.[42]

The earliest European sources relating to West Africa likewise attest the practice of human sacrifice in various societies in the coastal areas. One of the earliest European accounts of West Africa, that by Valentim Fernandes in the 1500s, refers to the burial of wives and attendants in the graves of kings in two societies in the extreme west of West Africa, among the Mandingo of the Gambia area and among the Beafada of modern Guinea-Bissau.[43] Slightly later, there is evidence of human sacrifice further east along the coast, in the kingdom of Benin. Catholic missionaries endeavouring vainly to win over the king of Benin to Christianity in 1539 complained of his persistence in 'human sacrifices, idolatries and diabolical incantations night and day', and feared that they themselves might be sacrificed 'should his fetish tell him to do so'.[44] An account by

39. N. Levtzion & J. F. P. Hopkins (eds), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 52.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
42. Al-Suyuti, letter to the kings of Takrur, 1493, translated in Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: a historical anthology* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 119–20.
43. Valentim Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique (Senegal au Cap de Monte, Archipels)* (trans. T. Monod, A. Teixeira da Mota & R. Mauny, Centro de Estudos da Guine Portuguesa, Bissau, 1951), pp. 39, 79.
44. A. F. C. Ryder, 'The Benin Missions', *J. of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2/2 (1961), pp. 258–9; cf. id., *Benin*, p. 71.

a Portuguese pilot who visited Benin around the same time refers more specifically to sacrifices at royal funerals, when 'those who are judged to have been most dear to and favoured by the king' volunteered to be buried alive with him, and died of starvation in his tomb.[45] Seventeenth-century sources record instances of human sacrifice all along the intervening coast: Olfert Dapper in the 1660s, for example, refers to the killing of slaves at the funerals of noblemen in the kingdom of 'Kquoja' (i.e. the Vai, of modern Sierra Leone), to the offering of human sacrifices to gods on the Ivory Coast, to the killing of slaves at the funerals of kings and 'great lords' on the Gold Coast, and to the sacrifice of slaves at royal funerals in the kingdom of Allada, between the Gold Coast and Benin.[46]

There is also some archaeological evidence suggesting the early practice of human sacrifice in West Africa. Of particular interest, as relating to an area for which contemporary Arab or European documentation is lacking, is the richly furnished burial, presumably of a king or chief, excavated at Igbo Ukwu, in the country of the Igbo east of Benin. This burial, which is probably to be dated to the ninth century, was accompanied by the bodies of five or more individuals, which are interpreted by the excavator as slaves sacrificed at the funeral.[47]

These various references show that human sacrifice, especially funeral sacrifice, and more especially sacrifice at royal funerals, occurred throughout West Africa in early times. In more recent times, however, the practice of human sacrifice was geographically much more limited. The practice disappeared over much of the northern West Africa, presumably through the influence of Islam. Even in areas under Islamic influence, it is true, human sacrifice sometimes persisted into quite recent periods. As late as the nineteenth century, for example, we find even in Borno, a thoroughly Muslim society, rumours of the sacrifice of a young girl to the River Komadugu Yobe at its annual flood.[48] But generally, the practice of human sacrifice on any significant scale survived into more recent times only in the southern, non-Islamic areas of West Africa, and is of course best documented in the coastal areas which were in direct contact with European traders. Even within this southern area, however, human sacrifice was a much more important institution in some societies than in others. Although references can be found in European sources to the practice of

45. 'Voyage from Lisbona to the Island of San Thomé south of the Equator, described by a Portuguese pilot', originally published in 1550, in J. W. Blake (trans. & ed.), *Europeans in West Africa 1450–1560: documents to illustrate the nature & scope of Portuguese enterprise in West Africa, etc.* (Hakluyt Society, 1942), vol. I, pp. 150–1.

46. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, pp. 403, 433, 480, 493.

47. Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo Ukwu: an account of archaeological discoveries in Eastern Nigeria* (Faber, 1970), vol. I, pp. 265, 269.

48. John E. Lavers, 'Islam in the Bornu Caliphate', *Odu*, new series, 5 (1971), pp. 40–1.

human sacrifice all along the coast, European observers seem to have felt that it was practised on an especially horrific scale in certain specific West African kingdoms, all of which were located in the eastern section of the coast conventionally termed Lower Guinea.

Moreover, it is not merely a question of human sacrifice having *survived* on a large scale in these societies, when it had declined or disappeared elsewhere. The detailed evidence strongly suggests that the incidence of human sacrifice actually *increased* in certain West African societies in recent times, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is admittedly difficult to be altogether sure of this. The evidence consists basically of the testimony of contemporary European observers. These European sources undoubtedly give the impression of an increase in the scale of human sacrifice, but this may reflect less any change in the real situation than changing European attitudes towards African societies. The progressive growth of European feelings of racial superiority led European observers to emphasize those aspects of African societies which seemed exotic or barbarous, among which human sacrifice was very prominent, and this emphasis on human sacrifice was further encouraged, as noted earlier, by the use of the issue in polemics over the morality of the slave trade and of colonial conquest. It is therefore possible that the impression of an increase in human sacrifice given in European sources may be misleading, and merely an illustration of the general point made by Philip Curtin that the European image of Africa 'was more European than African', that is, it was determined by, and changed in accordance with, European preconceptions rather than African data.[49] There are, however, certain instances where detailed evidence does appear to demonstrate an increase in the scale of human sacrifice, the most important of which require extended discussion.

Benin

Along West African states with a special reputation for human sacrifice, first place, at least in point of time, undoubtedly belongs to the kingdom of Benin. As noted earlier, the first explicit reference to human sacrifice in Benin occurs in a report of missionaries active there in 1539. Alan Ryder has argued that the silence of earlier European sources suggests that human sacrifice had only been introduced into Benin in the early sixteenth century,[50] but this seems unwarranted. The earliest European description of Benin, that of Pacheco Pereira in the 1500s, while not referring specifically to human sacrifice, does observe that 'the way of life of these people is full

49. Curtin, *Image of Africa*, p. 479.
50. Ryder, 'The Benin Missions', p. 239; id., *Benin*, p. 71.

of abuses and fetishes and idolatries, which for brevity's sake I omit'.[51] It should also be noted that an account of the human sacrifices which accompanied a royal funeral in Benin, written *c.* 1540, describes these as 'an ancient custom',[52] and there is archaeological evidence which has been interpreted as suggesting the practice of human sacrifice in Benin already in the thirteenth century.[53] The evidence for an increase in the scale of human sacrifice after the sixteenth century, however, is more persuasive.

The report of 1539 suggests regular human sacrifices, but is unspecific about their scale and context. More information on this is provided in sources of the seventeenth century. The account of Samuel Brun, published in 1623, refers specifically to the sacrifice of captives taken in Benin military campaigns.[54] Brun's account, which is based on hearsay, also makes the wild claim that no less than 2,000 human victims were sacrificed in Benin annually, but more detailed and circumstantial accounts do not suggest such a large scale of sacrifice. The German surgeon Ulsheimer in 1603 witnessed human sacrifices offered on a campaign by the Benin army and during an annual festival when the king appeared in public on horseback at the head of his troops (evidently the *isiokuo*, or festival of Ogun, the god of war). The numbers, however, were small, only two human victims being offered on each occasion.[55] In 1652 Catholic missionaries in Benin disrupted a religious ceremony in the royal palace at which five human victims were killed.[56] A more elaborate picture of human sacrifice in Benin emerges in the account of Olfert Dapper published in the 1660s. Dapper's account of the royal funerals of Benin appears to be based on the account of *c.* 1540 already cited, but he adds that besides the royal favourites buried alive in the King's tomb many others were killed 'along the streets and in their own homes'. He further notes that slaves were killed at the funerals of private citizens also, citing one instance when as many as 80 slaves had been sacrificed at the funeral of a wealthy woman, and observing generally that 'nobody important dies there without it costing blood'. He gives a detailed account of two annual festivals which involved human sacrifices: that at which the king led his troops through the city (here again, presumably the *isiokuo*, or Ogun festival), when between 10–13 slaves were killed, and a commemorative festival in honour of the king's predecessor (i.e. the *ugie-erhoba*), which

51. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (trans. G. H. T. Kimble, Hakluyt Society, 1937), p. 126.
52. 'Voyage from Lisbona to the Island of San Thomé', p. 150.
53. Graham Connah, *The Archaeology of Benin* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), pp. 66, 249. This evidence, however, comprising a mass burial of over 40 individuals, might possibly relate to a judicial execution rather than to human sacrifice.
54. 'Samuel Brun's Voyages of 1611–20', in Jones, *German Sources*, p. 68.
55. 'Ulsheimer's Voyage', *ibid.*, pp. 24, 38.
56. Ryder, 'The Benin Missions', p. 244; id., *Benin*, p. 105. It is not clear to which of the annual festivals of Benin this refers.

involved the sacrifice of human and animal victims to a total of 400–500, 'but not more than 23 men in a day', the human victims being normally criminals taken from the gaols. In addition, Dapper refers more vaguely to the offering of human sacrifices in the installation rituals of a new king, and to the occasional killing of human victims for gods, 'when the priests demand them', the victims in this case also being criminals.[57]

It is debatable how far Dapper's account should be taken as suggesting an increase in the scale of human sacrifice in Benin since earlier times. The greater detail of his account, as compared with earlier sources, evidently derives primarily from his concern to give a comprehensive description of Benin customs, and reflects the growth of European knowledge of and interest in the subject of human sacrifice rather than any increase in the scale of the practice itself. In two instances, however, where Dapper's account of a specific ceremony can be compared with an earlier source, there is some suggestion of an increase or elaboration: at the royal funeral, Dapper records an additional category of victims (those killed in the streets and in their homes), and at the annual Ogun festival Dapper's figure of 10–13 victims represents a substantial increase over the two victims recorded earlier by Ulsheimer. How far this increase in scale was general is a matter for speculation.

It has often been suggested that the scale of human sacrifice in Benin increased substantially from the late seventeenth century onwards.[58] In fact, the evidence for a general increase in human sacrifice, at least before the nineteenth century, is not decisive. In two instances, the evidence does suggest the introduction of human sacrifices into ceremonies in which earlier these had not figured, but the numbers of victims involved were small. By the late eighteenth century three or four human victims were sacrificed each year at the mouth of the Benin River, in order to attract European trade,[59] whereas Dapper had earlier referred to sacrifices offered to the Sea without specifying that these were human.[60] Likewise, the annual 'coral festival' (*ugie-ivie*), at which the royal regalia were displaced to the populace, which had been described by Dapper and by a Dutch visitor in 1702 without explicit reference to human sacrifice,[61] by the 1780s did involve human sacrifice, although apparently only of a single victim.[62] Accounts of other Benin festivals in the eighteenth century, however, offer

57. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, pp. 498–504.
58. See e.g. Davidson, *Black Mother*, pop. 236–8; for a critique of this view, cf. Graham, 'The slave trade', esp. pp. 327–30.
59. John Adams, *Remarks on the Country extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (1823, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1966), p. 115; cf. Ryder, *Benin*, pp. 205–6.
60. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 504.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 502; David Van Nyendael, 'A Description of the *Rio Formosa* or the River of *Benin*', in William Bosman, *A New & Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 465–6.
62. Ryder, *Benin*, p. 223.

figures for human sacrifices which seem in line with those given earlier by Dapper. In particular, an account of the festival in honour of deceased kings (the *ugie-erhoba*) in 1736 records 20 human victims, as against 23 given as the daily tally by Dapper.[63] An account of the new yam festival (*agwe*), a ceremony not mentioned by Dapper or any other earlier source, in 1786 gives a comparable figure of 18 human victims.[64]

There is more persuasive evidence for a general increase in the scale of human sacrifice during the nineteenth century. A British trader who visited Benin towards the end of the eighteenth century had observed that 'human sacrifices are not so frequent here as in some parts of Africa',[65] a judgement which probably reflected the increasing scale of human sacrifice in some other West African kingdoms (notably Dahomey, which will be considered next) rather than any decline in Benin. During the nineteenth century, however, Benin was to recover its paramount association with human sacrifice in European eyes, as a whole series of European visitors reported the offering of human victims allegedly on a massive scale. This obsessive stress upon human sacrifice reached a hysterical climax in the context of the British expedition against Benin in 1897, with the publication of a celebrated book with the lurid title *Benin, the City of Blood*.[66] In large part, no doubt, this increasing emphasis on human sacrifice in Benin reflected changes in European attitudes rather than in local realities, and it can be demonstrated that European observers of the nineteenth century grossly exaggerated the scale of human sacrifice in Benin.[67] A detailed study of this issue by Alan Ryder, however, notes that there is evidence for specific elaborations of human sacrifice in Benin at this period, as well as generalized impressions of an increase in scale, including sacrifices for purposes not recorded earlier (to control the weather and to close roads), sacrifices in new forms ('crucifixion' on trees), and the sacrifice of female as well as male victims at the annual ceremonies. Overall, the evidence is convincing for a substantial increase in the scale of human sacrifice in Benin from around the 1830s to the 1880s.[68] The accession of a new king, Ovonramwen, in 1888 appears to have been followed by a temporary decline in the scale of human sacrifice,[69] but the practice attained a new height of extravagance at the time of the British attack on Benin in 1897, when numerous victims were killed in a desperate attempt to ward off foreign conquest: contrary to the usual British propaganda, the large

63. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.
65. Adams, *Remarks*, p. 115.
66. R. H. Bacon, *Benin, the City of Blood* (Edward Arnold, 1897).
67. Europeans tended to assume, wrongly, that all unburied corpses in Benin were those of human sacrifices: cf. Graham, 'The slave trade', pp. 329–30.
68. Ryder, *Benin*, pp. 247–50.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

numbers of human sacrifices were a response to the British expedition, rather than *vice versa*.[70]

Dahomey

During the eighteenth century, Benin had been overshadowed in European eyes as the major practitioner of human sacrifice in West Africa by Dahomey, the principal kingdom in the area known as the 'Slave Coast', between the Gold Coast and Benin.[71] Before the eighteenth century, Dahomey had been a state of only minor importance. The most powerful state of the Slave Coast during the seventeenth century was the kingdom of Allada, while the most important commercial centre was the small state of Whydah, on the coast to the south-west of Allada. Dahomey was in origin an offshoot of Allada, founded by a prince of the royal house of that kingdom in the interior to the north. But in the early eighteenth century Dahomey emerged as the most powerful kingdom in the area, and invaded and conquered both Allada and Whydah in the 1720s.

European accounts of Allada and Whydah before their conquest by Dahomey in the 1720s refer to the practice of human sacrifice in these kingdoms, but without great emphasis. Dapper, for example, refers to the killings of concubines and servants at royal funerals in Allada,[72] and later accounts of Whydah record the sacrifice of wives and slaves at royal funerals there also,[73] as well as the practice of substitutionary sacrifice, the killing of a man to preserve the king when ill.[74] There is no suggestion, however, that human sacrifice was practised on any extravagant scale. Royal funerals involved the sacrifice of only two women and an unspecified number of men in Allada, and of only eight women and a variable but also unspecified number of men in Whydah. There is also no record of the offering of human sacrifices at any of the regular annual festivals of Allada or Whydah.

By contrast, the scale of human sacrifice in Dahomey was enormous. This was already apparent at the time of the first direct European contact with the kingdom in the 1720s. In 1727 an English trader witnessed the sacrifice of 400 war captives in a ceremony in Dahomey, and heard reports (very probably exaggerated) that as many as 4,000 had been sacrificed after the Dahomian conquest of Whydah earlier in that year.[75] Royal funerals

70. Graham, 'The slave trade', pp. 329–30; Home, *City of Blood Revisited*, pp. 86–7.

71. On Dahomey, in addition to the works cited in n. 15 above, a Ph.D. thesis is currently in preparation by John Reid at the University of Stirling, dealing with Dahomey in the nineteenth century, which will clarify further the role of human sacrifice in this kingdom.

72. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 493.

73. Jean Barbot, 'Description des Côtes d'Affrique' (unpublished ms of 1688, in Public Record Office, London, ADM. 7/830); Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage du Chevalier des Marchais en Guinée, Isles Voisines & à Cayenne* (Paris, 1730), vol. II, pp. 92–5.

74. Bosman, *New & Accurate Description*, p. 383.

75. Snelgrave, *New Account*, pp. 31, 48–9.

in Dahomey involved hundreds of deaths: for example, the funeral ceremonies for King Kpengla, who died in 1789, involved, over a period of two years, the killing of some 1,500 persons, many of them war captives.[76] The contrast with Allada and Whydah earlier is also illustrated by one point of detail, relating to a custom common to Whydah and Dahomey. In both kingdoms, in the period between the death of a king and the installation of his successor disorderly and criminal behaviour was permitted without punishment–evidently in order to emphasize the importance of royal authority for the maintenance of order. But whereas in Whydah this involved merely crimes against property,[77] in Dahomey the king's wives fought with one another in the royal palace, hundreds being killed and subsequently buried with the king.[78] In addition, the funeral sacrifices were supplemented in Dahomey by annual commemorative sacrifices for deceased kings, usually known as the 'Annual Customs' or 'Watering of the Graves', at which large numbers of war captives and criminals were killed. Estimates of the number of victims killed at the Annual Customs during the eighteenth century range between 40–50 and 200–300;[79] eyewitness accounts of particular occasions suggest totals well below 100,[80] but these appear to relate only to those sacrifices offered publicly, and need to be supplemented by sacrifices offered in secret (usually of women) inside the royal palace.[81] Further, *ad hoc* sacrifices were commonly offered, in which people were killed to carry special messages to the king's deceased predecessors.[82] The total annual slaughter in Dahomey, even apart from the royal funerals, must have run into several hundreds.[83]

While the much greater scale of human sacrifice in Dahomey, as

76. Dalzel, *History of Dahomy,* pp. 204–5, 224, 226, 229–30: the king's wives killed 595 of their own number on his death, 68 war captives were killed on the journey of the royal corpse to the capital and 48 men on its journey to the tomb, over 300 captives were killed at the tomb, and a further 500 men, women and children were killed at the official funeral ceremony (the 'Grand Customs') over a year later.

77. Bosman, *New & Accurate Description,* p. 366a.

78. Dalzel, *History of Dahomy,* pp. 150–1, 204–5: 285 royal wives were killed in this manner in 1774, 595 in 1789.

79. The higher figure is given by Norris for 1775/6, the lower by Isert for *c.* 1784: Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee,* p. 136; Paul Erdman Isert, *Voyages en Guinée & dans les Isles Caraïbes* (Paris, 1793), p. 148.

80. One observer who witnessed three separate 'Customs' in the early nineteenth century never counted more than 65 victims: John M'Leod, *A Voyage to Africa* (1820, reprinted by Frank cass, 1971), p. 60. Norris in 1772 records seeing the corpses or severed heads of about 80 victims, as well as seven men awaiting execution, but it is not explicitly stated that these comprised the total of those sacrificed: *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee,* pp. 93–4, 100–1, 106, 110–1.

81. Such executions of females in secret are reported, at least, in the nineteenth century: Burton, *Mission to Gelele,* p. 233; cf. also F. E. Forbes, *Dahomey & The Dahomans* (1851, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1966), vol. II, p. 152.

82. M'Leod, *Voyage to Africa,* pp. 63–4; Burton, *Mission to Gelele,* pp. 234–5.

83. In 1864, when the scale of human sacrifice may have been rather less than in the eighteenth century, Burton estimated the total toll at no less than 500 in an average year: *Mission to Gelele,* p. 235.

compared with Allada and Whydah, is clear, the history of the development of the institution within Dahomey itself is more obscure. It may well be that Dahomey was marked from its foundation by a greater elaboration of human sacrifice than its parent state of Allada. In the 1720s it was claimed in Dahomey that the killing of a selection of the war captives taken in victorious campaigns 'had ever been the Custom of their Nation'.[84] The enormous scale of sacrifice in the eighteenth century was perhaps merely a by-product of the increasing scale and success of Dahomian military operations. Some later sources, however, assert that the *annual* Customs had been introduced into Dahomey only by Agaja, the king who was responsible for the conquest of Allada and Whydah in the 1720s.[85]

What is more certain is that the scale of the Annual Customs was further increased in the early nineteenth century. King Adandozan of Dahomey was deposed in 1818, so tradition alleges, for neglecting to 'water the graves' of his predecessors: in the context, this appears to mean that his lack of military success was not yielding a sufficient supply of war captives for sacrifice, rather than that he was deliberately running down the ceremonies.[86] His successor, Gezo, in contrast extended and elaborated the Customs. After a notable victory against the neighbouring kingdom of Oyo in 1823, Gezo instituted an additional annual festival involving human sacrifices to commemorate this success.[87] It also appears that the numbers of victims offered at the regular Annual Customs were increased under Gezo, totals of 300 and of 249 victims being recorded during the 1830s and 1840s.[88] Although, for reasons which will be discussed later in this article, the scale of human sacrifice was somewhat reduced from the 1850s onwards, it continued to be practised on a large scale down to the French conquest of Dahomey in the 1890s.

Asante

During the nineteenth century, the pre-eminence of Dahomey in European perceptions with regard to human sacrifice in West Africa was challenged not only by a resurgent Benin to the east but also by the kingdom of Asante, in the hinterland of the Gold Coast to the west. Like Dahomey, Asante was a new state, which had been only of minor importance before the eighteenth century. During the seventeenth century, the Gold Coast and its hinterland had been divided into a large number of

84. Snelgrave, *New Account*, pp. 46–7.
85. Forbes, *Dahomey*, vol. II, p. 88; Skertchly, *Dahomey*, pp. 118–9.
86. A. Le Herissé, *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey* (Larose, Paris, 1911), p. 315; cf. Hargreaves, 'Ideological Interpretation', pp. 19–20.
87. Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, p. 126; Skertchly, *Dahomey*, p. 179.
88. A total of 300 is reported *c.* 1830: Theophilus Conneau, *A Slaver's Log Book, or 20 Years' Residence in Africa* (Robert Hale, 1977), p. 204. A total of 249 is reported for 1848/9: Forbes, *Dahomey*, vol. I. p. 33.

small states; Asante emerged as the dominant power in the hinterland at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and eventually overran the coastal area also in the 1800s. Seventeenth century sources refer frequently to the practice of human sacrifice, especially of slaves, at the funerals of chiefs and important men in the coastal kingdoms,[89] and there is one report also of the sacrifice of captives taken in war to a god.[90] Doubtless human sacrifice was practised in the interior at this period also. But nothing suggests that human sacrifice in this area had attained any especially grand scale before the rise of Asante.[91]

One of the earliest European accounts of Asante, in 1701, already alludes to the sacrifice of captives taken in war.[92] The earliest contemporary sources suggesting an especial extravagance of scale of human sacrifice in Asante, however, is a report of 1797 claiming that between 1,400 and 1,500 people had been sacrificed for the funerals of the royal princes, an excess which allegedly provoked a popular rebellion.[93] The funeral of the mother of an Asante king in 1809 is said to have been marked by the sacrifice of no less than 3,000 human victims, over 2,000 of whom were prisoners of war.[94] These accounts, based on hearsay, are very probably exaggerated, but the earliest detailed first-hand descriptions of Asante, produced by British missions to the capital Kumase in 1817 and 1820, confirm the practice of human sacrifice on an extravagant scale. Human sacrifices were offered at private as well as at royal funerals, and also to gods to ensure the success of Asante military operations and on occasions of national disaster. In addition, human victims were killed at regular Asante festivals, such as the annual Yam festival (*Odwira*), which involved over 100 deaths a year, and the monthly *Adae* Festival, at which over 70 people were killed on one occasion in 1820.[95] Richard Burton, seeking to defend Dahomey against charges of excess in these matters in the 1860s, could reasonably claim that Asante was worse.[96]

Old Calabar

A fourth West African state which acquired a reputation, at least briefly,

89. e.g. 'Ulsheimer's Voyage', in Jones, *German Sources*, p. 31: 'Wilhelm Johan Müller's Description of the Fetu Country, 1662–9', *ibid.*, pp. 156, 179; Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 480; Bosman, *New & Accurate Description*, p. 231–2.
90. 'Müller's Description', in Jones, *German Sources*, p. 169, reporting an incident at Fetu in 1666.
91. Few precise figures are given, but Müller records three funerals at Fetu in the 1660s which involved the sacrifice of over 80, over 30, and seven slaves: *ibid.*, p. 179.
92. Fynn, *Asante*, p. 50. For subsequent Asante traditions recording the sacrifice of war captives for the funerals of royalty during the eighteenth century, cf. Dupuis, *Journal*, p. 233; C. C. Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast & Asante* (2nd edn reprinted, Ghana Universities Press, Accra, 1966), p. 82.
93. Fynn, *Asante*, p. 137.
94. Bowdich, *Mission*, p. 289.
95. *Ibid.*, pp. 262, 279, 282–3; Dupuis, *Journal*, pp. 116, 140–2.
96. Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, p. 234.

for excessive human sacrifice was Old Calabar, on the coast east of Benin. Human sacrifice is already referred to in a European account of this place in the seventeenth century,[97] but there is nothing to suggest a scale at all out of the ordinary until the early nineteenth century. It is, indeed, fairly clear that at that time the numbers offered as human sacrifices in Old Calabar were escalating dramatically.[98]

In Old Calabar, although human sacrifices were occasionally offered to deities,[99] the principal slaughter of human victims occurred at the funerals of important men. The evidence for an increase in the scale of human sacrifice is a series of figures for specific funerals between the 1780s and the 1840s. These certainly attest an increase in the scale of mortality at the funerals of the great men of Calabar, but interpretation is complicated by the fact that much of this increase represented the death of suspected witches through the poison ordeal, rather than sacrifices, and the sources do not always clearly distinguish between the two. At the funeral of Duke Ephraim, king of Old Calabar, in 1786 it appears from a contemporary local diary that 65 people were sacrificed, nine men and women (presumably free relatives and wives) being buried with him and 56 slaves being killed in subsequent ceremonies; there seems to have been no resort to the poison ordeal.[100] At the death of Eyo Nsa, the ruler of the Creek Town section of Old Calabar, in 1820 a visiting European estimated that not less than 100 people were sacrificed in a single day.[101] At the funeral of Duke Ephraim's son, also called Duke Ephraim and also king of Calabar, in 1834 it is claimed that over 200 free men were killed, besides 'slaves without number'[102]: this figure certainly includes victims of the poison ordeal as well as sacrifices, but a contemporary local document shows that those killed as witches on this occasion numbered under 50.[103] On the death of Eyamba, king of Calabar, in 1847 a resident European missionary recorded an account of mass slaughter, including both sacrifices and deaths through the poison ordeal: no overall figure is given, but it is said that 30 of Eyamba's wives were killed on the first day alone.[104]

In 1850, largely as a result of European influence, funeral sacrifices were abolished in Old Calabar. The administration of the poison ordeal, how-

97. A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600–1891* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973), p. 26.
98. Cf. G. I. Jones, 'The political organization of Old Calabar', in D. Forde (ed.), *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (International African Institute, 1956), pp. 151–3.
99. Cf. Latham, *Old Calabar*, p. 35.
100. Diary of Antera Duke, in Forde, *Efik Traders*, pp. 46, 48–50 (with translation, pp. 97, 99–100).
101. *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool*, (Longman, 1830), p. 280.
102. H. M. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies & Central Africa* (1863, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1970), p. 497.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

ever, continued, and caused many deaths at the funerals of the leading men of Calabar down to the abolition of the poison ordeal itself in 1878.[105]

The riverine Igbo

It has been suggested by Elizabeth Isichei that an increase in the scale of human sacrifice can also be discerned among the Igbo, in the interior between Benin and Old Calabar, and more especially in the Igbo city-states situated on the River Niger such as Abo and Asaba.[106] The evidence in this case, however, is exiguous. There is very little evidence for conditions in the Igbo country before the nineteenth century, so that variations in the scale of sacrifice are difficult to document. Isichei is able to compare the five or six individuals buried with the chief at Igbo Ukwu in the ninth century with a figure of 40 slaves killed reported at the funeral of the king of Abo in *c.* 1845,[107] but since these are two different communities and there is in any case no certainty that those buried in the grave at Igbo Ukwu represented all those sacrificed, this comparison is of limited significance. Isichei also cites the case of Asaba, where the number of individuals holding the *Eze* title, whose installations and funerals involved human sacrifices (two on each occasion) is said to have increased from an original two to some 500 by the end of 1870s, an increase from 200 to 500 occurring within a few years during the 1870s.[108] This certainly implies an increasing scale of sacrifice, but it is unclear how far this increase can be generalized. In the case of Abo, it may be noted that the account reporting the killing of 40 slaves at the royal funeral in *c.* 1845 also states that 'this practice is gradually dying out at Abo, if it is not altogether extinct'.[109] The argument for a general increase in the incidence of human sacrifice in the Igbo country appears to rest less upon any hard local evidence than upon analogy with the better documented cases of the neighbouring states of Benin and Old Calabar, and perhaps also upon Isichei's general disposition to believe that any unpleasant features of pre-colonial Igbo society attested in the nineteenth century must represent corruption and degeneration from an earlier more harmonious condition.

Towards an explanation of the incidence of human sacrifice

In attempting to explain variations in the incidence of human sacrifice across space and through time in West Africa, one obviously relevant factor is the size of the available pool of potential victims. Not all members of

105. Latham, 'Witchcraft accusations', pp. 254–5.
106. Isichei, *The Ibo People*, pp. 568, 63; id., *History of the Igbo*, pp. 47, 100–1.
107. W. B. Baikie, *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora & Binue* (John Murray, 1856), p. 315.
108. Elizabeth Isichei, 'Historical change in an Ibo polity: Asaba to 1885', *J. of African History*, **10**, (1969), pp. 423–4.
109. Baikie, *Narrative*, p. 315.

society were equally liable to selection for sacrifice, the victims being drawn preponderantly from specific (and usually disprivileged) groups. The funeral sacrifices which were common over much of West Africa involved primarily the killing of wives and slaves of the deceased, and the numbers killed were evidently at least loosely correlated with the numbers of wives and slaves that the kings and chiefs concerned possessed. The increasing scale of human sacrifice evident in some West African societies can therefore be linked to the increasing concentration of wealth, in the form of wives and slaves, in the hands of wealthy and powerful individuals. In some instances, it is true, slaves were purchased specifically for sacrifice rather than (or as well as) being selected from the household of the deceased,[110] but this practice obviously also reflects the same process of the concentration of wealth. Funeral sacrifices increased in scale not merely as an incidental by-product of this concentration of wealth, but also as a means of advertising wealth to the community and thereby ensuring that it conferred commensurate prestige. Human sacrifice can be seen as a particular form of the conspicuous consumption in which wealthy men in pre-colonial West Africa habitually indulged in the quest for social standing.[111] The increasing concentration of wealth which lies behind much of the increase in the scale of human sacrifice in the coastal areas of West Africa can of course itself be linked, at least in large part, to the increasing scale of the trade with the Europeans from the fifteenth century upwards.

War captives formed an additional category of potential victims for sacrifice, which was of especially great importance in Dahomey and Asante. In societies which customarily, as a form of thanksgiving for divine or ancestral assistance in war, sacrificed a portion of their captives, the scale of human sacrifice would evidently tend to increase with any growth in the scale and regularity of military activity. Here again, human sacrifice was not merely a by-product of increasing militarism, but served as part of its ideological apparatus, since the public sacrifice of war captives advertised military success and the obligation to provide victims for sacrifice supplied a justification for the waging of war. In Dahomey, for example, although in fact only a small proportion of the captives taken in war were sacrificed (most being kept as slaves in Dahomey or sold to the Europeans at the coast[112]), official ideology created the impression that the principal

110. This is reported e.g. on the Gold Coast and at Abo: Bosman, *New & Accurate Description*, p. 231; Baikie, *Narrative*, p. 315.

111. Cf. Jones, 'Political organization of Old Calabar', p. 153; Isichei, *The Ibo People*, p. 54.

112. Apologists for the slave trade regularly claimed the reverse, that the majority of Dahomey's war captives were sacrificed: e.g. Dalzel, *History of Dahomy*, pp. 169–70, 173, 209, 221. But in the 1770s Dahomey is said to have been exporting 5,000–6,000 slaves annually (Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee*, p. 62), whereas the annual tally of sacrifices clearly ran into hundreds rather than thousands.

purpose of warfare was to supply victims for sacrifice to deceased kings.[113] The increasing scale of human sacrifice can therefore also be linked to the increasing militarization of society which is evident in some parts of West Africa, especially the Gold and Slave Coasts, from the late seventeenth century onwards, a process of which the rise of Dahomey and Asante was itself a part. This militarization, in turn, seems to be linked to the development of the Atlantic trade, as the expanding market for slaves at the coast increased the economic attractiveness of war and the importation of European firearms stimulated the revision of West Afrian military tactics and the reconstruction of West African military organizations.[114]

It can further be suggested that the practice of human sacrifice on an especially large scale was commonly linked to royal authority, and to the development of highly centralized monarchies.[115] In some societies, human sacrifice is said to have been a royal perogative: this is stated, for example, both of Benin and of Dahomey.[116] In the case of Benin, this appears to mean that royal authorization was required for the offering of human sacrifices, rather than that only the king could offer such sacrifices. In Dahomey, however, it appears that the sacrifice of human victims by persons other than the king was formally banned, although this step was not taken until the 1840s.[117] Human sacrifice served royal authority partly through the prestige of conspicuous consumption and partly through creating an air of fear around the royal office—a 'demonstration of power', as Olfert Dapper expressed it in the seventeenth century.[118] King Kpengla of Dahomey, in an explanation of human sacrifice offered to a European enquirer in the 1780s, avowed both of these objectives: 'You have seen me kill many men at the Customs. . . . This gives a grandeur to my Customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy. This makes my enemies fear me, and gives me such a name in the bush'.[119]

113. For an analysis which uncritically reproduces this official ideology, cf. Dov Ronen, 'On the African role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Dahomey', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines,* **11,** (1971), pp. 5–13.

114. For this process of militarization, see esp. Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade & Polities in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982), pp. 130–68; also *id.*, 'Firearms & Warfare on the Gold & Slave Coasts from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries', *J. of African History,* **12,** (1971), pp. 185–213.

115. Cf. J. D. Fage, 'Slavery & the slave trade in the context of West African history', *J. of African History* **10,** (1969), p. 402.

116. For Benin, see R. E. Bradbury, 'The Kingdom of Benin', in D. Forde & P. M. Kaberry (eds), *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 3–4, 33. For Dahomey, see M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, an ancient West African kingdom* (J. J. Augustin, New York, 1938), vol. II, pp. 54–5, 281.

117. John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa* (1847, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1968), vol. I, p. 258; vol. II, p. 306. The human sacrifices at private funerals reported by Forbes, *Dahomey,* vol. I, p. 32; vol. II, pp. 199–200, presumably occurred in the period prior to this prohibition. Even after the 1840s, however, human sacrifices were permitted for the funerals of certain senior chiefs: Burton, *Mission to Gelele,* p. 234.

118. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge,* pp. 480, 493 (referring to the Gold Coast and Allada).

119. Dalzel, *History of Dahomy,* p. 220.

Beyond this, large-scale human sacrifices were often linked to the elaboration of a royal ancestor cult, which can be seen as providing the legitimating ideology for royal power. It is, at any rate, clear that in addition to the human sacrifices offered at the actual funerals of kings, many of the sacrifices offered at regular ceremonies were related to the cult of deceased kings. This was most clearly the case in Dahomey, where human sacrifices were offered virtually exclusively to royal ancestors, and were not normally offered to gods.[120] The Annual Customs, as noted earlier, were performed in honour of dead kings, the human victims being killed so that their blood might 'water the graves' of the past rulers and so that they themselves could swell the retinues of these kings. It has rightly been observed that the central point of the Annual Customs in Dahomey was to assert and reinforce royal power.[121] It is noteworthy, moreover, that both Agaja, who is said to have introduced the Annual Customs in the early eighteenth century, and Gezo, who extended and elaborated them in the early nineteenth century, were usurpers: Agaja had succeeded irregularly, in preference to his predecessor's children, while Gezo had displaced his predecessor by a *coup d'état*.[122] Both, therefore, had an obvious interest in reinforcing their somewhat questionable legitimacy by an extravagant display of attention to the cult of their royal ancestors.

In Benin also, although human sacrifices were offered to gods and to non-royal ancestors as well as to dead kings, many of the most important instances of human sacrifices were linked to royalty. In addition to the major annual festival which involved human sacrifices to past kings, culminating in sacrifices for the reigning king's father (the *ugie-erhoba*), human sacrifices were also offered to deceased kings at the annual Oro masquerade (the *ugie-oro*), while the annual yam festival (*agwe*) involved veneration of the mythical founder of the royal dynasty, Odudua. Other annual festivals involved human sacrifices for the king's 'head', i.e. his spirit double or genius (the *igwe*), and for the royal regalia (the *ugie-ivie*).[123] Ryder, indeed, suggests that the increase in human sacrifice in Benin during the nineteenth century represented an increasing resort to the ritual powers of the monarchy in a period of growing economic and political difficulty.[124] In Asante also, although human sacrifices were often offered to deities and to non-royal ancestors, the most extravagant slaughter seems to have been related to the royal ancestor cult. In particular, many of the sacrifices at the annual Yam Festival and at the monthly

120. Herskovits, *Dahomey*, vol. II, p. 53.

121. Cocquery-Vidrovitch, 'La fête des coutumes', p. 711.

122. For details, see I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey & its Neighbours 1708–1818* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 60–2, 196–201.

123. For the festivals of Benin, see esp. R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom & the Edo-Speaking Peoples* (International African Institute, 1957), pp. 55, 58–9, Paula Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin* (Thames & Hudson, 1980), pp. 75–93.

124. Ryder, *Benin*, p. 250.

Adae ceremonies were offered to deceased kings, the victims being often killed over the royal stool, the symbol of royal authority.[125] In Asante also, there is some suggestion that the kings built up the royal ancestor cult as a counter to the power of the priests of the gods, who formed a check upon royal authority.[126]

As noted earlier in this article, a common argument, originally articulated by Davidson and elaborated more recently by Isichei, seeks to link the expansion of human sacrifice in West Africa to the effects of the Atlantic slave trade. The argument is partly that the slave trade encouraged economic differentiation, with the emergence of dominant minorities of wealthy men who indulged in conspicuous consumption through the offering of human sacrifices, but partly also that the slave trade fostered a general 'disregard for human life' which was expressed in human sacrifice.[127] Empirically, it is perhaps questionable how far a correlation between human sacrifice and participation in the slave trade can be discerned. Not all societies heavily involved in the slave trade practised human sacrifice on a large scale, while one of the principal sacrificing states, Benin, was never more than marginally involved in the slave trade.[128] But at least as a contributory factor, the slave trade may well have played an important role in such cases as Dahomey and Asante. The precise nature of the link between human sacrifice and the slave trade, however, is debatable. In particular, the notion that the slave trade promoted a 'disregard for human life' seems unhelpful. Although this is clearly true in a moral sense, in an economic sense the implications of the slave trade were quite the reverse: as apologists for the slave trade argued, the slave trade provided an economic incentive to preserve people for sale rather than killing them, so that if the existence of a market for slaves had any effect on the numbers of human sacrifices it would surely have to been to reduce rather than to increase them. There is some reason to believe that the slave trade had some effect on the selection of sacrificial victims, encouraging the sacrifice of the old and infirm, and therefore unsaleable, while leaving the strong and healthy to be sold,[129] but there is no very

125. Both the Yam and Adae ceremonies involved rites at the Bantama, the royal burial place: see e.g. Bowdich, *Mission*, p. 279; T. B. Freeman, *Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku & Dahomi* (1844, reprinted by Frank Cass, 1968), p. 136; Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast*, p. 131. For sacrifices over the royal stool, cf. e.g. Dupuis, *Journal*, p. 142.

126. M. D. McLeod, *The Asante* (British Museum, 1981), p. 64.

127. Davidson, *Black Mother*, p. 224; Isichei, *The Ibo People*, pp. 47, 578; id., *History of the Igbo*, p. 47; id., *History of West Africa*, p. 11.

128. Benin was, however, at various periods heavily involved in the export of other commodities (pepper, ivory, gum and cotton textiles), so that the Atlantic trade may still have played a role here in the expansion of human sacrifice, by encouraging the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the palace and chiefs.

129. For examples, see Bosman, *New & Accurate Description*, p. 231 (on the Gold Coast); Snelgrave, *New Account*, p. 47 (in Dahomey). Since, however, slave labour was widely employed within West African societies, such selective pressures would presumably have existed to some degree even without an export trade in slaves.

obvious way in which European purchases of slaves at the coast could have led directly to an increase in the overall numbers sacrificed. The link between human sacrifice and the slave trade, insofar as it existed, must be seen as a more indirect one, realized through the militarization of West African values and institutions which the trans-Atlantic market for slaves helped to encouage.

It is also noteworthy that the most convincing evidence for a general increase in the scale of human sacrifice in West Africa relates to the nineteenth century, that is when the overseas slave trade was in decline. It seems probable, indeed, that the expansion of human sacrifice at this period was related to the decline in the export of slaves. Davidson suggested that the increase in human sacrifice in the nineteenth century reflected a sort of psychological crisis, caused by the 'economic insecurity' which followed the end of the Atlantic slave trade.[130] This view seems to rely overmuch upon the specific case of human sacrifices offered in Benin to attract European trade, mentioned above, and probably also exaggerates the political and social dislocation caused by the end of the overseas slave trade.[131] The increase in human sacrifice at this period was paralleled by a general increase in the scale of domestic slavery in the societies of coastal West Africa,[132] and is indeed at least to some degree explained by it: if societies were holding more slaves, then clearly they had more slaves to sacrifice. It is sometimes suggested that human sacrifice increased in order to dispose of slaves who were now, with the collapse of overseas markets, unsaleable;[133] but while this view might apply to the military states in the interior (such as Asante) which were involved in the actual 'production' of slaves, it can hardly apply to the commercial communities on the coast (such as Old Calabar) which purchased their slaves from the interior. More probably, the explanation is that the decline of the export of slaves caused something of a glut within West Africa, which was reflected in a general fall in the price of slaves.[134] With such a fall in slave prices, kings and chiefs could evidently afford not only to buy more slaves, but also to kill more, without a

130. Davidson, *Black Mother*, p. 224; cf. p. 238.

131. On the the implications of this economic transition for West African soceties, see e.g. R. A. Austen, 'The abolition of the overseas slave trade: a distorted theme in West African history', *J. of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, **5**, 2 (1970), pp. 257–74; A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Longman, 1973), pp. 124–66.

132. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: a history of slavery in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 160. For Asante, see also Wilks, *Asante*, p. 708; for Dahomey, Robin Law, 'Royal monopoly & private enterprise in the Atlantic trade: the case of Dahomey', *J. of African History*, **18**, (1977), p. 573; for Benin, Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (3rd edn, Ibadan University Press, 1960), p. 49; for Calabar, Latham, *Old Calabar*, pp. 91–3; for the Igbo area, David Northrup, *Trade without Rulers: pre-colonial economic development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978), pp. 220–3.

133. Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind*, p. 215; Isichei, *The Ibo People*, p. 63.

134. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, p. 139; cf. also Wilks, *Asante*, p. 177; Isichei, *The Ibo People*, p. 62.

proportionate increase in expenditure: the unit costs of human sacrifice were falling.[135]

The politics of human sacrifice: local pressures for restriction

The end of human sacrifice in West Africa was largely due to external pressures and influences—the penetration of Islam southwards from the interior and the penetration of European influence from the coast. There is not much information on the way in which Islam affected the incidence of human sacrifice in West Africa: al-Suyuti's condemnation of the practice cited earlier is one of the very few explicit references to the issue in Islamic sources. But it is not to be doubted that the disappearance of human sacrifice in the northern areas of West Africa reflects primarily the process of Islamization.

The impact of Europe is of course much better documented. This was already having some effect in limited areas of West Africa in the seventeenth century. On the Gold Coast, where the Europeans held a number of fortified posts, human sacrifice was suppressed as far as European authority extended, though this was not very far.[136] Outside this very limited area of direct European authority, Christian missionaries were active, and although in general these had little success before the nineteenth century they did make some converts earlier, notably in the kingdom of Warri, to the south-east of Benin, whose royal family was Christian throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[137] Dapper in the mid-seventeenth century noted that the people of Warri made few animal or human sacrifices, 'but regard such things as atrocities', and it seems reasonable to attribute this unusual attitude to the influence of Christian propaganda.[138] But in general European and Christian influence was not significant before the nineteenth century. From the 1840s in particular British diplomatic (and occasionally military) pressure was employed in an attempt to impose treaties abolishing human sacrifice (as well as the slave trade) on West African states. On the Gold Coast, when a number of coastal states came together formally under a British semi-protectorate in 1844 the opportunity was taken to proclaim the abolition of human sacrifice, and in the interior a similar provision was included in the treaty imposed on Asante after the British punitive expedition in 1874.[139] Further east, the authorities of Old Calabar, under the influence of locally resident European missionaries and traders,

135. Cf. Isichei, *History of West Africa*, p. 104.
136. Bosman, *New & Accurate Description*, p. 232.
137. See esp. A. F. C. Ryder, 'Missionary activities in the Kingdom of Warri to the early nineteenth century', *J. of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, **2**, 1 (1960), pp. 1–26.
138. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 507.
139. J. F. A. Ajayi & M. Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, vol. II (Longman, 1974), pp. 204, 213.

proclaimed the abolition of human sacrifice in 1850,[140] while the riverine Igbo state of Abo accepted a treaty abolishing the practice in 1863.[141] But in a number of cases, this pressure for the abolition of human sacrifice was resisted as long as the West African states concerned retained their independence. In Benin, Dahomey and Asaba, for example, the end of human sacrifice came only with the European conquest at the end of the nineteenth century.

The decline of human sacrifice in West Africa was not, however, merely a question of foreign pressures imposing abolition. In some instances pressures for the restriction, if not for the complete abolition, of human sacrifice emerged within West African societies themselves. The internal politics of human sacrifice have been little studied, the only attempt at a general treatment of the issue being the article by Elizabeth Isichei, published in *African Affairs* in 1978.[142] Isichei's analysis, however, is somewhat limited, since it takes as given that human sacrifice is evil, and sees the movements against the practice in certain West African societies basically as evidence of the existence in Africa of moral values congruent with those of Europe and Islam. This has the dual advantage of demonstrating the respectability (by the European standards) of African societies, and of suggesting that African societies contained within themselves the potentiality to reform their own abuses, thus undermining one of the conventional justifications for the European conquest. Social reform, however, is best conceptualized not as the recognition of abuses defined by some supra-historical standard, but rather as the reformulation of moral standards so as to identify as abuses practices not previously condemned. It is necessary, therefore, to explain as well as document and celebrate the emergency of disapproval of human sacrifice. This, however, is by no means easy to do, since the evidence available comprises principally accounts of West African societies by European outsiders, who offer only imperfect and often distorted perceptions of the motives and objectives of the Africans involved.

One obvious source of opposition to human sacrifice was the reluctance of potential victims to be sacrificed. Already in the seventeenth century, Dapper reported that in the Kingdom of 'Kquoja' in Sierra Leone the traditional sacrifices of slaves at the funerals of noblemen were 'not much practised of late', because the slaves concerned either ran away in anticipation of their master's death or defended themselves with arms against attempts to seize them for sacrifice.[143] Later accounts show that the flight of slaves, in order to avoid being sacrificed, was a standard reaction to the

140. See esp. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years*, pp. 421–3.
141. J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891* (Longman, 1965), p. 210.
142. Isichei, 'Quest for social reform', pp 469–72.
143. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, p. 403.

death of large-scale owners of slaves in others societies also.[144] But this sort of resistance did not really constitute a challenge to human sacrifice as an institution, but merely reflected the unwillingness of individual slaves to volunteer for selection as sacrifices. It was apparently rare for slaves to organize themselves collectively to demand the complete abolition of human sacrifice, just as it was rare for there to be collective rebellions against the status of slavery, although individual runaways were common enough.

One exceptional instance where slaves did take collective action to abolish the practice of human sacrifice occurred in Old Calabar in the 1850s. Although the law of 1850 banning human sacrifices in Old Calabar was due largely to the influence of European missionaries and traders, the slaves themselves played a critical role in enforcing observance of the law. During 1850 the farm slaves of the Duke Town section of Old Calabar began to organize themselves, binding themselves by a blood oath to defend each other, and on two occasions, in 1851 and 1852, these 'Blood Men' invaded Calabar town in armed bands to impose their will on the ruling freemen.[145] On both occasions, the immediate purpose was to support factions among the Duke Town freemen—in 1851 to support the king, Archibong, then ill and supposedly the victim of witchcraft, and in 1852, after Archibong's death, to enforce the application of the poison ordeal upon those suspected of bringing about his death. But on both occasions, the prevention of funeral sacrifices seems to have been a subsidiary motive: in 1851, the settlement negotiated by the British consul after the withdrawal of the slaves included a provision confirming the abolition of human sacrifices; and in 1852 the slaves withdrew only after an agreement that 'no more persons should die, in any way, for the late king', a wording which clearly embraces sacrifice as well as the poison ordeal, and which can perhaps be interpreted in terms of an exchange of guarantees, the slaves agreeing not to require more freemen to take the ordeal and the freemen in turn promising not to sacrifice any slaves.[146] There is some suggestion, indeed, that the slaves' insistence on the application of the poison ordeal in 1852 represented not only the taking of sides in a dispute among the free leaders of Duke Town, but also a desire for vengeance against the freemen who had formerly oppressed them.[147] The success of

144. For examples from Asante, see Bowdich, *Mission,* p. 282; Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years,* vol. II, p. 225. For Old Calabar, see Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years,* pp. 295, 336, 642–3.

145. For the Calabar 'Bloodmen', see esp. Forde, 'Political organization of Old Calabar', pp. 148–57; K. O. Dike, *Trade & Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1957), pp. 154–7; Latham, *Old Calabar,* pp. 93–5; K. K. Nair, *Politics & Society in South Eastern Nigeria 1841–1906: a study of power, diplomacy & commerce in Old Calabar* (Frank Cass, 1972), pp. 48–55.

146. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years,* pp. 477–8, 499.

147. Cf. Hugh Goldie, *Calabar & its Mission* (Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, Edinburgh, 1890), p. 159.

the Duke Town slaves was subsequently emulated by the farm slaves of the Creek Town section of Calabar, who on the death of King Eyo Honesty in 1858 likewise bound themselves by a blood oath to resist human sacrifice, and marched armed on the town to overawe the freemen.[148]

This exceptional resort to collective action by the slaves of Old Calabar may have been inspired by awareness of European disapproval of human sacrifice, which had been articulated by Christian missionaries resident in Calabar since 1846. But in addition, it probably owed much to the special situation of slaves in this society, who had been accumulated in large numbers in a very short period in the early nineteenth century and settled in agricultural communities in the hinterland separate from the town.[149] This situation would evidently have facilitated the development of a collective identity among the farm slaves, in opposition to the freemen in the towns, and thus also the organization of collective action.

In other cases, disputes over human sacrifice produced not a division between ruling groups and the disprivileged, but a division within the ruling group. In Benin, King Ewuakpe, who seems to have died in *c.* 1710, is said by tradition to have provoked a rebellion by his chiefs and people by the extravagant scale of human sacrifices offered at his mother's funeral; ironically, he is also said to have secured his chiefs' submission by sacrificing one of his own wives to the gods.[150]

This rebellion is presumably identical with one recorded in contemporary European sources as having occurred during the 1690s, which was ended by a compromise peace in *c.* 1700.[151] The traditional account is most naturally interpreted as recording a protest against the abuse of human sacrifice (very likely, against the sacrifice of free citizens, rather than merely slaves, criminals and war captives) rather than against the institution itself, but it is noteworthy that a Dutch trader who visited Benin around this time describes Benin religion in some detail without mentioning human sacrifice, which may be held to suggest that the practice had been temporarily suspended.[152] Ryder suggests that this abolition was due to Ewuakpe's initiative, and had indeed been the provocation for the chief's rebellion,[153] but the evidence of the traditions suggests that if human sacrifice was indeed abolished, this was more probably imposed by the chiefs on the king than *vice versa*. In any case, the abolition, if it occurred, was merely temporary. Possibly its reversal can be associated with the restoration of royal power in Benin effected by the crushing of a

148. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years*, pp. 643–4.
149. See esp. Latham, *Old Calabar*, pp. 91, 95.
150. Egharevba, *Short History of Benin*, pp. 39–40.
151. Van Nyendael, 'Description of the *Rio Formosa*', pp. 466–7; cf. Ryder, *Benin*, pp. 114–5, 118–9.
152. Van Nyendael, 'Description of the *Rio Formosa*', esp. pp. 455–6.
153. Ryder, 'The Benin Missions', pp. 251, 254; id., *Benin*, pp. 114–5.

further rebellion of chiefs by Ewuakpe's successor Akenzua in the 1710s.[154]

In Asante also, disputes over human sacrifice played some role in the deposition of two kings during the eighteenth century, but the details are far from being clear. King Kusi Obodum, who was deposed in 1764, is said by one traditional account to have alienated his chiefs and people by forbidding human sacrifices.[155] This, however, is probably a misunderstanding: other accounts stress rather Kusi Obodum's lack of military success,[156] and it seems likely therefore that the true complaint against him (as against Adandozan in Dahomey in 1818) was that he was failing to secure sufficient war captives for sacrifice, rather than that he had banned sacrifices. A similar ambiguity surrounds the disputes which led to the deposition of King Osei Kwame in 1798. A contemporary report of 1797 states that the killing of excessive numbers of people for the funerals of two Asante princes had led to a rebellion against Osei Kwame, which was ended by an agreement that 'the king may no longer kill or sacrifice anyone', but that convicted criminals should instead be sold as slaves at the coast.[157] Here again, however, it seems improbable that this was really a total abolition of human sacrifice (far less of capital punishment), and more likely that it was an attempt to impose limitations and controls on the practice, perhaps specifically to restrict the sacrifice of free citizens. Moreover, an account of these disputes recorded a generation later gives a quite different account, which makes the king rather than his subjects the initiator of reform. This claims that Osei Kwame was deposed for his attachment to Islam, which had led him to prohibit many religious festivals involving human sacrifice, although he still continued to offer human victims to the royal ancestors.[158] This suggests that Osei Kwame was not so much seeking to suppress human sacrifice altogether, as to concentrate its practice upon the cult of the royal ancestors. On this supposition, the to accounts may perhaps be reconciled: Osei Kwame, it may be suggested, sought to enhance royal power by prohibiting or reducing human sacrifice for the non-ancenstral cults, while the opposition in turn sought to impose limits on the ancestral sacrifices. What was at issue was not the legitimacy of human sacrifice as such, but rather the rival claims for victims of the royal ancestor cult and the cults of the gods, which in turn expressed the tension between royal and chiefly power.

The situation which arose in Asante in the aftermath of the British punitive expedition against it in 1874 is somewhat clearer. There was

154. Egharevba, *Short History of Benin*, p. 40; cf. Ryder, *Benin*, pp. 118–9.
155. Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast*, p. 130.
156. e.g. Dupuis, *Journal*, pp. 238–9; Fynn, *Asante*, pp. 84–98.
157. Fynn, *Asante*. p. 137.
158. Dupuis, *Journal*, p. 245; cf. Wilks, *Asante*, p. 253.

then a move to abolish human sacrifice, as was required by the treaty of 1874, and laws to this effect were promulgated in 1876 and 1881. The practical effect of these laws seems to have been, in 1876 to restrict sacrifices to convicted murderers, and in 1881 to abolish public executions at religious ceremonies.[159] In part, of course, these reforms were merely a response to British pressure, born out of a desire for better relations with the British. As the king of Asante himself explained in a letter to the British authorities in 1876: 'The King and people knowing very well that human sacrifice is distressing to the feelings of whitemen, and that their friendship will not go well with them while they keep up that custom, they determined to abolish it'.[160] But more than this was involved. It appears from Ivor Wilks' work that the issue of human sacrifice served as a symbol in a struggle between modernizers and traditionalists in late nineteenth century Asante, between those who supported and those who opposed the reshaping of Asante institutions and values on the model of those of Europe. The discontinuation of the sacrifice of war captives implicit in the law of 1876 served specifically to symbolize the renunciation of the militarist (or, in Wilks' own term, 'imperialist') policies which had earlier been dominant in Asante, but which had been decisively discredited by the defeat of 1874.[161]

An essentially similar dispute arose in Dahomey in the 1840s and 1850s, though in this case it was the traditionalists rather than the modernizers who were to prevail. As noted earlier, King Gezo who acceded to the throne in 1818 at first increased the scale of human sacrifice in Dahomey, but from the 1840s he began to reduce it. In 1847 a British observer was already reporting, with more enthusiasm than accuracy, 'the abolition, in a great measure, of human sacrifice'.[162] What this meant in practice seems to have been the banning of human sacrifices by private individuals, already mentioned, and the ending of capital punishment for certain specific offences.[163] Gezo seems also to have proclaimed an end to the sacrifice of female victims, although European observers believed that such sacrifices were continued in secret.[164] There was apparently also a significant reduction in the number of victims killed publicly at the Annual Customs, which fell to 32 in 1850.[165] In the 1850s, Gezo went further. In 1853 he actually sent a message to the British that he 'would give up the practice of

159. Wilks, *Asante*, pp. 627–30.
160. *Ibid.*, p. 628; cf. the similar message of 1891 quoted by Lewin, *Asante*, p. 162.
161. For the conflict between 'imperialist' (i.e. war-oriented) and 'mercantilist' (trade-oriented) ideologies in Asante, see esp. Wilks, *Asante*, pp. 674–88. Wilks himself, however, does not make the connection between human sacrifice and 'imperialism'.
162. Duncan, *Travels*, vol. 11, p. 305.
163. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 141; vol. II, p. 195.
164. Forbes, *Dahomey*, vol. II, p. 152.
165. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 33; vol. II, p. 171.

human sacrifices altogether'.[166] Although the British authorities were sceptical about his sincerity, it appears that he did carry out his proclaimed intention, insofar as he now killed only criminals, and no longer war captives, at the Annual Customs.[167] Gezo also made arrangements for the reduction, though not for the complete abolition, of human sacrifice at his own funeral, banning in particular the customary mutual slaughter of the royal wives.[168] However, opposition to Gezo's reforming policies was led by a senior chief, the *Mehu*, supported by the heir apparent to the throne.[169] When Gezo died in 1858, there were rumours that his death was a supernatural punishment for his reforms (or alternatively, that he had been murdered by his human oponents), and there was a disputed succession to the throne, reflecting the division of the Dahomian chiefs between a party who are said to have wished to abolish the annual sacrifices and another which wished to retain them. In the event it was the reactionary party which won and installed their candidate, the heir apparent, as king.[170] After 1858, the human sacrifices in Dahomey were not only maintained, but moderately increased in scale, with the killing of war captives as well as of criminals.[171] Although the scale of human sacrifice was to fall again later in the nineteenth century, this was due to the poverty and lack of military success of the monarchy rather than to any desire for reform.[172] It was left to the French to suppress human sacrifice after their conquest of Dahomey in 1892.

Gezo's move to reduce human sacrifice in Dahomey was partly a response to British diplomatic pressure, applied by a series of official and unofficial emissaries from the 1840s onwards, and partly also due to the influence of some of his white associates, notably the Brazilian slave trader

166. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1854 (0.6), vol. LXIII: *Correspondence... relating to the Slave Trade, 1853–4*, item 118, Rear-Admiral Bruce to Secretary of the Admiralty, 25 April 1853.

167. M. Laffitte, *Le Dahomé: souvenirs de voyage & de mission* (Alfred Mame, Tours, 1874), p. 92; Pierre Bouche, *La Côte des Esclaves & le Dahomey* (E. Plon, Nourrit & Cie, Paris, 1885), p. 342.

168. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1865 (3503—I), vol. LVI: *Correspondence ... relating to the Slave Trade, 1864*, item 19, Consul Burton to Earl Russell, 23 March 1864. This account reports that Gezo had made his chiefs to swear 'to disallow the general slaughter which, before his time, always followed his demise': Hargreaves, 'Ideological Interpretation', p. 50, takes this as implying the total abolition of funeral sacrifices, but the account in Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, p. 232, n. 48, shows that only the mutual slaughter of the royal wives was at issue.

169. Repin, 'Voyage au Dahomey', *Etudes Dahoméennes*, 3 (1950), p. 95, reporting the situation in 1856.

170. Bouche, *La Côte des Esclaves*, pp. 342, 368; cf. Laffitte, *Le Dahomey*, p. 92; Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, pp. 235, 299. See also Hargreaves, 'Ideological Interpretation', esp. pp. 47–52; & the forthcoming work of John Reid, cited above, n. 71.

171. 800 human victims were killed for Gezo's funeral; *Parliamentary Papers*, 1859 (2569–1), vol. XXXIV, Sess. II: *Correspondence ... relating to the Slave Trade, 1858–9*, item 17: Consul Campbell to Early of Malmesbury, 7 Feb. 1859. At the Annual Customs, Burton in 1864 counted 39–40 victims, not including sacrifices at the royal tombs which he did not witness: *Mission to Gelele*, pp. 233, 276, 311.

172. Cf. Edouard Foà, *Le Dahomey* (A. Hennuyer, Paris, 1895), p. 289.

Francisco Felix da Souza.[173] But especially in the 1850s, more was at issue than a cosmetic deference to non-Dahomian opinion. It appears that the reduction in human sacrifice was part of a general programme of modernization and accommodation to British pressure which Gezo adopted at this period, the principal feature of which was the renunciation of the slave trade (which Gezo had accepted under pressure of a British naval blockade, in 1852) and an active commitment to commercial agriculture as an alternative source of export earnings. This programme necessarily implied the demilitarization of the Dahomian state, not only because war had been the source of the slaves exported but also because the Dahomian military ethos involved a disdain for agriculture. As Gezo himself had urged, in fending off British pressure for the end of the slave trade in 1850: 'My people are a military people, male and female... I cannot send my women to cultivate the soil, it would kill them. My people cannot in a short space of time become an agricultural people... All my nation, all are soldiers'.[174] In the 1850s, however, Gezo did make the attempt to shift Dahomey's orientation from war to agriculture, suspending the customary annual campaigns and incorporating into the Annual Customs ceremonies endorsing the new agricultural role of the monarchy.[175] The reduction of human sacrifice was a necessary corollary to this policy because of its central association with Dahomian militarism, the Annual Customs involving traditionally the sacrifice of captives taken in war to report the latest military successes to the past kings of Dahomey.

The abortion of Gezo's reform project is extremely instructive, in illustrating the central importance of human sacrifice for the ideology of royal power in Dahomey. There was evidently a fundamental contradiction in Gezo's attempt to lend royal authority to a campaign against human sacrifice, as part of a wider campaign against Dahomian militarism, when royal authority had been traditionally based upon a royal ancestor cult marked by large-scale human sacrifice, which was simultaneously a celebration of Dahomian martial values. Gezo himself was evidently aware of the problem, for in 1848 he told the British, when still evading their proposals for reform: 'He held his power by an observance of the time-honoured customs of his forefathers; and he would forfeit it, and

173. For da Souza's influence, see Forbes, *Dahomey*, vol. I, p. 107. Ironically, when da Souza died in 1849 human sacrifices were offered for his funeral: *ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 32–3.

174. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852 (1455), vol. LIV: *Papers relative to the Reduction of Lagos*, item 13, inclosure 3, Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, on his Mission to Dahomey, entry for 4 July 1850; cf. Forbes, *Dahomey*, vol. II, pp. 187–8.

175. For the elaboration of the Annual Customs to include ceremonies celebrating the role of the monarch as king of 'the bush', i.e. 'of the farmer folk and country as opposed to the city', see esp. Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, pp. 268–9. The analysis by Edna G. Bay, 'On the trail of the Bush King: a Dahomean lesson in the use of evidence', *History in Africa*, **6**, (1979), pp. 1–15, underestimates the relevance of this for the expansion of exports of agricultural produce, as well as assuming implausibly that the institution pre-dates the earliest evidence for it in contemporary sources in the 1850s.

entail upon himself a life full of shame, and a death full of misery, if he rejected them'.[176] In the event these forebodings were substantially justified, even if we concede that Gezo himself was allowed to die a natural death. In the absence of the sort of psychological shock provided in Asante by the catastrophic defeat by the British in 1874, the attempt to subvert the ideological traditions of the Dahomian monarchy proved self-defeating. As Richard Burton, looking back on this episode in the 1860s, was forced to conclude, there was simply no prospect of royal authority in Dahomey bringing an end to human sacrifice: 'To abolish human sacrifice is to abolish Dahomey itself'.[177] Human sacrifice had expanded in scale in West Africa largely through its association with royal authority and with militarism, and for a highly autocratic and militarized kingdom such as Dahomey it was not a remediable excess, but a central and indispensable part of its ideological superstructure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should perhaps be stressed that the historical problem of human sacrifice in West Africa lies not in its mere existence, since human sacrifice in one form or another is attested in early periods of the history of virtually every area of the world. The principal problem is not even the survival of human sacrifice in West Africa into recent times, since forms of human sacrifice enjoyed a comparable longevity elsewhere also: for example, in India, where the burning of widows (formally by their voluntary choice) at their husbands' funerals continued in Bengal until suppressed by the British colonial authorities in 1829, or in Japan, where a famous General committed suicide at the funeral of an Emperor as late as 1912.[178] What requires explanation is rather the practice of human sacrifice on an especially large (and, the evidence suggests, actually increasing) scale in certain particular societies of pre-colonial West Africa. The persistence of religious traditions which, unlike Islam or Christianity, legitimated human sacrifice was evidently a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the scale of human sacrifice practised in societies such as Benin, Dahomey and Asante, and additional factors need to be adduced. While the analysis offered in this article will doubtless require modification in the light of further research, certain general points do seem to be clear. Human sacrifice in West Africa was predominantly funeral sacrifice, offered to deceased humans rather than to gods, and served above all to advertise wealth and

176. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1849 (399), vol. XXXIV: *Missions to the King of Ashantee & Dohomey* [sic], item 2, inclosure, Report by B. Cruickshank, Esq., of his Mission to the King of Dahomey, 9 Nov. 1848.

177. Burton, *Mission to Gelele*, p. 235.

178. For these and other comparative instances, see the general study by Nigel Davies, *Human Sacrifice in History and Today* (MacMillan, 1981), which is, however, disappointingly superficial in its treatment of Africa.

to reinforce royal authority. In addition, in certain instances where sacrificial victims were drawn especially from war captives (as in Dahomey and Asante) human sacrifice appears to have served as part of the ideological apparatus of militarism. Conversely, opposition to human sacrifice within West African societies, in addition to instances of resistance on the part of prospective victims, occasionally arose as a by-product of attempts to check royal autocracy or to challenge the dominance of militaristic ideology. To the extent that the concentration of wealth and political power and the militarization of West African societies was promoted by involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, there is some substance to those views which have sought to link the elaboration of human sacrifice in West Africa to the impact of the slave trade, although it must be conceded that there were other forces than the slave trade which encouraged social differentiation, political centralization and militarism. The implications for the incidence of human sacrifice in West Africa of the decline of the overseas slave trade in the nineteenth century, however, were contradictory: by reducing the cost of slaves in local markets, it made human sacrifice cheaper and thus facilitated a further expansion of scale, but at the same time by undermining the economic basis of militarism it encouraged attempts to redirect energies from slave 'production' to less martial forms of commerce, which might involve (as in Asante and Dahomey) an attack on the institution of human sacrifice. Controversies over human sacrifice thus reflected, at the ideological level, the crisis of adaptation posed for some West African societies by the economic changes of the nineteenth century.