

The Slave Trade, Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin History

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The General Approach*

Crucifixions, human sacrifices, and every horror the eye could get accustomed to, to a large extent, but the smells no white man's internal economy could stand . . . Blood was everywhere; smeared over bronzes, ivory, and even the walls. [1]

Such was the description of Benin City rendered by R. H. Bacon, Commander of the British Punitive Expedition, in 1897. This account, together with Captain Alan Boisragon's, left no doubt but that Benin City was truly no more than a "collection of half-ruined mud houses, not better than the huts in an ordinary native village." [2] Many historians have accepted these first-hand observations as conclusive evidence that Benin had, indeed, undergone a gradual moral and cultural degeneration since the end of the seventeenth century. The first explicit report of this alleged "decline" in the Benin Empire was that of David van Nyendaël, who observed that the houses of Benin City "stand like poor man's corn, widely distant from each other," [3] and that the city itself was desolate and depopulated due to civil war. Nyendaël's report of depopulation, combined with Olfert Dapper's earlier account of large-scale human sacrifices, has been correlated to the expanding European slave trade with West Africa in most historical analyses of Benin's "decline."

A recent shorthand statement of Benin's history best reflects the

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general approach, if not the exact words, of the writings of Henry L. Roth, A. F. Mockler-Ferryman, Alan C. Burns, C. R. Niven, Thomas Hodgkin, and J. D. Fage.

The rise of Benin . . . is closely connected with the European demand for slaves . . . The profits from the trade with the Europeans gave the rulers and merchants of Benin an incentive and also, in the form of firearms, the means, to extend their rule . . . By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the continual warfare was destroying the prosperity and even the structure of the state . . . Large parts of the city were deserted and left to crumble into ruins. Trade, even the trade in slaves, declined, and, as European traders came ever less frequently to the city, so the purpose of slave-raids became increasingly to provide victims for human sacrifices. Eventually, of all the greatness of Benin, all that survived was the unchecked and self-destructive lust of its rulers for power and human booty. [4]

Since this statement was not designed to serve as other than the briefest "introduction" to the history of the Benin Empire, a more detailed analysis of its contents must, *ipso facto*, probe the implications of each phrase. Certainly, none of the above historians, who have approached Benin from the larger perspective of Nigerian or West African history, would claim that their works have exhaustively interpreted the available sources on Benin's past.

This critique of the general approach reassesses the role of the European slave trade in the history of Benin proper. It also argues that two symptoms of Benin's alleged decline, i.e., the ruins and depopulation of Benin City and the rulers' "lust" for indulgences of human sacrifice, have been misinterpreted, by chroniclers as well as historians. The chroniclers' accounts, which have formed the basis of the general approach, must therefore be re-examined, especially in conjunction with Bini oral tradition and ethnographic data. A reappraisal of these sources yields the conclusion that the history of the Benin Empire, between 1486-1897, is more accurately posited as a series of fluctuations and adjustments, rather than as a gradual "rise" and "decline."

THE SLAVE TRADE

The first problem is how "closely connected" the European slave trade was to the "rise" of Benin. Did, in fact, the "profits" and firearms obtained from the slave trade significantly help the early *Oba* to "extend their rule?" According to Egharevba, [5] the territorial extent of the Benin Empire was markedly enlarged under Ewuare the Great (c. 1440-1473), Ozolua (c. 1481-1504), and Esigie (c. 1504-1550). While Egharevba's oral tradition dates the first use of firearms

in Benin from the reign of Esigie, all other evidence supports A. F. C. Ryder's theory that firearms were not imported by the Portuguese at all. [6] The first Dane guns were most likely brought to Benin by the Dutch, during the 1690's. [6] None of the sixteenth-century chroniclers mentions the existence of firearms, while Barbot [7] and Nyendaël, [8] in 1682 and in 1702, specifically omit firearms from their lists of Bini weapons. Available evidence, in short, contradicts the argument that firearms were important in the territorial expansion of the Benin Empire.

But Bini warriors were very successful in battle. Pereira wrote that the Benin of the early sixteenth century "is usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each." [9] It is important to note, however, that these wars were fought by the great warrior *Oba*, Ozolua and Esigie. They were extending the work begun by Ewuare, before the Portuguese first arrived—the work of extracting tribute from the Edo-speaking people who resided near Benin proper. The fact that the Portuguese offered manillas for Benin's prisoners does not logically presuppose that the Bini made war on their neighbors in order to earn manillas. Although, as Ramusio noted, c. 1540, the Bini may have felt they were doing their erstwhile enemies "the best service in the world by sending them to be sold in this way to other lands where there is an abundance of provisions;" [10] nevertheless, it must be recognized that Benin, with the rest of West Africa, "enjoyed a vigorous and separate life, and was by no means entirely dependent upon the transatlantic market." [11]

There is, indeed, no evidence to prove that the slave trade in Benin proper was ever extensive in absolute numbers. Barros, to be sure, reported that "a great number" of slaves were obtained at Gwato, to be bartered at Mina; but he also warned that Gwato was "very unhealthy." [12] Benin's pepper was a most important export until 1506, while ivory was also bought at Gwato. [13] The gold trade at Mina began to bring greater returns, however, and "the factory at Gato was abandoned in the reign of King John III," marking "the end of the Benin-Mina slave trade." [14] Windham, in 1553, and Welsh, in 1588, bought pepper and elephants' teeth at Gwato, but reported the deaths of many men in the "very intemperate" climate. [15] Artus, c. 1600, observed that male slaves were not sold at Gwato, [16] a fact which was later confirmed by Dapper, Barbot, and Nyendaël. [17]

It seems that the slave trade at Gwato, the port of Benin proper, was only active for approximately thirty years after the opening of the Portuguese factory there, in 1486. [18] During the latter part of the sixteenth century, after the Portuguese factors had left, the trade at Gwato became more intermittent, the main items of export then

being pepper and ivory, rather than slaves. [15] Artus, Dapper, Barbot, and Nyendaël, the seventeenth-century chroniclers, all mention Benin's export of dyed cotton cloth, jasper stones, leopard skins, blue coral, pepper, and ivory, as well as *women* slaves. Certainly the slaves obtained from Gwato were an important source of labor for the early Portuguese traders at Mina and São Thome; but, in terms of absolute numbers, that early slave trade was very slight. Furthermore, there is no evidence from the time of Windham, in 1553, to that of Nyendaël, in 1702, that male slaves were exported from Gwato. While it is not very likely that the slave trade contributed significantly to Benin's "rise," from 1486-1702, it should be noted that a relatively stable commerce in human cargo existed, during these times, within the "state" of Benin.

Thus, it becomes necessary to differentiate between the "state" of Benin and Benin proper.¹ For the state, in fact, consisted of many "independent communities" which "were seldom at peace," which enjoyed "very full powers of local government," and which "were left pretty much alone to work out their own destinies". [19] The peoples of the territory between Bonny and Lagos constituted a "state," only insofar as their tribute and services were rendered to the *Oba* of Benin. [19] A careful reading of Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin* shows that most of Benin's wars, after the initial conquests of Ewuare, Ozolua, and Esigie, were fought between the followers of rival claimants to the throne, between neighboring communities, or between the army of Benin proper and that of a recalcitrant community, which had refused to render its due tribute to the *Oba*. It is probable, in connection with the state's role in the slave trade, that the European factors, from the very beginning, dealt more directly with the individual communities than with the *Oba*. The early Portuguese factors, at any rate, may "have employed subordinates, who were sent up other rivers . . . in order to buy slaves and bring them back to the factory." [20] The Itsekiri, for instance, who have occupied the mouth of the Forcados River since the fifteenth century, [21] have consistently engaged in far more active commerce with the Europeans than has the central government, which has held the trading monopoly at Gwato.

The mouth of the Formosa River, on which Gwato is located, was immediately found to be "shallow and full of hidden rocks," [22] the sand bar being only ten feet below the surface at low tide. [23] Approximately ten leagues to the east, however, is the Forcados River, which was soon recognized as a deeper and safer passage-way to the

1. Benin proper should be regarded as an inland area, including that territory which is presently demarcated by the Benin Divisional Boundary.

interior. [24] Pereira reported the existence of a village on the Forcados River, in Warri territory, from which "slaves and cotton cloths" were exported. [24] He said, further, that the country between the Forcados and the Delta was "densely populated" with Ijo, who "are warlike and are rarely at peace," and that their "principal trade" was also in slaves, with "some" ivory. [24] These river communities, from the early sixteenth century, then, engaged in independent slaving operations.

Welsh's voyages, in 1588 and 1590, appear to have been among the last European efforts to negotiate the sand bar at the mouth of the Formosa River. Naturally, the increasing use of the safer Forcados inlet enhanced the position of the Itsekiri, and increased European trade in Arebo at the expense of Gwato. By 1600, Artus wrote that "the Portuguese and Dutch trade most at the Forcado," although, even among the Warri, there were "not above five hundred slaves to be gotten in a year." [25] Artus also noted that the "king" of Warri was "very absolute," [25] and Warri (Itsekiri) independence was confirmed by the subsequent reports of Dapper, Barbot, and Nyendaël. The latter stated that the banks of each inland waterway were "inhabited by a particular nation," each of which paid tribute to the *Oba* of Benin, except the King of Warri, who regarded the *Oba* as a "neighbour and ally." [26] This evidence unanimously supports the conclusion that the European slave trade in the Benin Kingdom, after Portugal's early probes at Gwato, centered almost exclusively on the Itsekiri community. This "Kingdom of Warri," with a more favorable geographic location and a greater receptivity to the teachings of Portuguese missionaries, [27] had achieved "absolute" independence from the Benin "state" by 1600.

Further confusion about the extent of Benin's slave trade results from the reports of slavers themselves who often defined "Benin" as the entire coastal area between "Guinea" and "Angola," during the seventeenth century. [28] Further refinements in the slavers' definition of "Benin" had, by 1799, placed the Benin factory somewhere between Bonny and the Gold Coast, although no Liverpool slavers traded in the entire area during that particular year. [29] Donnan points out that "Benin" often referred to the Bight of Benin, which included the Bight of Biafra, noting that "when a narrower limit is intended it is usually the Bight of Biafra." [30] Thus, European slavers never distinguished the Warri trade from that of Benin, while they often included the coastal entrepôts of the entire Bight within their definition of "Benin." Such imprecision necessarily escalated the number of slaves which were said to have been purchased at "Benin," although even this exaggerated number generally was comparatively moderate. [31]

By 1726, male slaves, but only those from outside Benin proper, were once again being sold at Gwato. [32] In 1758, Captain Harrison managed to get "over the Bar at Benin and found only one vessel there, *viz.* a Portuguese sloop at Waree." [33] Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo who lived in a "remote" province of the Benin Kingdom at this time, said that his people's "subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal." [34] Individual traders would offer firearms, or smoked fish, in return for human cargo. Members of Equiano's community "sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, or some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous." [34] Equiano himself was kidnapped and sold by three enterprising strangers. Captain Landolphe, who traded at Gwato and Arebo between 1769-1792, realized his greatest profits in the ivory trade, although he also earned much from the slave commerce. [35] Dyed cotton cloth, red wood, and palm oil were also exported. Landolphe's is the only account available where the actual embarkation of slaves, females and non-Bini males, is recorded. Captain John Adams, in his journey between 1786-1800, was the last chronicler to witness the existence of the slave trade in Benin proper. He acknowledged, however, that the slave trade in Gwato was less important than the ivory trade there, and it was relatively inconsequential when compared to slaving operations at Bonny or Lagos. [36]

James Fawckner, who went to Gwato to buy palm oil and ivory, noted, again, the "absolute power" of the Warri monarch, and stated that Warri was "a noted place for carrying on the slave trade." [37] In 1830, Captain Owen noted that the Formosa River "possesses very little commerce." [38] His explanation was that "palm oil and ivory are now the only articles exported," and only those rivers "that can admit vessels of burden are resorted to, of which Bonny, Old Callabar, and Camaroons, are the principal." [38] That this "falling off in the trade was severely felt by the people of Benin," [38] was demonstrated by the *Oba's* request, in 1838, that Moffat and Smith settle "that palaver" [39] with the king of England. Although Moffat interpreted the *Oba's* request as a reference to British interference with the slave trade, it is more reasonable to assume that the *Oba* was actually troubled by the general "falling off" in all trade, including ivory and palm oil, which was explained by Captain Owen.

Richard Burton observed, in 1862, that it was "a hopeless task to restore commerce to Benin." [40] Since the Bini wove their own cotton cloth and brewed their own wine, Burton thought that they "seemed to care little for the suspension of trade: it became painfully evident that they could stand the ordeal better than we could." [40] Indeed, *Oba* Adolo accepted the abolition of the slave trade "as a *fait*

accompli, and never even alludes to its revival." [40] Burton also reported that the factors at Gwato were unscrupulous, and he recommended that their factories be abandoned and razed to the ground. [40] Apparently, his suggestion was followed, for Gallwey, in 1893, said that there had been no factories at Gwato "until very recently." [41] Palm oil, agreed Burton and Gallwey, was then the primary export. The latter also noted that the Itsekiri "do their best to obstruct" direct trade with Benin proper, and that the inland waterways leading to Gwato were very dangerous because of snags, rapid current, and sunken trees. [41]

An overall view of the period, between 1486-1897, yields the conclusion that the European slave trade was seldom, if ever, of considerable importance to Benin proper. First-hand reports from Owen and Burton mention the existence of a large-scale slave trade, at Gwato, in previous times; but neither actually witnessed such during their own visits to Benin proper. Captain Landolphe was the only chronicler to record the actual embarkation of slaves at Gwato. There were some periods, during the four centuries of European contact, when slaving operations in Benin proper were relatively more or less intensive. Yet, looking over the entire period, the most stable exports from Benin proper seems to have been ivory, supplemented first by pepper, later by palm oil.

One significant aspect of the European slave trade, however, was its effect in reinforcing the economic autonomy of Benin Kingdom's outlying provinces. The increasing assertiveness of the Itsekiri, in particular, has been noted above—the ultimate effect of their advantageous trading position being manifested in their overt obstruction of all European trade with Benin proper. The case of Lagos might serve as an example of the influence of the European slave trade on Benin's outlying provinces :

As time went on the kings became lax in paying the customary tribute and in 1830 the messengers from Benin were sent back without it. No attempt to enforce payment would have been successful . . . [because] the Europeans engaged in the slave trade would have rendered valuable assistance in repelling any attacks from Benin. [42]

Since the Benin state had always been decentralized, it was the payment of tribute, rather than an alleged change in political hegemony, which was most important to the *Oba*. But it must not be assumed that the due tribute was ever categorically defaulted by an outlying province, and was never collected after its initial renunciation. Rather, as was true throughout Benin's history, the prompt payment of due tribute depended on the relative strength of the central army at any time, as opposed to the forces of a recalcitrant vassal. Thus,

in 1862, Burton noted how the Itsekiri felt toward the payment of tribute to the *Oba*:

When he is strong, the people pay him the customs olden time; when he is weak, they laugh at his beard. [43]

European influence in outlying provinces was most influential when coupled with the obstacles against effective communication within Benin Kingdom, such as swamps and jungles.

Therefore, the general effect of the European slave trade was its reinforcement of the economic self-assertiveness of Benin's outlying provinces, with which the Europeans traded. The slave trade was in no way "closely connected" with the territorial expansion of the Benin Empire, under Ewuare, Ozolua, and Esigie. If traders "came ever less frequently" to Gwato, it was probably because they were less interested in ivory than in slaves, and there is no indication of any slave-raiding activities by Benin's central army. To assert that the cultural and moral "decline" of Benin was due to its insulation from external commerce and ideas, is to assume that there was such a "decline." It makes more sense to recognize that Benin proper did not adapt to highly dynamic external forces as rapidly as did Warri, Bonny, and Lagos. But Benin's very conservatism in such a fluid situation attests more to the depth of her traditional tenets than to any "decline" in her cultural and moral values.

DEPOPULATION

Much of the confusion about the depopulation of Benin City revolves around the conflicting and often self-contradictory reports of Dapper, Barbot, and Nyendaël. Nyendaël should be considered the most accurate reporter of the three, as the works of Dapper and Barbot were "compiled from the observations of others." [44] Dapper, whose informants themselves may never have visited Benin, [45] wrote that Benin City "hath thirty very strait and broad streets, each a hundred and twenty feet wide . . . [and] the houses stand built in rows, in good order close by one another, as here in Europe." [46] Accompanying this idealized description of Benin City was an equally imaginative etching, showing hills in the background which do not actually exist. [48] Artus, a more accurate authority, [44] had indeed mentioned a broad and open street, separating the town from the court complex, and he had mentioned that the houses were built in "good order," [49] but he made no such extravagant statements, or etchings, as Dapper's. Barbot, whose voyages to Guinea in 1678 and 1682 probably did not take him to Benin City, [44] confirms

Dapper's description, almost too faithfully. Nyendaël's "generally unflattering" impressions, [50] on the other hand, constitute the landmark from which the depopulation and cultural "decline" of Benin City is generally dated.

Nyendaël's testimony, then, is worth examining. He tells of a tiny, depopulated Gwato, which had been left to ruins by civil wars, but which was being rebuilt. [51] This impression was similar to that of Artus, [52] and may well be the best indication of Gwato's insignificance, and Arebo's corresponding preeminence, in external trade. Nyendaël's explanation for the ruins and depopulation of Benin City seems fairly valid in general, if not in specifics; because Egharevba and Bradbury have confirmed that the period of Nyendaël's visit was one of tension and rebellion within Benin proper. [53] Nyendaël did, nevertheless, commend the Bini's dye-making processes, their soaps, and their cotton cloths; and he asserted that "the king hath a very rich income." [54] He also stated that Benin City was "at least four miles large. The streets are prodigiously long and broad, in which continual markets are kept." [54] The houses that were in use were "large and handsome, with clay walls," and their "architecture" was "passable." [54] Nyendaël's testimony leaves little doubt that the accounts of Dapper and Barbot omitted some of the less fanciful realities of Benin City. On the other hand, Nyendaël's "poor man's corn" passage, quoted in the first paragraph, has obscured his more favorable impressions of Benin City. The ruins of which he spoke are most likely the deserted adobe homes of the supporters of a rival claimant, or of a "street-king." [54] These unoccupied homes could easily have been partly washed away by heavy rains or a tornado. At any rate, Nyendaël's report of Benin City, during a particular time of internal stress, should not imply that he witnessed an explosion which had been building up for two centuries. Rather it is an interesting account of a period of disharmony in Benin proper—only one of many such periods alluded to by Egharevba.

William Smith found, in 1726, that "the greatest kingdom in Guinea is that of Benin." [55] He said that Benin City's markets "are kept very clean" and that "the houses are large and handsome;" [55] but he guardedly added that the city "has long continued depopulated." [55] Equiano, an Ibo, reported that the Benin kingdom was the "most considerable" in all of Guinea, "both as to extent and wealth." [56] Landolphe, who spent more time in Benin kingdom than any other chronicler, observed that the houses in Benin City were well-constructed, and that the population of that metropolis might be as much as eighty thousand. [57] Adams, at approximately the same time, wrote of an irregularly built town of

about fifteen thousand people. [58] And Lt. King, in 1820, witnessed a city once again depopulated by civil war, "the habitable part being only two or three miles in circumference." [59] He also said, however, that "the streets are long and straight; the houses, regularly built . . . [and] the houses of persons of distinction are very neat and very fashionable." [59] Fawckner, also, described a "very large" market and houses which were "decidedly superior." [60]

Moffat and Burton were much impressed by the presence of skulls in Benin City; and the latter said, in 1862, that there did exist "streets broader than Parisian squares." [61] Although Burton wrote that the city itself was "in a most ruinous condition," [61] he was visiting it in August, at the height of the rainy season. Jacolliot's estimate of Benin City's population, in 1879, was fifty thousand; [62] but Captain Gallwey, in 1893, found only "a straggling collection of houses, built in clusters here and there, in little or no order." [63] The comments of Boisragon and Bacon, from their experience of 1897, seemed to confirm Gallwey's observation. [62]

Since the time of Artus, then, there seems to have existed at least one broad and long street, the one dividing the court complex from the town. Succession struggles, during which factions of townspeople probably supported rival candidates, led to corresponding emigrations by those who supported the rejected claimant. [64] The adobe houses of the emigrated people would then be beaten down by rain, leaving the appearance of ruins. The homes themselves were probably "irregularly" built, although such information hardly offers an index to cultural decline, unless straight rows of houses are thought to denote innate cultural superiority, and unless Dapper's testimony is uncritically accepted. Chroniclers who described the physical condition of Benin City never stayed in that city for an extended period of time. They never became acclimated to the unique atmosphere of Benin City, being invariably disappointed when they compared it to the accounts of Dapper and Barbot, or to some of the more westernized cities on the Guinea coast. Raymond Tong, in 1958, said that his initial impression of Benin City was that "it was very ugly," but he gradually recognized that its "mudwalled dignity" really fit in with the landscape. [65] He thought that earlier visitors "had perhaps seen all too vividly the red, and had been unable to notice the green of the place. Had they remained longer they might have noticed it." [65] Benin City, indeed, appears to have been depopulated from time to time, as Nyendael and King reported, during and immediately after periods of civil strife. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Benin was ever a large town, and, in times of relative peace and stability, its population could be counted in five digits. The chroniclers' reports of ruins and depopulation in Benin City, in short, offer

no conclusive evidence of a cultural decline, which has been an alleged symptom of the ultimate destruction of "the prosperity and even the structure of the state."

HUMAN SACRIFICES

There is little doubt that human sacrifices were an integral part of the Benin state religion from very early days. Barros, for instance, observed that "the king of Beny was very much under the influence of his idolatries," [66] and Pereira said that Benin life "is full of abuses and witchcraft and idolatry, which for brevity's sake I omit." [67] Leo Africanus, in the early sixteenth century, recorded that the Bini "live in idolatry, and are a rude and brutish nation; notwithstanding that their prince is served with such high reverence . . . [that on] his death his chief favourites count it the greatest point of honor to be buried with him." [68] Ramusio, c. 1540, said that "all are anxious for the honor" to be buried with the *Oba*, as this was an "ancient custom" in Benin. [69] Human sacrifices, then, existed long before the demands of European slavers could have created an "unchecked and self-destructive lust" in Benin's rulers for "human booty."

The *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, which seems to have replaced the *Uzama Nihinron* as the most effective check on the *Oba*'s political power, [70] was created by Ewuare, before the coming of the Europeans. [71] Since the senior members of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* transacted "most of the day-to-day administration of the kingdom", [70] these men were probably the "fetish priests" or the "ju-ju men" which so impressed European visitors from the time of Pereira to that of Gallwey. In other words, both human sacrifices and "fetish priests" existed in Benin prior to the beginnings of the European slave trade, and prior to the great military victories of Ozolua and Esigie.

Later chroniclers' reports of human sacrifices and the influence of "fetish priests" seemed to vary individually, according to the sensibilities and writing style of each witness. Neither "fetish priests" nor human sacrifices were recorded by Windham, Welsh, and Artus, while both of the former found the Bini to be friendly, "very gentle and loving" people. [72] The more verbose and sensational accounts by Dapper and Barbot described "horrible" human sacrifices, [73] attending the funerals of important people. This blood-letting, which allegedly honored the "Devil," [73] did not seem to affect the Dapper-Barbot thesis that Benin City was "very well-peopled" and that "no town in *Guinea* can compare to it, for extent and beauty." [74] Nyendaël, who recorded nothing about human sacrifices, did state

that three powerful lords governed "in the king's name, [and] they act as they see fit." [75]

Smith, Landolphe, and Adams seemed to feel, generally, that "human sacrifices are not so frequent here as in some parts of Africa." [76] Landolphe and Adams attested to the supreme power and authority of the *Oba*, while Smith called Benin "the most potent kingdom of Guinea." [77] Baron de Beauvais, who accompanied Landolphe in 1786, provided the first eye-witness account of human sacrifice in Benin proper, in his description of the death of fifteen men during a religious ceremony. [78] He wrote spectacularly, but not convincingly, about rumors of more wholesale slaughters, pointing out their "superstitious," or religious, orientation. [78] Neither King, Fawckner, nor Owen regarded the practice of human sacrifice in Benin so noteworthy as to comment on its abuses. Fawckner, indeed, witnessed his most "shocking and most revolting spectacle" [79] at Benin in an ordeal, where a man's thumb was burned. It should be noted that the best-documented period of human sacrifices in Benin City, the 1780's, was the one in which the chroniclers have unanimously attested to *Oba* Akengbuda's untrammelled political power. Landolphe, Beauvais, and Adams mentioned no fetish priests who might have unduly influenced "one of the most powerful rulers of Africa." [78] Furthermore, the more experienced travellers, who have provided the most trustworthy accounts, i.e., Windham, Artus, Nyendaël, Landolphe, and Adams, did not regard Bini human sacrifices as excessive, [76] and, except in the 1780's, as not even noteworthy.

Moffat, in 1838, made no mention of a mysterious set of fetish priests, who were supposedly dispatching the central army to obtain captives for sacrificial purposes. His singular contribution to the literature of Benin's "moral degradation" was his description of the *Arho Ogiuwu*, a veritable "Golgotha", a place where human skulls were heaped up and bleaching in the sun." [80] Most affronted by this scene were Moffat's sensibilities, as he was "disgusted" by the sight of turkey-buzzards feeding on the carcasses of the beheaded, and he was sickened by the "insufferable" stench. [80] Burton, in 1862, also was physically repulsed by the *Arho Ogiuwu*, as well as by the very streets of the city, in which "green and mildewed skulls [were] lying about like pebbles." [81] Benin City, he said, "has a fume of blood, it stinks of death." [81] He admitted, however, that the people showed "no emotion whatever" concerning the unfortunate victims. Jacolliot, in 1879, witnessed the sacrifice of two girls at a religious ceremony, and reported that the carcasses of the *Arho Ogiuwu* were those of criminals and prisoners, who had been reconciled to their death. [82] Gallwey, in 1893, stated that "the king is all-

powerful, though he would appear to be somewhat in the hands of his big men, and very much tied down by fetish customs." [83] He also observed that the "Golgotha" was really "the place where all criminals' bodies were deposited." [83] The impressions of Commander Bacon and Captain Boisragon have been noted in the opening paragraph; but Bacon also noted that "every person who was able . . . indulged in a human sacrifice," [84] because—as Boisragon deduced—the Bini were fearful "that they would be attacked" by the British. [85]

Thus, observers between 1838-1897 documented the moral degeneracy of Benin, by describing the skulls and carcasses, feasted on by turkey-buzzards, which adorned the great open field at the entrance to the city. While Burton [86] and Gallwey both commented on the influence of the members of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, neither they nor any other chronicler stated that the *Oba's* position was merely nominal. Akengbuda, as has been noted above, seems to have exercised despotic powers, while Overami, in 1897, probably trusted his advisors' judgment too readily. [87] The witnesses' accounts themselves provided ample evidence of Bini belief in the religious efficacy of human sacrifice, and local indifference toward the sights and smells of the *Arho Ogiuwu*. There is some confusion as to whether the mass sacrifices of 1897 were initiated voluntarily, [84] or by Overami's order; [87] and an explanation of the underlying tenet of Bini religion, explaining their attitude toward human sacrifice, is therefore in order. First, however, two more observations of British visitors should be noted. Cyril Punch, who visited Benin c. 1890, maintained that "the actual number of [sacrificial] victims has been exaggerated," [88] and the British District Officer, in 1914, said that "the Bini do not appear to have been a blood thirsty nation, in spite of their power, but on the contrary a courteous and friendly people." [89]

Before the 1890's, all human sacrifices reported were in conjunction with the funerals of great men, gods, or annual ceremonies:

Few human sacrifices were allowed except at Benin [City and] . . . all the chief ones were offered to the *Obba's* ancestors, who, it was thought, ruled the nation and secured its well-being. [90]

A. K. Ajisafe has said "it was considered necessary and honourable to kill a few men (slaves or convicts) for the funeral of a big man (e.g. the *Oba* or any chief or rich man)." [91] P. A. Talbot, however, has written the most complete ethnographic analysis of Bini sacrificial customs:

At Benin the worship of the *Obba's* forefathers corresponds almost to the state religion and celebration of the rites form the chief ceremonies

of the year. It was from the sacrifices . . . in connection with these, that the Bini Empire obtained its partly undeserved reputation for blood-thirsty cruelty. [90]

The human sacrifices at funerals, to certain gods, and at annual ceremonies were not excessive in number nor unjust in choice of victims. [92] And these sacrificial victims were the only ones,

. . . with the exception of some at the order of 'doctors' when the empire was in peril, as for instance, at the Benin Expedition of 1897, when several victims were slaughtered 'to keep the war from the city.' The impression which the members of that expedition carried away from Benin town, as the City of Blood, was no doubt largely due to the number of corpses seen by them in the *Arho Ogiuwu* . . . which they thought were the bodies of slaughtered victims, whereas they were really those of executed criminals and of persons who had died from infectious disease, etc., to whom decent burial was denied. If also, as stated, all the human sacrifices consisted of criminals, these would probably have preferred death as an offering to the gods or ancestors than in any other form . . . The most abhorrent to modern ideas were the sun and rain sacrifices in which the victims were tied to the branches of trees, but it must be remembered that these were always wizards and witches, and so guilty, in native eyes, of the worst possible crime. The idea of Benin rule, therefore, as one of blood-stained despotism appears at variance with the truth. [90]

Historians cannot afford to neglect Talbot's ethnographic interpretation of Benin's sacrificial practices, even if such an interpretation explicitly contradicts the general historical thesis, about the "self-destructive lust" of Benin's rulers for "power and human booty." Benin's practices of human sacrifice cannot be judged on the Western scale of values.

Finally, it should be noted that none of the chroniclers' accounts present an eye-witness testimony to a sacrificial ceremony in which more than fifteen men were executed. The sensational stories that grew out of reports by Dapper, Barbot, and Beauvais were based primarily on rumor and speculation. The moral and physical reactions of the Victorian chroniclers to Benin's "Golgotha" were unaccompanied by any eye-witness accounts of mass slayings. That skulls and carcasses remained in open air, in the *Arho Ogiuwu*, seemed natural to the Bini, whose burial customs differed from those of the Europeans. R. E. Bradbury's concise introduction to Bini religion best summarizes the actual sacrificial occasions, and the usual number of victims required on each occasion. [93] His evidence, together with Talbot's, points to a limited, ritual custom of human sacrifice in Benin proper, but lends no substantiation to the blood-curdling rumors reported by Dapper, Barbot, and Beauvais. The mass sacrifices of the 1890's, ironically, were partially occasioned by Bini apprehensions about British plans for enforcing the stoppage of Benin's human sacrifices!

CONCLUSION

The above analysis, of Benin's slave trade, the ruins and depopulation of her capital city, and Bini sacrificial customs, has dealt with some of the hypotheses of the general historical approach to Benin's history. It has been shown that the European slave trade had very little effect on developments within Benin proper, and that the cultural and moral symptoms of Benin's alleged decline have been overemphasized. If, indeed, Benin proper was not "closely connected" with the slave trade, if firearms were not important in her territorial expansion, if Benin City was not characterized by ruins and depopulation, and if human sacrifices were not excessive, then the general historical approach to the "rise" and "decline" of the "state" of Benin must be reappraised. More specifically, an alternative explanation of Benin's history must be advanced in contradiction to the general assertion that, by 1700, Nyendaël's time, "continual warfare was destroying the prosperity and even the structure of the state."

But, since the "state" of Benin was thoroughly decentralized, it existed only insofar as outlying provinces paid their due tribute to the *Oba*. The fluid situation in which the Benin "state" existed defies precise definition of the extent of that state:

It is impossible at the present time to determine the extent of the Benin empire at any particular period in the past . . . The frontiers were continually expanding and contracting as new conquests were made and as vassals on the borders rebelled and were reconquered. [94]

The extent of the state of Benin, the *Oba*'s control over frontier territories, was in constant flux, as tribute was paid or refused by certain border "vassals." But the long reigns of Akenzua I, Eresoyen, Akengbuda, Osemwede, and Adolo [95] suggest that the institutional structure of Benin proper was just as stable after Nyendaël's visit as beforehand.

The conclusions of the general historical approach rest largely on the accounts of European slavers and chroniclers, accounts which have been neither critically nor exhaustively explored. Thus, Commander Bacon's report, from which has been extracted the opening sentence of this article, also contains the important observation that Benin City "was not without its beauty of a sort . . . It seemed a place suggestive of peace and plenty." [96] Failure to correlate conflicting, and often self-contradictory, evidence from the chronicles with oral tradition and ethnography, has led to a vague and inadequate explanation for the history of this important area. The forthcoming

work by the *Scheme for the Study of Benin History* will indubitably clarify the picture.

Meanwhile, a workable alternative to the shorthand explanation of Benin's history has been advanced by R. E. Bradbury:

Written accounts of Benin describe periods of fluctuating power and prosperity disturbed by civil wars which appear to have been caused by disputes over the succession to the kingship . . . Between periods of dissension the kingdom seems to have shown remarkable powers of recovery . . . The history of Benin, then, is one of alternating periods of territorial expansion and contraction in accordance with the degree of power and authority at the centre. [94]

But even Bradbury's analysis is not free from reference to the pivotal date of Nyendaël's visit; and his work is not historically oriented. While the Benin Scheme's monograph will undoubtedly explain Benin's history in more specific terms, the larger problem of terminology will continue to plague African historians—especially the writers of general histories—until more accurate phrases are found to describe discontinuous cultural phenomena.

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