"Arbitrary rule" and the Eighteenth-Century Discourse of Guinea

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Introducing the English edition of Anders Sparrman's *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope* in 1785, the anonymous translator remarks: "Now every authentic and well-written book of voyages and travels is, in fact, a treatise of experimental philosophy" (1.27). By the late eighteenth century Africa had become a particularly popular focus and subject for such speculation. The *Critical Review* wrote in October 1792: "To explore the internal parts of Africa seems now to be the great subject of the philosopher, the botanist, and the politician" (qtd. in James 19). But the phenomenon was hardly new, and in this paper I shall attempt to show how a particular late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century discourse of Africa shaped certain later Enlightenment preoccupations which preceded the abolition of slavery. My argument will be that the obsessive concern in African travelogues of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the apparent "cruelty" and "despotism" of African forms of rule was not the expression of purblind ethnocentricity that it is now often taken to be, but was rather the imprint of an anxious contemporary European polemic surrounding the European transition from absolutist to constitutional monarchies.

Travel writing lends itself readily to the speculative survey. Travelling into and through the unknown is essentially a hermeneutic process, a reading of the unfamiliar which thus becomes a constitutive process, in which the "eye/I" of traveller/narrator constructs, as much as discovers, the object of investigation. While, as we shall see, it is now taken to be a truism that such a condi-

tioned imagination would either discern in a strange society only what was definably "other" or reduce it to an undistinguished "same," my argument will also be that individual travellers often intended more subtle discriminations and engaged in more search- ing speculation than they are now credited with by a modern critical readership intent on discounting the validity of colonial discourses. Enlightenment travelogues might well tell us more about the societies from which travellers came than about those they visited, but the encounter could lead as often to dialogue as to dismissal.

The speculative nature of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century African travel writing was encouraged also by the nature of European contact with Africa during this period. The writings we are concerned with here were produced during what may be called the great lull in the European expropriation of Africa (Penrose viii). The process of the strategic annexation of Africa's vital coastal areas culminated in 1652 when the Dutch occupied the Cape of Good Hope. For the next century and a half European exploration of Africa settled down to a much slower process of consolidation, small-scale expeditions and encroach- ments, and the beginnings of ethnographic research. Major Afri- can exploration re-commenced only at the end of the eighteenth century, inspired by, for instance, the founding of the African Asso- ciation in 1788.

In the meantime the want of major new travelogues was filled, first, by massive compendia of existing travel accounts, such as the work of the Churchills in 1704, John Harris's in 1705, and Thomas Osborne's and Thomas Astley's in 1745, or, second, by equally massive ethnographic descriptions extrapolated from ear- lier travelogues. A first in the field was Olfert Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* (1668), translated in 1670 by John Ogilby as *Africa: being an Accurate Description*. It was followed by many others, the *Atlas Geographus* of 1714, the several works, published between 1728 and 1732, by Jean Baptiste Labat on West Africa, Jean Barbot's *Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (1732), and Peter Kolben's work on the Cape of Good Hope of 1719 being of particular note. These "manners and morals" descriptions inevitably became eval-

uative and comparative judgements rather than mere records of the African polities encountered.

Furthermore, the assemblages of travels were no longer merely compiled, as they had been in the prototypes of Richard Hakluyt (1598) and Samuel Purchas (1625), but were increasingly subject to editing and reshaping. John Harris set about editing out what he regarded as tedious repetitions in the travels he collected. His successor, John Campbell, took the process much further and in the second edition of Harris's work (1744) homogenized all the travels into a single third-person narrative, thus effectively destroying the authenticity of the originals. Thomas Astley's editor, John Green, adopted a similar strategy, but in the words of John Pinkerton, whose *General Collection of Voyages and Travels* of 1808 reverts to the reprinting of unvarnished originals, Green's plan led to

> needless repetition . . . and superfluous anxiety about the pretended accuracy of frivolous or false information. . . . Amidst great pretensions to accuracy [the work collapses into] solemn discussions of mere trifles . . . and minute and microscopic balancing of one straw against another. (Preface)

Pinkerton was quite right. In the attempt to lay before the reader an encyclopaedic overview, both the compendia of travels and the purportedly analytical descriptions of African polities often became burdensome exercises in supererogation, piling up details without understanding, mediating the authenticity and authority of the original experience through a grid of Eurocentric speculation. Thus an account originally marked by novel insight and genuine questioning could be flattened out into corroborative pastiche.

Modern scholarship has stigmatized most of these texts as transmitting little of value about Africa and as projecting rather an image of Africa and the African as always and only the opposite to Europe and the European. An influential article by Katherine George in 1958 identified in ethnographic travelogues from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries a consistent tendency "to emphasize the strange, the shocking, and the degrading qualities of the peoples and cultures they deal with, and thus to emphasize the gulf between the civilized and primitive worlds" (63). These re-

marks have ever since determined the nature of critiques aimed at the historical European discourse of Africa, giving rise to an essentially punitive and dismissive stance towards a whole body of suspect colonial texts. Philip Curtin's *The Image of Africa* (1964) claims that "the reporting [of Africa] often stressed precisely those aspects of African life that were most repellent to the West and tended to submerge the indications of a common humanity" (23). Thus, the literary construct of the "noble savage" was, as Wylie Sypher had already suggested in 1942, as unauthentic and as racially determined as that of the "brutal savage."

> Both represent opposite poles on the single scale of English values. ... All the virtues of character esteemed by the British — courage, a sense of honour, truthfulness, refinement, intelligence — are embodied in the one; the other epitomizes the non-valued opposites — cravenness, dishonesty, gluttony, and stupidity.

So wrote Alta Jablow in a 1963 thesis (44) afterwards incorporated in *The Africa that Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa* (1970), her joint work with Dorothy Hammond.

From here it has been a short step to the current orthodoxy expressed in Abdul R. JanMohamed's concept of "the economy of Manichean aesthetics" (1983, 1985), which posits a series of simplistic binary opposites invoked as an ideological shorthand in colonial texts dealing with relations between white and black. Hugh Ridley has put it most bluntly:

> Colonial literature [is] an exclusively European phenomenon with next to nothing worthwhile to say about other races or cultures. No more than antisemitic literature can be used as a handbook to Jewish culture should colonial literature be treated as a source-book on the Third World. (2-3)

It is, of course, not difficult to back such allegations with ample evidence from the literature. Wholesale calumny of Africans is not hard to find, but it is also true that such comments, and the legitimate abhorrence the modern reader feels for them, have obscured a quite different and much more complex polemic subsumed in these writings. The apparently formless and exhaustive accumulation of detail and incident in the typical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century African travelogue or compendium of travel,

is frequently inhabited by a sub-text of social and political curiosity
and exchange in which the novitiates are often as much the Euro-
peans as the Africans.

Jean Labat's favourable description in 1730 of the people of
Cape Mesurado indicates such an alternative colonial discourse,
which was not merely fanciful and fitful:

> These people are large and strong, well-built, they have a proud
> and martial bearing, are brave and intrepid, as their neighbours
> as well as Europeans who have truckled with them and tried to
> maltreat them have discovered. They have spirit, they think well,
> speak to the point, know their own interests perfectly, and . . . they
> value these [interests] remarkably, firmly, yet with politeness.
> Their lands are cultivated with care, there is order and pattern in
> everything they do.   (*Voyage* 1.120)

These are not savages, either "brutal" or "noble," but complex,
fully rounded people, and they can be found everywhere in African
travel writing of the period.

Two aspects of African culture drew repeated and even exag-
gerated attention: the one was the nature of African kingship and
government, the other was African funeral custom — one a cen-
tral political issue, the other an indicator of religious belief. I shall
concentrate here only on the first of these. When one places the
many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of African
funeral customs and attitudes to death in the context of the con-
temporary European abandonment of revelatory and enthusiastic
faiths in favour of rational theism, much of what now seems merely
sensational and obsessive takes on clearer significance; that discus-
sion, however, must await another occasion.

English political discourse of the second half of the seventeenth
century was dominated by the spectre of "arbitrary rule." The
Puritan revolution, followed by an uneasy restoration of an un-
regenerate monarchy which precipitated the exclusion crisis of the
1680s and, hence, the establishment of constitutional monarchy,
ensured that the term was freely used by both radicals and royal-
ists to describe each other's excesses. At issue was the notion of
sovereignty: who bestowed it, who exercised it, and how unlimited
was it? Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), which in many ways
directed the debate, was emphatic in some of its answers, vague in

others. Hobbes explained that there were only three kinds of government: Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy; in immoderation, they would become Tyranny, Oligarchy, and Anarchy (97). But he also argued that whoever held sovereignty, however it may have been bestowed, had to hold it absolutely (178), since the primary reason for "the dissolution of commonwealths" was the "want of absolute power" (171-72). Once a polity had acceded sovereignty to either monarch or assembly, that power was unchallengeable, since "nothing the Sovereign Representative can do to a subject, on what pretence soever, can properly be called injustice or injury, because every subject is author of every act the sovereign doth" (112). It would appear that Hobbes's attempt to define sovereignty in such a way as to prevent arbitrary rule was a sure recipe to promote it. Since it was also Hobbes who famously defined human life in its natural state as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (65), philosophic travellers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who turned to societies that seemed to fit his description may be taken to have been alert to the vexed question of sovereignty and the exercise of power.

The New Oxford English Dictionary cites 1642 as the earliest recorded date for "arbitrary" in the specifically political sense of "unrestrained in the exercise of will; of uncontrolled power or authority; absolute," but it was probably Dryden who, in the 1680s, gave this sense its most noted currency. He accepted Hobbes's argument that sovereignty could be invested in either monarch or assembly, but wrote in the "Epistle to the Whigs," prefacing *The Medal* (1682), his second attack on Shaftesbury, that "All good subjects abhor the thought of Arbitrary Power, whether it be in one or many." Having already attacked the Exclusionists in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) as seeking to invoke a principle that would place the polity at the mercy "of each unbounded Arbitrary Lord" (1.760), he proceeds in *The Medal* to show how Shaftesbury attempted, first, to "seduce" his sovereign into "Arbitrary sway" (1.78) and, on failing, then to incite "an Arbitrary Crowd" (1.142). But Shaftesbury's designs are defeated, since, as Dryden concludes in his ideal of English moderation,

Our Temp'rate Isle will no extremes sustain,
Of pop'lar sway, or Arbitrary Reign:

But slides between them both into the best;
Secure in freedom, in a Monarch blest.   (ll. 248-51)

Clearly, however, a sovereignty that had to allow for both abso-
lute power and the subject's freedom could not be as unproblem-
atic as this. The resultant unease informs most contemporary
constitutional discussions. It is also reflected in many a traveller's
account of African systems of government. Often, of course, the
response was one of straight dismissal. Barbary, for instance, was
held in a low political esteem that went back to the crusades.
George Sandys in 1615 described Morocco and the other Barbary
states as "once the seats of most glorious and triumphant empires
. . . now through vice and ingratitude become the most deplored
spectacles of extreme misery" (Dedication). John Windhus, visit-
ing the same countries in 1721, more than a century later, reflects:

> The happiness enjoyed by the people of England is the preservation
> of those laws which give them liberty, and make the face of nature
> smile among us; while other nations, especially that which is the
> subject of this book, labour under oppression and the arbitrary will
> of a single person.   (Pinkerton 15.442)

Yet another three-quarters of a century later, William Lempriere
writes:

> The empire of Morocco, in all its parts, presents a striking picture
> of the wretched policy and miserable consequences of despotic
> government. . . . Of the mode in this despotic government of seiz-
> ing persons at the arbitrary pleasure of a governor, an Englishman
> can scarcely form an idea.   (109, 13)

Of Moroccan government, then, the English view remained
essentially condemnatory and static throughout at least two cen-
turies. Indeed, the extent to which it was no longer an actual
society observed by the English visitor but rather a set exemplum
for political censure is suggested by Lempriere's rather ponderously
Johnsonian conclusions on the subject of "arbitrary power":

> Man is a creature not formed for arbitrary power. So limited are
> his views, so variable his disposition, so violent and tyrannical his
> passions, that the wisest of men would certainly not wish for abso-
> lute authority, and the best, if entrusted with it, would probably
> abuse it.   (232)

Part of the problem was that the Islamic governments of North Africa were close enough in character and structure to their European counterparts to lend themselves readily to such parodic and cautionary interpretation. But the political structures of coastal West Africa — or Guinea as it was then known — were much less familiar and hence much less easily assessed.

From the very beginning of the colonial encounter Europeans had had problems with how to name and describe coastal West African systems of government. Terms such as "kingdom," "king," "duke," "prince" were freely used, terms which imposed European expectations that could not be satisfied. But by the seventeenth century the problem had been recognized. Olfert Dapper dismissed in 1668 the notion of Guinea as a single kingdom, and insisted that, on the contrary, there was "a great multitude" of independent peoples between "Melli" (more or less the present Guinea Bissau) and "Benin" (the Niger estuary): "There are every eight or ten miles a particular country or people, each under its own king, with no other king exercising any sovereignty over them" (381). What Dapper was addressing here was the very un-European and perennially puzzling system of village-based acephalous communities networked into larger jural polities (Davidson 77) that could involve hundreds of villages and thousands of people (Bennett 13-14). Accordingly, Dapper sets out to examine each of these kingships in detail, specifically mentioning whether power is "volkomen en onbepaelt" (total and undefined [408]) or in any way conferred, limited, or accountable. Typically, however, such investigation is not conducted analytically or principially, but descriptively and anecdotally, thus often obscuring in detail or narrative the political gist of the discourse.

At other times what is observed is not understood, or is misrepresented. So, for instance, Dapper, after giving a detailed account of the complex ceremonial relationships between king and subjects among the Jolof or Wolof, remarks cryptically: "De wetten des lands zijn zeer weinig, en by hen wort alleen de wet der natuuren onderhouden" (The laws of the land are very few, and among them only the law of nature is observed [345]). This is apparently intended as a complimentary comment, albeit naïve, suggesting a simply but effectively organized polity. Two years

later, however, Ogilby translates this passage in such a way as to give "the law of nature" a specifically pejorative Hobbesian sense: "There are no peculiar or municipal laws; for indeed the Law or Light of Nature is the only rule they steer by" (352). Later still, in a popular French redaction of Dapper's work, Pherotee de la Croix, leaning on Ogilby's English version, renders the whole of Dapper's careful account and conclusion as follows: "Ils ont fort peu de Loix; ils ne suivent que ce que leur dictent les lumières obscurcies de la Nature par une grande ignorance et par beaucoup de mauvaises coutumes" (2.435) (They have very little law; they merely follow what the obscure lights of Nature dictate to them through great ignorance and many wicked customs [translation mine]). Such erosions of originally favourable insights can be multiplied without difficulty.

Anthony J. Barker has suggested that throughout the period under discussion, European condemnation of African forms of government was pervasive though inconsistent, changing according to developments in European political priorities. Thus, in the early seventeenth century, African ruling structures, measured against varieties of absolutist European monarchies, were deemed to be formless or non-existent; by the eighteenth century, judged by Enlightenment ideals of moderate constitutional monarchies, African governments are presented as "unmitigated despotism" (142).

But the travel literature of the period suggests that there was rather more careful debate and diversity about the matter than such an oppositional hypothesis suggests. There is perhaps another progression over the same period that is as instructive as Barker's proposal. I am referring to the move from an allegorical reading of travel to a speculative impulse in exploration: the move from Samuel Purchas' credo in 1613 that "Religion is my proper aim" ("To the Reader") to Sparrman's translator's claim that a proper travelogue is really "a treatise of experimental philosophy." Purchas described and conceived of his travels as pilgrimages, ultimately illustrating a Puritan conception of a historically revealed divine plan and a cosmic encounter between Christian good and pagan evil. Within such a framework, "pagan" customs could only be admitted in order to condemn themselves.

But as the revolution of the saints failed, as divine kingship itself was challenged, and as Hobbes, followed by Locke, introduced more pragmatic considerations as well as doubts into a world view based exclusively on revelatory religion, strange polities may no longer have presented themselves to the European view as just damned errors. True, doubt did not necessarily produce a broadening of minds. On the contrary, George L. Mosse has argued that European racism owes its origins substantially to the relationist zeal of the eighteenth century to map and categorize mankind (18-20). Later still, the temptation to apply a Linnaean taxonomy to human races not only encoded and exaggerated difference, but generated hierarchic structures which in their crudest form would emerge in pro-slavery texts such as John Matthews' in 1788:

> Trace the manners of the natives, the whole extent of Africa from Cape Cantin to the Cape of Good Hope, and you find a constant and almost regular gradation in the scale of understanding, till the wretched Cafre sinks nearly below the Ouran Outang. (158-59)

Again, however, there were dissenting voices. Several commentators, for instance, saw that the apparent turmoil and perennial warfare among coastal West African polities resulted from the trauma and destabilization of slavery. What Davidson has called an "economy of violence" (226) was first identified by William Bosman at the turn of the seventeenth century. Bosman showed that the incompatible pressures of self-protection on the one hand and inter-tribal slave raids to acquire the means of trade and protection on the other led to a mounting spiral of endemic violence. Furthermore, coastal slave raids set up a ripple effect. By the late seventeenth century the spiral had impinged on larger inland polities such as Asante, Dahomey, and Benin, resulting in the destruction of the smaller coastal communities by these more powerful states of the interior. In turn, the pressures placed on political, religious, and social structures within these larger, more complex, yet fragile, polities would lead to a brutalization of governing practices and religious rituals as these resources apparently failed to resist the violent encroachments of slavery. Thus came about the fearful reputations of Asante, Dahomey, and Benin for horrendous sacrificial holocausts, cannibalism, and cruelty, which would peak

at the end of the nineteenth century in works such as R. H. Bacon's *Benin, City of Blood* (1897) and A. Boisragon's *The Benin Massacre* (1897), and John C. Grant's sensational novel, *The Ethiopian* (1900). (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1902] may well echo some of these resonances, too.) But the incipience of the tragedy generating the violence, which in these late-Victorian texts becomes mainly an incentive to demonize blacks, was detected and recorded — though not always recognized — by several early eighteenth-century visitors to Guinea. In the process, they revealed much of value about how these polities functioned.

In the case of Benin, a reputed practice of large-scale and cruelly executed human sacrifices at royal funerals, first reported by Jesuit missionaries in 1607, popularized by Purchas in 1625 (9.263-64), and thereafter included in virtually every European account of the area, provided an archetypal model of tyranny which by 1668 Dapper depicted as follows: "The King of Benin rules with unlimited power (onbepaelde maght) and cruel authority, and regards all his subjects, however aristocratic they may be, as his slaves" (501). But David van Nyendael, who visited Benin in 1702, found a rather different rule (*Atlas Geographus* 479ff.). While still describing the human sacrifices, he claimed that the king, far from being a tyrant, was "a nominal sovereign," who made all his decisions in consultation with three "great lords." Indeed, as van Nyendael's account develops, despite the fact that it is imbricated in the generally hostile stance of the *Atlas Geographus*, a complex political and religious structure emerges.

Jean Barbot, a Huguenot trader who visited West Africa frequently in the late seventeenth century and published his *Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* in England in 1732, elaborated on van Nyendael's apparently contradictory account of Benin. He reported the extensive practice of sacrificing wives and slaves at the burial of a king, but also noted that the custom was falling into disuse, if for no other reason than that at the first sign of the king's likely demise, wives and slaves absconded smartly (Churchill 5.88). Other occasions of human sacrifice were, however, still observed even though in general Barbot described a flourishing and well-regulated city "prodigious large" and incomparable in Guinea "for extent and beauty." It is "all

over planted with fine large and ever-green trees"; in its "thirty
very great streets . . . twenty fathom wide . . . continual markets
are kept . . . every day." The city is divided into wards and dis-
tricts, each governed by "its respective king of the street"; the
inhabitants are "very civil and good-natured people," and par-
ticipate in a sophisticated and well-regulated system of trade over-
seen by the king and his representatives (358-59). Why then the
human sacrifices? Barbot unconsciously provides the clue when
he describes the sacrifices as made to "the devil . . . whom they
look upon as a deity of great authority" who has to be appeased by
continual human sacrifice (374). Barbot does not spell it out, but
since African religions are typically not numinous and salvationary
in the Christian individualist sense, but rather symbolic constructs
to explain the world, control natural forces, and make society
cohere, his remark implies that as the cataclysm of slavery in-
creased, so would the sacrifices that were deemed to prevent it.
What Barbot was witnessing was Benin on the eve of large-scale
disintegration, eventually recorded by nineteenth-century visitors
as just an orgy of bloodshed, but which was in effect a national
suicide.

A further and final example of a contradictory but revealing
European response to West African political developments of the
late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries involves the emer-
gence of the Kingdom of Dahomey at the expense of the small
coastal polity of Whydah or Ouidah. Ouidah was a small English
and French slave trading centre on the coast near the present
border between the Republics of Togo and Benin (formerly
Dahomey). From its first mention in the late seventeenth century
it was depicted as a demi-paradise. Thomas Phillips, visiting it in
1693-94, described it as

> the pleasantest country I have seen in Guinea, consisting of cham-
> paigns and small ascending hills, beautified with always green
> shady groves of lime, wild orange, and other trees, and irrigated
> with divers broad fresh rivers which yield plenty of good fish.
> (Churchill 6.230)

But already, too, the raids to supply the slave trade were taking
their toll in brutalizing the inhabitants of this edenic land: "I have
seen nine or ten bags full of men, women, and children's heads at

a time brought to the king's town, when the soldiers returned from ravaging, which they in great scorn and disdain would fling and kick about" (237).

Jean Barbot, who must have visited Ouidah at about the same time, confirmed the beautiful prospect but also exposed the canker at its core: "The Blacks of Fida [i.e. Ouidah] are so expeditious at this trade of slaves, that they can deliver a thousand every month." Indeed, Ouidah's impact on its surroundings must have been calamitous, since Barbot estimates that the Ouidans were adept at trading for slaves up to 200 leagues inland (Churchill 5.327).

In 1705, William Bosman expanded on Phillips' paradisal description of Ouidah in a passage that was to be frequently anthologized in eighteenth-century African travelogues, and he presented the people as living in a state of primal and ordered innocence (339-44). But James Houston, who visited Ouidah in 1722 as a surgeon on a slave ship and still found the country to be "the finest and most beautiful landskip" (15), explodes in a diatribe against its people: "I shall only say in one word that their natural temper is barbarously cruel, selfish and deceitful, and their government equally barbarous and uncivil" (34). Clearly, we are once again seeing the reaction of an uncomprehending European to the final stages of a disintegrating society. Just five years later, in March 1727, Ouidah was destroyed by the kingdom of Dahomey, an inland polity up to then scarcely heard of among Europeans, but which, under its ruler Agaja (1708-32), was making a bid to enter the maritime slave trade (Davidson 237). William Snelgrave, who landed at Ouidah just as the conquest was completed, described the former paradise: "The carnage of the inhabitants was, above all, a most moving spectacle, the fields being strewed with their bones" (19).

Now, however, ensued one of the most intriguing encounters between white and black in eighteenth-century African travel writing. Snelgrave was, in fact, a slaver, and, determined not to be done out of business by these developments, he sets about wooing the new ruler of Ouidah. What develops is a narrative worthy of Defoe. Snelgrave's account makes compelling reading, full of dramatic interest and adventure, cruelty and comedy, but the leading

figure is undoubtedly Agaja himself. About forty-five by Snel-
grave's estimate, Agaja reveals himself as powerful, energetic,
shrewd, and witty, "a politic and courageous prince" (6):

> His face was pitted with the small pox; nevertheless, there was
> something in his countenance very taking, and withal majestic.
> Upon the whole, I found him the most extraordinary man of his
> colour that I have conversed with, having seen nothing in him that
> seemed barbarous.   (75)

As a trading partner he played Snelgrave along very nicely, re-
marking at one stage that he would treat Snelgrave "as a young
wife or bride, who must be denied nothing at first" (62).

Notwithstanding Agaja's impact on him, Snelgrave had no
doubt that the king practised human sacrifice, and that his people
had eaten many of their Ouidan prisoners. He describes some of
these incidents, and states that spectacles such as the following
occurred frequently: going to the king's tent "in our way we saw
two large stages, on which were heaped a great number of dead
men's heads, that afforded no pleasing sight or smell. Our inter-
preter told us they were the heads of four thousand of the Whidaws
[sic]" (31). Snelgrave raised with Agaja these matters as well as
many others relating to the king's rule and the slave trade. Finding
him in a well-disposed mood at one point, for instance, Snelgrave
tried to intercede on behalf of the conquered Ouidans:

> I took this opportunity of pleading for the common people of that
> kingdom, [saying] ". . . if his Majesty would be pleased to receive
> them to mercy, and restore them to their country, on paying a
> certain tribute, they would be of great advantage to him; because
> they were very industrious in cultivating the land, and many of
> them understood trade exceeding well, which his own people were
> little versed in."   (65)

To this Agaja readily consented, on condition that the Ouidans
delivered to him their king, then still in hiding, dead or alive.
Snelgrave's response was interesting in the context of current de-
bates about relationships between king and subjects: "I did not
think [it] proper, on hearing this, to say anything more on the
matter, or observe to his Majesty how wrong a policy it was to
oblige subjects to act so villainous a part towards their Sovereign"
(65-6).

There is much else in the same vein of Swiftian debate. Snelgrave left with his cargo of slaves, and returned two years later, August 1729, to find that Agaja had withdrawn to his northern capital, Abomey. (In the meantime, incidentally, Snelgrave also appears to have read *Gulliver's Travels* [1726]; he describes the king as now being at war with the "Yahoos," who were presumably the Oyo.) He did not meet Agaja again, but from hearsay he constructs a familiar pattern of both personal and political decay into "arbitrary rule": "It seems the King of Dahomey is grown exceedingly cruel towards his people, being always suspicious that plots and conspiracies are carrying on against him: so that he frequently cuts off some of his great men on bare surmises" (154).

But the story did not end here. Anthony Barker has claimed that Snelgrave's account of Dahomean cannibalism in 1727 "came to dominate eighteenth-century impressions of Negro cruelty" (133). It certainly opened up considerable debate, but it did not merely confirm European prejudices about Negro cruelty. On the contrary, Snelgrave's work may well be credited with triggering off the abolitionist debate. John Atkins, a surgeon in the Royal Navy who had visited Ouidah a few years before Snelgrave, published his *Voyage to Guinea, Brazil and the West-Indies* (1735) a year after Snelgrave, refuting his claims of human sacrifice and cannibalism, and accusing Snelgrave of setting up just the kind of excuse Europeans needed to justify slavery, convincing themselves that "they are only subduing brutish nature, and exchanging, for their mutual good, *spiritual* for *temporal* inheritances" (Preface). Atkins went further, and launched one of the earliest full-scale attacks on the whole institution of slavery, concluding:

> To remove Negroes, then, from their homes and friends, where they are at ease, to a strange country, people, and language, must be highly offending to the laws of natural justice and humanity; and especially when this change is to hard labour, corporal punishment, and for masters they wish at the Devil. (178)

William Smith, who visited Ouidah about the same time as Snelgrave, published his *New Voyage to Guinea* in 1744. He repeated Bosman's paradisal description of Ouidah (193-95), also countered Snelgrave's charges, and furthered the incipient abolitionist debate by incorporating into his text the narrative of Charles

Wheeler. Wheeler had spent ten years in Guinea, living with a highly intelligent black woman whose reported debates with Wheeler about African versus European customs, laws, and "the despotic and arbitrary power of the parent" (264) once more read like the work of Swift. Wheeler's concluding remarks are trenchant and powerful:

> The discerning natives account it their greatest unhappiness, that they were ever visited by the Europeans. They say, that we Christians introduced the traffic of slaves, and that before our coming they lived in peace; but, say they, it is observable, that wherever Christianity comes, there come with it a sword, a gun, powder and ball. And indeed thus far they say right, for the Christians are continually at war one with another.   (Smith 266)

When, in 1762, Anthony Benezet published his *Some Historical Account of Guinea . . . with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade*, which was to prove to be the first crucially influential contribution to the abolitionist debate, Snelgrave's account of what had happened at Ouidah was a centrepiece in his demonstration of the devastating effect of the slave trade on both the countries and the people involved. But while Benezet invoked claims of Christian compassion, his argument was not yet the discourse of human rights and philanthropic idealism of the late eighteenth century. Rather, in both his books, it was a discourse of inhumanity and cruelty, emphasizing the "desolation and bloodshed continually fomented in those unhappy people's country" (*Short Account* 5). Central to Benezet's thinking was a conscience sensitized by a century-long enterprise, going back at least as far as Olfert Dapper, which was aimed at attempts to characterize African systems of government, to assess their "arbitrary power" and the excesses of such power, and then, in the more perceptive accounts, to re-examine such "despotism" as a function of the impact of slavery. It must be stressed that no observers went to Africa specifically to study African forms of rule, and few even made explicit comparisons between European and African political systems. What can be claimed, however, is that a persistent and reiterated concern in their narratives with African "despotism" and "arbitrary power" arose not so much from a position of European confidence and resolution as from the instabilities of a Eu-

ropean constitutional debate still very much in the balance. Thus, while some commentators grasped at the no doubt re-assuring opportunities to condemn African polities out of hand, others, sensitive to the nature and excesses of "arbitrary rule" in Europe, appear both to have been alert to the possibility that the true source of the violence they perceived in Africa lay in the vast political destabilization caused by the slave trade, and, hence, to have launched a critique that would issue directly into the abolitionist debate.

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