

1 The Comparative History of Honour

The central argument of this book is that understanding African behaviour, in the past and the present, must take account of changing notions of honour, which historians and others have neglected.¹ Until the coming of world religions, honour was the chief ideological motivation of African behaviour. It remained a powerful motivation even for those who accepted world religions.

This conviction first arose while I was teaching the history of precolonial Africa, especially when trying to understand the late nineteenth-century civil wars that accompanied the arrival of Christianity in the Buganda kingdom on the northern shore of Lake Victoria. The Christians' behaviour seemed inexplicable, for they endured without resistance a terrible persecution, while quarrelling furiously among themselves and taking obvious pleasure in their enemies' sufferings. A specialist, Michael Twaddle, suggested that one way to understand them might be to study heroic behaviour in ancient Greece as described in Moses Finley's *The world of Odysseus*.² He was largely right. Buganda's Christians practised a heroic honour with many similarities to that dramatised in *The Iliad*, where members of a male warrior elite competed for individual reputation, chiefly by physical combat according to recognised procedures that imposed little moral restraint on violence and egotism. At its extreme, in Finley's words, 'everything pivoted on a single element of honour and virtue: strength, bravery, physical courage, prowess. Conversely, there was no weakness, no unheroic trait, but one, and that was cowardice and the

¹ The book is confined to sub-Saharan Africa, excluding Moors, Tuareg, and northern Sudanese but including Ethiopians, Funj, and southern Sudanese.

² M. I. Finley, *The world of Odysseus* (2nd edn, London, 1977). For Michael Twaddle's own account, see his *Kakungulu and the creation of Uganda, 1868–1928* (London, 1993), esp. pp. 18, 66, 81, 103–4, 112, 301.

2 Honour in African History

consequent failure to pursue heroic goals.³ Buganda's heroes displayed greater concern for loyalty to chief and king than those of *The Iliad*, while real heroes, of course, pursued additional routes to honour, perhaps by generosity, gifts of leadership, or arts of peace, but the repeated demonstration of martial prowess in the pursuit of individual preeminence remained indispensable. Heroic cultures of this type, with many variations, have been described in regions as diverse as early medieval Europe, Aztec Mexico, pre-Tokugawa Japan, early South India, and Melanesia.⁴ This book will suggest that many African peoples observed similar heroic practices, often into the early twentieth century, but they have seldom been studied. The most important work on the subject in sub-Saharan Africa, Boubakar Ly's doctoral thesis on the sociology of honour among the Wolof and Tukolor peoples of Senegal, has never been published and lacks the chronological framework to make it easy to use historically, while his plea, in an article, that 'reflections of the same type may be made by other Africans on their own societies' has gone unheard.⁵ Although there have been some recent anthropological studies, only Catherine Ver Eecke's on the Fula and Karin Barber's on the Yoruba have adequate historical dimensions.⁶

Nevertheless, there is an extensive literature about honour in Africa, but it concerns North Africa as part of a broad Mediterranean culture area extending perhaps further eastwards into the Islamic world. These anthropological studies of Mediterranean honour took the Sahara as their southern border.⁷

³ Finley, *World*, p. 28.

⁴ H. Munro Chadwick, *The heroic age* (reprinted, Cambridge, 1967); Inga Clendinnen, 'The cost of courage in Aztec society,' *Past and Present*, 107 (1985), 44–89; Eiko Ikegami, *The taming of the samurai: honorific individualism and the making of modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), parts 2 and 3; K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil heroic poetry* (Oxford, 1968); C. R. Hallpike, *Bloodshed and vengeance in the Papuan mountains: the generation of conflict in Tanade society* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 251–3.

⁵ Boubakar Ly, 'L'honneur et les valeurs morales dans les sociétés oulof et toucouleur du Sénégal,' Thèse pour le Doctorat de Troisième Cycle de Sociologie, Université de Paris (Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines), 2 vols., 1966; idem, 'L'honneur dans les sociétés oulof et toucouleur du Sénégal,' *Présence Africaine*, 61 (1967), 39, n32.

⁶ Catherine Ver Eecke, 'Pulaaku: Adamawa Fulbe identity and its transformations,' PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1988; Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow: oriki, women, and the past in a Yoruba town* (Edinburgh, 1991). For other recent anthropological studies, see Paul Spencer, *The Samburu: a study of gerontocracy in a nomadic tribe* (London, 1965), pp. 103–12; Marc J. Swartz, *The way the world is: cultural processes and social relations among the Mombasa Swahili* (Berkeley, 1991); Pascal Baluez, 'Honneur et pudeur dans la société swahili de Zanzibar,' *Journal des Africanistes*, 67, 2 (1997), 25–48.

⁷ Two major collections were J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and shame: the values of Mediterranean society* (London, 1965), and J. G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers (eds.), *Honor and grace in anthropology* (Cambridge, 1992). See also Charles Lindholm, *Generosity and jealousy: the Swat Pukhtun of northern Pakistan* (New York, 1982).

They described small-scale, rural societies, often antagonistic to distant state institutions, in which honour was not the prize of a warrior elite but the concern of any family and individual competing for respect by displaying qualities of manhood and womanhood. Manliness demanded capacity to sustain and defend a household, to maintain personal autonomy, to avenge insult or violence, and perhaps to demonstrate hospitality, integrity, wit, and style.⁸ Female honour was seen in the literature chiefly from a male perspective as the preservation of virginity before marriage and chastity within it.⁹ The centrality of sexual shame to honour codes has also been stressed for the early modern European states that cultivated the duel.¹⁰ It has fostered the view that extreme concern for female chastity is an essential characteristic of a true honour culture, which perhaps partly explains why study of the subject stopped at the Sahara. Yet chastity was less important, although significant, in other honour cultures such as Japan.¹¹ Moreover, some anthropologists have thought it exaggerated in Mediterranean studies,¹² and feminist scholars, in particular, have stressed the need to replace male views of female honour by studies of what women honoured in themselves and one another.¹³ This book will try to obey the feminist injunction; although chastity was an important component of female honour in many African societies, women appear commonly to have given greatest weight to fertility, endurance, and active support of children and household.

If it is true that honour cultures with strong heroic elements survived in many African societies until colonial rule, then it is important to discover what happened to them during the twentieth century and whether they continue to shape contemporary behaviour. It may be asked, for example, whether the intense concern with appearances characteristic of honour cultures¹⁴ has remained a feature of African social and political life, whether, as the Senegalese historian

⁸ See, for example, Raymond Jamous, *Honneur et baraka: les structures sociales traditionnelles dans le Rif* (Cambridge, 1981); Michael Herzfeld, *The poetics of manhood: contest and identity in a Cretan mountain village* (Princeton, 1985).

⁹ For example, Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Honor,' in *International encyclopaedia of the social sciences* (New York, 1968), vol. 6, pp. 505–6; David D. Gilmore, 'Introduction: the shame of dishonor,' in his *Honor and shame and the unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C., 1987), pp. 2–21.

¹⁰ Donald R. Larson, *The honor plays of Lope de Vega* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), esp. pp. 17–22; Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in early modern England: honour, sex and marriage* (London, 1999).

¹¹ Ikegami, *Taming*, pp. 244–6; Mariko Asano-Tamanoi, 'Shame, family, and state in Catalonia and Japan,' in Gilmore, *Honor*, pp. 104–20.

¹² J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: an essay in comparative social anthropology* (London, 1977), pp. 77, 98.

¹³ Unni Wikan, 'Shame and honour: a contestable pair,' *Man*, NS, 19 (1984), 635–52; Alison Lever, 'Honor as a red herring,' *Critique of Anthropology*, 6, 3 (Winter 1986), 83, 86, 94, 101–2.

¹⁴ Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and slavery* (Princeton, 1996), ch. 1.

4 Honour in African History

Cheikh Anta Diop put it, 'Every African is an unconscious aristocrat'.¹⁵ Relations between genders and generations require consideration, as does corruption, whose roots in other continents have often been traced to premodern value systems.¹⁶ One especially important question is whether legacies from honour cultures are important obstacles to democracy, as they were, although for different reasons, in interwar Japan. Equally important and easier to demonstrate is how surviving notions of honour have influenced African responses to the AIDS epidemic, often in self-destructive ways.

These lines of thought suggest that honour is a linking theme running through much of African history. This book is a set of variations on that theme. But honour is notoriously the 'most elusive of social concepts', an 'alluring, even seductive' word that can become vacuous unless clearly defined.¹⁷ At the same time, the definition must be broad enough to embrace Homeric heroes, Mediterranean villagers, German duellists, and Japanese *samurai*. The most useful definition, because it is stripped of cultural specificity and designed for cross-cultural comparison, is Frank Henderson Stewart's minimalist characterisation of honour as 'a right to respect'.¹⁸ As a right – like, say, a right to privacy – honour exists both subjectively and objectively. It exists subjectively in the sense that individuals believe they are entitled to respect. But it exists objectively only if others treat them with respect and if the individuals can if necessary enforce respect. Most or all people believe that they have a right to respect as individuals, but they can enjoy and confer it only as members of groups. The groups determine the criteria of honour, but any society is likely to contain several such groups with different criteria, so that honour is a contested category.

Stewart's analysis raises three other points necessary to the present argument. First, he distinguishes between vertical honour, a right to special respect enjoyed by those of superior rank, and horizontal honour, a right to be respected by one's equals.¹⁹ While high-status groups in stratified societies generally try to enforce their right to respect and deny that of others, their view cannot be taken as that of the society as a whole – although the mistake is often made – because the denial is not necessarily accepted by the inferiors, who, in addition, may enjoy honour through the respect of their equals (and inferiors, if any). Although it is true that a claim to honour that cannot be enforced is vanity, so that courage

¹⁵ Quoted in Ly, 'L'honneur et les valeurs,' vol. 2, p. 500.

¹⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The gift in sixteenth-century France* (Oxford, 2000).

¹⁷ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and social death: a comparative study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 80; Wikan, 'Shame,' p. 635.

¹⁸ Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago, 1994), p. 21. The following paragraphs are based chiefly on this book.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–63.

is the *sine qua non* of honour,²⁰ nevertheless even slaves may have means to enforce such claims, not only on other slaves but sometimes, in practice, on their masters.²¹

Second, the enjoyment of horizontal honour depends on behaviour approved by the group and can therefore in principle be lost absolutely by gross violation of its code, as happened when a Mediterranean woman was murdered by her kinsmen for sexual misconduct or an officer lost his commission by refusing to fight a duel. Stewart accepted this, especially where notions of honour were highly codified, but he suggested that in the real world things might be less clear-cut.²² Others have argued more strongly that in practice honour was commonly a right that could be enjoyed in greater or lesser degree.²³ The question is important to this book because one of the most sensitive studies of honour in sub-Saharan Africa, Paul Spencer's account of the Samburu pastoralists of Kenya in the late 1950s, distinguished between honour, which all defended, and prestige, a supplementary value for which some competed.²⁴ If this were generally true, much of the behaviour described in this book as competition for honour would properly relate rather to prestige. However, there is reason to doubt the general truth of the distinction. Even the Samburu did not make it in their own language, having no word for honour as Spencer defined it.²⁵ Accounts of honour elsewhere have often stressed its competitive character. 'The world of Odysseus', for example, 'was fiercely competitive, as each hero strove to outdo the others,' and students of Mediterranean honour often stressed its competitive character: 'a constant struggle to gain a precarious and transitory advantage over each other.'²⁶ No other evidence from sub-Saharan Africa has been found to suggest a sharp distinction between honour and prestige, although, of course, certain actions were always more honourable or dishonourable than others.

A third point arising from Stewart's analysis is that in both Europe and China the primary criterion of honour shifted over time from rank and behaviour to moral character, from what a person had or did to what a person was. This accompanied a reconciliation between the demands of honour and those of

²⁰ Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and social status,' in Peristiany, *Honour and shame*, p. 22; Pitt-Rivers, 'Honor,' p. 505.

²¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The shaping of Southern culture: honor, grace, and war, 1760s–1890s* (Chapel Hill, 2001), pp. 3, 303; this volume, p. 123.

²² Stewart, *Honor*, pp. 123–5.

²³ Wikan, 'Shame,' pp. 644, 648.

²⁴ Spencer, *Samburu*, p. 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ Finley, *World*, p. 118; Herzfeld, *Poetics*, p. 11.

6 Honour in African History

virtue (as taught by religion) and law (as enforced by the state).²⁷ Elements of such a shift will be seen to have occurred in certain parts of Africa, perhaps especially under Muslim influence.

The first half of this book analyses the role of honour in precolonial Africa in the terms suggested by Stewart's definition. It begins with the heroic, pre-Islamic code of the aristocratic horsemen of the West African savanna, dramatised in epic literature but challenged, defeated, absorbed, and transmuted during the nineteenth century by Islam. In Ethiopia, by contrast, heroic honour was challenged by Christianity from an earlier date, but there the contest created a heroic Christianity more than a Christian heroism. The West African cavalry ethos began also to penetrate the Yoruba world of rank and civil honour in southern Nigeria, but this was more radically militarised during the nineteenth century by civil war and firearms. The state rather than the horse became the fount of honour not only in Yorubaland but in the pre-Islamic, infantry-dominated kingdoms of West and Central Africa, where, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, vertical honour was predominant and soldierly duty to the state began to supplant heroic egotism. Yet Africa's many stateless peoples also pursued honour, balancing the heroic notions of young men against the more sedate code of mature householders. Heroic and householder honour probably coexisted in most regions, but they are especially well documented in nineteenth-century southern Africa, where the warrior ethos of Zulu and related peoples contrasted with the mundane claims to respect displayed in the earliest court records. That honour thus existed at all social levels emerges yet more clearly from the experience of slaves. On the eve of colonial rule, the Great Lakes region of East Africa witnessed a unique fusion of heroic traditions and imported Christianity, indicating that accommodation to honour cultures was the key to successful innovation in precolonial Africa.

The second part of the book considers what Boubakar Ly called 'the crisis of honour' created by colonial conquest.²⁸ Military defeat destroyed the coherence of honour cultures, despite tenacious resistance by their adherents. As colonial rule became entrenched, heroic honour fragmented. It was not transformed en bloc, as had happened in Japan where the Tokugawa period (c.1600–1868) had tamed the *samurai* into servants of the state,²⁹ for Africa's colonial regimes lacked the legitimacy, the power, and the time to achieve that. Instead, elements of the fragmented tradition were incorporated into new ethics: the military codes of colonial armies, the ideals of respectability and professionalism, notions of

²⁷ Stewart, *Honor*, chs. 3 and 7; Hsien Chin Hu, 'The Chinese concepts of "face",' *American Anthropologist*, NS, 46 (1944), 45.

²⁸ Ly, 'L'honneur dans les sociétés,' p. 62.

²⁹ See Ikegami, *Taming*, parts 4–7.

gender, and the masculinities of miners and townsmen. Yet because the taming of African honour was incomplete, elements also survived to find expression in nationalism and armed liberation movements, in postcolonial politics and responses to AIDS.

The limited historical sources available in Africa often make it difficult to pursue these elusive issues. There were no written codes of honour. The earliest sources in many parts of the continent are boasts, praise poems, or epics. Early Muslim writings display the interaction between heroic honour and Muslim virtue. In Ethiopia the chronicles of kings and hagiographies of saints provide a continuous source from the fourteenth century. The Swahili literature of the East African coast is available from at least the eighteenth century. After 1500 European travellers' accounts multiply, to be supplemented by commercial and political documents from the western and southern coasts and then in the nineteenth century by mission sources and the first colonial legal records. The sources for the colonial period are more extensive, even overwhelming; the most useful are autobiographies, military and court records, compilations of customary law, investigations of corruption, anthropological studies, and novels.

This scarcity of sources is an important obstacle to the historical study of honour in Africa, but it has not been the main obstacle in writing this book. The chief problem has been an inability to read almost all the sources in African languages. As Boubakar Ly insisted, any satisfactory study of honour must begin by analysing the vocabulary used to discuss it.³⁰ Historians of honour in other continents have frequently centred their work on the changing meanings of words.³¹ Similar studies in Africa over the full range of Ethiopian, Swahili, or Hausa sources could be immensely rewarding, but those with the necessary linguistic skills must undertake them. Only the most tentative suggestions about the language of honour can be made here, generally on the evidence of dictionaries. Almost equally valuable for the history of honour are legal records, especially defamation cases in which plaintiffs defended their reputations. Kirsten McKenzie has shown their value in her study of honour and respectability among white people in the early nineteenth-century Cape Colony.³² Following her example, one body of legal records concerning Africans in the Eastern Cape during the later nineteenth century has been used in this book, but many records await study.

³⁰ Ly, 'L'honneur et les valeurs,' vol. 1, p. 15.

³¹ Bichr Farès, *L'honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam: étude de sociologie* (Paris, 1932); Hsien, 'Chinese concepts'; Charles Barber, *The theme of honour's tongue: a study of social attitudes in the English drama from Shakespeare to Dryden* (Göteborg, 1985).

³² Kirsten Elizabeth McKenzie, 'Gender and honour in middle-class Cape Town: the making of colonial identities 1828–1850,' DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1997.

8 Honour in African History

Some who read this book may be surprised, even affronted, by its subject. Why, they may ask, spend several years and many pages examining honour when the problems of contemporary Africa are so often attributed to *lack* of honour, to corruption and cruelty and greed? The contention here is that such thinking is mistaken. Human beings seldom do things they believe to be wrong. They do wrong things because they believe them to be right. That is why honour is so important. It is an immensely powerful motivator. It expresses a group's highest values. But what was honourable to a Homeric hero is not necessarily honourable to modern people. To understand an alien code of honour is a challenge to the imagination. The first step is to suspend one's own value system.

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Part One

Hero and Householder

2 Men on Horseback

One version of heroic honour took shape in the broad belt of open grassland south of the Sahara Desert stretching from the Atlantic coast to the foothills of Ethiopia. Here horses could flourish, safe from equatorial diseases. Traders could range the savanna and cross the desert from the Mediterranean coast, bringing Islam, literacy, and knowledge of the outside world. Towns could be built with sun-baked mud. Equestrian aristocracies could dominate peasants. Rulers could weld these components into kingdoms and empires.

These open grasslands fostered sub-Saharan Africa's best-documented notions of honour, both vertical and horizontal. Probably originating in hunting and warfare, they appear first in praises sung at royal courts, then in the unwritten codes of warrior elites. By the eighteenth century, professional bards had composed these traditions into an epic literature. Many savanna polities were by then officially Islamic, but the heroic code remained essentially pagan. Its formation, before it was profoundly challenged by Islam during the early nineteenth century, is the subject of this chapter.

During 1352–3 the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta visited the court of the Mali Empire on the upper Niger. He witnessed four public displays which are the earliest firm evidence of the cultivation of honour in this region. One was a boast of prowess widespread in Africa:

Sometimes one of them will stand before the sultan and mention the deeds which he has performed in his service, saying: 'I did so-and-so on such-and-such a day and I killed so-and-so on such-and-such a day.' Those who know the truth about this express their affirmation by seizing the string of the bow and releasing it as one does when he is shooting. When the sultan says to him: 'You have spoken the truth' or