



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

War, Wealth, and Wives: *The Annual Customs of the Kingdom of Dahomey*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

Ozikoro.com · Anthropology and Ethnography · 4 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

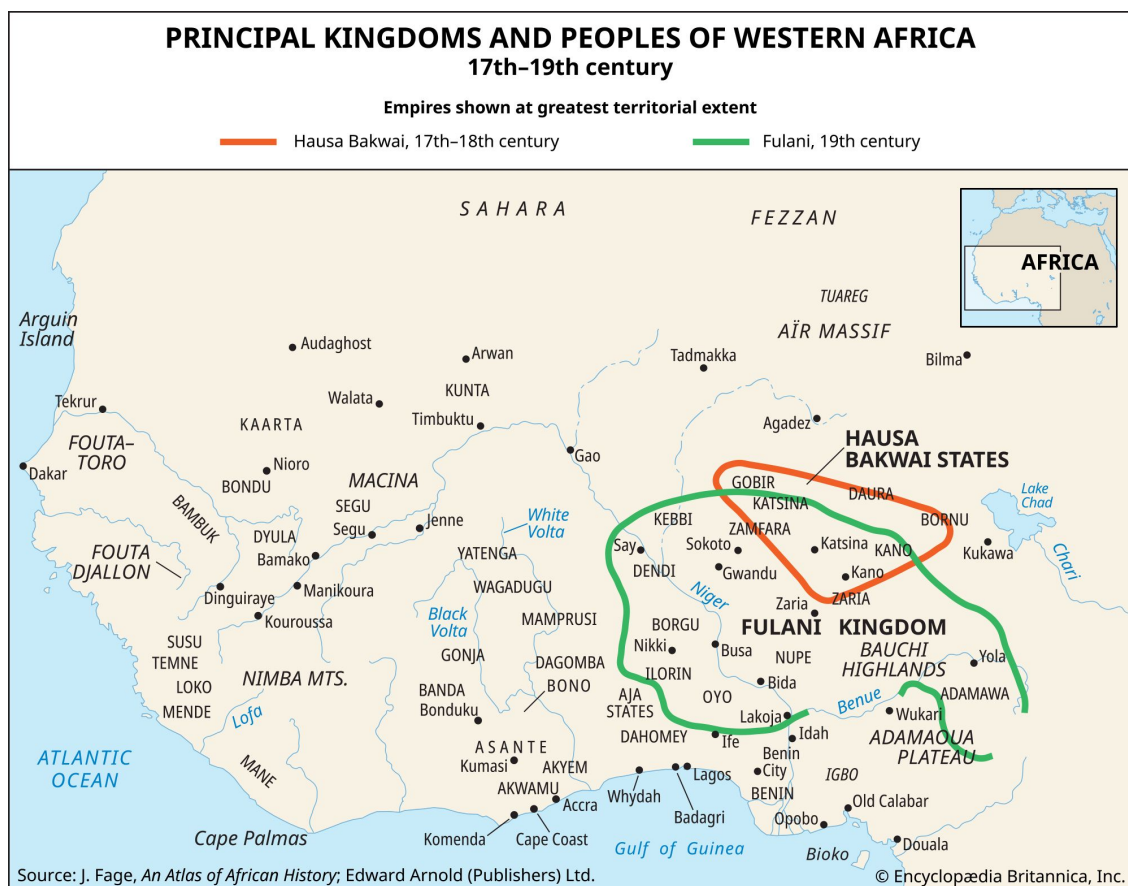
King of Dahomey with his wives - Scanned 1890 Engraving

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò
WAR, WEALTH, AND WIVES

War, Wealth, and Wives: The Annual Customs of the Kingdom of Dahomey

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe · Anthropology and Ethnography · Ozikoro.com



The map of Dahomey. Photo credit: Britannica

The Kingdom of Dahomey (c. 1600–1894), located in present-day Benin, established itself as a formidable power in West Africa largely due to its highly centralized military structure and dominance in the transatlantic slave trade. The spiritual, political, and economic engine of this kingdom was the Annual Customs (known as the Xwetanu or Huetanu), a series of elaborate ceremonies and public spectacles that served to renew the king's power, honor the royal ancestors, and redistribute national wealth. While celebrated as a vital religious and administrative event, the Customs gained international notoriety for the practice of large-scale human sacrifice.

The Xwetanu was not a single festival but a protracted cycle of ceremonies, varying in frequency and scale depending on the reign of the current king. Its primary purpose was the worship of ancestral kings, a key aspect of Dahomeyan statecraft. It was believed that the deceased monarchs required annual tribute in the form of human messengers, wealth, and communication, to continue watching over the kingdom.

01

The Customs also functioned as a crucial administrative tool:

A Renewal of Allegiance: The ceremonies required all major chiefs and officials to publicly renew their loyalty to the King.

Military Review: It showcased the power of the army, including the formidable corps of female soldiers known as the Mino or Dahomey Amazons.

Wealth Distribution: The King used the Customs to publicly distribute cowrie shells (the main currency), cloth, and liquor, a display of royal generosity and control over the nation's economy. As J. A. Skertchly observed in his 1874 account, the distribution of goods was a massive,

highly anticipated event.



The sacrifices made to the ancestors. Photo credit, "Their Spirits Gone Before Them" by Laura Facey.

War, Prisoners, and the Economy of Sacrifice

The themes of war and wealth were inextricably linked to the Annual Customs through the slave trade. The sacrificial victims for the Xwetanu were primarily drawn from two groups:

Prisoners of War, which consisted of individuals captured during annual slave-raiding campaigns (known as Hwetu) into neighboring territories, were the main source of victims and criminals which consisted of individuals who had committed capital offenses within Dahomey.

The Customs provided an essential economic justification for perpetual warfare, as successful campaigns ensured a supply of victims to appease the ancestors. This practice drew the ire of European powers, particularly Great Britain, which had officially

abolished the slave trade. In an 1860 debate in the House of Commons, British officials discussed the scale of the sacrifices, highlighting the international pressure placed upon Dahomey to end the practice.

02

The Royal Court, Wives, and Administrative Power.

The role of women in Dahomey, especially within the royal structure, was central to the Xwetanu and state administration. The King maintained a massive royal harem (or palace), which was not simply a domestic institution but the de facto civil service of the kingdom. These thousands of “wives” performed crucial administrative, political, and military roles:

Mino (Amazons): The Mino were instrumental not only in the annual raids for captives but also in the internal consolidation of power. Their existence allowed the King to maintain a powerful military force loyal directly to him, bypassing traditional, potentially rebellious, male chiefs. The most famous contingent were the female warriors, who fought alongside men and whose strength and ferocity were celebrated during the Customs and the,

Court Officials: Many of the King’s wives acted as his eyes and ears, holding parallel ranks to male ministers and officials, ensuring the King had a trusted network of intelligence and control throughout the realm.

The Annual Customs, through public displays, reinforced the absolute authority of the King, whose political control was amplified by his massive, centralized court of wives and warriors.

The most infamous element of the Xwetanu was the human sacrifice,

sometimes referred to as the “Grand Custom.” Historical accounts, including both contemporary descriptions and later analyses, describe the sacrifices as being carried out on a massive scale, with estimates of the numbers of victims often reaching into the hundreds, particularly during the reign of King Gezo.

The victims were ritually killed and their blood used in ceremonies to honor the ancestors and water the graves of previous kings. The practice was framed by Dahomeyan belief not as intentional cruelty, but as a mechanism for;

Ancestral Communication: Victims were “sent” as messengers to the royal ancestors, carrying news and gifts to the spirit world. The spiritual dimension of honoring the royal ancestors was the foundation of the King’s legitimacy.

Spiritual Cleansing: The Custom was meant to cleanse the nation of impurities and ensure a prosperous year.

Observers like Skertchly, despite his attempts to provide a nuanced perspective, noted the brutal and public nature of the killings, where victims were often dispatched with a single blow. This clash between the state’s religious justification and the horror felt by foreign observers cemented Dahomey’s reputation as the “Black Sparta” and became a major factor in its eventual colonization by France.

- Akanle, L. (2017, October 18). A look at Dahomey’s gory history of human sacrifices on a large scale. Face2Face Africa.
- Parliament of the United Kingdom, House of Commons. (1860, August 17). Human sacrifices at Dahomey. Hansard.
- Skertchly, J. A. (1874). Dahomey as it is: being a narrative of eight months’ residence in that country, with a full account of the notorious annual customs, and the social and religious institutions of the Ffons. Chapman and Hall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

Law Graduate / Creative & Research Writer.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
