***Sumptuary Laws in Precolonial West Africa: The Examples of Benin and Dahomey***

**Toby Green**

Prior to 1800, West African history is in general little studied in the Western Academy. Where precolonial African history is studied in detail, this tends to relate to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a feature in which the impact of the 200+-year-old abolitionist movement is writ large. In the late 18th century, abolitionist debates in the United Kingdom centred around the impact of the slave trade on the political disorder then apparent in many parts of Western Africa; abolitionists argued that the slave trade had led to political corruption and turmoil, of which it was a cause, whereas those in favour of continuing the trade in enslaved persons held that this trade “rescued” captives from a benighted continent. The core focus was thus the impact of the institution of slavery on African histories, and this remains the case to this day when it comes to the study of African history outside the continent.

Certainly, the problems of the Abolitionist-derived focus on slavery in African history must be acknowledged. Ever since the 1780s, the history of Africa in Western discourse has either been dismissed as non-existent (by the likes of GWF Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper), or has been associated more or less exclusively with the realities of slavery. The dearth of historians specialising on areas other than slavery teaching pre-colonial African history in the History departments of major Western institutions underlines the point. There can at times be little scope in this discussion to allow for sustained discussions of – for instance -- art, music or poetry in West African and indeed Atlantic history; or to consider changes in religious lives and practice which formed a crucial lens through which all these historical changes were experienced.

One of the corollaries of this historiographical context is that there are many areas in the historiography of Africa which have not been fully addressed by historians of the continent, and therefore have not been assimilated into more general accounts of historical change by those who are not specialists. Partly, this is owing to the comparatively recent origins of the field (which really began to grow in the 1960s), and partly too owing to the fact that many core concepts of History are European and do not map well into an African context. Yet there are many areas which would benefit from discussion and which have yet to be properly addressed, and the question of historical changes in sumptuary laws is one of these.

Little or almost nothing has been written directly on sumptuary laws in West Africa in the precolonial period. However there is a vast array of material on the matter in a range of primary documents and printed accounts written in Arabic, Dutch, English, French and Portuguese. To propose a full analysis in the space available here would be impossible, given the range of materials and the number and complexity of the different kingdoms in the region. As a result in this chapter I have decided to examine these laws by looking at two of the more famous kingdoms in West Africa, Dahomey and Benin. While Benin – located to the East of Lagos in what is now Nigeria – flourished from the mid-15th century onwards, and remained a powerful kingdom into the late 18th century, Dahomey’s power rose through its direct access to the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the 1720s onwards; and Dahomey remained the major kingdom in what is now the Republic of Benin until the imposition of formal French colonialism in the late 19th century.

The inclusion of this chapter in this volume is of interest for a number of reasons. From the perspective of those interested in the history of West Africa, the analysis of sumptuary laws supports the development of historical discourse beyond the field of the study of slavery, already a useful contribution. But secondly it adds an important strand to the understanding of the process of political change on the continent. The regulation of consumption was a key strand in the armoury of increasing political power which was an important feature of society in many West African societies at this time. Understanding the nexus between consumption, display, and power may therefore offer a useful perspective in understanding the concentration of political power which characterized many parts of the region during the era of the trade in enslaved persons. It helps in understanding the rise and establishment of the state in modern African history through a different lens.

With regard to the broader discussion of sumptuary laws undertaken in this volume, this chapter can also offer an important perspective through the differences which emerge between the situation in West Africa and that studied in the other case studies in this volume. The regulation of expense which is a key feature of sumptuary laws emerges in a different context in the case studies examined here. It was not through specific control of personal outlays on clothing that the kings of Benin and Dahomey exercised control over what was worn and displayed, but through other avenues of control: prohibitions, control over trade, and the development of a legal framework which enshrined this power. Thus these case studies provide an interesting way of stretching the concept of the sumptuary law, and understanding also more broadly how global patterns of consumption varied from one world region to another.

These case studies can therefore put the rise of mass consumption in European nations during the same period into an interesting context. Where the hold of the European nobility over consumption power waned in the 17th and the 18th centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie, in both Benin and Dahomey monarchs retained great power over rights of consumption and display through strict control over imports, and the creation of special administrative posts which regulated this trade. The use of particular imported cloths and jewels, and the consumption of certain foods, remained limited to the royal elite, and this helped to augment strict class divisions in each kingdom. The growth of the mass import of goods from Asia and Europe in West Africa thus did not contribute to the democratization of consumption, but rather cemented divisions in society which were manifested (in part) through differential access to the new goods.

***Benin: Sumptuary Laws in a West African Forest Kingdom***

Benin was one of the most enduring and important of pre-colonial West African kingdoms. Situated to the east of Lagos in what is now southern Nigeria, it was a state that had a long history prior to the arrival of Portuguese ships in the late 1480s. After probably being founded in around 1200CE, it grew rapidly, with strong connections to the heart of Yorubà culture at Ile-Ife. Connections between Edo and Ile-Ife remained close throughout the history of Benin. Towards the end of the 13th century, Oba Oguola is said to have sent to Ile-Ife for a master bronze caster to teach the craft to the Edo, and exchange with Ile-Ife deepened the craft in Edo as the centuries passed. Moreover, as the historians Peter Roese and Dmitri Bondarenko have shown, Edo rituals reveal the close links to the Yoruba, since heads of the deceased Obas were sent to Ife for burial right up to the time of the British conquest.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By the 1450s, a series of changes began to affect Benin. To the North of Benin, in Oyo and Nupe, dynasties became consolidated and developed new relationships with the Edo people of Benin. In Benin, Oba Ewuare (enthroned c. 1440) responded by strengthening town chiefs against palace factions in a bid for unity. Administrative changes consolidated the kingdom, with the establishment of three associations of palace chiefs and royal festivals designed to protect and renew the kingdom. Ewuare also expanded the urban structures of Edo (the Bini name for the capital of Benin), improving the road system. These developments were facilitated by growing military power.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus in the decades prior to the Portuguese arrival in the 1480s, Benin had expanded territorially as well as consolidating as a state. A key facet of this was that, as AFC Ryder noted, Oba Ewuare’s power was strengthened by his reputation as both a magician and warrior.[[3]](#footnote-3) The belief that the dynasty was supernaturally gifted fed military success, which in turn fed this belief. This aspect of Benin would play a key part in the kingdom’s early relationship with European powers, since it rapidly became clear that the Edo showed no signs of converting to Christianity.

The next 50 years saw the evolution of the trading relationship which characterised the first two centuries of Benin’s relations with European traders. The initial focus of trade in the 1490s was in the Beni pepper, which served as a popular substitute for Indian spices and was marketed by Portuguese traders through their strong networks in Antwerp (Belgium). But when spices from India came onto the market following Vasco da Gama’s voyage to Calicut at the end of the 15th century, the focus began to shift to the trade in enslaved persons[[4]](#footnote-4): traders from the Portuguese island of São Tomé were trading captives from Benin by 1510, often to sell further along the West African coast in Elmina for gold, which was then shipped to Europe.

Nevertheless the slave trade in Benin at this time was very different from that in other parts of Atlantic Africa such as Kongo and Senegambia. The Obas of Benin were unwilling to sell men from the kingdom, who were vital for warfare and were in any case seen as “slaves of the king”. As early as 1516, according to Ryder, the Oba of Benin had established separate markets for male and female slaves; restrictions on the sale of male slaves developed by 1530 into a total embargo on the Atlantic slave trade which persisted more or less until 1700.[[5]](#footnote-5) By the end of the 1530s, both Portuguese missionaries and traders had concluded that the profits to be found here were not what they had hoped or required.[[6]](#footnote-6) Benin therefore offers a striking example of a West African kingdom which strongly resisted the demands of European slave traders and instead traded with the wider world through local cloth production.

In this context of a powerful, autonomous West African kingdom, it is noteworthy that the place of laws regulating consumption and production was described very early by European observers of the kingdom. Moreover, as the art historian Kathleen Bickford Berzock points out, these laws were vital in controlling two of the major mediums used for manifestations of royal power, brass and coral.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the case of brass, this was one of the most important imports brought by the Portuguese during the 16th century, where large amounts of manillas (armrings) made of the metal were imported and melted down; much of this molten metal was then reused by brass-casters in forging the famous Benin Bronzes, many of which can be observed today in the British Museum.[[8]](#footnote-8) However access to this brass was controlled by the Oba, and was strictly limited to the castes of brass casters (*Igun Eronmwon*) who were the highest-ranking court guild in Edo. As the volumes of the metal available increased, so too did the prestige of the guild, and the attempts to control the use of the metal by the Obas, as all royal artists belonged to hereditary guilds within the Iwebo palace society.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The case of coral was also important, for it was a key marker of nobility in Benin, and remained so for many centuries. The Dutch sailor Willem Bosman noted in a book published in 1705 how in Benin, nobility was designated by “a String of Coral [which]…they are obliged to wear continually about their Necks”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Another Dutch traveller, Nyendael, visiting in 1702, described how two nobles who had lost or broken chains of coral had been killed for the offence.[[11]](#footnote-11) One 1786 description of the Royal Council of Benin described how the “Council consisted of sixty ‘big men’, who wore round the neck, on the wrists and on the ankles their double strings of coral”.[[12]](#footnote-12) The importance of this coral as a token of nobility, and the hierarchy within the kingdom, was expressed through the fact that “the King keeps these Corals in his own Possession; and the Counterfeiting or having any of them in Possession without his Grant, is punished with Death”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus it is clear that there was strict royal regulation of access to these necklaces, as who could wear them was a core sign of political power and social prestige.

The place of coral within the manifestation of royal power had long been important in Benin. The archaeologist Akinwumi Ogundiran suggests that it was related to the longstanding interest in Benin and also in Yorubà kingdoms for the firing of glass beads of many different colours as insignias of power, dating he suggests to at least 1000CE.[[14]](#footnote-14) And long before Bosman was writing, in around 1604, the German traveller Andreas Ulsheimer gave a vivid description of the place of corals in affirming royal power in Benin. At the annual royal festivities at Edo, which Ulsheimer witnessed, the Oba appeared “riding out into the town on a horse decorated with red scarlet and draped with red corals. He sits side-saddle on it…imposingly dressed after their fashion in red scarlet cloth [*ododo*] and draped not only with fine red corals but also with other strange things”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In Benin, it was crucial that royal power was both a temporal and a religious experience. In the 15th century, before the arrival of the Portuguese, the Obas had renewed religious shrines as part of the kingdom’s expansion, and this strengthened the kingdom in the face of external influences from the Atlantic. The adoption of coral as a symbol of royal power was merely an adaption of existing frameworks. Royal power however was accentuated through the control which the Obas were able to exert over the import of coral, which alongside the increasing number of bronze plaques which lined the palace walls were manifestations of the history and power of the kingdom. Through control of who could and could not display the tokens of nobility and refashion history through the bronze plaques, the Obaship gained in power.

The evolution of these laws of consumption and display in the kingdom in the 16th and 17th centuries is therefore important. They may well have grown out of very old laws regulating access to the Oba, and the relationship between the Oba and his subjects. Early outside observers noted that there were strict taboos over the death of Obas and the ability of subjects of the kingdom to interact with them. An (in)famous story recounted in around 1550 by a Portuguese pilot who knew the coast well held that when the Oba died, his subjects accompanied the body into the grave, and were then covered with a large rock, where they died one by one and accompanied the Oba into the life to come.[[16]](#footnote-16) Meanwhile, in Benin’s relationship with the religious centre of Yorubaland at Ife there were also important laws of separation observed: the Benin ambassador to Ife never saw the king (Oni), just some silk curtains which he sat behind, and when the ambassador took his leave a foot would appear from behind the curtains in symbol of departure greeting.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In these accounts of taboos and prescriptions, the relationships of the king of Benin to the nobility is very important. The king controlled trade in coral and then distributed it to his nobility, who would wear it in council meetings as a symbol of their authority. Consumption, too, was constrained, and not only in Benin, but also in other kingdoms along the West African coast. One visitor in 1604 described how in the Gold Coast kingdom of Fetu, once the king had drunk, the nobles took the drinking vessel from him and finished off the contents.[[18]](#footnote-18) Perhaps most importantly, the sight of the king itself was a privilege and a rarity; the Oba would allow himself to be seen by the general population just once a year, where he entered in the manner described above by Ulsheimer, but for the rest of the year, as two Capuchin missionaries described it in around 1651, he kept himself secluded in his palace, just as the Oni of Ife kept his distance from the ambassadors of the Oba as seen above.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Distance, secrecy, representation through visual bronze reproductions, and the power of royal apparel were thus integral to the performance of majesty in Benin in the 16th and 17th centuries. Shoring up this semi-divine power required the redistribution of some of the trappings of power among the nobility and control trade as this grew with the Atlantic dimension, so as to regulate access to vital materials such as bronze and coral accordingly. The Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper, who compiled reports from travellers around 1670, wrote that even clothing was circumscribed, as no one was allowed to go clothed in the Court without royal approval, and there were many members of the Benin nobility “who go stark naked, without any sign of shame, only with a Chain of fine Coral or Jasper around their Necks”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Three royal officials acted as intermediaries between the Oba and the people, and anyone wanting to apply to the Oba had to go through them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The mention of nudity here is significant, for in tandem with other sources it suggests that there was strict regulation of dress by the Oba (as the laws relating to coral would suggest). A striking passage in Mary Kingsley’s *Travels in West Africa* is noteworthy here. Writing of the secret societies among Yoruba peoples (to whom Benin was related, as noted here through Ife), she writes that “among some of [them], the boy has to remain under the rule of the presiding elders of the [secret] society, painted white, and wearing only a bit of grass cloth, if he wears anything” until his initiation is complete.[[22]](#footnote-22) While this account of Kingsley’s is significantly later, the rules regarding dress and secret societies were clearly strict, and this nudity certainly represents these nobles’ subordination to the Oba (their elder) and his control over their attire. In many Yorubà societies, nobility as also shown through the wearing of *agbadas*, to which again access was strictly regulated, revealing the importance of regulation of consumption then at work in this part of West Africa.

Written evidence on Benin for the precolonial period is somewhat patchy, but the overall picture is unambiguous. Royal power was maintained through a combination of the growth of state power – expanding military and administrative apparatus, control over trade – and the manifestation of this power. The ways in which royal power was performed to the population annually at the Royal festivals required strict laws to regulate access to the core insignia of the nobility in terms of coral and clothing. The growth of an authochtonous history as narrated through the bronze plaques at the palace also required increased brass imports and control over their distribution. While these were not sumptuary laws in terms of regulating what could be spent by whom, the social impact of this strict regulation was rather similar. Control over consumption and distribution of prestige goods was a core element of Obaship in Benin, as the kingdom evolved from the late 15th to the 18th centuries.

***Dahomey: The Performance of Power in the 18th Century***

One of the most powerful states in West Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries was Dahomey, located in what is now the Republic of Benin. Dahomey was a relatively new polity, supplanting the nearby kingdoms of Allada and Hueda in the 1720s; thereafter it became a major participant in the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved persons, through its port at Ouidah. However, though having supplanted Allada, Dahomey borrowed idioms of political power through cults of the royal ancestors, and indeed its kings claimed to be heirs to the Allada monarchy.[[23]](#footnote-23)

During the 17th century, the most powerful kingdom in the region had been that of Allada, a kingdom of Ajá people who had also borrowed many Yoruba traditions. Allada was a major trading partner of Europeans, selling cloth, ivory, and enslaved Africans to Dutch, French and Portuguese traders. Atlantic trade in Allada was underway by the 1580s, and there was heavy connection to the Portuguese settlement on the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. By the 1660s, however, Allada was weakening as the growth of trade saw the king of Hueda (Whydah) becoming more powerful. The king of Allada sent embassies to Spain in 1658 and France in 1670, but to no avail. In the early 1680s European traders moved their forts to Hueda: the Dutch in 1682, the English in 1683, and the Brandenburgers in 1684. Dahomey, meanwhile, was still a small kingdom, having been founded between 1620 and 1650. But when the Europeans signed a 6-clause convention with Whydah in 1704, recognising it as an international neutral port, and Whydah’s internal strength then began to weaken, Agaja, king of Dahomey seized his chance; under his leadership, Dahomey conquered Allada in 1724 and Whydah in 1727, becoming at once the most powerful kingdom in the region. [[24]](#footnote-24)

Once in the political ascendancy, Dahomey maintained extensive political connections to its neighbours, as of course did many other West African kingdoms in this era. From 1730 until the early 19th century, it was a tributary of the Yorubà kingdom of Oyo (located in what is now southern Nigeria), and indeed borrowed several administrative structures from Oyo, including the royal slaves known as *Ilari*. In the context of this chapter, it is also significant that Dahomey had strong connections with Benin, and indeed in 1799 sent ambassadors to the Oba at Edo to see if he would cooperate in a joint attack on the Dutch at the fortress of Elmina on the Gold Coast.[[25]](#footnote-25) The official charged with dealing with the Europeans, the *Yovogan*, wore necklaces of coral, which also suggests strong connections to Benin (as we have seen).[[26]](#footnote-26) These interconnections formed part of what the historian IA Akinjogbin described as the “Yoruba-Ajà commonwealth” – peoples with a shared history dating back to the 14th century – and thus the reciprocal cultural, economic and political influence were an important part of life in the region throughout the precolonial period.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In this context, it is not surprising to see a shared approach towards the authority of the king and the construction of a separate and semi-mythic figure in the person of the king in Dahomey, much as had already emerged in Benin even before Dahomey arose as a kingdom in the 17th century. Indeed, these characteristics were also apparent in Dahomey’s immediate predecessor, Hueda, in the late 17th century. Bosman described how “no Man is permitted to see [the King of Hueda] eat”,[[28]](#footnote-28) while one visitor from the Brandenburg Chartered Company, in 1793, described a similar situation of awe before the monarch as had pertained in Benin:

“[The King] receives his dignitaries…sitting on the throne. At a distance of 20 paces from this throne they throw themselves down, kiss the ground and clap their hands, continuing to do so until a sign is given from the throne for them to approach. Thereupon they creep up to the steps of the throne on all fours and remain in a kneeling position there during the [audience].”[[29]](#footnote-29)

This pattern of prostration before the monarch was, as the historian Robin Law points

out, also shared by the successor state of Dahomey, and conveys well the sense of awe and separation cultivated by monarchs along this part of the West African coast by the later 17th and into the 18th century. Moreover, just as in Benin, annual royal festivities saw the enactment of this semi-mystical power by the king, which was attended by representatives of the European chartered companies with trading posts at the port of Ouidah.

A good description of these annual festivities was given by the English Trader Robert Norris, in a book published in 1789. Norris described how, on the last day of the annual customs, “a large stage is erected near one of the palace gates, adorned with flags and umbrellas, and surrounded with a fence of thorns, to keep off the rabble; on this are piled heaps of silesias, checks, callicoes, and a variety of other European and Indian goods; a great many fine cotton cloths that are manufactured in the *Eyo* [Oyo] country; and a prodigious quantity of cowries”; significantly, it was for the king to disburse the cloths to his nobility and to the ship captains, while the cowries (the major form of money used in Dahomey) was thrown to the crowd.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In other words, the use and display of those luxury imported goods was regulated by the king, and it was in this which the display and performance of power lay; cowrie money itself was useful, and was accessible to all, but it could not supplant the true manifestation of nobility, which lay in access to these luxury imported goods. This description also suggests strict regulation of the wearing of particular cloths (in this case those from Oyo), and this was something also implied elsewhere by Norris, when he described a standard dress among commoners in Dahomey, where “country dress…consists of a pair of wide drawers, and a piece of cloth about three yards long, and two broad, worn loosely around the body”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

As in Benin, one of the methods by which the King of Dahomey retained control over these manifestations of power was through absolute authority over imports into the kingdom. As noted above, the *Yovogan*, was charged with managing all European trade there, charging taxes and regulating the import of key goods – contraband gold, Brazilian tobacco, cowries (used as currency in the kingdom) and cloth – in exchange for enslaved persons. A sense of the control which the King exercised over this trade was given by the Brazilian priest, Vicente Pires, who described how in 1797 any ship beached at the bar beside the Brazilian fort of Ajudá at Ouidah was seized and all its goods held to be the property of the King of Dahomey: no one other than the king was permitted to build a house with more than one storey (such an area existed at his palace at Abomey), and if they did he usually seized it for himself.[[32]](#footnote-32)

By this time, a complex administration had been developed by the kingdom of Dahomey. There were regulated markets in different towns on different days of the week, and a series of officials to deal with international trade, agriculture, and national affairs. The laws of the kingdom made it clear that regulated dress and access to luxury goods were the prerogative of the king: the precise regulation of clothing is also shown through the fact that only senior heads of lineages were allowed to wear fine hats, while no one could trade tobacco, rum, or enslaved persons without royal permission, and the king inherited from all his vassals.[[33]](#footnote-33) Moreover, by the mid-18th century under King Tegbesu, if any subject of the kingdom as convicted of a crime, all of his property was forfeited to the king;[[34]](#footnote-34) with legal enslavement on the increase owing to the pressures of Atlantic trade and the incentives offered by merchants in captives, this was another legal avenue to ensure control over the access to and ownership of goods which could be used to manifest nobility and wealth.

One of the implications to emerge from these accounts of the control of trade and the distribution of luxury goods is that clothing was a key marker of nobility, and jealously guarded by the crown. Umbrellas, too, were seen as a sign of status, and could be used only by favoured dignitaries and wives of the king.[[35]](#footnote-35) That access to fine clothing was seen as a prerequisite of nobility in the kingdom is made apparent by the embassies sent by the king of Dahomey around the turn of the 19th century to Salvador da Bahia and Lisbon. The costs of these embassies were paid for by the Portuguese crown, and the bills which were kept make it clear that clothing was the principal expense for the ambassadors from Dahomey. In the case of the 1795-6 embassy, the major costs listed included fine cloths, capes, hats, jackets, coats and shoes, itemised for both the king’s son and for the official ambassador.[[36]](#footnote-36) In the case of the 1805 embassy, there were again fine silk cloths given as gifts to the royal party.[[37]](#footnote-37) In other words, access to luxury imported cloths and the ability to wear them was a defining feature of nobility and prestige in Dahomey by the late 18th century; the nobility sought to gain access to these whenever they could, and the King ensured that this access was regulated through control of trade at the port of Ouidah and strict inheritance laws.[[38]](#footnote-38)

As we have seen in this part of this chapter, the development of these laws relating to imports and inheritance was not something that happened in Dahomey in isolation. It was a characteristic shared with Benin, with which Dahomey had diplomatic connections. It was the best method for kings to shore up their hold on power and their ability to distribute the apparel of power to their trusted followers, thereby consolidating their rule in an era of widespread political instability in West Africa. The growth of political unrest and the repeated overthrow of the *Alafins* of Oyo in the later 18th century meant that access to and control of the display of wealth and influence was vital to kingship in West Africa. Thus, regulation over display and clothing did not decline in this period of history, in contrast to the situation in Europe where consumption was becoming democratised; if anything, such regulations became more rigidly enforced.

That this was a common political and structural change in this part of West Africa is shown by the description made by the Danish traveller Paul Erdmann Isert of the king of Great Popo in 1789.[[39]](#footnote-39) This was the neighbouring kingdom to the west of Dahomey, also a major trader in captives for the Atlantic trade, where some traders were wealthy enough by this time to have built three-storey houses, and to educate their children in Europe.[[40]](#footnote-40) According to Isert, on meeting the King of Great-Popo, they were all offered brandy, but “the king did not drink, since he must never partake of anything in public”.[[41]](#footnote-41)

As we have seen, such rituals of taboo and separation were shared in common in kingdoms between Benin in the east and Dahomey and Great-Popo in the west. These were taboos which had religious origins in the connection between royalty and the religious cults originating from Ife, and interconnecting with the Aja and Fon religious practices which were found in Dahomey. The rise of Atlantic trade provoked intense political competition, and made access to and retention of political power a very difficult task. In this circumstance, the semi-mystic power of the kings which had been safeguarded through strict regulation began slowly to be transformed, and incorporate strict regulations requiring consumption which ensure the continued “splendid isolation” of the king and nobility. What was thereby enshrined was the accentuating distance between the king and nobility on the one hand, and the commoners on the other. These laws thereby enabled this growing distance, and the accentuation of political power which accompanied the growth of Atlantic trade between the 16th and 18th centuries; their impact was very similar to the sumptuary laws which had existed in other part of the world heretofore.

***Conclusion: Power and Majesty in West African History***

The recent 2015 exhibition on the precolonial Kingdom of Kongo at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was subtitled, “Power and Majesty”. This chapter has shown how these features, and the way in which they were manifested, are important aspects of understanding changes in state power in the West African kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey. These case studies offer important starting points for beginning to think through how regulations regarding clothing, display, and consumption changed in West Africa from the 16th to the 19th century, and also how this contrasts with the situation in other world regions. These kingdoms were connected to one another culturally and commercially, and as we have seen the regulation of consumption became if anything more strict in this period, in contrast to the situation in Europe.

Study of the ways in which these laws changed from the 16th to the 19th centuries offers an important new perspective on the changes to the West African state and the manifestation of kingship in this vital historical period, going beyond the stranglehold which the study of slavery so often has over the historical discussion of Africa. However it is also significant to try to consider in this chapter just how wide-reaching this framework was in the region, since there is a danger that building into a general conclusion from just these two case studies could present a danger of over-generalisation. To bring the discussion to a conclusion, it may therefore be helpful to consider in brief evidence from different regions of West Africa, in order to consider how widespread this pattern actually was, and how useful the region is as a comparator to the other case studies examined in this book.

In this context, some examples from the oral literatures of the broader region of West Africa are quite revealing. The oral literatures from what is now the republic of Mali have several interesting pieces of evidence relating to the general importance of analogues to sumptuary laws during the precolonial period. Several decades ago the French anthropologist Christiane Seydou compiled an interesting book, derived from the Fula praise-singer Tinguidji, a Mâbo or praise-singer to the nobility from Massina. Massina became an important Islamic kingdom in what is now central Mali in the 19th century, and the tale of Silâmaka and Poullôri was, says Seydou, a *noddol* or call to the Fula chief of Massina, to reinvigorate the historical consciousness of his predecessors.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The significance for this discussion is that one part of Tinguidji’s recital makes clear the importance of the regulation of consumption in Fula culture by the late 18th and early 19th centuries:

“A real Fula from the West *Pullo gorgal piir duu*

Does not eat before his sister *nyaamtaa yeeso banndum-debbo*

Does not eat before his wife! *nyaamtaa yeeso deekum!*

People say that whoever sees the mouthful *‘Be mbi ‘ i neďďo si yii lonnge*

that you take will lose all respect for you. *maaďa fuu hafete!*”[[43]](#footnote-43)

In this case, the act of consumption is closely connected to rituals of purity and the gendered division of activity and life which has been well studied by many anthropologists in the tradition of Mary Douglas.[[44]](#footnote-44) However there is also the implication here that there was also a class hierarchy when it came to consumption; it was not just women who did not see a “real” Fula eating, but also anyone might lose respect if they observed the act of consumption. Class and gender hierarchies were clearly represented in the question of practise relate to consumption in this region by 1800.

A similar regulation of consumption at this time is also clear from oral literatures found in The Gambia region. The Federation of Kaabu was a large state that prospered from the 16th to the 19th centuries in the region from what is now Guinea-Bissau, southern Senegal (the Casamance), and the south Bank of the Gambia river.[[45]](#footnote-45) A highly hierarchized society evolved here, and one of the oral narratives describes a well in the Badora region, on the borderlands of Casamance and north-eastern Guinea-Bissau. This well was called Njampeng Njai, and according to one account recorded in the 1960s, “It was surrounded by pawpaw trees and by silk cotton trees with smoothish earth./The women of the princely house used to draw water from it./ Poor women did not draw water from it.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

These two examples both come from the latter end of the precolonial period, from the late 18th or early 19th centuries. It is therefore important to note the process of change from the earlier times documented by these oral literatures in the region. Here one oral account of the first emperor of the empire of Mali, Sunjata Keita (*fl. c. 1235-55*) is very important. The Sunjata epic is the centrepiece of oral literatures of the region of what the historian Boubacar Barry called “Greater Senegambia”, and many different versions exist.[[47]](#footnote-47) In that of Lansine Diabaté from Kela, recorded and published by Jan Jansen, Esger Duintjer and Boubacar Traore, a rather different view of patterns of eating and consumption is recorded:

“Just then *O tuma,*

at Manko Farako Mangankèn’s home *Manko Farak*ɔ *Mangankèn*

when Sogolòn Kejùgu had given birth, *Sogolon Kejugu jigilen*

when the old woman had been sent *musok*ɔrɔnin d*ε bilalen k’o ka waa*

to announce the child’s arrival… *denko fɔla…*

At that time, the king’s breakfast *o tuma yan, mansakε ka daraka*

was taken in the company of the whole population. *bεεbe, jamabεε be ajε ka damun”*.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Thus where in the Fula narrative the “real” Fula eats unobserved, in the narrative about the origins of Mali, the king of Mali was observed by the whole population. Read together, these oral sources suggest a shift in the regulation of consumption and power in the heartland of the old Mali empire which resonates strongly with the case studies we have looked at on Benin and Dahomey. Where in distant times there were fewer barriers between the king and the commoners, and they might watch him eat, the passage of time saw more divisions grow up between different social groups, and in time power came to be displayed in part through separation and the guarding of these taboos by elites.

As we have seen in this chapter, a core contributory factor in this change was the rise of a greater preponderance of imported cloths and greater variety of foodstuffs, which accompanied the expansion of trade to and from West Africa from the 14th to the 19th centuries. The examples discussed here have shown that this process was accompanied not so much by a democratisation of consumption as by the establishment of more universal regulation of consumption in many different societies. In this case therefore, what may be preserved is not necessarily the distant details of the audience which the Mansa of Mali had when he ate breakfast, but rather the sense of the growing regulation which attended the consumption patterns of the elite over a long period of time.

An important idea of how this process may have taken place in West Africa is provided by the Song of Bagauda, a Hausa homily transcribed and translated by the scholar Mervyn Hiskett. In what is now Northern Nigeria, Hausa peoples controlled important kingdoms, especially the city of Kano, which was a major terminus for the trans-Saharan trade to Tripoli from the 15th century onwards. The “Song of Bagauda” described well the rule of the Kano king Babba Zaki, from c. 1747-71, stating that “it was he who introduced remoteness into kingship/Setting body-guards to rebuke the people./One could not see him – the Great One – except through an intermediary”.[[49]](#footnote-49) Importantly, these changes were also connected to the growing power of Kano, since “It was his sovereignty that has set the standard for Kano./ It was in his time that horses were amassed”.[[50]](#footnote-50)

By the middle of the 18th century, therefore, perhaps the most important kingdom of the Sahel was developing the sort of separation between kings and people that is suggested too in the Fula narrative from Massina to the east, and which we have seen also in the examples from Benin and Dahomey considered in more detail in this chapter. The growth of trade and state power which emerged in the 18th century, with expanded cavalry, and the import of large numbers of firearms and other trade goods which bolstered state authority, was leading to a concentration of power in many different West African kingdoms. This concentration of power was manifested in a growing separation between ruling elites and the populations, and this separation was embodied through the regulation of consumption which made real and apparent this separation. The rise in trade and consumer goods therefore produced divisions in society which would lead to great political tensions by the 19th century.

The trajectory of sumptuary laws in West African societies is therefore somewhat different to the case of many European societies, where increased trade led to a democratisation of consumption patterns as the rising bourgeoisie lobbied for similar rights to the aristocracy. In West Africa, consumption and deportment was strictly regulated, though there were not precise laws over who could spend money on what. In this regulation, the question of class was fundamental. The absence of a strong and independent bourgeoisie in Benin and Dahomey – other than those court officials who worked for the Kings – meant that there was not the same pressure to relax sumptuary laws as was the case in European countries. Where a “middle class” could lobby for the end to such differentials of display, this was not the case in West Africa, which meant that the divide between the aristocracies and the commoners (who were always potentially enslaveable) grew quickly.

The result was a crisis of power in the 19th century, where revolutionary movements swept many areas, from Senegambia in the West to the Niger Bend and northern Nigeria. These movements, grounded in deep-seated class antagonisms, led to the overthrow of the traditional aristocracies in many of these areas. While access to trade goods and political capital had grown, the control of these and the distribution among the nobility had enabled the growth of a ruling elite class and the steady encroachment on the rights of peoples in many kingdoms, as the examples of Benin and Dahomey have shown in detail in this chapter. In many parts of West Africa, the movements which arose in the 19th century dispensed with these ruling elites, and the inevitable struggles which followed in their turn paved the way for the swift rise of formal colonialism.

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2. ibid., 80-6; AFC Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897* (Harlow: Longmans, Green & Co., 1969), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 38-40 on the early pepper trade and the impact of the Indian spice trade, and shift towards the slave trade. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the disappointment of missionaries in 1539, see António Brásio (ed.), *Monumenta Misonária Africana:* *África Ocidental* (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1952-88 – hereafter MMA),Vol. 2, 79-80; on the economic problems with the trading post at Benin, see ibid., Vol. 1, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kathleen Bickford Berzock, *Benin: Royal Arts of a West African Kingdom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For the manilla trade in 1517, see Robert Garfield, *A History of São Tomé Island, 1470-1655: The Key to Guinea* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press), 46; and for the early 1520s see Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 53, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Berzock, *Benin*, 5. The best recent discussion of the brass casting is Gregor M. Metzig, “Corals, brass and firearms: Material commodities in cultural interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin”, in Harriet Rudolph and Gregor M. Metzig (eds.), *Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? The Material Culture of Transcultural Diplomacy* (Göttingen: European History Yearbook 107, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. H. Ling Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968; first published in 1903), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description*, 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Akinwumi Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations of the Atlantic Experience in Yorubaland”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies 35/2-3* (2002), 433-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Adam Jones (ed. and trans.), *German Sources for West African History 1599-1669* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1983), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. MMA, Vol. 4, 619-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ásia de João de Barros: Primeira Década* (Lisbon: Agência Geral das Colónias, 1945), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jones, *German Sources*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mateo de Anguiano, *Misiones Capuchinas en África* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1957), Vol. 2, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. John Ogilby (ed. and tr.), *Olfert Dapper: Africa, Being an Accurate Description of…* (London: Tho. Johnson, 1670), 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description*, 464;Roth, *Great Benin*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa: Congo Français, Corisco, and Cameroons* (London : Penguin, 2015), 538; first published 1897. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Robin Law, *The Kingdom of Allada* (Leiden: CNWS, 1997), 65-6, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the origins of Dahomey and the early history of Allada, see ibid., and also IA Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours: 1708-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (Lisbon - hereafter AHU), Conselho Ultramarino (hereafter CU), Bahia, Caixa 213, Doc. 12, fol. 2r. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Clado Ribeiro de Lessa (ed.), *Viagem de África em o Reino de Dahomé, escrito pelo Padre Vicente Ferreira Pires no ano de 1800 e até agora Inédito* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1957), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 11-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bosman, *A New And Accurate Description*, 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Adam Jones (ed. and trans.), *Brandenburg Sources for West African History, 1680-1700* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH 1985), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee, King of Dahomy an Inland Country of Guiney, to which are added the author’s journey to Abomey, the Capital, and a short account of the African Slave Trade* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968; first published 1789), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lessa, *Viagem de África*, 27, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 98-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. AHU, CU, São Tomé, Caixa 27, doc. 45ª. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. AHU, CU, São Tomé, Caixa 39A, doc. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In general, on the embassies of Dahomey in Brazil and Portugal, see Ana Lucia Araujo, “Dahomey, Portugal, and Bahia: King Adandozan and the Atlantic Slave Trade”, *Slavery and Abolition* 33/1 (2012), 1-19; Joice de Souza Santos, *As Embaixadas dos Reinos da Costa Africana Como Mediadores Culturais: Missões Diplomáticas em Salvador, Rio de Janiero e Lisboa (1750-1823)* (Rio de Janeiro: Pontifícia Universidad Católica do Rio de Janeiro, 2012, Unpublished MA dissertation); Luis Nicolau Parés, “Cartas do Daomé: Uma Introdução”, *Afro-Asia 47 (2013*), 295-395. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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40. Selena Axelrod Winsnes (ed. and trans.), *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Paul Erdmann Isert’s* Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia *(1788)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1992), 90-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. On Segu see Jean Bazin, “War and servitude in Segou”, *Economy and Society 3/2* (1974), 107-44; David C. Conrad, *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu According to Tayiru Banbera*, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1990; Richard L. Roberts, “Production and Reproduction of Warrior States: Segu Bambara and Segu Tokolor, c. 1712-1890”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13/3 (1980), 389-419. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
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44. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1989; first published 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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46. National Centre for Arts and Culture, Research and Documentation Division, Fajara, The Gambia, Transcribed Cassette 23A, page 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; tr. Armah, A. Kwei). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Jan Jansen, Esger Duintjer and Boubacar Tamboura (eds. and trans.), *L’Épopée de Sunjata, d’Après Lansine Diabate de Kela* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1995), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Mervyn Hiskett, “The ‘Song of Bagauda’: A Hausa King List and Homily in Verse: II”, SOAS Bulletin 28/1 (1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid.. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)