

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Iliffe. *Honour in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xxiv + 404 pp. \$30.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-54685-0; \$88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83785-9.

Reviewed by Martin A. Klein (Department of History, University of Toronto)
Published on H-SAfrica (April, 2006)



John Iliffe has, over about forty years, presented us with a constant stream of thoroughly researched and original works of historical scholarship. In recent years, he has focused on broad, magisterial essays on what he considers unexplored but important themes in African history. This book is a case in point. Both John Iliffe and I have been influenced by the unpublished thesis of a Senegalese sociologist, Boubakar Ly.[1] Otherwise, many scholars have dealt with honor, but few have tried to pull an argument together in the way that students of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies have. Iliffe lays out his argument on the first page: “Until the coming of world religions, honor was the chief ideological motivation of African behavior. It remained a powerful motivation even for those who accepted world religions.” The origin of this book was a conversation with Michael Twaddle. When Iliffe sought to understand the behavior of the Uganda martyrs, Twaddle suggested that he study heroic behavior in ancient Greece. Once he did, the quest for honor became a universal explanatory theme.

The first half of the book is a tour of Africa that examines how different African societies conceived of honor and how it affected behavior. He starts with the aristocratic cavalry warriors of the Sudan and the *griots* extolling their accomplishments. He relies heavily on epics like those of Sundiata. He also relates the aristocratic codes of honor to *pulaaku*, the code of the pastoral Fulbe, which stresses manners, self-control, reserve and courage.[2] Many Fulbe bands have a flagellation ritual in which two young men face each other and take turns striking each other between the neck and shoulder blade with a stick. The goal is for each to withstand pain without flinching. He later relates this to circumcisions, in which young males are expected to withstand pain stoically. The difference between the pastoralists and their

more aristocratic counterparts is that the warriors of various state traditions are given to boasting and to challenges, and their code of honor is rank-linked. The horsemen were loyal to their fellows and protected those under their authority, but they believed that they had the right to impose themselves on and enslave those less fortunate than themselves.

Iliffe then looks at Islam. He suggests that Muslims often question the glorification of the hero and the egotistical pursuit of rank and personal reputation, substituting the service of the Prophet. Muslims change the discourse, but often end up absorbing much of the value system of their pagan enemies. He then moves around Africa. In Christian Ethiopia, Christianity did not seriously hinder the warrior philosophy. The warrior ethos involved praise songs, boasting, humiliation of the enemy and an emphasis on hand-to-hand fighting. He then looks at the states of lower Guinea like the Yoruba and Asante, to central and southern Africa, to interlacustrine Africa, and to stateless societies. In each he finds some kind of honor code.

Within that framework, he describes differences between codes of honor. Two differences loom particularly large. The first is the distinction between vertical honor, which is based on rank and rooted in birth. This is the logic behind *griots* reciting the genealogies of warriors they are praising. The second is a distinction between the heroic honor of the young warrior and the “household” honor of the elder. The values of the young male are personal courage and daring, often honed in conflicts or cattle raids. The householder is more measured, more concerned with protecting family and community through conciliation and negotiation. There is also a contrast between male honor and female honor, though fe-

male honor is less well developed and differs radically from male honor. Societies also differ in their emphasis on virginity, chastity and sexual behavior. Sundiata's sister, after all, discovers the secret of the magical power of his rival, Sumanguru, by seducing him.

All of this is very well done, though I have reservations about a few points. Part 2 is labeled "Fragmentation and Mutation" and deals with what happens to these honor codes when Africa is conquered. Iliffe first has to explain why more Africans did not die resisting, though those who did resist often were led by their conceptions of honor to disastrous confrontations with superior military technology. He discusses the confrontation with Christianity and to a lesser degree, with Islam. He sees honor in the elites falling back on efforts to maintain rank and status with colonial hierarchies, and to protect control of their women and children. He looks at attitudes toward gender and at the ways men respond to the challenges of urban life and migrant labor. He reads honor into African political behavior, and behavior of nationalists and independent African governments, both civilian and military. He argues that the quest for honor shapes the way rebels of all kinds fight. All of this is very well argued and very suggestive in places, but I have my reservations.

First, Iliffe uses honor in a very broad and general way. He is often talking about dignity, pride, self-respect, prestige or status. All of these things merge into honor. By using the concept broadly and defining it in such a general way, he loses what he starts with, a tool that explains certain cultures. In places, he is talking about values that exist in all or almost all cultures. In many of the things he describes, Africans are not that different from the rest of us. I cannot, for example, see honor shaping student protests, which are more like the behavior of students in Berkeley or Paris in 1968 than they are like the behavior of medieval horsemen. He sees the quest for honor in the charges of spear-wielding Africans against the massed squares of colonial armies, but would he describe the suicidal charges of European infantry during World War I in the same way?

Second, I think he fails to distinguish between honor as discourse and honor as it shapes real behavior. People do not behave the way epics describe behavior. That does not mean that heroic behavior does not happen. He provides many descriptions, some of them eloquent, but that is usually not the way people behave. The *ceddo* warriors and their counterparts all over the western Soudan spent more time strutting and boasting than they did fighting.

The rationale for their existence was slave-raiding, but in any given year, few of them captured more than one slave. We can also ask why these men, with their military ethos, speedily became law-abiding subjects after the colonial conquest. In much of West Africa, there was neither significant banditry nor physical resistance once the conquest is over.

Third, he uses honor to explain things that have multiple causes. By the later chapters, he is simply talking about masculinity. There are many factors that explain the AIDS epidemics in southern and eastern Africa, but honor is not one of the most important.

Honor would be a more effective analytic tool if used in a more explanatory way. I can best illustrate that by several examples from my own work.[3] I have tended over the years to a materialistic interpretation of history, but in my research on slavery in the Western Sudan, those interpretations were inadequate. They particularly failed to explain the persistence of vestiges of servile behavior that continue up to the present. The former masters clung to status distinctions even after economic control was gone and the former slaves acquiesced. Iliffe has a chapter entitled "The Honour of the Slave," but he does not understand slavery and the importance of honor in differentiating them from the non-slave or noble. We see the honor codes in the grant to former slaves of both the right to beg and sexual license, in particular the right to do dances which are forbidden to free-born Muslims. The slaves get something out of this. They can ask for help when they are short of money, and the noble can prove that he is noble by being generous. Iliffe somewhere picked up the idea that virginity and chastity were more valued in the south and east, than in West Africa. That is certainly not my experience. In the past, sexual relations with a slave woman, even if forced, affirmed her lack of honor. Honor was the boundary. It was also the boundary in the western Soudan between the "nobles" and the caste artisans. The artisans were often well off and often proud of their skills, but they were defined in the eyes of the larger society by their lack of honor.

Of course, slaves and artisans seek honor. In the twentieth century, they sought honor in establishing control of family life and work, but they sought it most strongly in the practice of Islam. I spent much time in 1963 in the home of a man who was from a *griot* family, but tried to overcome his origins by refusing to behave like a *griot*, by developing a reputation for integrity and by the strict practice of Islam. He had partial success, but his children could not marry "noble" women

and were always referred to by others as *griots*. The most ambiguous group was that of the slave warriors like the Wolof *ceddo* and the Bambara *tonjon*. They had an esprit de corps and a code, which stressed loyalty and courage. It was a code of honor, which is one reason that men of *ceddo* descent talk about their origins, but their status depended on their subservience. Stilwell tells the story of a slave official in Kano, who was promoted above his station.[4] When the Emir persuaded the British to retract the appointment, the man was forced to strip to his loin cloth and to accept that, in spite of his wealth and fine clothes, he was still a slave. My argument here is that honor was ideal, but it was also a boundary and in the world of rural West Africa, some found it useful to play the role assigned them.

In his discussion of the colonial military, Iliffe does not seem to recognize that most of the soldiers in late-nineteenth-century West Africa were slaves. The success not only of the *tirailleurs*, but also of Samory's sofa and many British units was based on the traditions of slave soldiers. They were loyal and brave, but it was a slave warrior ethos. A military career commanded little respect in many parts of West Africa. Formal recruitment began in French Africa in 1912, but the African force sent to Europe in World War I was about 75 percent slave. Slavery no longer existed, but no chief with a population of former slaves would send free men unless they were enemies of his. By the beginning of World War II, recruiting methods had changed and free peasants were often recruited, but the *tirailleurs* still had an esprit de corps. They were often more resolute than French units during the fall of France, perhaps because of a code of

honor, perhaps because some German units, like the elite Death's Head Division, were executing African prisoners. Perhaps the best demonstration of honor in that sorry story was that of the French officers, who tried to remain with their civilized African soldiers to save them from the barbarism of fellow Europeans.

My argument here is simply that honor is more of a two-edged sword. Iliffe recognizes that there are different kinds of honor. There are other points that I could question, but I think I have given the reader a sense of the book's strength and weaknesses. Iliffe ends with a plea for further research. It is well taken. This book makes a powerful argument and raises important questions.

Notes

[1]. Boubakar Ly, "L'honneur et les valeurs morales dans les socits oulof et toucouleur du Sngal," Thse pour le Doctorat de Troisième Cycle de Sociologies, Université de Paris, 2 vols., 1966.

[2]. *Pulaaku* is best discussed in the work of Paul Riesman, *First Find Your Child a Good Mother: The Construction of Self in Two African Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[3]. Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 14.

[4]. Sean Stilwell, *Paradoxes of Power: The Kano "Mamluks" and Male Royal Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1804-1903* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Martin A. Klein. Review of Iliffe, John, *Honour in African History*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11644>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.