They are concerned, of course, to explain why this was so. They reject any idea of a general African, or even southern African, ideology of human sacrifice. In every place where medicine murders took place, or became notorious – and they examine the crisis in Swaziland in the 1970s, in Venda in the late 1980s, in Ghana, in Nigeria – motives for murder could be understood 'only within local systems of belief that were difficult for outside observers to penetrate' (p. 310). They explicitly reject the approach of John and Jean Comaroff in an influential 1999 article in which they 'analysed both witchcraft and ritual murder together with a variety of other phenomena such as trading body parts, the production of ''zombies'' and pyramid scams'. They find 'little justification for the way in which [the Comaroffs] indiscriminately aggregated such diverse phenomena . . . or indeed for the speculative flourishes by which they sought to explain them with reference to the contradiction between the consumerist propensities of late capitalism and the realities of poverty, inequality and structural unemployment faced by modern youth' (p. 295).

Murray and Sanders focus only on medicine murder. They are particularly interested by the question of why at some times its commission aroused no great interest, but at others generated a moral scare. Their explanation for this is essentially political rather than economic. In Basutoland the key parties to a medicine murder were the most powerful men in society, but they were not denounced by the impoverished young who took part in the murders. The moral panic about such murders in Basutoland between the late 1940s and early 1950s had political causes: they took place both before and after these ten years but were generally ignored. In those particular years there was an acute tension between the chiefs and the British administration. The tension was the result of a crisis in the system of indirect rule. The British, and especially High Commissioner Baring, in fact wanted to strengthen the chiefs against South Africa. But Baring thought strengthening could only be achieved through purification. The dreadful evil of medicine murder must be extirpated and those responsible for it punished. For their part the senior chiefs took every step they could to empower themselves. The result was the conviction for medicine murder of the second and fourth most senior chiefs in the country and their hanging in August 1949. It was 'the blackest day' in Basutoland's colonial history and spread panic throughout the country.

Murray and Sanders have not attempted to emulate Jean la Fontaine. But they have laid the foundations for a real attempt to understand our contemporary moral crisis. Any such attempt will need to emulate their carefulness and rigour.

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JOHN ILIFFE, *Honour in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, African Studies Series (pb, £16.99 – 0521 546850; hb £45.00 – 0521 83785 5). 2005, 404 pp.

The 'Concluding questions' which end this sweeping volume are decidedly modest in tone. In them, John Iliffe identifies areas of future research, and expresses the belief that, in suggesting such questions, the book will have served a purpose. Elsewhere, however, he is rather more bold about the argument, notably on p. 227, which states his central thesis with characteristic clarity: honour matters in African history; we can understand the periodization of African history partly in terms of competing notions of honour (some local,

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some exogenous), and we can understand some profound continuities in patterns of behaviour and political action through an appreciation of the way that new formulations of honour have drawn on, and modified, existing notions of dignity. The spread of AIDS; the patrimonialism of the postcolonial state; the role of the military in politics – all can be understood in terms of the enduring significance of certain ideas of honour.

As always, Iliffe displays an extraordinary command of a range of literature on diverse topics across sub-Saharan Africa. Repeatedly, he picks up an idea from the literature on one part of Africa – Boubakar Ly's work on heroism and piety in Senegambia, or the literature on respectability in South Africa – and works it into his wider theme. Almost in passing, he offers crisp summaries of difficult debates, and novel insights on old questions. His analysis of the martyrdom of Buganda's Christians – which is, perhaps, the key moment in the book as a whole – is a model of limpid brevity, and I was entirely persuaded by his suggestion that commitment to honour made negotiation impossible in Buganda in 1890–1. Elsewhere, I was particularly impressed by his comments on justice and the relationship between states and corporate lineage groups: 'A state's control over feud indicated its command over access to honour'. I wish I'd said that. Though the book is on the long side, Iliffe's fluent style and the sheer ambition of his discussion carry the reader (at least, this reader) along.

Having said which, I was not always sure where I was being carried, beguiling though the commentary was. There is a little ambiguity over whether the stress is on change or continuity; but more importantly, I felt some continued uncertainty over what exactly honour *is*. Iliffe identifies several different models of honour, and makes careful attempts to pick out distinctive notions of honour among women (largely relating to fertility, but in some cases to control of sexuality), among male householders, and among youths. But it is not always clear how these differing notions of honour related to one another; or even if it is safe to consider them all to be 'honour'. Crucially, one might ask whether honour is the same as a sense of propriety; the distinction suggested here between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' systems of honour clearly relates to that question, but does not entirely answer it.

It is surely significant that the most consistent strand in this story is provided by the ethic which is most easily identified as one of honour: the 'heroic' mode, the ostentatious bravado of the male warrior. This offers the clearest demonstration of Iliffe's argument of continuity through change, and it is repeatedly counterposed in his analysis with householder notions of dignity: warrior against pietist; *cheo* against *heshima*; heroic virtue against civic virtue. In Iliffe's analysis, the civic virtue of the householder tended to sit rather more easily with a Christian ethic of proper behaviour and so helped to produce a Christian-influenced model of respectability. The contrast between flamboyantly bemedalled military hero and sober householder is an acute one (think of Amin versus Nyerere), and the implication that militaries created by, and inherited from, the colonial state helped to sustain and reproduce the heroic ethos is interesting (though the use of the expression 'regimental' honour is a little confusing).

But how do we understand the coexistence within a society of multiple notions of propriety which can be used to critique as well as legitimate behaviour? Iliffe is concerned with competing ideas of honour, but arguably he understates the complexity of this competition: how effectively can honour be, as some would put it, 'counter-hegemonic' in its operation? It is argued here that, in interlacustrine society, Iru aspired to a Hima sense of honour, and of course it is true that many Iru sought to adopt Hima culture. But Iru did not simply accept the Hima norm which identified them as loud, vulgar and dirty.

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They offered their own critique of Hima behaviour – denouncing them as lazy, licentious and haughty – based on an alternative sense of proper behaviour. And while Iliffe suggests that respectable notions of female honour preclude beer selling, there are plenty of women in modern Africa who would view this activity as entirely compatible with their ideal of the 'proper woman' who provides for her children. This is, as one would expect, a remarkable, clever and thought-provoking book; and this kind of historical attention to questions of ethics and proper behaviour is very welcome. But 'honour' may itself be too constricting a formulation to allow a full exploration of how people have argued, and still argue, over doing the right thing.

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ROBIN LAW, *Ouidah: the social history of a West African slaving 'port': 1727–1892*. Oxford: James Currey (pb £18.95 – 0 85255 497 4; hb £50 – 0 85255 498 2); Athens: Ohio University Press (pb US$29.95 – 0 8214 1572 7; hb US$49.00 – 0 8214 1571 9). 2004, 320 pp.

With some three decades of research and publications on the Slave Coast, Oyo, Dahomey and Allada, Robin Law is extraordinarily well qualified to produce a study of Ouidah. This key entrepôt of the slave trade was a 'port' located 4 km from the sea that had to utilize long boats to access ships anchored offshore, yet nevertheless sent more than a million people into slavery across the Atlantic. With his characteristic thoroughness and attention to evidence, Law provides a dense and detailed history of Ouidah under the suzerainty of the kingdom of Dahomey.

Sources for Ouidah are many and varied, and Law draws most heavily on British archival records supplemented with French and Beninese archives, papers of nineteenth-century missionaries, contemporary travellers' accounts, local publications, secondary literature and interviews with Ouidah families. The field evidence tends to be used as corroboration of the written record, all in the interest of exploring a merchant community and the organization of the slave trade. In that sense, this is much more a commercial and political history than a social history, the book's title notwithstanding. Law is at his best in using scattered data to calculate valuable statistical measures of activity, for example in demonstrating the importance of the fishing industry in the seventeenth century and figuring out the pay rate for porters, which together point to a prosperous and vigorous pre-Dahomian local economy. Elsewhere, he calculates and presents in comparative terms the income flowing into Ouidah from the sale of slaves, again giving perspective on the relative prosperity of the town.

The book's organization is a combination of chronological and thematic chapters. Law devotes an early chapter to the pre-Dahomian period of Hueda control in the seventeenth century, when Ouidah was just a village with three trading factories/forts – French, British and Portuguese – located 11 km south of the Hueda capital of Savi. He then considers the aftermath of the Dahomian conquest, sparing his reader the well-known details of that event and the debates that he has addressed elsewhere around the thesis of I. A. Akinjogbin that the Dahomians pushed to the coast in order to stop the slave trade. He carefully recounts the nearly incessant wars that followed until 1775 as the Hueda tried in vain to retake Ouidah, and surveys changes

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