Loss of a Middle Ground? Intercultural Diplomacy in Dahomey and the Discourse of Despotism*

Christina Brauner

RESÜMEE

Der Beitrag setzt sich mit interkultureller Diplomatie im westafrikanischen Dahomey zwischen dem frühen 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert auseinander und verfolgt eine doppelte Stoßrichtung: Zum einen wird die diplomatische Praxis vor Ort, in erster Linie am Beispiel von Audienzreisen europäischer Vertreter in Dahomey, untersucht. Dabei frage ich, inwiefern sich ein transkulturelles Zeremoniell entwickelte, das sowohl europäische als auch afrikanische Elemente aufnahm und zu etwas Neuem verband. Zum anderen geht es um die (wechselseitige) Wahrnehmung und die Transformationen, die das europäische Bild Dahomeys seit dem späten 18. Jahrhundert durchlief. Anhand der immer stärkeren Verdichtung des Bildes von Dahomey als Despotie zeige ich exemplarisch auf, wie die europäische Wahrnehmung von außereuropäischen Herrschaftsformen immer stärker ‚alterisiert' wurde und zunehmend durch einen ‚exklusiven' Eurozentrismus dominiert wurde.

Stories about African rulers and European trading companies are not exactly what used to be expected when dealing with diplomatic history. That this essay can treat the very topic it does – intercultural diplomacy in West African Dahomey during the 18th and 19th centuries – is not least due to a recent change in diplomatic history itself, a change, for the most part, initiated by the adaptation of new methods and perspectives. The so-called "New Diplomatic History" is part of the general turn towards cultural history and, equally, of the turn towards historicizing "the state".[1] In the following I argue that

* The following essay is based on the research for my PhD thesis submitted in 2014: C. Brauner, Kompanien, Könige und caboceers. Europäisch-afrikanische Beziehungen und interkulturelle Diplomatie an Gold- und Sklavenküste, 17.-18. Jahrhundert, Köln [i.a.] 2015 [forthcoming]. I thank A. Flüchter, R. Ng, B. Stollberg-Rilinger and the participants of the Heidelberg conference for their comments and questions.

1 Cf., for instance, J. Watkins, Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe, in: Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 38 (2008) 1, pp. 1-14; H. von Thiessen / C. Windler, Einleitung: Außen-

intercultural diplomacy promises to be an especially fruitful field of research to investigate perceptions of 'foreign' statehood, conceptualizations of statehood in general and processes of transculturation.

First, I will outline the basic features of the New Diplomatic History and sketch what this paper can contribute to the debate on state and state-building (1.). Then, after a short introduction to the historical context (2.), I analyze audiences as intercultural encounters (3.). Audiences were the very situations in which political entities could meet, through performative construction, in and by the encounter of actors. Audiences allow us enlightening insights into the *practice* of diplomacy and offer rich material in asking for mutual perceptions and processes of transculturation.[2] The second part of the analysis addresses the question of historical change (4.): How did European descriptions of non-European statehood change over time? Here, I trace the development that European narratives about Dahomian rule and ceremonial underwent during the 18th and early 19th centuries and try to illuminate the beginnings of an exclusively European notion of state.

1. The New Diplomatic History and the Debates on State and State-Building

In former times diplomacy was mainly understood as a game with unchanging rules whose participants were modelled according to the concept of the modern state. Nowadays, historians have turned away from the idea of such an exclusively inter-state game and are increasingly focusing on the people who *made* diplomacy happen, analyzing their conditions of living as well as their modes of thinking and acting as "diplomats".[3] The notion of timeless rules is questioned, for example, by exposing the importance of ceremonial in early modern times.[4] Other studies point to the importance of networks

beziehungen in akteurszentrierter Perspektive, in: id. (eds.), Akteure der Außenbeziehungen. Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel, Köln [i.a.] 2010, pp. 1-12. See also the programmatic essay by P. Jackson, Pierre Bourdieu, the 'Cultural Turn' and the Practice of International History, in: Review of International Studies, 34 (2008) 1, pp. 155-181. The scholarly network "New Diplomatic History" is dominated by historians specializing in the 20th century: see http://newdiplomatichistory.org/ [visited on 2 January 2015].– Unfortunately, communication and exchange across the different periods is still underdeveloped: whereas discussions between medievalists and early-modernists are quite lively the gap towards modern or even contemporary history is huge. Besides, national specificities of historiographical discourses are also not to be underestimated.

2 Despite their indisputable importance in diplomatic practice, only a few studies have dealt with audiences so far, especially if compared to the extensive research done on negotiations or entries. Cp., however, e.g. P. Burschel / C. Vogel (eds.), Die Audienz. Ritualisierter Kulturkontakt in der Frühen Neuzeit, Köln [i.a.] 2014 and R. S. Love, Rituals of Majesty: France, Siam, and Court Spectacle in Royal Image-Building at Versailles in 1685 and 1686, in: Canadian Journal of History, 31 (1996) 2, pp. 171-198.

3 Cp. for example H. Kugeler et al. (eds.), Internationale Beziehungen in der Frühen Neuzeit. Ansätze und Perspektiven, Münster [i.a.] 2006; S. Andretta et al. (eds.), Paroles de négociateurs. L'entretien dans la pratique diplomatique de la fin du Moyen Âge à la première Guerre mondiale, Rome 2010; D. Frigo (ed.), Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800, Cambridge 2011; M. Häberlein / C. Jeggle (eds.), Materielle Grundlagen der Diplomatie: Schenken, Sammeln und Verhandeln in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit, Konstanz 2013.

4 This insight was gained by William Roosen in a pathbreaking essay: W. Roosen, Early Modern Diplomatic Cer-

and patronage in diplomacy, thus disproving elder assumptions about seemingly rational top-down organization.[5] Furthermore, the traditional focus on Italy and Western Europe, taken to be the "cradle" of modern diplomacy,[6] has been broadened. Diplomacy has been re-discovered as a field of intercultural interactions *par excellence*, within Europe as well as beyond its – scarcely fixed – borders.[7] Scholars interpret diplomacy as a way of moving across cultural or religious borders, considering religious, national and cultural differences, and investigating strategies of translation. These approaches have a twofold impact: On the one hand, an understanding of intra-European diplomacy as a result of entanglements and cultural transfers has been outlined.[8] On the other hand, diplomatic history has been taken beyond Europe, thereby providing comparative insights and questioning myths about assumed European "singularities".[9]

emonial: A Systems Approach, in: Journal of Modern History, 52 (1980) 3, pp. 452-476. See also B. Stollberg-Rilinger, Die Wissenschaft der feinen Unterschiede. Das Präzedenzrecht und die europäischen Monarchien vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhunder, in: Majestas, 10 (2002), pp. 125-150, esp. pp. 125ff.; ead., Höfische Öffentlichkeit. Zur zeremoniellen Selbstdarstellung des brandenburgischen Hofes vor dem europäischen Publikum, in: Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte N. F., 7 (1997), pp. 145-176; A. Krischer, Souveränität als sozialer Status. Zur Funktion des diplomatischen Zeremoniells in der Frühen Neuzeit, in: R. Kauz / J.-P. Niederkorn/G. Rota (eds.), Diplomatisches Zeremoniell in Europa und im Mittleren Osten in der Frühen Neuzeit, Wien 2009, pp. 1-32.

5 See H. von Thiessen, Diplomatie vom type ancien. Überlegungen zu einem Idealtypus des frühneuzeitlichen Gesandtschaftswesens, in: id. / C. Windler (eds.), Akteure (1), pp. 471-503 and id., Switching Roles in Negotiation. Levels of Diplomatic Communication between Pope Paul V Borghese (1605–1621) and the Ambassadors of Philip III, in: S. Andretta et al. (eds.) Paroles (3), pp. 151–172.

6 A 'classic' in this regard is G. Mattingly's "Renaissance Diplomacy" (London 1955). The academic quest for the origins of diplomacy is summarized by S. Péquignot, Europäische Diplomatie im Spätmittelalter. Ein historiographischer Überblick, in: Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, 39,1 (2012), pp. 65-95. – The notion of Renaissance Europe as the "cradle" of diplomacy can peacefully co-exist with descriptions or rather florilegia of "the beginnings of diplomacy". These are, however, clearly set apart from 'real' diplomacy of the modern fashion. Cp., for example., K. Hamilton / R. Langhorne, The Practice of Diplomacy, its Evolution, Theory and Administration, London / New York 1995.

7 Cp. esp. C. Windler, La diplomatie comme l'expérience de l'autre. Consuls français au Maghreb, 1700–1840, Genf 2002; id., Diplomatic History as a Field for Cultural Analysis: Muslim-Christian Relations in Tunis, 1700–1840, in: The Historical Journal, 44 (2001) 1, pp. 79-106; P. Burschel, Das Eigene und das Fremde. Zur anthropologischen Entzifferung diplomatischer Texte, in: A. Koller (ed.), Kurie und Politik. Stand und Perspektiven der Nuntiaturberichtsforschung, Tübingen 1998, pp. 260-271, esp. pp. 264ff.; see also S. Schattenberg, Diplomatie als interkulturelle Kommunikation, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History, online edition, 8 (2011) 3, URL: http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Schattenberg-3-2011 [accessed 2 January 2015].

8 See, e.g., M. Rohrschneider / A. Strohmeyer (eds.), Wahrnehmungen des Fremden. Differenzerfahrungen von Diplomaten im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert, Münster 2007; H. Duchhardt / M. Espenhorst (eds.), Frieden übersetzen in der Vormoderne. Translationsleistungen in Diplomatie, Medien und Wissenschaft, Göttingen 2012; H. Droste, Diplomacy as a Means of Cultural Transfer in Early Modern Times. The Swedish Evidence, in: Scandinavian Journal of History, 31 (2006) 2, pp. 144-150. An ongoing project entitled "Translating cultures: Diplomacy between the early modern and modern worlds" is based at Durham University, see https://www.dur.ac.uk/history/tdproject/ [accessed 2 January 2015].

9 Research on states situated on the European 'periphery', like Russia or the Ottoman Empire, demonstrates the necessity to historicize the notion of Europe itself, e.g., J. Hennings, Russia and Courtly Europe: Ritual and Diplomatic Culture, 1648–1725, Cambridge [in print] and id., The Semiotics of Diplomatic Dialogue: Pomp and Circumstance in Tsar Peter I's Visit to Vienna in 1698, in: International History Review, 30 (2008), pp. 515-544, esp. pp. 524ff. (on Russia); P. Burschel, Topkapý Sarayý. Oder Salomon Schweiggers Reise ans Ende der Zeit, in: id. et al.(eds.), Räume des Selbst. Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell, Köln [i.a.] 2007, pp. 29-40 (on the Ottoman Empire); C. Windler, La diplomatie (7) (on North Africa). Cp. also L. Blussé, Queen among Kings. Diplomatic Ritual at Batavia, in: K. Grijs / P. J. M. Nas (eds.), Jakarta – Batavia. Socio-cultural Essays, Leiden 2000, pp. 25-41.

The New Diplomatic History participates in the general historiographical movement towards questioning the notion of "state" and traditional narratives about "state-building". It draws on ongoing debates of networks and "empowering interactions" as part of state-building processes.[10] As these debates mostly focus on relations within political groups studies on external relations can offer an important complementary perspective. However, one should use the dichotomy of 'internal' and 'external' relations with care, as doubts have been raised about its applicability in times before the 19th century. By taking the different levels of political agency in pre-modern times into account – instead of presupposing container-like political entities with clear defined borders or a state monopoly in diplomatic relations – diplomatic historians have added to the ongoing revision of the history of state-building.

The analysis of intercultural diplomacy, here of Afro-European diplomacy in Dahomey, can contribute to these debates in general and the present volume in particular, namely in three intertwined ways:

Firstly, this analysis has a methodological edge as it requires us to think about the very categories traditionally used.[11] Designations like "ambassador", "sovereignty" or "international law" which (unfortunately still) go without saying in many intra-European case studies must be re-adjusted to the context in question by careful definition[12] or else substituted by more adequate, probably broader terms.[13] This includes a certain need to revise nationalist historiographies that tried to revaluate extra-European history exactly by employing elements and concepts derived from European master narratives. Since peoples formerly said to be "without history" started to claim their own memorable past, the categories and models used in this endeavour often were European imports, as these

10 Cp. W. Blockmans / A. Holenstein / J. Mathieu (eds.), Empowering Interactions. Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe 1300–1900, Farnham 2009; R. G. Asch / D. Freist (eds.), Staatsbildung als kultureller Prozess. Strukturwandel und Legitimation von Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit, Köln [i.a.] 2005; P. Eich / S. Schmidt-Hofner / C. Wieland (eds.), Der wiederkehrende Leviathan. Staatlichkeit und Staatswerdung in Spätantike und Früher Neuzeit, Heidelberg 2011. The link between the current debates on 'internal' state-building and diplomatic history is discussed by C. Windler, Symbolische Kommunikation und diplomatische Praxis in der Frühen Neuzeit. Erträge neuer Forschungen, in: B. Stollberg-Rilinger / T. Neu / C. Brauner (eds.), Alles nur symbolisch? Bilanz und Perspektiven der Erforschung symbolischer Kommunikation, Köln [i.a.] 2013, pp. 161-185.

11 A. Flüchter, Structures on the Move. Appropriating Technologies of Governance in a Transcultural Encounter, in: ead. / S. Richter (eds.), Structures on the Move. Technologies of Governance in Transcultural Encounter, Berlin / Heidelberg 2012, pp. 1-27. The interdisciplinary working group "Transcultural Comparisons of Monarchies", for example, avoids the term "state" and the problems connected with it by focusing on the broadly used concepts of "monarchy" and "dynasty". Thereby, the group aims at criticizing the traditional master narrative of the rise of the Western state; see W. Drews / J. Oesterle (eds.), Transkulturelle Komparatistik. Beiträge zu einer Globalgeschichte der Vormoderne (Comparativ 18, Issue 3-4), Leipzig 2008; A. Flüchter, Einleitung: Der transkulturelle Vergleich zwischen Komparatistik und Transkulturalität, in: ead. / W. Drews (eds.), Eliten – Sakralität – Gedenken. Monarchische Herrschaftsformen im transkulturellen Vergleich, Berlin 2015 [forthcoming].

12 A similar approach was realized by M. Pernau in her inspiring study of the Indian "Bürgertum", M. Pernau, Transkulturelle Geschichte und das Problem der universalen Begriffe. Muslimische Bürger im Delhi des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: B. Schäbler (ed.), Area Studies und die Welt. Weltregionen und neue Globalgeschichte, Wien 2007, pp. 117-149.

13 This problem is, of course, central to all forms of comparisons; see, e.g., J. Osterhammel, Transkulturell vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft, in: id., Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich, Göttingen ^{2}2003, pp. 11-45.

seemed to define what "history" was.[14] Historians from outside Europe now sought in their own past the mighty empires and great wars, the noble lords and valiant warriors, in short: the "great" and "serious" history as it had been exclusively claimed by Europe before. This "great" and "serious" history, however, tended to be a history of "great men" and, above all, of states. As diplomacy and international relations traditionally formed a core theme of 'serious' political history, it is not surprising that there are quite a few studies on these subjects dating back to the decolonization era.[15] In his account of Asante diplomacy, Joseph Adjaye for example tried to show that the Weberian model of "bureaucratic rule" was also applicable to a West African state – a model gravely challenged in its validity for the interpretation of early modern European history itself.[16]

Secondly, this field of research also enables us to question deeply entrenched narratives of state and state-building. Popular opinion, but also certain academic studies, still regards the "state" as a European invention[17] and projects European dominance and exceptionalism far back into history. To address the world view of contemporaries has been one fruitful strategy to tackle this "denial of coevalness"[18] between 'the West and the Rest'. Intercultural diplomacy provides a wealth of sources for such questions: How did early modern Europeans perceive rulers and rule beyond Europe? Did they apply a logic of diplomacy different from the one used at home? And, of course, the other way around: how did non-Europeans (in this case, West Africans) perceive European visitors? The answers resulting from such questions may often contradict modern assumptions about cultural differences and intercultural "misunderstandings".[19] For sure, they should not be taken for granted but need to be combined with a critical analysis of local power relations and resources. Thus, they can help us to bypass the asymmetries embedded in

14 For a general analysis of this problem see D. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton / Oxford 2000; for an insightful case study on African historiographies cp. C. C. Wrigley, Historicism in Africa. Slavery and State Formation, in: African Affairs, 70 (1971), pp. 113-124.

15 Cp., e.g., T. O. Elias, Africa and the Development of International Law, Leiden / Dobbs Ferry 1972; K. Ingham (ed.), Foreign Relations of African States. Proceedings of the 25th Symposium of the Colston Research Group 1973, London 1974; A. K. Mensah-Brown (ed.), African International Legal History, New York 1975.

16 J. K. Adjaye, Diplomacy and Diplomats in Nineteenth Century Asante, Lanham [i.a.] 1984. Adjaye is a pupil of Ivor Wilks who drew on Weber and Marx in his work on Asante and Akan history; see I. Wilks, Ashanti Government, in: D. Forde / P. M. Kaberry (eds,), West African Kingdoms in the 19th Century, Oxford 1967, pp. 206-238 and id., Forests of Gold. Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante, Athens, OH 1993. In a different way, European concepts of history were transferred to the history of West Africa by the work of R. A. Kea who mostly uses Marxist models in his studies of the social history of the Gold Coast; see R. A. Kea, Settlements, Trade and Politics in the 17th Century Gold Coast, Baltimore [i.a.] 1982.

17 See, for example, W. Reinhard, Geschichte der Staatsgewalt. Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, München ^{3}2002, p. 15, who states: "Europa hat den Staat erfunden." ("Europe invented the state.").

18 See J. Fabian, Time and Its Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object, New York 1983.

19 Cp. D. Carey, Questioning Incommensurability in Early Modern Cultural Exchange, in: Common Knowledge, 6 (1997), pp. 32-50, here esp. pp. 39f. and pp. 49f. See also S. Subrahmanyam, Courtly Encounters. Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia, Cambridge, MA / London 2012, Introduction: pp. 1-33, esp. pp. 1-7 and pp. 23-30. – It is all the same questionable whether the notion of 'misunderstanding' fits into the toolbox of a culturalist historian because it implies that there is one single correct 'understanding' or 'interpretation'. This, however, is at odds with the constructive and even basic hermeneutical insights on which cultural history draws.

traditional narratives of historical development and to put intercultural diplomacy back into historical context.

Diplomacy is, so to speak, the space *par excellence* where "states" – in the broad sense outlined in the introduction[20] – and their representatives have to come to terms with each other, to find a common mode of negotiation as well as of everyday interaction. Thus, *thirdly and finally*, the study of intercultural diplomacy allows us to ask for processes of "transculturation", for "hybrid" pratices and "entangled" concepts in the very realm of statehood.[21] The focus on the 18th and 19th centuries, and thus the transition from the early modern to the modern era according to usual European periodization – is of special importance in this regard and should be the starting point for comparisons: Did processes of transculturation continue over time or were they interrupted? How did their valuation change? Were they influenced by changing perceptions or do we rather observe a divergence between discourses in the imperial "centres" and localized practices on the spot?

2. The Setting: Dahomey and the Europeans

2.1. Trading Companies in West Africa

The case presented in the following requires us to broaden the traditional notion of diplomacy not only with regard to non-Europeans but also concerning the European actors involved:[22] In early modern West Africa, those Europeans who negotiated with local rulers, concluded defensive alliances with political groups, and defended their sovereign's honour, those men were neither officially appointed residents nor ambassadors in the strict sense of the term. They were mainly employees of trading companies, governors

20 A. Flüchter / C. Brauner, Introduction to this issue, p. 7-26.

21 In this paper, I use the term 'intercultural' to refer to all situations, phenomena (etc.) for which the actors' or objects' belonging (by self-identification and/or external classification) to different cultures are relevant. 'Transcultural', in contrast, is used in a narrower sense to denote all phenomena, practices and so forth that cannot, either by scholars or by contemporaries, be classified as belonging to one single culture but that in contrast evolved as 'shared' or 'entangled' phenomena. The term 'transcultural' borrows from the older concept of 'transculturation' coined by F. Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar, transl. by H. de Onís, Durham / London 1995 [first ed. 1940], esp. pp. 97-103. – It has been stated that every culture is hybrid, that is, every culture is transcultural. From a theoretical point of view I cannot but agree to this assumption. For pragmatic reasons and to enable us to use the term in scientific discourse, though, we have to narrow the term down, possibly by distinguishing 'shades' or 'degrees' of transculturality. See also the editors' introduction to this issue (20).

22 Research on 'non-official' or even 'private' diplomacy has flowered both with regard to pre-modern as well as modern eras. It is, however, rather a parallel development than an on-going exchange between periods. Besides, it is surely more difficult (if not all together impossible) to draw a clear line between 'official' and 'private' diplomacy in early modern times – remember only, e.g., the importance of family networks in the politics of this time. See, however, M. Keblusek / B. V. Noldus (eds.), Double agents. Cultural and Political Brokerage in early modern Europe, Leiden 2011; M. Häberlein / M. Bayreuther, Agent und Ambassador: Der Kaufmann Anton Meuting als Vermittler zwischen Bayern und Spanien im Zeitalter Philipps II., Augsburg 2013; with regard to contemporary history cp. Giles Scott-Smith, Introduction: Private Diplomacy, Making the Citizen Visible, in: New Global Studies 8 (2014) 1, pp. 1–7.

and factors of the chartered West Indian and African Companies. Trading companies cannot be classified as 'informal' diplomatic agents as they were endowed with certain privileges of sovereignty.[23] The extent of these privileges varied from company to company but it included more often than not the ability to make treaties with foreign princes and rights of jurisdiction. Thus, the companies were enabled to play a certain part in international law, a part, however, that allowed for a great deal of flexibility and situative interpretation. This role in diplomacy and international law assumed by the trading companies necessitates a revision of older hypotheses about diplomacy as state monopoly for the European context, too.[24]

This paper – as well as the larger project it belongs to – focuses on the Gold and Slave Coasts, that is, broadly speaking, the coastal region stretching from Ghana in the west to Bénin and western Nigeria in the east: Here, Europeans and Africans entertained long-term relationships that were still far off the dawn of colonial influence. These long-standing traditions of intercultural interaction provide a sound basis to ask about processes of transculturation. Besides, the Europeans on the spot were extraordinarily diverse: Representatives of Portugal, France, the Netherlands and England were engaged in the local trade as were Prussians, Danes, Swedes und Courlanders. Frequently, they were also engaged in mutual competition and even fighting among themselves, partly provoked by intra-European wars and conflicts, partly the result of coast-grown disputes.

2.2. The "Kingdom" of Dahomey

The "Kingdom"[25] of Dahomey was situated on the so-called Slave Coast.[26] Today, its name has vanished from the maps as the region that Agaja and his successors governed now belongs to the Republic of Bénin. Nevertheless, Dahomey still occupies a prominent place in the imagery of historical West Africa – as a state of mighty kings exercising "despotic" rule, [27] as the homeland of the female "Amazon" warriors and the site of

23 So far, only the East Indian companies and their role international law have been studied in this regard; cf. J. A. Somers, De VOC als volkenrechtelijke actor, [Deventer] 2001; C. H. Alexandrowicz, An Introduction to the History of the Law of Nations in the East Indies (16th, 17th and 18th Centuries), Oxford 1967; H. Steiger, Recht zwischen Asien und Europa im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert?, in: K. Bußmann / E. A. Werner (eds.), Europa im 17. Jahrhundert. Ein politischer Mythos und seine Bilder, Stuttgart 2004, pp. 95-118 and P. J. Stern, The Company-State. Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India, Oxford [i.a.] 2011.

24 See C. Brauner, Kompanien (*).

25 The notion of "kingdom" as it is applied to several political entities in West Africa in early modern as well as modern academic discourse calls for a investigation on its own; see C. Brauner, Kompanien (*), chapter 1. In this paper, I only want to distinguish between those early modern authors operating with the (wide) concept of "kingdom", that is, generally including Dahomey into patterns of description also applied to their own "states" back home in Europe, and those authors depicting Dahomey as something completely different from their own political background (see below, part 4).

26 For the history of Dahomey cp. A. Le Herissé, L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey. Mœurs, Religion, Histoire, Paris 1911; I. A. Akinjogbin, Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708–1818, Cambridge 1967; P. Manning, Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960, Cambridge [i.a.] 1982; E. G. Bay, Wives of the Leopard. Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey, Charlottesville, VA 1998; J. Cameron Monroe, The Precolonial State in West Africa. Building Power in Dahomey, Cambridge 2014..

27 This questionable 'classification' is, i.a., still used by the "Britannica Guide" volume on West African history pub-

bloody human sacrifices.[28] Its major coastal settlement, the town of Ouidah, is known as one of the most infamous ports of the Atlantic slave trade.[29]

A multitude of European trading companies operated in Ouidah; the English, French and Portuguese all had forts in Ouidah whose remains are still visible today. The Dutch also participated in the regional trade but had no fortified trading post at Ouidah. For their share in the trade, the different companies competed against each other and against 'private' enterprises. This situation shifted the balance of power in favour of Dahomey – especially as the slave trade was under royal control (though not monopolized, as Karl Polanyi and his followers thought), as were the trade routes in the hinterland where many slaves originated.[30] Generally, as Robin Law has attested, African dominance on the Slave Coast was even more pronounced than on the nearby Gold Coast. This is especially manifest in the fact that local rulers successfully thwarted all European attempts to gain a trade monopoly.[31] The situation of European settlements in Dahomey was especially precarious because they were not directly accessible from sea but located – as was the whole town of Ouidah – about 3.5 kilometres off the shore. Thus, all supplies and communication depended on the goodwill of the Dahomians who could easily close the roads to and fro.[32]

lished in 2011: "Dahomey was a despotic and militaristic kingdom." A. McKenna (ed.), The History of Western Africa (The Britannica Guide to Africa), New York 2011, p. 82.

28 Cp. V. Campion-Vincent, L'image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890–1895): Les sacrifices humains, in: Cahiers d'Études Africaines, 7 (1967), pp. 27-58 and A. Sonderegger, Die Dämonisierung Afrikas. Zum Despotiebegriff und zur Geschichte der Afrikanischen Despotie, Saarbrücken 2008. For the "Amazons" cf. R. Law, The 'Amazons' of Dahomey, in: Paideuma, 39 (1993), pp. 245-260. Insightful articles on human sacrifice are provided by id., 'My Head Belongs to the King': On the Political and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre-Colonial Dahomey, in: Journal of African History, 30 (1989) 3, pp. 399-415 and id., Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa, in: African Affairs, 84 (1985), pp. 53-87, esp. pp. 54ff. and pp. 67ff.

29 Cp. R. Law, Ouidah. The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port', 1727–1892, Athens, GA/Oxford 2004; P. Verger, Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le golfe de Bénin et Bahia de todos os santos du dixseptième au dix-neuvième siècle, Paris / Den Haag 1968 and A. Sinou, Le comptoir de Ouidah. Une ville africaine singulière, Paris 1995; for the French fort at Ouidah cf. S. Berbain, Le comptoir français de Juda (Ouidah) au XVIIIe siècle. Etudes sur la traite des noirs au golfe de Guinée, Paris 1942.

30 See K. Polanyi, Dahomey and the Slave Trade. An Analysis of an Archaic Economy, Seattle [i.a.] 1966; R. Arnold, A Port of Trade: Whydah on the Guinea Coast, in: K. Polanyi / C. M. Arensberg / H. W. Pearson (eds.), Trade and Market in the Early Empires. Economies in History and Theory, London 1957, pp. 154-176 and the critique by R. Law, Royal Monopoly and Private Enterprise in the Atlantic Trade: The Case of Dahomey, in: Journal of African History, 18 (1977) 4, pp. 555-577.

31 R. Law, 'Here is No Resisting the Country'. The Realities of Power in Afro-European Relations on the West African 'Slave Coast', in: Itinerario, 18 (1994), pp. 50-64, esp. pp. 52ff. and id., The Slave Coast of West Africa (1550–1750). The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society, Oxford 1999 (reprint 2001). For the Gold Coast, the account of Kwame Daaku is still unreplaced; K. Y. Daaku, Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600–1720. A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade, Oxford 1970.

32 Contemporary comments on the situation can be found, i.a., in A DESCRIPTION of the Castles Fort and Settlements Belonging to the Royal African Company of England, on the Gold Coast of AFRICA and at WHYDAH, s. d. [ca. 1737], The National Archives, Kew (TNA), T 70/1470 and Mémoire contenant des observations sur quelques points de la Côte de Guinée, visités en 1786, par la Corvette le Pandour, et sur la possiblité d'y faire des établissemens, par M. de Champagny, dd. 06.09.1786, Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), C 6/27. Champagny holds the topographical situation to be the main reason for the "dependance presque servile des Nègres Dahomets" the European forts had fallen into. He, consequentially, recommends abandoning the settlement at Ouidah and re-establishing it at Porto-Novo.

Dahomey's first encounter with Europeans resulted from its conquest of Allada and Hueda, two small kingdoms bordering the Atlantic shore and longstanding trading partners of the European companies, taking place in 1723 and 1727 respectively.[33] Therefore, the periodization of European-Dahomian relations is comparatively clear cut and offers the possibility to observe an evolution from a 'first contact' situation to more institutionalized forms of interaction.[34]

In contrast to the earlier arrangements in Hueda or Allada, there was a considerable physical distance between the European trading posts and the royal court of Dahomey. In Hueda, the European lodges had been annexed to the royal palace at Savi, owing to the intertwined reasons of control and prestige, as Kenneth G. Kelly has argued.[35] The court of Dahomey, in contrast, was located in the interior, usually at Abomey. It took a three days' march through thick forest and swamps to reach Abomey if starting in coastal Ouidah as most European visitors did.

The governors of the Ouidah forts, acting as local representatives of their respective company and sovereign, as well as others entrusted with a mission to the Dahomian court never travelled alone: They were always accompanied by hammock-bearers and porters, occasionally by a Dahomian envoy. Newcomers sometimes enlisted the support of an Dahomey-experienced colleague: Jacobus Elet, on his 1733 mission on behalf of the Dutch West India Company (*Westindische Compagnie*, short WIC), for example was advised and accompanied by the governor of the Portuguese fort, João Basilio.[36] In the 1790s, the French governor Gourg enjoyed the company of his experienced English colleague, Lionel Abson, during his voyages to Abomey.[37]

33 For the history of these states cp. R. Law, Ouidah (29) and id., The Kingdom of Allada, Leiden 1997.

34 According to contemporary reports, the first 'White' in Dahomey was Bulfinch Lambe. He was captured by Dahomian troops during the conquest of Allada; see W. Smith, A New Voyage to Guinea, London 1744, p. 170 and pp. 175f. Cp. M. Johnson, Bulfinch Lambe and the Emperor of Pawpaw: A Footnote to Agaja and the Slave Trade, in: History in Africa, 5 (1978), pp. 345-350; R. Law, King Agaja of Dahomey, the Slave Trade, and the Question of West African Plantations: The Embassy of Bulfinch Lambe and Adomo Tomo to England, 1726-32, in: Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 19 (1991), pp. 137-163 and id., An Alternative Text of King Agaja of Dahomey's Letter to King George I of England, 1726, in: History in Africa, 29 (2002), pp. 257-271.

35 K. G. Kelly, The Archaeology of African-European Interaction: Investigating the Social Roles of Trade, Traders, and the Use of Space in the 17th- and 18th-Century Hueda Kingdom, Republic of Benin, in: World Archaeology, 28 (1997) 3, pp. 351-369. Kelly comments on the spatial arrangement in Savi: "The *Hueda* were clearly able to express their power over the European nations on the Slave Coast, but at the same time were dependent upon their presence of the elevated wealth and power the *Hueda* leadership possessed. This complex situation is most clearly expressed in the circumscription of the European lodges, placing them under the watchful eyes of the *Hueda* elite, yet at the same time, through their close association with the European traders, the *Hueda* wer able to broadcast their privileged relationship to the sources of wealth and power." (365)

36 Elet asked Basilio, for example, to explain to him "ces maniere [sic] de cette pais, et leur nation"; Missive aan de Portugueese directeur Jean de Basil [i.e. João Basilio], s.d., in: H. den Heijer (ed.), Naar de koning van Dahomey. Het journaal van de gezantschapsreis van Jacobus Elet naarhet West-Afrikaanse koninkrijk Dahomey in 1733,'s-Gravenhage 2000, pp. 169f. The English captain and slave trader Snelgrave, too, visited Agaja in the company of more experienced men, including an employee of the Dutch factory in Jakin, cf. W. Snelgrave, A New Account Of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade, London 1734, p. 24.

37 Gourg recommended to his successor, Denyau de la Garenne, to maintain amicable relations with the two other gouvernours – unity between all three directors was, above all, necessary to successfully demand something of the king. He especially emphasized how much he was obliged to the English gouvernour, though, at the same

Apart from the immediate, face-to-face exchange with more experienced colleagues, knowledge about Dahomey in general and practices of interaction in particular was also transferred by other means. Memoranda and instructions left by departing officials for their successors explained routines and advised on the dos and don'ts in everyday interaction.[38]

3. Intercultural Diplomacy and the Emergence of a Transcultural Ceremonial

3.1. First Routines and Ceremonial Duties

After the conquest of Ouidah, routines of interaction between the forts and their new 'landlord' quickly evolved. The everyday affairs were – as off 1733 – entrusted to an official resident in Ouidah.[39] However, two occasions regularly required an audience at the court of Dahomey and, thus, direct communication with the ruler of Dahomey. Both occasions were primarily imposed by Dahomian authority. First of all, the governors of the European forts were obligated to attend upon the King on their arrival in Ouidah and hand over the "usual presents". Gourg, the French governor quoted above, instructed his successor Denyau de la Garenne in 1791 that, on his arrival, he should wait on the King "to thank him for having nominated him [i.e. Denyau] in my stead…"[40] It seems likely that the Dahomians themselves viewed this audience as necessary approval of the respective company's choice and act of 'installation' – there are even a few cases in which the king himself deposed European governors he disliked and installed others in their stead. Law actually argues that the chiefs of the European forts were treated as Dahomian "captains".[41]

The second occasion that usually required European governors to embark on the journey to Abomey was the annual celebration of the so-called "Customs" (Fongbe: *hwetanu* or *hwenùwá*). As the most prominent event in Dahomian religious-political life this "state-ceremonial cycle" reconfirmed the bonds between the ruler and his subjects and renewed

warned his successor not to engage himself too much ("… j'aime à croire que sans ses avis je n'existerai pas. Il a par ses alentours les moyens de savoir tout ce qui se passe, et m'a été très utile : C'est un aimable garçon en société, tout coeur, et des plus serviables, mais cependant il est à propos de ne pas trop se livrer à lui."). Mémoire pour servir d'instruction au Directeur qui me succédera au Comptoir de Juda, par M. Gourg, dd. September 1791, ANOM, C 6/27. – Concerning the question of knowledge transfer see also the essay by Ines Eben v. Racknitz in this issue.

38 This purpose is especially explicit in Gourg's instruction quoted above (37). Some authors, especially those of the 19th century, appear to have consulted published account of Dahomey before their sojourn. See, e.g., the journal of the British consul Louis Fraser; R. Law. (ed.), Dahomey and the Ending of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Journals and Correspondence of Vice-Consul Louis Fraser 1851–1852, Oxford i. a. 2012, pp. 49f., p. 57 et pass.

39 This office was held by the so-called *tegan* till 1743, afterwards he was replaced by the *yovogan* (or *yavogan*); see R. Law, Ouidah (29), pp. 57ff. Before 1733, each fort had its own "captain", obviously an imitation of the earlier system operating under Huedan rule (ibid., p. 55).

40 [pour le remercier de l'avoir nommé à ma place…] Mémoire pour servir d'instruction au Directeur qui me succédera au Comptoir de Juda, par M. Gourg, dd. September 1791, ANOM, C 6/27.

41 R. Law, Ouidah (29), p. 107.

the ties between living Dahomians and their ancestors. The "Customs", therefore, were essential in guaranteeing the welfare of the Dahomian commonwealth in general.[42] They were also the setting of human sacrifices which increasingly dominated all European images of Dahomey.[43]

The fact that the European governors were required to attend the "Customs" can be interpreted as another hint of their possible role as "Dahomian chiefs". However, it obviously was not the only role attributed to them by the Dahomians as in other regards, they were treated as the subjects and envoys of a foreign ruler. This is illustrated by their exemption from the usual prostration before the king and by the salute they were honoured with (see below).

Apart from these two occasions – the inaugural visit and the "Customs" – that regularly required an audience European governors also travelled to the Dahomian capital and attended audiences on specific issues, such as negotiating the release of prisoners or the terms of trade. More often than not, these 'extraordinary' audiences, too, took place on the request of the Dahomian ruler. Thus, the audiences as 'ceremonial duty' reflect the Dahomian pre-dominance. This is also evidenced in the governors' complaints, for example when the French governor Levet complained that King Agaja required him to attend an audience by "caprice" only:

> *In the beginning of October, the King ordered me to come to him in Bomé [Abomey; C.B.], which is 50* lieues *from here and the most unhealthy place of the whole Guinea Coast, on the pretext of certain* palabres *about trade. But actually he did so out of pure caprice because in the audience this prince granted me the subject of trade never came up…*[44]

3.2. On the Way to the Audience: The 'Ceremonial Look' and the Signs of Honour

The sequence of events up to the audience itself is related by nearly all authors as comprising three stages: the reception outside Abomey, the entry into the city, the wait for

42 See C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: historique et essai d'interprétation, in: Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, 19 (1964) 4, pp. 696-716; E. G. Bay, Wives (26). As an annual event, the "Customs" probably were a Dahomian innovation; the preceding kingdoms in the region knew only of a comparable ritual on the occasion of a royal funeral. See R. Law, Royal Ideologies: The Dissolution and Reconstruction of Political Authority on the 'Slave Coast', 1680–1750, in: Africa. The Journal of the International African Institute, 57 (1987) 3, pp. 321-344, here: pp. 325f. and id., Endnote 1: The Dahomian 'Annual Customs', in: id. (ed.), Dahomey (38), pp. 262ff.

43 Actually, human sacrifices were almost exclusively performed at the "Customs" but this was the very event European visitors regularly attended. Thus, it is no surprise that they inferred a general and frequent occurrence of human sacrifices from their "Customs" experience. Cp. J. Cameron Monroe, Continuity, Revolution or Evolution on the Slave Coast of West Africa? Royal Architecture and Political Order in Precolonial Dahomey, in: Journal of African History, 48 (2007), pp. 349-373, esp. p. 351.

44 "Au Commencement d'octobre, le Roy me mandat pour l'aller trouver a Bomé [Abomey] distant de 50 lieües d'Icy, et l'endroit le plus mal sain de toutte la coste de Guinée sous prétexte de quelques Palabres touchant le commerce, et réellement par pur Caprice, car dans l'audiance que ce Prince me donna, il ne fût question d'aucun Commerce." [my translation]; letter of Jacques Levet to the Compagnie des Indes, dd. 25.02.1744, ANOM, C 6/25.

the audience. Such a threefold procedure will strike every historian of European ceremonial and court life as utterly familiar. So, the very structure of interactions as perceived by the European visitors hints at their general understanding of Dahomey: They seemingly tried to interpret the interactions with its court, the king and his officials according to what they knew from the European courts and European diplomacy of their time. In their view, Dahomey as a political entity obviously functioned structurally in the same way as European monarchies back home.[45] In this regard one can apply Jürgen Osterhammel's phrase of "inclusive Eurocentrism" here which, according to Osterhammel, dominated Europeans' view on the world till 1800.[46]

Against this background, it is not surprising that special attention was paid to ceremonies and symbolic acts as these features were central to European court life and especially to diplomatic interactions in early modern times.[47] Since the Middle Ages an increasingly differentiated system of signs and procedures had evolved that regulated every step and movement (at least in theory) of rulers, diplomats, and court officials. The ceremonial pointed, on the one hand, to the dignity and the status of the respective diplomat and referred, on the other, to the status of state relations in general. Early modern sources attest to the importance of ceremonial not least by the multitude of ceremonial quarrels they report on. Even the question of who was a sovereign prince was mainly decided in the medium of ceremonial until the 18th century – the most important signs here were, amongst others, the use of a six-horse carriage and the privilege of remaining covered (leaving one's hat on) in the presence of another sovereign.[48] To put it bluntly: An early modern envoy or ambassador had to pay strict attention to details – how he was greeted and by whom, how many steps he had to advance to meet his host, where the audience he was granted took place and so forth – if he didn't want to disgrace himself and his master and to risk loss of status and privileges. He also had to care about his own behaviour towards his colleagues as ceremonial quarrels could even lead to bloodshed and outright diplomatic crises.[49]

Generally, the descriptions of audiences in Dahomey provided by early modern European visitors reflect what can correspondingly be termed the 'ceremonial look', which may be defined as a specific strategy of semiotizing the world by ascribing symbolic meaning to certain details. Speaking less abstractly, Early modern observers tried to read – as

45 A comparative perspective on courts is now outlined by J. Duindam / T. Artan / M. Kunt (eds.), Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires. A Global Perspective, Leiden 2011.

46 J. Osterhammel, Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert, München [2]2010, pp. 380ff.

47 A 'classic' in this field is still N. Elias, Die höfische Gesellschaft, Frankfurt a. M. [6]1992. See also W. Roosen, Ceremonial (3); B. Stollberg-Rilinger, Öffentlichkeit (3); ead., Wissenschaft (3); A. Pečar, Die Ökonomie der Ehre. Der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711–1740), Darmstadt 2003, chapter 3; A. Krischer, Souveränität (3).

48 See B. Stollberg-Rilinger, Honores regii. Die Königswürde im zeremoniellen Zeichensystem der Frühen Neuzeit, in: J. Kunisch (ed.), Dreihundert Jahre Preußische Königskrönung. Eine Tagungsdokumentation, Berlin 2002, pp. 1-26 and id., Öffentlichkeit (3).

49 The most famous incident of this kind is surely the "Carriage War", a conflict of precedence between the French and the Spanish ambassador that took place in London in the year 1661 and even led to casualties; cf. W. J. Roosen, The Age of Louis XIV. The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, Cambridge, MA 1976, pp. 181f.

they were used to – foreign courts and the new spatial and temporal arrangements they encountered as conveying messages about honour, esteem and personal relations. Rather abstract categories allowed them to interpret unfamiliar situations in analogy to familiar court ceremonial – to be close to the ruler, for example, represented a special honour, whether established by a certain seating plan or by sharing a bowl of rice.[50] Against this background, it is only consequent that European representatives quarrelled about precedence and orders of rank in West Africa in the same way they did at home.[51]

How did the 'ceremonial look' function in pratice? To answer this question we have to scrutinize visitors' descriptions of their arrival more closely: First, the visitors were received in some distance from Abomey by a delegation on behalf of the king, including soldiers from the royal household. Despite the strange apparel of some delegates and their dancing with soaring swords even the first visitor to leave an account of his audience interpreted this reception as an act of honour. This visitor, an English slave-trader by the name of William Snelgrave, writes:

> *The King, it seems, to do us the more honour, sent the principal person of his Court (whom the Negroes distinguish'd to us by the Title of the* Great Captain*) to receive us; which he did in a very extraordinary manner.*[52]

Later envoys to Abomey emphasized the presence of high-ranking officials within the delegation, which was understood as a special honour. In 1733, the French governor Julian Dubellay was convinced that he not only enjoyed the "usual ceremonies" but was specially honoured because three of the principal captains of Dahomey arrived to receive him.[53]Another criterion, also adapted from European usage, was the time spent waiting for the delegation at a certain meeting place outside Abomey. The fact that the delegations waited at a fixed meeting place also points to the routine of an established interaction.[54]

50 For the latter cp. O. Dapper, Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten, Amsterdam 1668, p. 411; seating plans as orders of rank are deciphered by B. Stollberg-Rilinger, Ordnungsleistung und Konfliktträchtigkeit der höfischen Tafel, in: Ulrich Schütte et al. (eds.), Zeichen und Raum. Ausstattung und höfisches Zeremoniell in den deutschen Schlössern der Frühen Neuzeit, München / Berlin 2006, pp. 103-122.

51 In Allada, later conquered by Dahomey, a French representative and his Dutch colleague almost resorted to arms when a conflict about precedence arose on the way to a royal audience; see C. Brauner, Ein Schlüssel für zwei Truhen. Diplomatie als interkulturelle Praxis am Beispiel einer westafrikanischen Gesandtschaft nach Frankreich (1670/71), in: Historische Anthropologie 21 (2013) 2, pp. 199-226, a revised English version is to be found online: To Be the Key for Two Coffers: A West African Embassy to France (1670/1), in: IFRA e-papers, 2013, URL: http://www.ifra-nigeria.org/IMG/pdf/Key-for-Two-_Coffers.pdf [accessed 2 January 2015].

52 Snelgrave, Account (36), pp. 27f. [emphasis according to the original]. – This audience, as well as some others, did not take place in Abomey but in a field camp near the old capital of Allada. Another important, more enduring site for audiences outside Abomey was the town of Cana (or Calmina) where the king of Dahomey resided during certain annual ceremonies.

53 Julien Dubellay to the "Syndics" and Directors of the Compagnie des Indes (lettre de commerce), dd. 21.11.1733, ANOM, C 6/25.

54 Ibid.; see also A. R. Ridgway, Journal of a Visit to Dahomey; or, The Snake Country, in: New Monthly Magazine, 81 (1847), pp. 187-198, pp. 299-309 and pp. 406-414, here p. 301.

Accompanied by the delegation, the visitor and his entourage made their entry into Abomey, where a more or less huge crowd expected them and they were greeted with gun salutes and cannon shots that were registered carefully. Here, one can observe how 'official' visitors like the governors, consuls or envoys were set apart from 'private' ones: Only members of the first group were granted 21 salutes, the usual number of shots to honour a sovereign prince (or his representative) in European court ceremonial.[55] 'Private' visitors received either no gun salute at all or a reduced number of shots. This is illustrated by a comparison between the two visits John Duncan paid to Abomey: On his first trip, in 1845, Duncan journeyed to Dahomey as a mere private 'explorer' and received no gun salute at all[56] During his second visit in 1849, after his appointment as vice-consul, he was greeted by 21 gun shots "in honour of Her Britannic Majesty" and another nine shots "in honour of myself as British Vice-Consul".[57] That such distinctions were made points to the fact that the court of Dahomey distinguished between different groups of visitors and used a somehow specified concept of 'diplomat' that mostly matched the European one.

The gun salutes can be interpreted as an element of a 'transcultural' ceremonial, as they necessarily required the import of guns and / or the looting of canons as well as the adoption of the European standard of 21 shots as a "royal salute". Another element that points to the transcultural character of Dahomian ceremony is the use of flags used in the reception and entry ceremonies.[58] These elements also show that the early modern European visitors never – even apart from all epistemological problems – experienced a 'pure' African ceremonial, whatever that should have looked like. They rather encountered a court that flexibly integrated new commodities and practices into its everyday life and its ceremonial. [59]

55 The earliest evidence for this symbolic number dates from 1733; "… je fus salué d'une quantité inombrable [sic] de Coups de fusils, et de 21 coups de Canon honneurs ordinaires en pareil cas, á tous les Gouverneurs, Directeurs, et chefs des nations.", letter of Dubellay, dd. 21.11.1733, ANOM, C 6/25 and from the same year (1733), the report of Elet in H. den Heijer (ed.), Naar de koning (36), p. 149. – On the diplomatic 'standard' of 21 salutes see J. Hartmann, Staatszeremoniell, Köln [i.a.] [2]1990, pp. 243-246 and pp. 280f.

56 See J. Duncan, Travels in Western Africa in 1845 & 1846 (1847), vol. 1, repr. London 1968, pp. 216ff.

57 Letter by John Duncan to Viscount Palmerston, dd. 22.09.1849, in: House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, 1849/50, Class B, no. 6, pp. 5-8, here p. 7. One could argue that Duncan also received a gun salute during his first voyage but simply did not report this. This is, however, quite implausible as the first report otherwise reveals a rather pronounced attention for ceremonial details (see, e.g., J. Duncan, Travels (56), vol. 1, pp. 216f. and pp. 220ff.).

58 Already in the 1730s, Dahomian ceremonial of reception involved the presentation of European flags, obviously in full awareness of questions of precedence etc. Later on, 'own' flags with Dahomian symbols were created after the adaptation of European models and used in receptions, entries, and other solemn occasions. See, e.g., for the use of European flags Heijer (ed.), Naar de koning (36), pp. 147f. and letter of Dubellay, dd. 21.11.1733, ANOM, C 6/25; for the use of Dahomian flags cp., i.a., Répin, Voyage au Dahomey par M. le Dr Répin, ex-chirurgien de la Marine Impériale (1860), in: Le Tour du Monde. Nouveau Journal des Voyages, 1863, pp. 65-112, here p. 82, and A. R. Ridgway, Journal (54), p. 301 who compares the symbols of the Dahomian flags to Egyptian paintings. – The development of Dahomian flags is analyzed by M. Adams, Fon Appliqued Cloths, in: African Arts, 13 (1980) 2, pp. 28-41 und 87f. Both European representatives and the Dahomian court seem to have used flags as presents, cf. P. Verger, Echanges de cadeaux entre rois d'Abomey et souverains européens aux xviiie et xixe siècles, in: Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, série B, 32 (1970) 3, pp. 741-754, here pp. 745-748.

59 The transformation of Dahomian local customs through the import of foreign goods was recently empha-

Early modern Europeans did not perceive the court of Dahomey as something set completely apart from the political life they knew from home. In contrast, they tried to apply notions of diplomatic practice they were familiar with – this is especially demonstrated by the 'ceremonial look'. This not only testifies to the fact that contemporaries saw the relation between Europe and Africa not (yet) in terms of a great divergence and essential alterity, but also demonstrates the reach of concepts historians long thought referred to Europe exclusively. Against certain postcolonial narratives it should be emphasized that the attention to ceremonial detail was not only a European obsession or projection but also something structurally shared by Europeans and Dahomians. Certain common standards developed over time that allowed for evaluation of specific positions. Furthermore, the definition of diplomatic actors was not least negotiated in the medium of ceremonial, as the question of the gun salutes demonstrates. Here, shared criteria to differentiate between 'official' and 'private' visitors evolved.

3.3. Finally, the Audience, or: How to Greet the King of Dahomey

The next step was to wait for the audience with the king. The time of waiting was again closely watched as an indication of the relationship's current status – the shorter it was, of course, the more honoured European visitors felt. With their protagonists finally entering into the royal court many reports take on a downright visual modus of description, opening up a tableau, setting out a scene revolving around the sight of the king in the centre. Listen to Snelgrave in 1727:

> *His Majesty was in a large Court palisadoed round, sitting (contrary to the Custom of the Country) on a fine gilt Chair, which he had taken from the King of* Whidaw *[i.e. Ouidah; C.B.]. There were held over his Head, by Women, three large Umbrellas, to shade him from the Sun: And four other Women stood behind the Chair of State, with Fusils on their Shoulders.* […] *The King had a Gown on, flowered with Gold, which reached as low as his Ancles; an* European *embroidered Hat on his Head; with Sandals on his Feet.*[60]

Or hear Norris in 1789:

> *…the king was seated, on a handsome chair of crimson velvet, ornamented with gold fringe, placed on a carpet, in a spacious cool piazza, which occupied one side of the court. He was smoking tobacco, and had on a gold laced hat, with a plume of ostrich feather; he wore a rich crimson damask robe, wrapped loosely round him, yellow slippers, and no*

sized by A. L. Araujo, Dahomey, Portugal, and Bahia: King Adandozan and the Atlantic Slave Trade, in: Slavery & Abolition, 33 (2012) 1, pp. 1-19, here p. 4, also using the example of firearms. Suzanne Preston Blier has even coined the term "culture of assemblage" with regard to Dahomey and its receptivity towards foreign things and practices; see S. P. Blier, Assemblage: Dahomey Arts and the Politics of Dynasty, in: Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics, 45 (2004), pp. 187-210 and ead. Europia Mania: Contextualizing the European Other in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Dahomey Art, in: K. Chatterjee / C. Hawes (eds.), Europe Observed. Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters, Lewisburg 2008, pp. 237-270.

60 W. Snelgrave, Account (36), p. 35 [emphasis according to the original].

> *stockings: several women were employed fanning him, and others with whisks, to chace* [sic] *away the flies: one woman, on her knees before him, held a gold cup, for him to spit in.*[61]

One could once more point to the elements that appear to be adaptations of 'new' customs (sitting on a chair), clothes[62] (hat, damask robe) and other objects (tobacco, guns). Another important aspect is the coexistence of elements of strangeness (above all, the dominant presence of women) and of familiar dignity (e.g., the throne and the umbrellas as sign of authority). These two aspects can be found side by side in earlier 18th century reports. In later times, in contrast, some authors saw themselves in need of explicitly justifying the king being 'kingly' and dignified *in spite* of being a "black barbarian".[63] This development is analyzed below (4.).

Right from the beginning, the European governors set their behaviour towards the ruler apart from the behaviour of the Dahomian subjects, including the two highest "ministers", the *mehu* and the *migan*.[64] Whereas the latter had to throw themselves on the floor and cover their heads with dust as everyone else, Europeans were not subjected to this procedure which they regarded as utterly humiliating. Different explanations for this exemption have been suggested over time: First of all, it was interpreted as a special privilege for (all) "white men". This explanation can already be found in a letter supposedly dictated by Agaja to King George III (1726) and was further elaborated in the 19th century.[65] A French missionary saw the main reason for this privilege in Dahomian acknowledgment of the Christian religion,[66] a rather dubious inference as there is some evidence of Muslims also being exempted from prostration.[67] A second interpretation,

61 R. Norris, Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy, an Inland Country of Guiney, London 1789, p. 95. Very similar in many aspects is [A. E. Pruneau de Pommegorge], Description de la Nigritie, Amsterdam 1789, p. 176. Probably Pruneau knew Norris' text.

62 That the king used garments of European or "Moorish" (that is, North African) production was a feature noted frequently by early modern visitors. Seemingly, these imported textiles were integrated into Dahomian systems of distinction. There were even requests for certain European articles of clothing to be donated as gifts to the king. For example, Agaja's "wish list" Dubellay noted down in 1733 included i.a. helmets and a "veste a la romaine […] pour un homme un peu plus gros et plus large de carrure que M. De Moliere"; letter of Dubellay, dd. 21.11.1733, ANOM, C 6/25.

63 Répin, Voyage (58), p. 82; J. Duncan, Travels (56), vol. 1, p. 224 etc.

64 Cp. E. G. Bay, Wives (26), pp. 69f., pp. 99ff. et pass.

65 R. Law, Alternative Text (34), p. 267: "But this only, as to my own People and Subjects; *for* as to the white Man, he always sat in a Chair in my Presence, as I did, and I always shewed him the same Compliments as he shewed me, and shall continue to all white Men the same, according to their Stations." F. E. Forbes, Dahomey and Dahomans: Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at his Capital in the Years 1849 and 1850, London 1851, vol. 1, p. 24.

66 He even puts that argument into the mouth of a local "Cabéchère": "'Vous le [le roi; C. B.] saluerez de la main. Nous noirs, nous nous prosternons le front dans la poussière devant Sa Majesté; vous Blancs, vous pouvez rester debout, car vous ne vous mettez à genoux que devant Dieu.' Se tenir debout est là-bas, comme ici, le privilège des enfants de Dieu et de la sainte Église!"; [A.] Dorgère (acc.), Prisonniers au Dahomey!, in: Les Missions Catholiques. Bulletin Hebdomadaire illustré de l'œuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, 23 (1891), pp. 421-426, here p. 425.

67 This evidence, however, refers only to Muslims from neighbouring states not Muslim subjects of Dahomey; cp. R. Law, Islam in Dahomey, in: Scottish Journal of Religious Studies, 7 (1986) 2, pp. 95-122, here pp. 110f.

however, did not explain it as a specific European-Christian privilege but as part of the Dahomian habit of generally accepting foreign customs.[68]

The manner of *how* to greet the king changed over time: Snelgrave's party, in 1727, was instructed to bow very low and pay the king "the respect of our hats"; six years later Elet, the representative of the Dutch company, was granted a handshake by the king and provided a chair to sit on as it was, from this time on, a 'standard' procedure in audiences.[69] Here, one may indeed assume a certain adaptation of European customs of greeting which would match the second hypothesis mentioned above.

Afterwards, a more or less ceremonialized conversation took place, that involved, at least virtually, the 'monarchs' the governors or envoys were thought to represent: the king of Dahomey brought out a toast to the sovereign of the visitor and inquired about his health. This question involved, ultimately, a construction of an analogous "royal brother" in far away Europe (a sister was sometimes acceptable, too). This construction manifested itself also in the Dahomian choice of presents for European rulers.[70]

This 'Dahomey-centric' construction of a "royal brother" constituted, however, a certain difficulty for those European envoys who simply had no single, monocratic ruler at home. The Dutch envoy Elet had no king to represent and, to make things even worse, not even a *stadhouder* because he unfortunately visited Agaja in the middle of the Second Stadtholderless Period (1702–1747). In whose name then to greet the king of? Elet obviously thought the Estates-General (*Staten Generaal*) a body too difficult to explain to an African king, probably not matching his world view at all. Therefore, he greeted the king in the name of "the Dutch admiral and his Grands".[71] Similiar 'tricks' were used by French envoys to Abomey in times of revolutionary changes in the mid-19th century. In 1848, Blanchely commented on the question of how to explain the introduction of a republican constitution in France to the king of Dahomey by saying that it was "inconvenient to speak thereof in the presence of a despotic and absolute king".[72] These instances of 'dissimulation' point to the fact that Europeans, too, had to adapt themselves to the necessities of intercultural interaction, even in the very question of statehood and representation.

To sum up the findings so far, I want to draw the attention to three major points: *Firstly*, the world view of the different actors and their mutual perceptions of each other have been addressed. During the 18th century, the basis for diplomatic interaction in Dahomey was the contemporary actors' belief in a shared political framework. Both,

68 A. Dalzel, The History of Dahomy. An Inland Kingdom of Africa, London 1793, Introduction, p. viii and p. ix; J. A. Skertchly, Dahomey as It is: Being a Narrative of Eight Month's Residence in that Country, London 1874, p. 200.

69 W. Snelgrave, Account (36), p. 35; H. den Heijer (ed.), Naar de koning (36), p. 148.

70 See C. Brauner, Kompanien (*), chapter 3.

71 "de Hollandse admiraal beneevens zijn grooten" [my translation]; H. den Heijer (ed.), Naar de koning (36), pp. 148f.

72 "inconvenant […] d'en parler en présence d'un roi despote et absolut" [my translation]; Blanchely, Au Dahomey. Voyages en 1848 et 1850 de M. Blanchely, de Whydah à Abomey, in: Les Missions Catholiques, 23 (1891), pp. 534-537, 545-548, 562-564, 575f. and 587f., here p. 545: "Je lui [le roi Gezo; C.B.] transmis beaucoup de compliments de la France, du chef de l'Etat, passant sous silence les événements de la République. Il eut été inconvenant d'en parler en présence d'un roi despote et absolu."

Europeans and Dahomians, envisioned the political entity of the respective other and its functioning according to the basic lines their own institutions worked along. In the diplomatic interactions the logic they applied did not differed fundamentally from that which they were used to at home and the usual relations to neighbours.
Secondly, the diplomatic practices themselves have been analyzed. The general set-up of Euro-Dahomian relations was defined by a decisive Dahomian dominance that was not least expressed in the 'ceremonial duties' the king levied on the European governors. Europeans in Dahomey, in the first place, had to adapt to Dahomian requirements and customs. It was, however, no one-sided process of adaptation and transfer: On the material level, the court ceremonial in Dahomey was transcultural right from the beginning. It proved to be very receptive for new commodities and procedures such as the use of chairs or flags. Such receptions and transfers existed not only with regard to European objects and practices but also in relation to Dahomey's neighbouring states and group, especially the "Kingdom" of Oyo and the Yoruba. Transfers occurred not only on the material level; there also evolved shared concepts and standards of ceremonial as the example of the gun salutes showed.
And *thirdly*, the analysis has also demonstrated the necessity of a broad notion of diplomacy. Only such a definition allows us, inter alia, to take the ambivalent status of actors into account, a phenomenon also not uncommon in intra-European diplomacy. Here, the forts' governors were obviously perceived as representatives of foreign "royal brothers" and "Dahomian captains" at the same time. Such a 'double role' should not be interpreted as an obstacle to diplomatic functions or an abnormal contradiction. Exclusive ties to loyalty and belonging as claimed by the modern nation-state were rarely to be found in early modern times. Early modern people rather had to live up to the political as a difficult network of relations on different levels where personal ties were of essential importance but seldomly exclusive.

4. The Meaning of Crossed Legs, or: The Impact of the Discourse of Despotism

The notion of despotism is an important strand of interpretation in the European discourse on extra-European rule, especially from the 17th century onwards. It was, neatly fitting to the Aristotelian model,[73] first applied to the Near East, especially to the Ottoman Empire.[74] With regard to Africa, it appears comparatively late. In the accounts of

73 Arist., Pol., III, 1285a, 20-25 and 1295b, 20ff. Cp. M. Richter, Aristoteles und der klassische griechische Begriff der Despotie, in: H. Maier et al. (eds.), Politik, Philosophie, Praxis. Festschrift für Wilhelm Hennis zum 65. Geburtstag, Stuttgart 1988, pp. 21-37.

74 R. Koebner, Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term, in: Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 14 (1951), pp. 275-302; L. Valensi, The Making of a Political Paradigm: The Ottoman State and Oriental Despotism, in: A. Grafton / A. Blair (eds.), The Transmission of Culture in Early Modern Europe, Philadelphia 1990, pp. 173-203; M. Grothaus, Vorbildlicher Monarch, Tyrann oder Despot? Europäische Vorstellungen vom Osmanischen Reich zwischen Renaissance und Aufklärung, in: Frühneuzeit-Info, 6 (1995) 2, pp. 181-203 J.-P. Rubiés,

the 16th and 17th centuries it is still mainly the king of Spain or the Spaniards in general who are depicted as despotic or tyrannical.[75] During the 18th century, however, the notion of 'despotism' increasingly came to dominate the European discourse on African rule and African rulers. The interpretations in question borrow, on the one hand, from earlier descriptions of Oriental despotism, often using explicit comparisons with the "Orient" and transferring terms like "seraglio" or "Vizir" to the African context.[76] On the other hand, there evolved specific features ascribed to 'African despotism' that differed from the typical image of Oriental despotism. Most important, amongst them, was the intimate connection made between slavery, the slave trade and human sacrifices. In the following, I analyse what impact the notion of despotism had on European representations of Dahomian ceremonial and governance.

Let us start with the arrival of visitors in Abomey again: Above, I outlined how European visitors read the ceremonies of reception and entry as 'signs' of honour. In his 1789 account, Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, a former gouvernour of the French fort and now convinced abolitionist, did not care so much about attributes of rank and status. In contrast, he 'read' the whole ceremony of reception outside Abomey as an allegory of reversed order, royal caprice and vanity, in short, of Dahomian despotism. He concludes his description of the reception committee as follows:

> *The view of these troups has something imposing in it and even frightful for those who see them for the first time. They give a first impression of the despot who entertains them.*[77]

Pruneau's gaze on these ceremonies is no longer dominated by the 'ceremonial look' but rather by a different strategy of semiotization one can correspondingly call the 'ethnographic look'. This look aimed at the "African character" as an all-explaining feature and scrutinized interactions and arrangements rather for elements of strangeness than for analogies.[78]

Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu, in: Journal of Early Modern History, 9 (2005), pp. 109-180.

75 Cp., e.g., S. Brun, Schiffahrten (1624), facsimile edition, Basel s.d., p. 65; N. Villault de Bellefond, Relation des Costes d'Affrique appellées Guinée, Paris 1669, pp. 440f. and E. Tilleman, En kort og enfoldig Beretning om det Landskab Guinea og dets Beskaffenheid/A Short and Simple Account of the Country Guinea and its Nature (1697), transl. and ed. by S. A. Winsnes, Madison 1994, pp. 21f.

76 For the transfer of the term "seraglio" to Dahomey see i.a. R. Norris, Memoirs (61), p. 18. In 1786, Champagny explicitly referred to the "Oriental despotism" in Dahomey; see Mémoire contenant des observations sur quelques points de la Côte de Guinée, visités en 1786, par la Corvette le Pandour, et sur la possibilité d'y faire des établissemens, par M. de Champagny, dd. 06.09.1786, ANOM, C 6/27.

77 "L'aspect de ces troupes a quelque chose d'imposant, & même d'affrayant pour ceux qui la voient la première fois. Ils donnent la premiere idée du despote qui les entretient." [my translation]; [Pruneau de Pommegorge], Description (61), pp. 171-174, here: p. 174.– On the early modern notion of "Oriental ceremonial" as it was developed in enlightened discourse and its use in contemporary critique of European rulers cp. M. Vec, Zeremonialwissenschaft im Fürstenstaat. Studien zur juristischen und politischen Theorie absolutistischer Herrschaftsrepräsentation, Frankfurt a. M. 1998, pp. 289ff. and pp. 393ff.

78 This shift is vividly illustrated by the changing valuation of time in the context of audiences. In earlier times, periods of waiting and the 'speed' of one's reception by the ruler were understood as markers of esteem like in European court ceremonial. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, in contrast, authors like Richard Francis Burton

The point in question is not the critical attitude Pruneau de Pommegorge shows towards the ruler of Dahomey – such criticism was present in European descriptions right from the beginning of European-Dahomian relations. Within the paradigm of despotism, the criticism is no longer addressed to a single ruler and his possible misbehaviour or his cruel character. Now, the criticized way of governance is part of a system, a specific African type of rulership that is no longer equated to European forms. Governor Gourg, for example, remarked in 1792 that the King of Dahomey "like all Negro kings is a despot and decides on the life of his subjects who all are his slaves".[79] A few years later, Jean-Baptiste-Léonard Durand was convinced that nearly all rulers in Africa reigned more or less despotically and with a "volonté arbitraire" [80] This basic alterization of African rule, thus, is an essential step towards the formation of an exclusively European notion of "state".
The increasing presence of the despotism paradigm during the second half of the 18th century is thus linked to a change in attitudes towards Africans in general and African rulers in particular. Whereas earlier visitors mainly expected an African ruler to be 'kingly' according to familiar standards later visitors expected an African ruler to be, above all, African, which was to them a strange, rather typified kind of human being. [81] The statement of an entomologist, who visited King Glélé in 1871, illustrates such expectations of a European audience:

> *My introduction to the far-famed King of Dahomey was disappointing. I had expected to have seen a half-naked savage, with a grim blood-thirsty mien. Instead of this sanguinary monster, I beheld a tall athletic, broad-shouldered person, several shades lighter in colour than his people, with a truly kingly dignity about him by which alone he could be recognised as the ruler of the country. His features were not by any means of the repulsive full-blooded negro type…* [82]

What impact did the despotism paradigm have on the description of ceremonial? An illustrative example is provided by juxtaposing two accounts of the same scene: When the English slave trader Snelgrave was received by King Agaja in 1727 he noted that the King was sitting with his legs crossed. Snelgrave did not further comment on this, probably

took periods of waiting as evidence for "the African"'s different attitude towards time in general; R. F. Burton, A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome, London 1864, vol. 1, pp. 203f., see also R.,Law (ed.), Dahomey (38), p. 72.

79 "… comme tous les Rois négres est despote et dispose de la vie de ses sujets qui sont tous esclaves" [my translation]; Mémoire pour servir d'instruction au Directeur qui me succédera au Comptoir de Juda, par M. Gourg, 1791, ANOM, C 6/27.

80 J.-B.-L. Durand, Voyage au Sénégal ou Mémoires historiques, philosophiques et politiques sur les découvertes, les établissemens et le commerce des Européens dans les mers de l'Océan atlantique, Paris 1802, pp. 370f.

81 About the earlier importance of social rank also in the judgment of Africans or "Moors" see the illuminating analysis by M. Häberlein, "Mohren", ständische Gesellschaft und atlantische Welt. Minderheiten und Kulturkontakte in der frühen Neuzeit, in: C. Schnurmann / H. Lehmann (eds.), Atlantic Understandings. Essays on European and American History in Honor of Hermann Wellenreuther, Hamburg/Münster 2006, pp. 77-102.– Not to be misunderstood, I do not say that there was no 'ceremonial look' at African courts in later times, say in the 19th century, nor that there was only a 'ceremonial look' in the earlier period – it is rather a question of dominating features.

82 J. A. Skertchly, Dahomey (68), p. 141.

taking it as another strange custom of Dahomey.[83] In 1793, the anti-abolitionist writer Archibald Dalzel revised Snelgrave's account for his own *History of Dahomy*: Now, Agaja's posture of sitting could serve as proof of the "Oriental" character of Dahomian rule. Dalzel writes: "His manner of sitting at that time, viz. on a chair, was not his custom, nor that of the country; but seemingly intended for more than usual state: for, on a future audience, he was cross-legged on a carpet, after the Asiatic manner, though he always preserved a proper majesty and decorum."[84] Dalzel refers to the topos of the Ottoman Emperor or the Ottoman *vizir* in cross-legged posture, a prominent subject in contemporary visual arts. The prominence of imaginations of the Ottoman Empire in the description of Dahomey is due to the despotism paradigm. By its ascent, the Ottoman Empire and the "Orient" in general became the most prominent objects of comparison in European discourse about Dahomey and other African states. The transfer of features was, as the issue of sitting cross-legged shows, not limited to the political structure but resulted in a more general 'Orientalization'. Interestingly, the examples observers drew on began to change in the early 19th century – whereas the Ottoman Empire was the most prominent object of comparison in the late 18th century, 19th century authors increasingly refer to"despotical" China and India. Richard Francis Burton, for example, likened the prostration before the ruler of Dahomey to the Chinese *kotau* and the "shashtanga" of the Hindus.[85]

Not only the royal posture of sitting but the ceremonial in general was subjected to reinterpretation in the context of the despotism paradigm. A very important element in all descriptions of 'despotical' Dahomey was the prostration that all subjects were required to make before the king. It was regarded as unambiguous evidence of all Dahomians being slaves to the king. There existed, however, a slight ambivalence of interpretation with regard to the two highest officials, the *mehu* and the *migan*, who were, as mentioned above, also required to prostrate before the ruler:[86] On the one hand, their prostration was interpreted as indicating their slave status as well and, therefore, as indicating a grave deficiency – the court of Dahomey was said to have no or at least no 'real' nobility.[87] The existence of a nobility was perceived as an essential feature of the European (pre-modern) state, a reading especially enforced by the anti-absolutist edge the discourse of despotism

83 "… the King was sitting cross-legg'd on a Carpet of Silk, spread on the Ground"; W. Snelgrave, Account (36), p. 60. Snelgrave further dwells on the fussiness with which his party had being asked to take the same posture as their host.

84 A. Dalzel, History (68), p. 33.

85 R. F. Burton, Mission (78), vol. 1, pp. 258f. Further examples include F. E. Forbes, Dahomey (65), vol. 1, pp. 30-33, p. 50 and p. 64 (China) and J. A. Skertchly, Dahomey (68), p. 142.

86 Mémoire contenant des observations sur quelques points de la Côte de Guinée, visités en 1786, par la Corvette le Pandour, et sur la possiblité d'y faire des établissemens, par M. de Champagny, dd. 06.09.1786, ANOM, C 6/27. The "Mémoire" takes this gesture to be, apart from the arbitrariness of rule, the most important element of the "despotisme oriental" the King of Dahomey rules with.

87 Cp., e.g., A. Dalzel, History (68), Introduction, p. vii and X. Béraud, Note sur le Dahomé, in: Bulletin de la société de géographie (Paris), 5e série, 12 (1866), pp. 371-386, here: p. 376. Béraud explains the prostration as evidence of the king's status as a demigod: "En un mot, il est comme un demi-dieu devant qui tous, plébéiens ou dignitaires du royaume, se prosternent et se couvrent de poussière."

always bore. The absence of a nobility implied, according to this view, the absence of monarchy – in short, it was the very criterion by which a monarchy was degraded into sheer despotism.[88] On the other hand, another interpretation attributed to the two officials greater power; in fact, it took them to be the true, though hidden, rulers of Dahomey. This kind of rule was also illegitimate. Though it did not necessarily imply the lack of a nobility, it certainly implied a lack of control and of rule of law which was increasingly viewed as the essential criterion for legitimate governance. Both interpretations, however, could draw on the very authority in the field, that is namely Montesquieu, who sustained this very ambivalence towards the power of the *vizir* and the *seraglio* in his own work.[89] Corroborative evidence for such a link is provided by Forbes who directly compared the *mehu* to the "Grand Vizier".[90]

Why did the despotism paradigm have such a great impact on European depictions of Dahomey? Firstly, the turn towards 'alterizing' extra-European states was surely a trend of the time. A shift towards the discourse of despotism may be observed not only with regard to Dahomey and other African states, but also in the case of other extra-European regions. Secondly, the usage of topoi pointing to despotic rule could also serve individual interests. One of their earliest appearances, for example, can be found in a letter by the French governor Dubellay dating from 1733. In Dubellay's letter all important elements of despotic rule (though not yet full-fledged despotism, in my opinion) are assembled: arbitrary and cruel rule, enslavement of all subjects, the ruler enclosed in his court. The final end of his frightening description is, however, the request, or rather the claim, for an increase of his wages as a 'danger bonus' so to speak.[91] The construction of 'despotical Dahomey' was no single enterprise pre-planned by a single master-mind or something for which "the European discourse" is to be blamed. It was rather the result of the – often non-deliberate – collaboration of different actors and their respective narrative strategies in a specific historical context.

That the image of Dahomey was increasingly influenced by the discourse of despotism was, thirdly, also due to the current debate on abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The advocates of the slave trade used the example of "despotic Dahomey" to argue against abolition, presenting the condition of slavery in the Americas as the lesser of two evils. Remaining in Dahomey, they insinuated, meant for the majority of slaves nothing less than certain death as human sacrifice. The bleaker the conditions appeared to be within Africa, the friendlier the fate of slavery in the Americas seemed to look.[92] With "despotic rule" and "slavery" as presumed natural conditions of the lives of Africans, the

88 Cp., e.g., Montesquieu, L'Esprit des lois, ed. by R. Derathé, vol. 1, Paris 2011, vol. 1, l. II, c. IV, p. 198. Montesquieu explains that there is no honour and no rank in a despotic state as everybody is a slave, ibid., l. III, c. VIII, p. 202.

89 Montesquieu, Esprit (88), vol. 1, l. III, c. 9, pp. 33f.; and in contrast: ibid., l. V, c. 14, pp. 67f. and c. 16, pp. 73f.

90 F. E. Forbes, Dahomey (65), vol. 1, p. 22.

91 Letter of Dubellay, dd. 21.11.1733, ANOM, C 6/25.

92 Cp., i.a., R. Law, Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey, in: Journal of African History, 27 (1986) 2, pp. 237-267; A. Sonderegger, Dämonisierung (28), pp. 398-434.

transatlantic slave trade could even be depicted as a sort of educating or civilizing mission – a strand of thought prominently followed by Hegel in his philosophy of history.[93]
Anti-abolitionists, however, were not the only ones to describe Dahomey as "despotic" – their abolitionist opponents (like Pruneau de Pommegorge quoted above) basically agreed with them. But the abolitionists had a different explanation for Dahomian despotism: For the most part, they did not construct an essentially despotic "African character" but regarded European slave-trading as the main cause for Dahomian despotism.[94]
With regard to diplomatic practice European actors proved to be less and less willing to adapt to local customs during the first half of the 19th century – yet slowly, as circumstances still forced European actors on the spot into some degree of adaptation. Discursive constructions of European dominance here surely preceded the ability to enforce these self-imaginations in practice. One important factor for this change can be found in the changed attitude towards African rule and 'statehood' described above.
At the same time, a process of forgetting shared history set in: Even the time-valued gift-exchange during the inaugural visit in Abomey was refused by one of the more stubborn British officials as a mere "African custom". Dahomian officials, however, had an appropriate answer ready: "it was not their custom, it was white man make it so."[95] They certainly had a point – as we have seen, the diplomatic practices at the court of Dahomey had evolved through more than a century of Euro-African interactions.

5. Concluding Remarks

First of all, I hope to have demonstrated that it is worthwhile to investigate Euro-African relations from the perspective of transcultural history and to integrate a look at the West African 'periphery' into European histories of diplomacy. By closely scrutinizing the practices of interactions and their representations, it is possible to cut across traditional teleologies pointing to the colonial era and to characterize the "pre-colonial" era of Euro-African relations as an era with its own, with own asymmetries and with a shared political framework right in the very hub of the transatlantic slave trade.[96] The transcultural

93 Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Berlin 1822/1823. Nachschriften von Karl Gustav von Griesheim, Heinrich Gustav Hotho und Friedrich Carl Hermann Victor von Kehler, ed. by K. H. Ilting, K. Brehmer and H. N. Seelmann (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Vorlesungen. Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte, vol. 12), Hamburg 1996, p. 100; id., Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte (Werke 12), Frankfurt a.M. 1986, pp. 124f. and pp. 128f.

94 See, e.g., B.-S. Frossard, La cause des esclaves nègres et des habitans de la Guinée, vol. 1, Lyon 1789, p. 232: "Le troisieme moyen que les Européens mettent en usage, pour se procurer des esclaves, consiste à exciter plusieurs Souverains de la Guinée à étendre un joug despotique sur leurs Sujets." Cp. also [A. E. Pruneau de Pommegorge], Description (61), pp. 207f., pp. 214ff. and pp. 262ff.

95 It is the British Vice-Consul Fraser (resident in Dahomey in 1851/2) who is especially distinguished by his stubbornness and undiplomatic behaviour. In many regards he refused to adapt to the local "custom of the coast" and proudly declared his intention to teach the Africans "British mores". R. Law (ed.), Dahomey (38), p. 67 (et pass.).

96 Also the term "pre-colonial" itself should questioned though it is still widely used for periodization of African his-

perspective can also contribute to the changing look of diplomatic history mentioned in the beginning as several traditional assumptions are called into question, especially those about putatively specific European phenomena.

In this regard, *secondly*, the analysis of contemporaries' perceptions is very important: Encounters between Europeans and Dahomians were, to put it bluntly, not encounters between "states" and "tribes", nor between "civilized" and "primitive cultures"; they were, in the first place, encounters between different people living in the same era.[97] Early modern observers – on both sides – attributed to the respective other the same structures of political organization, the same features of statehood they knew from home. Especially the construction of the "kingdom" of Dahomey by the Europeans corresponded to the construction of an analogous "brother king" by the Dahomian ruler. Until the late 18th century both sides featured an inclusive Euro- (respectively Dahomey-) centrism. This correspondence was, however, increasingly destabilized by the rise of an exclusive Eurocentrism as expressed, amongst others, in the discourse of despotism. The exchange between "royal brothers" dwindled away and made room for the civilizing missions with their clear cut asymmetries (which still took nearly a century to realize, at least in West Africa).

Thirdly, the corresponding perceptions of shared characteristics did, at least partly, result in the development of shared practices. For example, Dahomian and European actors tacitly agreed on the importance of ceremonial and its relation, inter alia, to the status of political relations and the distinction between 'private' and 'official' visitors. Right from the beginning of documentation, the ceremonial in Dahomey integrated and adapted 'new' elements, commodities and practices. The norms and rules governing the ceremonial that structured diplomatic encounters also reflected mutual adaptation. The diplomatic practices on the Gold and Slave Coast were, as I have argued in my dissertation, transcultural in character not only with regard to their 'material elements' but also and importantly in relation to their 'usage' – it was a world that Africans and Europeans made together.[98]

Fourthly, I addressed the aspect of historiographical narratives and tried to outline the beginnings of an exclusively European notion of "state". The discourse of despotism and its great impact on the description of ceremonial and political life in general, the shift from a 'ceremonial' to an 'ethnographic look' at the Dahomian court all contributed to the

tory. A sound critique was advanced by C. Marx, Geschichte Afrikas. Von 1800 bis zur Gegenwart, Paderborn [i.a.] 2004, pp. 12f. About the status of "pre-colonial" African history in general cp. R. Reid, Past and Presentism. The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History, in: Journal of African History, 52 (2011) 2, pp. 135-155.

97 This wording borrows from Johannes Fabian's dictum: "To put it bluntly, cultures are neither entities nor agents. They cannot clash or be at war, nor can they encounter each other; only people can, singly and collectively."; J. Fabian, You Meet and You Talk. Anthropological Reflections on Encounters and Discourses, in: S. Juterczenka / G. Mackenthun (eds.), The Fuzzy Logic of Encounter. New Perspectives on Cultural Contact, Münster 2009, pp. 23-34, here: p. 26.

98 C. Brauner, Kompanien (*)

formation of an *essential* alterity of African rule. Finally, the long history of this "middle ground" fell into oblivion,[99] and the European "state" achieved its incomparability.

99 This term was coined by Richard White in his The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815 (first edition, Cambridge [i.a.] 1991) and has since enjoyed a formidable career in academic vocabulary dealing with processes of transculturation and intercultural exchange; see the essays in Forum: The Middle Ground Revisited, in: William & Mary Quarterly, 23 (2006) 1, pp. 3-96 and White's own preface to the 20th anniversary edition (Cambridge [i.a.] 2011, pp. xi-xxiv). Beyond this generalized usage, there are, in my opinion, structural parallels between cross-cultural interactions in White's North America and the West African coast which would be worthwhile exploring.