Animals and Inequality in the Ancient World

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INTRODUCTION

The kingdom of Hueda, located in the modern Republic of Benin, was an African state that flourished during the middle Atlantic period, ca. AD 1650–1727 (Law 1990, 2004). In terms of settlement organization and political structure, Huedans drew from the urban tradition of the region, where as early as ca. AD 1000, archaeological evidence from nearby Nigeria indicates that elite people inhabited palace complexes that were in turn surrounded by agriculturalists and artisans who lived in rural villages, and regional administrators who lived in densely settled centers (Ogundiran 2001; Shaw 1977, 1978). International markets, located near the Huedan palace at Savi, were a draw for people from the countryside (Norman 2009a), as were nearby state-sponsored temples and the palace itself, which served as the final point of judicial appeal (Law 1991). Our knowledge of Hueda is distilled from three main sources: oral accounts, historical documents, and archaeological evidence.

From recent archaeological excavations, we know that the Huedan palace complex at Savi coalesced as a densely settled urban center in the early seventeenth century and collapsed spectacularly in the early eighteenth century (Figure 14.1). The palace itself stretches approximately 1.5 by 1 kilometers (Kelly 2001) and is surrounded by at least four other regional settlement centers, which are interpreted as the house compounds of regional community leaders (Norman 2009a). Given historical accounts speaking to numerous quarrels between the Huedan crown—or “stool” in keeping with the local materiality of royalty—and regional community leaders, it is quite possible that these fortified and expansive residences were also points of resistance against royal authority.
PYTHONS, PIGS, AND POLITICAL PROCESS IN THE HUEDA KINGDOM

(Akinjogbin 1967). From historical documents, we know that part of the stress within the Huedan political coalition revolved around the trade of war captives (Law 1991). During the period of its international prominence, more captives were traded from Hueda into the Middle Passage than any other port of call in West or Central Africa (Elitis 2011). In turn, Huedan elites worked to subvert royal monopolies on the slave trade and divert Atlantic riches toward their own interests (Akinjogbin 1967).

Despite political stresses, archaeological research has revealed that local political economies were linked to Atlantic ones through markets at Savi; Atlantic trade items historically known to have passed through palace markets were recovered from agricultural villages located around the palace (Kelly 2001, 2004; Norman 2009a, 2009b, 2010). The nature of these exchanges is the subject of recent research, but most likely relates both to economic transactions, such as market vendors trading cowry-shell currency to agriculturalists for staples, and gift-giving, in which elites passed cloth and other items down the line to curry favor and secure coalitions (Norman 2009a, 2009b). The Huedan political economy was thus both a source of stress and cohesion, as was the cosmological world that enveloped the Huedan human landscape.

Modern Huedan oral-history specialists carefully curate and convey accounts of vodun, or cosmological actors, who shaped the emergence of Hueda as an Atlantic state, facilitated its emergence as a hot spot of the Atlantic world, and

Figure 14.1. Project area and historical kingdoms in and near modern Benin.
played a fundamental role in its ultimate collapse (Blier 1995; Norman 2009b). Throughout the Bight of Benin region, as well as in associated diasporic places, the term *Vodun*, when capitalized, glosses the decentralized religious tradition practiced throughout the region and, in the lower case, refers to individual deities such as ancestral figures, forest spirits, and creators of the universe (Blier 1995). In terms of the rise and fall of the kingdom, Huedan oral historians suggest that the narrative of the Huedan state is only intelligible when recounted alongside the history of Dangbe, the principal vodun for the kingdom as represented by its reptilian avatar, the African royal python (*Python regius*).

This chapter explores the politics and practices surrounding Huedan python worship, where Dangbe served as a symbol of the royal family, a major source of statewide stability, and a mainstay in ceremonies that provided a sense of well-being (Norman and Kelly 2004). Historical accounts suggest that pythons were ubiquitous aspects of Huedan daily life and this chapter argues that, as such, they linked quotidian daily practices to spectacular cosmological events (see Smith 2003). The chapter charts a path through the numerous historical accounts that discuss Dangbe and his involvement in sociopolitical processes and transformations. Then, it tracks the use of animals and animal avatars at the most spectacular state rituals as well as some of the most ordinary moments within Huedan households. This chapter endeavors to explore not only subject/object relations between vodun and Huedan political processes, but also the social role that animals played in the multiple scales of Huedan society in which social authority was turned into political action (see Meskell 2005). In so doing, it builds on attempts to expand the theorization of socialized landscapes beyond built places and the unbuilt spaces connecting them, to include the numerous animate, nonhuman things that did memory work, actively framed social relations, and served as mediums for configuring and reconfiguring identity (Bender 1993; Carmichael et al. 1994; Lekson 1996). In short, the chapter argues that pythons were part of the materiality of the Huedan social world and thus builds on this volume’s focus on writing animals into human landscapes to arrive at a more complete rendering of past social landscapes. First though, it is necessary to present the archaeological evidence from the palace complex at Savi, and the surrounding countryside, which is at the core of the above argument.

**SNAKES IN THE RAFTERS, ANCESTORS UNDER THE FLOOR: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SAVI PALACE AND COUNTRYSIDE**

The Huedan palace center at Savi was identified through archaeological survey and excavations by Kenneth Kelly (2001, 2004) and its rural countryside
and urban warrens explored by the author from 2002 to 2010 (Norman 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Archaeological research revealed that Huedan kings placed their palace complex approximately seven kilometers from the Atlantic coast and adjacent to an expansive body of freshwater, known today as Lake Toho (Figure 14.2). This position was advantageous on several fronts: the upland clayey soils that predominate around the palace are much more productive than are the sandy soils found along the coast, Lake Toho provided a source of fish and other aquatic resources, and the lake constrained and concentrated north/south terrestrial movement and thus afforded Huedan kings a chance to monitor movement of traders and their goods throughout the region (Norman 2009a).

Within the town and countryside surrounding Savi, archaeologists encountered deflated rectangular architectural mounds, which range in size and organization from 40-by-100-meter multiroom house compounds to 5-meter single-room ovular or circular structures. Huedans constructed houses out of rammed clay, with walls in some of the larger structures approaching a meter in thickness. Huedan builders excavated structural clay, common throughout the Savi countryside, from pits purposefully dug adjacent to the houses. The resulting open borrow pits served as boundary ditches as well as trash pits. In many cases, house compounds or, in the case of villages, clusters of house compounds were surrounded by the noncontiguous ditch segments. Networks of ditches and conjoining house walls presented a relatively unbroken series of architectural features that separated zones inside and outside of house compounds. For example, someone wanting to access the innermost portion of a house compound, or village, would be required to pass through a ditch or house entryway (Figure 14.3). These architectural systems, much like a coiled snake, offered protection to those elements at the center, while putting at risk those elements at the boundaries.

The Savi settlement center, which covers an area of approximately one hundred square kilometers, contains a palace center, four dense concentrations of architectural features interpreted as the residences of regional community leaders, and networks of villages inhabited by artisans and agriculturalists (Norman 2009a).

In terms of stratigraphy, the archaeological structures and features described above exhibited European trade items dating from the early seventeenth century to the early to mid-eighteenth century (e.g., Dutch trade pipes with maker’s marks) overlain by a common layer of burned material. This burned layer resulted from catastrophic destruction; the walls and roofs of numerous structures burned and thereafter slumped into low architectural mounds. The
archaeologically recorded zone of devastation was associated with a campaign of conquest in March of 1727, when historical accounts record that troops from the nearby kingdom of Dahomey burned and sacked the palace at Savi (Law 1991); archaeological evidence suggests the larger urban complex shared the fate of the palace (Norman 2010).

The dense settlement system recorded in archaeological survey and excavation accords well with the accounts of European travelers to Savi such as Willem Bosman (1721:315) who recounts that the villages were tightly packed around the palace “not a musket shot from one another.” The English slaver Thomas Phillips (1732:214–218) noted that, in terms of political organization, each of these smaller settlements had a “captain” and that their houses were
Figure 14.3. Excavations at Locus 2.
slightly larger than the general populace. Archaeological evidence suggests that both large and small settlements were organized along a northeast/southwest road (Norman 2009a) that historical accounts describe as the main corridor of commerce along which captives were driven to the sea and goods were moved to the interior as material payment, but not replacements, for the human loss (Law 1991).

Archaeological excavations by the author in regional settlement centers surrounding Savi revealed dense concentrations of large, handmade, locally produced earthenware-ceramic storage jars and jar fragments. These vessels are interpreted as storage vessels for maize and other staples and occur in a much greater frequency in regional settlement centers than in village houses. Although storage jars concentrated in settlement centers, smaller cooking and serving vessels occurred in similar frequencies in both settlement centers and village sites. One possible reason for this discrepancy is ritualized “patron role” feasting that legitimized established unequal social relations through the distribution of food and drink (Dietler 1996, 2001). On such events in Hueda, Bosman (1702:362) reports that the Huedan king “is daily obliged to keep Four Thousand Men, and to provide them with Meat and Drink.” Gifts of choice cuts of meat and drink were the burdensome responsibility of elites who feted potential trading partners, as well as work details at the ends of their projects (Norman 2010). Huedan kings used these same strategies with Europeans, attempting to create beholden relationships through providing copious quantities of sheep, hogs, fowl, bread, fruit, and beer on a daily basis (Bosman 1721:338–339).

In the Huedan social world, patrons were required to provide gifts to their clients and feasting events marked spectacular points on the Huedan calendar; however, ceremonial redistributions reached beyond the realm of politics and economics. The Hueda terms for presenting offerings to shrines for vodun spirits can be translated as to “feed” or “feast.” It is clear from historical accounts that the Huedan world was alive with vodun in want of sustenance. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Huedans designated trees, specific bodies of water, and certain animals as physical representations of vodun (Bosman 1721:368). In the domestic sphere, vodun ancestors might reside or rest in, or visit, family shrines (Norman 2009b). For both community-wide deities and those within the house compound, sacrifices were necessary to attract the attention of cosmological actors and focus their attention on the requests of the petitioner (Bay 1998; Norman 2010). Feeding vodun involves not only perishable items, but also durable things (Norman 2009b); vodun have been described as having an insatiable appetite for new “hot” material.
items (Rush 2001). Archaeologically, the signature for this religious aesthetic for accumulation and ceremonial feeding is trade items drawn from throughout the Atlantic world and clustering in domestic spaces alongside purposefully constructed ceramic offering vessels.

Excavators recovered anthropomorphic and zoopomorphic ceramic vessels, human remains, and Atlantic trade items from small freestanding shrines located near or within domestic activity areas (e.g., entranceways to house compounds and courtyards). At one excavation locale, Locus 2, excavators unearthed two skulls: one placed on an elaborately incised bowl and another in a large storage jar (Figure 14.4). European mass-manufactured trade items (e.g., cut nails, hand-blown glass bottles, smoking pipe fragments) clustered around the skulls as did heavy concentrations of carbonized organic material. Both crania were recovered within a small, deflated architectural mound adjacent to the main entrance to a large house compound. The small structure is interpreted as a shrine and fits with historical descriptions of Huedans venerating ancestral figures and vanquished opponents by installing their skulls in places of honor within the household (Law 1989). Historical accounts record Huedans removing skulls from postcranial bones and placing them in shrines as part of structured deposits—collections of materials that in sum represent certain deities or people—in household shrines (Norman 2009b). These records correspond nicely with the archaeological finds from seventeenth and eighteenth century contexts such as skulls recovered within storage jars from subfloor pits. In all cases where human remains were recovered, excavators encountered concentrations of imported Atlantic trade items (Norman 2009b). Today, in southern Benin, the honor of being interred within one’s house is reserved for patriarchal and matriarchal figures and consequently a family might lavish fine cosmologically charged offerings on the deceased who is thereafter elevated to be the family’s representative with other cosmological actors. Historical accounts from the Hueda kingdom, as well as the broader Bight of Benin region sharing historical and linguistic connections with Hueda, document that during the Hueda era offerings were lavished on ancestral figures on an annual basis (Labouret and Rivet 1929; Norman 2009b).

Spaces interpreted as religious offerings included small caches of these same ritual ceramics with a few imported items and organic materials. These offerings were placed within walls and at the base and corners of houses just below living surfaces. These Huedan-era (ca. AD 1650–1727) religious spaces connected families to their pasts and literally rooted house compounds to lineages and ancestral actors (Norman 2009b). Huedan families offered lavish food
and material goods to focus the attention of ancestors on the family and convince them to intervene in earthly affairs on their behalf. These offerings also braced the house against cosmological attack from outsiders, neighbors, and displeased vodun (Norman 2009b). Thus, houses were stages for cosmological battles, and feasting vodun was part of the logical response to slave raiding and internal political intrigue, and for mitigating the flux and dislocation due to the regional warfare that would eventually bring down the kingdom (Law 1991). It was vodun who brought wealth, prosperity, and stability, and sacrifice and offerings were required to keep cosmological largess flowing.

Huedan feasts brought rich, poor, young, old, and cosmological actors together for communion. It can be further argued that snakes served as a medium bridging household feasts and events organized at the state level. During the Huedan era, European traders gave numerous accounts of snakes

Figure 14.4. Excavations at a shrine, including human skull and ceramics.
in and around Huedan houses; reportedly, they often occupied places in rafters and chased vermin on the ground (Phillips 1732:223). European traders visiting Hueda in general and the towns of Savi and Ouidah in particular noted various bush and arboreal vipers and constrictors throughout the kingdom. One snake in particular attracted much attention and Snelgrave (1734:11) describes this class of constrictors as

peculiar to their Country, being of a very singular Make; for they are big in the middle, round on the Back like a Hog, but very small at the Head and Tail, which renders their Motion very slow. Their Color is yellow and white, with brown Streaks; and so harmless, that if they are accidently trode (for it is a capital Crime to do it willfully) and they bite, no bad Effect ensues; which is one Reason they give for worshiping of them.

This snake is undoubtedly a python, and two species of pythons are common in the area today: the African rock python (Python sebae) and the African royal python (Python regius). Oral accounts, historic documents, and modern Vodun practice all agree that it is the latter, smaller species that was, and still is, venerated as Dangbe. The African royal python is correspondingly sacred and is thus afforded numerous ritual prohibitions.

During the Huedan era, Bosman (1721:349) noted 140,000 gods within the Huedan pantheon with the first and most prominent represented by Dangbe, the second tier including sacred trees, and the third the sea (Bosman 1721:347). Reportedly, Huedans created new gods on a daily basis and moved gods who were deemed ineffectual out of the pantheon (Bosman 1721:347–348). However, pythons are universally recorded as the senior or tutelary deity.

In tracing the deeper history of Dangbe, Christian Merlo and Pierre Vidaud consider him so important to the polity that they chart the trajectory of python worship alongside the earliest iterations of the kingdom, as well as the ethnolinguistic identity of the kingdom’s populace (Merlo and Vidaud 1984:269). Bosman (1721:350–351) describes the principal snake venerated as Dangbe as being very old and being spirited away from another kingdom where he was displeased by the wickedness of the people there. In the oral histories that they collected in the early twentieth century, Merlo and Vidaud (1966:66) recorded that Dangbe confers on people the knowledge of good and evil: he “opened their eyes.” Dangbe is universally considered to be at the center of the Huedan pantheon, and is an exaggerated archetype of humanity as well as a self-contained pantheon incorporating aspects of war, fertility, culture and the arts, wisdom, and earthly well-being, and he serves as the controller of waters (Villiers 1950:34).
As central elements of the Huedan cosmos, it follows that earthly manifestations of Dangbe would receive special treatment within the kingdom. European travelers noted that thatched-hut temples were spaced along the aforementioned main road linking Savi to the coast, and if a royal python was encountered along the thoroughfare a ritual specialist picked the snake up and returned it to the temple (Hair, Jones, and Law 1992:638). The role of the ritual specialist was an important one, because Huedan devotees would avoid physical contact with royal pythons, and thus movement and commerce stopped along the road until the python was removed. In this way, pythons actively shaped the flow of people and ideas in public spaces throughout the kingdom, and shaped the ways that Huedans not only experienced their landscape but also the ways that they circumambulated throughout it. However, pythons were not bound to public spaces as Bosman (1721:357) describes:

Serpents, notwithstanding that we are frequently molested by them, since in the hot Sun-shine Weather . . . they visit us by five or six together, creeping upon our Chairs, Benches, Tables, and even our Beds, and bearing us Company in Sleep; and if they get a good Place under our Beds, and our Servants . . . don’t turn up our Bedding, they sometimes continue there seven or eight Days. Where they have also cast their Young.

Indeed, pythons were part of the human and living landscape of Hueda and to kill or even endanger one in a public or private space was a capital offense.

Bosman (1721:356) recorded an event in which English traders killed a python soon after landing on Ouidah Beach nine kilometers south of Savi, and in response the English party was killed by infuriated Huedans. The English trading lodge, and all the goods and items therein, were immediately burned. In 1697, after a European-owned hog killed and ate a python, the Huedan king issued a royal decree that all of the pigs in the kingdom be killed. Thousands of Huedans reportedly executed the order by using clubs and swords to kill swine with moblike fury. Bosman (1721:361) arrived after the incident and reported that pork was “dear” throughout the Hueda kingdom due to the shortage. It was apparently even hazardous to disturb or dislocate a royal python, reflected in the case of a European who removed a python from his house with a stick and was nearly killed by a group of devotees (Bosman 1721:357). Given the fact that physical harm would be visited on European traders and their goods if they disturbed pythons, it is not surprising that English trader John Smith (1967 [1744]:196–197) was corrected and chided by a senior official of the English trading lodge after the following event:
One Day, as I walk’d abroad with the English Governor, I spied one of them lying in the Middle of the Path before us, which indeed I would have kill’d had he not prevented me, for he ran and took it up in his Arms, telling me, that it was the Kind of Snake which was worshipp’d by the Natives, and that if I had kill’d it, all the Goods in his Fort, and our Ship would not be sufficient to ransom my life.

Beyond movement around the house, and around the kingdom, pythons also shaped relationships between people, their cosmos, and their domestic spaces. Huedans today associate ditches with pythons, because ditches contain aesthetic elements associated with the constrictors. These shadowy and dank spaces are ideal for python habitation; they provide the cool and moist temperature that protects a python’s skin, and the vermin that provide a large portion of their diet. When viewed from the surface, the ditches trace a sinuous pattern on the landscape and shape movement away from their voids in undulating patterns. Such shapes and patterns are also associated with the movement of pythons, as are strips of white cloth flapping in the breeze and a cord or string placed on the ground. The logic is clear: ditches that evoke the aesthetic elements associated with pythons and that restrict practitioners’ movements are potent landscape features aimed at protecting the family, or families, living in interiors of house compounds from uncertainty located on the outside (Norman and Kelly 2004). Beyond protecting and delineating the Huedan house compound, Dangbe and his pantheon were also leveraged for massive affairs of state.

The largest and most spectacular ritual on the Hueda calendar was a parade by the king and his retinue to the grand temple of the python (Figure 14.5). Bosman (1705:370, italics in original) describes the location:

situated about two [Dutch] Miles [or approximately seven English miles] from the King’s Village, and built under a very beautiful lofty Tree, In which (say they) the Chief and largest of all Snakes resides. He is a sort of grandfather to all the rest; is represented as thick as a Man, and of an [im]measurable length.

The parade was thus located outside of the bounds of the palace, and correspondingly outside of the direct control of the king. The king was preceded in the parade by drummers, trumpeters, singers of praise songs, and hundreds who carried gifts of silk, cowries, imported European goods, and prepared food. The parade represents a moving feast and mirrors the aforementioned structure of the ritual in which vodun are appeased at the household through food offerings (Norman 2010). As a central ceremony aimed at statewide reciprocity in which kings and commoners repaid debts to one another and to
Figure 14.5. Nineteenth-century engraving of the Temple of the Python, Ouidah, Benin (Morienval 1898:41).
Dangbe, the recompense was dear and repayment ceremony spectacular. The cost was particularly onerous to Huedan kings.

The annual parade, and ceremonial payment at the temple of the python, was the only time of year when the king left the confines of the palace, and he often did so with Europeans taking part in the parade. By order of Huedan kings, Europeans were housed in specially built trading lodges near the Huedan palace complex and were forbidden from fortifying their positions (Law 1991). Europeans complained that the fact that they were housed together impeded their ability to secure favorable prices for war captives; representatives of the Huedan king would simply move from lodge to lodge playing English offers against those of the French, Portuguese, Dutch, and so on (Kelly 1997). Beyond economics, these Europeans represented symbols of social standing and Atlantic connectivity unavailable to competing Huedan elites (Kelly 1997), and possibly rose to the level of avatars representing foreign vodun (Norman 2010).

Throughout the Bight of Benin region, wealth is reckoned more in terms of the followers with specialized knowledge and skills that a leader can muster, rather than gilded whatnots and paper script (Guyer 1993). Thus, the bodies of foreign traders play into the long-term history in the Bight of Benin region, which incorporated foreign traders into the theatrics of state and local political negotiations (see Brooks 1993), and into displays of wealth in terms of parading one’s followers (Norman 2010). Europeans participated in these parades alongside the king’s retinue and people exhibiting signs of dwarfism, associated in the Hueda area with the vodun Toho (Norman 2009b). Albinism, twin births, breached births, and various diseases each have their own vodun, as well as their own material repertoire (e.g., specially constructed ritual ceramics) for worship (Norman 2009b). In essence, the king was organizing people who exhibited aesthetic elements of certain vodun—for example, dwarfism is associated with Toho, the color white is associated with Lisa, variola (smallpox) scars are associated with Sakapata—thus gaining social standing as the giver of gifts, keeper of the feast, and orchestrator of this cosmological cavalcade. The parade itself was an important point for referencing the well-being of the kingdom, in that all wealth was seen as coming from Dangbe, and during this ceremony reciprocal gifts were given by the king as thanks for the largess of the python deity. These payments were rendered as partial reciprocity for regional community leaders organizing corvée labor and military action for the king. The parade was also the point on the Huedan calendar when the king presented gifts to local community leaders and the priests at the temple of the python (Norman 2010).
After conversations with the Huedan king, Bosman (1721:350) reported that the high priest of Dangbe requested “Money,” “Silk,” “Cattle, Eatables and Drinks: All of which exacted from the king and he sometimes grows tired and refuses them.” Bosman (1721:350, italics in original) continued the description of the pressure leveraged by the high priest of Dangbe, by virtue of the fact that he controlled the temple and the avatars of Dangbe contained therein:

This I had once an Opportunity of observing; for, finding him very much enrag’d, I made no Scruple to ask him, What had so much displeased him? He very freely told me, That that Year he had sent much larger Offerings to the Snake House than usual, in order to obtain a good Crop; and that one of his Viceroy’s (whom he shewed me) had desired him afresh in the Name of the Priests, who threatened a barren Year, to send yet more: To which he answer’d, That he did not intend to make any further offerings this Year; and if the Snake would not bestow a plentiful Harvest on them, he might let it alone: For (said he) I cannot be more damaged thereby, the greatest Part of my Corn being already rotten in the Field.

In other years, the grand priest of Dangbe prescribed considerable quantities of precious merchandise: barrels of cowries, hard alcohol, gunpowder, cattle, goats, and chickens (Bosman 1721:178–179). Given the great expense of the parade cycle, with gifts necessarily given to both regional governors and the temple of the python, Bosman (1721:351) reported that the king “broke off the custom,” which at the time of his visit had “grown in disuse for several years past.” During Bosman’s visit he reported that the king sent his wives and, in editorializing on the issue, suggested that expense was the reason that he did not participate (Bosman 1721:351). While the expense of the parade was substantial, the expense in not having the parade was even more dear, and arguably played a role in the collapse of the kingdom.

CONCLUSIONS: PYTHONS AND CONSUMPTION, PYTHONS AND COLLAPSE

Historical accounts suggest that pythons were part of the lived experience for Huedans; these avatars of Dangbe inhabited Huedan homes, moved through fields, traversed roads, and were closely involved in political action. Historical accounts are equally clear that food, drink, and Atlantic trade items were equally involved in the negotiation of political, social, and economic capital. Feasting and reciprocal gift-giving were not bound to exchanges between Huedans, or between Huedans and foreign traders. They included exchanges between Huedans and members of their pantheon; good fortune required
thanksgiving to one’s ancestors, among others. Causing favorable imbalance, such as economic gains in the markets or ascending to the royal stool, required offerings and sacrifice that held the potential to convince cosmological actors to intervene on one’s behalf. Archaeological remains from the Savi countryside interpreted as shrines and offering spaces represent material sacrifices pooled in and around shrines recorded within house compounds. These offerings were part and parcel of structuring architectural features in such a way to protect and preserve the family line. Around the house compound, ditches did such cosmological work by evoking elements of the python deity to protect and control movement into and out of the domestic sphere.

However, pythons did not always successfully define and defend social space associated with Hueda. In March of 1727, troops from the nearby kingdom of Dahomey advanced on Savi, with a mandate from king Adgaja of Dahomey to conquer Hueda and link Dahomey territories in the north to Hueda territory in the south (Law 1991). After a few days of fighting in the territory north of Lake Toho, Huedan troops retreated to Savi. Dahomean troops surveyed their newly conquered territory and then moved south to the lake, just north of Savi. Reportedly, the defense at the lake was left to the care of pythons (Snelgrave 1734:12–16). Although this might have been a metaphorical, or metonymic, statement by Huedans, it speaks to the belief that Dangbe would intervene on behalf of Huedans for the defense of their territory. However, Dahomeans forded the river and found that Huedans had largely fled in advance, or “vapoured” (Snelgrave 1734:15). Quite probably, at least some of the reluctance of Huedan to take up arms and defend the kingdom related to larger issues of discontent and elite infighting in the kingdom (Akinjogbin 1967) as well as non-elite discontent associated with the growing irregularity of public parades and spectacles associated with Dangbe, which in the years before the collapse had been reduced and restricted by the Huedan king (Norman 2010).

The pythons left behind in the small temples along the main road, and presumably in the main Temple of the Python, fared poorly, as did the many thousands of Huedans who were killed, sold into slavery, or displaced. Snelgrave (1734:31) noted that it was difficult to dine, because flies were swarming around “a great number of dead Mens Heads,” which were piled on stages not far from their tent. So many Huedans were killed that Snelgrave (1734:19) reported the fields being strewn with bones. When Snelgrave (1734:47–48) asked why so many old men were sacrificed by his troops, Adgaja, king of Dahomey responded that they would always plot against the king and would never be easy under slavery after having been masters in their own land. Apparently
there was a similar fear of pythons being leveraged in these plots as Snelgrave (1734:12) described that

the Conquerors found many of them in the Houses, which they treated in this manner: They held them up in the middle, and spoke to them in this manner: *If you are Gods, Speak and Save your selves.* Which the poor Snakes not being able to do, the Dahomes cut their Heads off, ripped them open, broiled them on Coals, and eat them.

Above and beyond the symbolic link between shattering the Huedan state and shattering the bodies of the python, the act of consumption also started the process of incorporating Huedan pantheons into Dahomean ones, and to this day there is a prominent temple to Dangbe in the Dahomean palace complex at Abomey.

As Appadurai (1986) states clearly and forcefully, things have social biographies that extend and change through the generations. During the Atlantic era, artisans in Holland created trade pipes, and probably never imagined that they would be incorporated into ancestral shrines in West Africa. As archaeologists problematize categories associated with form and function and seek more locally coherent renderings of subject/object relations, it seems necessary to incorporate animals into such discussions as well. It is no longer good enough to describe animals solely in terms of calorie content; now we must also consider how people used animals to negotiate status and power, frame memories of themselves, and reference their position within social landscapes. Such renderings add a needed element to landscape studies, where animals are seen as active elements in shaping human action.

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