

Chapter II

SERPENT CULT AT WHYDAH

Père Labat writing of the year 1698 in the Island of Martinique, recounts what he had personally heard from the lips of Père Braguez, who in turn had actually witnessed the serpent cult at Whydah when the King himself was in attendance to consult the oracle. This is probably the earliest recorded account of an eye-witness, before European contacts had modified the ritual. The narrative runs as follows: "The people on their knees and in silence were withdrawn some distance apart; the King alone with the Priest of the country entered the enclosure, where after prolonged prostrations, prayers and ceremonies, the priest drew near to a hole where supposedly he had a serpent. He spoke to him in behalf of the King and questioned him as regards the number of vessels that would arrive the following year, war, harvest and other topics. According as the serpent replied to a question, the priest carried the answer to the King who was kneeling a short distance away in an attitude of supplication. This by-play having been repeated a number of times, it was finally announced that the following year would be prosperous, that it would have much trade, and that they would take many slaves. The multitude expressed their joy by loud shouts, dancing and feasting." Père Braguez further stated that he had subsequently interviewed the officiating priest who assured him: "That the cult rendered to the serpent was only a cult in its relation to the Supreme Being, of whom they were all creatures. That the choice was not left to themselves, but that they had adopted it through obedience to the common Master's orders, which were always founded on sound principles. The Creator knew perfectly the dispositions of the creatures who had come from his hands, and

{p. 23}

appreciated only too well man's pride and vanity, not to take every means suitable to humble him; for which purpose nothing seemed more effective than to oblige him to bow down before a serpent, which is the most despicable and the vilest of all animals." [1]

Reynaud Des Marchais, the French navigator, went on his first voyage to Guinea in 1704. During the next twenty years, on recurrent visits, he made a close study of the customs and practices of the various kingdoms. In 1724 he sailed on his last voyage to the Coast and spent several months carefully revising his notes and checking up on his sketches. Shortly before his death he gave his manuscript to Père Labat who published it in 1730. [2] In his Preface Père Labat accentuates the fact that on the voyage of 1724 Des Marchais had corrected "the observations which he had made on several earlier ones." [3] The narrative itself shows that Des Marchais was an eye-witness of the scenes that he describes concerning the serpent cult at Whydah and the dates on his sketches indicate that he attended these functions in different years.

Concerning the origin of this worship of the serpent at Whydah he states: "The principal divinity of the country is the serpent, although it is not known just when they began to acknowledge him, to render him a cult. They only know as absolutely certain that this pretended divinity came from the Kingdom of Ardra. These Whydahs having undertaken to give battle to the Ardras, a large serpent left the enemy's army and came to deliver himself to that of Whydah. But he appeared so

gentle, that instead of biting like the other animals of his species, he caressed and embraced everybody. The chief sacrificer made bold to take hold of him and raise him up on high to bring him in view of the entire army, which, astonished at the prodigy, prostrated themselves before this compliant animal, and rushed on their enemies with such courage that they completely routed them. They did not fail to attribute their victory to this serpent. They respectfully carried

[1. P. Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique*, Vol. II, p. 41 f.

2. Cfr. *Nouvelle Biographie Générale*, Paris, 1860, Vol. XXXIII, p. 467.

3. P. Labat, *Voyage du Chevalier Des Marchais en Guinée, Isles Voisines, et à Cayenne, fait en 1725, 1726 & 1727*, Amsterdam, 1731, Vol. I, Preface, p. ii.]

{p. 24}

him along, built him a house, brought him sustenance, and in a short time this new god eclipsed all the others, even the fetishes which were the first and oldest gods of the country."[4]

Des Marchais adds: "It is of particular note that the most thoughtful Negroes very seriously assert that the serpent which they venerate today is really the identical one which came to find their ancestors, and which enabled them to achieve this famous victory which freed them from the oppression of the King of Ardra."[5]

This would suggest that the centre of Ophiolatry at Whydah is of comparatively recent origin, and other indications point strongly in the same direction.

Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century the capital of Whydah is usually marked on the maps as Xavier or Sabi, also spelt Sabe, Saby, Savi, etc., and presumably a corruption of the word Xavier which alone appears on the D'Anville map of Guinea dated April, 1729. Des Marchais, also, heads his chapter on the subject merely as "The Town of Xavier." [6] It is hard to believe that at so early a date this name should have been applied anywhere except to a Jesuit Mission. As a matter of fact from about 1600 to 1617, one or more Jesuits were labouring continuously along the Guinea Coast with headquarters at Sierra Leone. In 1607 Fr. Balthasar Barreira, S. J. certainly visited Benin and in 1613 Fr. Emmanuel Alvarez, S. J. built a chapel at Lagos.[7]

Whether or not the Jesuits did actually establish a mission in Whydah and named it Xavier, this much is certain; that, in connection with their labours along the Guinea Coast, there is absolutely no mention of serpent worship in any form. And as

[4. Labat, *Des Marchais*, Vol. II, p. 133 f.

5. Ditto, p. 134. Note:--For his own part, Des Marchais seems to be rather sceptical about the longevity of this serpent. He writes: "If he is still alive, and it has always been so believed since he was given to this people, he should be of prodigious length and thickness. But it is needful to pay attention to what these people say of it and then believe what one thinks proper. For it is only the chief Sacrificer who has the privilege of entering its secret apartments, the King himself can do so only once when he goes to present his offerings, three months after his coronation."--*Des Marchais*, l. c., Vol. II, p. 136.

6. Ditto, Vol. II, p. 36.

7. Cfr. Antonius Francus, *Synopsis Annalium S. J. in Lusitania*, 1540-1725, Augsburg, 1726.]

{p. 25}

the Jesuits in their Relations are proverbially so detailed in such matters, we have a strong presumption that it was non-existent within their field of activity at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

This presumption is strengthened by the fact that Charles Chaulmer in 1661, while describing the fetish practices of Guinea does not mention the subject." Moreover Dr. O. Dapper who goes into great details about each of the Guinea Kingdoms and their religions in 1668,[9] as well as John Ogilby, two years later,[10] are both silent on this point of serpent worship.

From all this it is safe to conclude that in all probability the Ophiolatry of Whydah had its origin in the latter half of the seventeenth century as it was well established there before the century's close.

The whole story of the advent of the serpent, it must be admitted, if taken by itself savours somewhat of a mythological derivation of the cult from neighbouring Ardra. But this suggestion would be scarcely compatible with known facts, as we find no indication that Ophiolatry had any previous existence there. Actually Des Marchais takes care to point out that, in the fetishism of Ardra, it is the buzzard that is singled out for veneration, and that they show these birds "the same respect and the same attention as is had for the good serpents at Whydah." [11]

But even if we exclude this mythological aspect of the story, at least as far as Ardra is concerned, there is still a possibility that it may have reference to some migration from the east that brought to Whydah, together with Ophiolatry, much-needed succour in the time of some war against Ardra.

Before leaving Des Marchais, attention should be called to his minute description of the procession held on April 16, 1725, in honour of the serpent after the coronation of the King of Whydah.[12] He also goes into great detail about the recruiting and

[8. Charles Chaulmer, *Le Tableau de l'Afrique*, Paris, 1661.

9. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten*, Amsterdam, 1668.

10. John Ogilby, *Africa*, London, 1670.

11. Labat, *Des Marchais*, Vol. II, p. 261.

12 Ditto, Vol. II, p. 145 ff.]

{p. 26}

training of little girls for the future office of priestesses and their subsequent marriage to the serpent.[13]

We may now take up chronologically the principal accounts of the serpent worship at Whydah that have come down to us. The earliest detailed narrative and antedating even that of Des Marchais is from the pen of William Bosman, the Chief Factor for the Dutch at the Castle of St. George d'Elmina. Written originally in Dutch in 1700, it was quickly translated and circulated throughout Europe. Concerning Whydah, or as he calls it Fida, he declares: "It is certain that his country-men have a faint idea of the true God, and ascribe to him the attributes of Almighty and Omnipotent; they believe that he created the universe, and therefore vastly prefer him before their idol-gods: but yet they do not pray to him, or offer any sacrifices to him; for which they give the following reason. God, say they, is too high exalted above us, and too great to condescend so much as to trouble himself or think of mankind: wherefore he commits the government of the world to their idols; to whom, as the second, third and fourth persons distant in degrees from God, and our appointed lawful governors, we are obliged to apply ourselves. And in firm belief of this opinion they quietly continue. Their principal gods, which are owned for such throughout the whole country, are of three sorts. First, a certain sort of snakes, who possess the chief rank amongst their gods. . . . Their second-rate gods are some lofty high trees; in the formation of which Dame Nature seems to have expressed her greatest art. The third and meanest god or younger brother to the other is the sea. These three mentioned are the public deities which are worshipped and prayed to throughout the whole country.[14]

"They invoke the snake in excessive wet, or barren seasons: on all occasions relating to the government and the preservation of their cattle, or rather in one word, in all necessities and difficulties in which they do not apply to their new batch of gods. And for

[13. Ditto, Vol. II, p. 144 ff.

14. William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coast*, London, 1705, p. 368.]

{p. 27}

this reason very great offerings are made to it, especially from the King.[15]

"The snake-house . . . is situated about two miles from the King's village, and built under a very beautiful lofty tree, in which, say they, the chief and largest of all the snakes resides. He is a sort of grandfather to all the rest; is represented as thick as a man, and of an unmeasurable length. He must also be very old, for they report that they found him a great number of years past; by reason of the wickedness of men, he left another country to come to them, at which being overjoyed, they welcomed their new-come god with all expressible signs of reverence and big veneration and carried him upon a silken carpet to the snakehouse, where he is at present." [16] This is a slight variation from the account of Des Marchais.

Bosman continues: "The reverence and respect which the Negroes preserve for the snake is so great that if a black should barely touch one of them with a stick, or any otherwise hurt him, he is a dead man, and certainly condemned to the flames. A long time past, when the English first

began to trade here, there happened a very remarkable and tragical event. An English Captain having landed some of his men and part of his cargo, they found a snake in their house, which they immediately killed without the least scruple, and not doubting but they had done a good work, threw out the dead snake at their door, where being found by the Negroes in the morning, the English preventing the question who had done the fact, ascribed the honour to themselves; which so incensed the natives, that they furiously fell on the English, killed them all and burned their house and goods.[17]

"In my time an Aquamboean Negro took a snake upon his stick, because he durst not venture to touch it with his hands, and carried it out of the house without hurting it in the least, which two or three Negroes seeing, set up the same cry that is usual on account of fire, by which they can in a small time raise the

[15. Ditto, p. 369.

16. Ditto, p. 370.

17. Ditto, p. 376.]

{p. 28}

whole country. . . . By these instances we are deterred from meddling with the accursed gods or devilish serpents, notwithstanding that we are frequently molested by them, since in hot sunshine weather, as if they were lovers of darkness, they visit us by five and 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 out of laziness don't turn up our bedding, they sometimes continue seven or eight days, where they have also cast their young. But when we are aware of these vermin and do not desire to be troubled with them any longer, we need only call any of the natives, who gently carries his god out of doors.[18]

"But what is best of all, is, that these idolatrous snakes don't do the least mischief in the world to mankind. For, if by chance in the dark one treads upon them, and they bite or sting him, it is not more prejudicial than the sting of the millepedes. Wherefore the Negroes would fain persuade us that it is good to be bitten or stung by these snakes, upon the plea that one is thereby secured and protected from the sting of any poisonous snake. But here I am somewhat dubious, and should be loth to venture on the credit of their assertions, because I have observed that the gods themselves are not proof against these venomous serpents, much less can they protect us from their bite. We sometimes observe pleasant battles betwixt the idol and venomous snakes, which are not wanting here.[19]

"The species of these idol serpents here are streaked with white, yellow and brown; and the biggest which I have seen here is about a fathom long, and the thickness of a man's arm." [20]

"If we are ever tired with the natives of this country, and would fain be rid of them, we need only speak ill of the snake, after which they immediately stop their cars and run out of doors. But though this may be taken from a European that they like; yet,

[18. Ditto, p. 377.

19. Ditto, p. 379.

20. Ditto, p. 380.]

{p. 29}

if a Negro of another nation should presume to do it, he would run no small risk.[21]

"In the year 1697, my brother factor Mr. Nicholas Poll, who then managed the slave trade for our Company at Fida, had the diversion of a very pleasant scene. A hog being bitten by a snake, in revenge, or out of love to god's flesh, seized and devoured him in sight of the Negroes, who were not near enough to prevent him. Upon this the priests all complained to the King; but the hog could not defend himself, and had no advocate; and the priests, unreasonable enough in their request, begged of the King to publish a royal order, that all the hogs in his kingdom should be forthwith killed, and the swiny race extirpated, without so much as deliberating whether it was reasonable to destroy the innocent with the guilty."[22]

Twenty years after Bosman wrote his narrative, John Atkins, Surgeon in the Royal Navy, sailed from Spithead, February 5, 1720, on an expedition in quest of the pirates that were infesting the slave route from the Guinea Coast to the West Indies. Under the caption "Whydah" he wrote in his account of the voyage: "This country is governed by an absolute king, who lives in Negrish majesty at a town called Sabbee, six miles from the sea. His palace is a dirty large bamboo building, of a mile or two round, wherein he keeps near a thousand women, and divides his time in an indolent manner. . . . He is fattened to a monstrous bulk, never has been out since he became king (nigh twelve years)." [23]

Concerning the religion of the country, Atkins remarks: "The most curious of their customs, and peculiar to this part, is their snake worship, which, according to my intelligence, is as follows. This snake, the object of their worship, is common in the fields, and cherished as a familiar domestick in their houses, called deyboys; they are yellow, and marbled here and there, have a

[21. Ditto, p. 381.

22. Ditto, p. 381.

23. John Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies in His Majesty's Ships, the Swallow and Weymouth, London, 735, p. 110.]

{p. 30}

very narrow swallow, but dilatible (as all of the serpent kind are) to the thickness of your arm on feeding. It is the principal deity or fetish of the country, and brought into more regularity than others, by the superior cunning of their fetishers, who have one presiding over them, called the grand fetisher, or high priest, who is held in equal reverence with the King himself; nay, sometimes more, through gross supersitition and fear, for they believe an intercourse with the

snake, to whom they have dedicated their service, capacitates them to stop or promote the plagues that infest them. He hath the craft by this means, to humble the King himself on all occasions for their service, and to drain both him and the people, in supplying their wants. It is death for a native to kill one of these snakes, and severe punishments to Europeans. When rains are wanted at seedtime, or dry weather in harvest, the people do not stir out after it is night, for fear of the angry snake, which, provoked with their disobedience, they are taught, will certainly kill them at those. times, if abroad, or render them idiots." [24]

All this was written on the eve of the destruction of Whydah as a nation. The Dahomans of the interior were bent on securing an outlet to the sea, that they might eliminate the coastal tribes from their position of middle-men in the lucrative slave trade. After the conquest of Ardra, Whydah alone stood between them and the consummation of their plan. Ordinarily a stout resistance might have been expected. But, as Atkins' description has shown us, the reigning king was devoid of the most fundamental qualities for directing affairs in such a crisis.

William Snelgrave who visited the country three weeks after the event, places the date of the destruction of Whydah by the Dahomans as March, 1727. [25] In this connection he writes: The King of Dahomey "was obliged to halt there by a river, which runs about half a mile to the northward of the principal town of

[24. Ditto, p. 113.

25. William Snelgrave, *A New Account of some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, London, 1734, p. 2.]

{p. 31 }

the Whidaws, called Sabee, the residence of their King. Here the King of Dahomey encamped for some time, not imagining he could have found so easy a passage and conquest as he met with afterwards. For the pass of the river was of that nature, it might have been defended against the whole army, by five hundred resolute men: but instead of guarding it, these cowardly luxurious people, thinking the fame of their numbers sufficient to deter the Dahomans from attempting it, kept no set guard. They only went every morning and evening to the river side, to make fetiche as they call it, that is, to offer sacrifice to their principal God, which was a particular harmless snake they adore, and prayed to on this occasion, to keep their enemies from coming over the river.

"And as worshipping a snake may seem very extravagant to such as are unacquainted with the religion of the Negroes, I shall inform the readers of the reasons given for it by the people of Whidaw. This sort of snake is peculiar to their country, being of a very singular make; for they are very big in the middle, rounding 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 accidentally trod on (for it is a capital crime to do so wilfully) and they bite, no bad effect ensues; which is one reason they give for their worshipping of them. Moreover, there is a constant tradition amongst them, that whenever any calamity threatens their country, by imploring the snake's assistance, they are always delivered from it. However this fell out formerly, it now stood them in no stead; neither were the snakes themselves spared after the conquest. For they being in great numbers, and a kind of domestic animal, the conquerors found

many of them in the houses, which they treated in this manner. They held them up by the middle, and spoke to them in this manner: If you are gods, speak and save yourselves: Which the poor snakes not being able to do, the Dahomans cut their heads off, ripped them open, broiled them on the coals, and ate them. It is very strange, the conquerors

{p. 32}

should so far condemn the gods of the country, since they are so barbarous and savage themselves, as to offer human sacrifices whenever they gain a victory over their enemies." [26]

Another valuable witness is William Smith who was sent out by the Royal African Society of England which desired "an exact account of all their settlements on the coast of Guinea." [27] He arrived at Whydah. Road, April 7, 1727, that is, immediately after the snake incident. He adds many interesting details to Captain Snelgrave's account. Thus he tells us: "His Majesty of Whydah, who is the largest and fattest man I ever saw, thinking himself a little too bulky to fight, was, upon the first alarm, privately conveyed away by the main strength of a couple of stout lusty Negroes in a hammock, by which means he saved his life." [28]

"The city of Sabee was above four miles in circumference. The houses neatly built, though only mud-wall covered with thatch, having no stone in all that country nor even a pebble as big as a walnut." [29]

Concerning the serpent worship, Smith states: "They are all pagans and worship . . . a large beautiful kind of snake, which is inoffensive in its nature. These are kept in fittish-houses, or churches, built for that purpose in a grove, to whom they sacrifice great store of hogs, fowls, and goats, &c. and if not devoured by the snake, are sure to be taken care of by the fittish-men, or Pagan priests. . . . The laity all go in a large body by night with drums beating, and trumpets of elephant's teeth sounding, in order to perform divine worship, and implore either a prosperous journey, fair weather, a good crop, or whatsoever else they want. To obtain which from the snake, they then present their offering, and afterwards return home. They are all so bigoted to this animal that if any Negro should touch one of them with a stick,

[26. Ditto, p. 10 f.

27. William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, London, 1745, p. I.

28. Ditto, p. 190.

29. Ditto, p. 192. Note: -According to Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy*, London, 1789, p. 69: "The infatuated Whydahs contented themselves with placing, with great ceremony, the fetish snake in tile path, to oppose the invading army, which not answering their hopes and expectations, they deemed all other resistance vain, and fled precipitately before the conqueror."

{p. 33}

or otherwise hurt it, he would be immediately sentenced to the flames. One day as I walked abroad with the English Governor, I spied one of them lying in the middle of the path before us,

which indeed I would have killed 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 worshipped by the natives, and that if I had killed it, all the goods in his fort, and our ship would not be sufficient to ransom my life, the country being so very populous that I could not stir without being seen by some of the natives; of whom there were several looking at us that happened to be on their march home from their captivity at Adrah. They came, and begged their god, which he readily delivered to them, and they as thankfully received and carried it way to their fittish-house, with very great tokens of joy."[30]

The destruction of Whydah as a Kingdom did not put an end to the veneration of the serpent there. According to William Davaynes, who was one of the directors of the East India Company and who had left the Coast of Africa in 1763 after having resided there twelve years, eleven years as Governor at Whydah and the other at Annamboe, "The snake was the peculiar worship of the ancient people of Whydah, and when this province was conquered by the King of Dahomey, the worship of the snake was continued upon motives of policy. Formerly a person who killed a snake was put to death; but now a goat is sacrificed as an atonement."[31] The last statement must apply to the case of Europeans alone, for as we shall see the death penalty against

[30. Ditto, p. 196 f. Note:--Speaking of Dahomey and vicinity he says, p. 213: "All the natives of this Coast believe there is one true God, the Author of them and all things." C. des Brosses, *Du Culte des Dieus Fetiches, ou Parallèle de l'Ancienne Religion de l'Égypte avec la Religion de Nigritie*, Paris, 1760, pp. 25-37, drawing his information principally from Atkins, Bosman and Des Marchais, gives us a detailed account of the serpent cult at Whydah which he calls by its old name Juidah. As the title of his book suggests, he would make Egypt the source of this Ophiolatry of West Africa.

31. Note:--Cfr. *Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to trade and foreign Plantations, London, 1789. Part I, View of the Evidence that the Committee had obtained of the present state of those parts of Africa from whence slaves have been exported.*--This is a large folio volume of some twelve hundred pages which are unfortunately not numbered, thus making reference difficult.]

{p. 34}

natives who injured the sacred snake continued for some time to come.

Concerning the continuation of the serpent cult itself, Robert Norris states: "By Trudo's management (in tolerating his subjects with the free exercise of their various superstitions; and incorporating them with the Dahomans by intermarriage if it may be so-called), no distinctions being made between the conquerors and the conquered, who were now become one people, many of those who had fled their native countries, to avoid the calamities of war, were induced to return and submit quietly to his government."[32] And "The remnant of the Whydahs who had escaped the edge of Guadja's sword, were abundantly thankful to him, for permitting them to continue in the enjoyment of their snake worship."[33]

Archibald Dalzel went out to Africa as a surgeon in the year 1763, and resided three years on the Gold Coast, some little part of the time as Governor, and four years as Governor of Whydah, returning to England in the year 1770. He was one of the witnesses who testified before the Committee of Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to trade and foreign plantations. Reference has already been made to the Report of this Committee which was

published in 1789, and which contains the following statement: "With respect to the religion of the people at Whydah and the general object of their worship, Mr. Dalzel observed that in no part of Africa had he been able to understand the religion of the natives. At Whydah they pay a kind of veneration to a particular species of large snake, which is very gentle. In Dahomey they pay the same kind of veneration to Tigers. Thus veneration does not prevent people from catching and killing them if they please, but they must not touch the beard, which is considered as a great offence. They have a great number of men they call Fetiche men, or padres. The word fetiche is derived from a Portuguese word meaning witchcraft." [34]

[32. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey*, p. 2.

33. Ditto, p. 105, Note.

34 Note:--Cfr. also, Archibald Dalzel, *History of Dahomey, an Inland Kingdom of Africa*, London, 1793, Introduction, p. vi: "Most of the savage nations {footnote p. 35} have some confused notion of a Supreme intellectual Being, the maker of the universe; but this idea not being easily understood among a people not much addicted to metaphysical reasoning, a variety of corporeal beings have been selected as objects of devotion, such as the sun, moon, living animals, trees, and other substances. The tiger is the fetish of Dahomey; the snake, that of Whydah."]

{p. 35}

For the condition at Whydah in the closing days of the eighteenth century, when throughout the British Empire the slave trade was coming to an end, we have the testimony of Dr. John M'Leod formerly of the British Navy who in 1803 served as surgeon on a ship, bound from London to the Coast of Africa, in the slave trade. On this occasion. he visited the centre of the serpent cult and tells us: "In Whydah, for some unaccountable reason, they worship their Divinity under the form of a particular specie of snake, called Daboa, which is not sufficiently large to be terrible to man, and is otherwise tameable and inoffensive. These Daboahs are taken care of in the most pious manner, and well fed on rat, mice and birds, in their fetish-houses or temples, where the people attend to pay their adoration, and where those also who are sick or lame apply to them for assistance." [35]

That the British abolition of slavery made little change in the serpent worship at Whydah, is evidenced by ample testimony. Thus, John Duncan in his journal records at Whydah in the Spring Of 1845: "The snake is also a fetish here; and houses are built in several parts of the town for the accommodation of the snakes,

[35. John M'Leod, *A Voyage to Africa with some Account of the Manners and Customs of the Dahomian People*, London, 1820, p. 32. Note:--Dr. M'Leod had previously stated of Dahomey in general:--Snakes of the boa species are here found of a most enormous size; many being thirty to thirty-six feet in length, and of proportionate girth. They attack alike the wild and domestic beasts, and often the human kind."--l. c., p. 32. These are certainly not the sacred species, as he tells us on the very next page: "The bulk of the animals these serpents are capable of gorging would stagger belief, were the fact not so fully attested as to place it beyond doubt. The state of torpor in which they are sometimes found in the woods after a stuffing meal of this kind, affords the Negroes an opportunity of killing them"--l. c., p. 31. If they were of the sacred variety they would not be killed by the Negroes.

To this same period belongs Pierre Labarthe, who writes, *Voyage à la Côte de Guinée*, Paris, 1893, p. 133: "They have here a kind of high-priest whom the Negroes call the Great Fetisher or Great Voodnoo; he claims to have descended from heaven and poses as the interpreter of the gods on earth; under this guise he demands the same

honours as are shown to the King." And again: "Despite their superstitions, these people have a confused idea of a Supreme Being, all Powerful, immense; they seek to placate Him through their fetishers: they are persuaded that God is too good to do them harm: that is why they render Him no worship."--l. c., p. 135.]

{p. 36}

where they are regularly fed. These houses are about seven feet high in the walls, with conical roof, about eight feet in diameter, and circular. The snakes are of the boa-constrictor tribe, and are considered quite harmless, although I have my doubts upon it. They generally leave this house at intervals, and when found by any of the natives, are taken up and immediately conveyed back to the fetish-house, where they are placed on the top of the wall, under the thatch. It is disgusting to witness the homage paid to these reptiles by the natives. When one of them is picked up by anyone, others will prostrate themselves as it is carried past, throwing dust on their heads, and begging to be rubbed over the body with the reptile. After taking the snake up, a very heavy penalty is incurred by laying it down, before it is placed in the fetish-house. Wherever a snake is found it must be immediately carried to the fetish-house, whether it has ever been placed there before or not. Snakes abound about Whydah; their average length is four feet and a half; head flat, and neck small in proportion."[37]

Another entry in Duncan's *Journal* is of particular interest, as it gives us in detail the punishment inflicted on the natives for even accidentally killing a sacred serpent. Earlier writers merely indicate that such an individual was given to the flames. Here, however, we have a full description. Under date of May 1, 1845, he writes at Whydah: "Punishment was inflicted for accidentally killing two fetish snakes, while clearing some rubbish in the French fort. This is one of the most absurd as well as savage customs I ever witnessed or heard of. Still it is not so bad as it was in the reign of the preceding King of Dahomey, when the law declared the head of the unfortunate individual forfeited for

[36. John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 & 1846*, London, 1847, Vol. I, p. 126. Note:--The Reverend Thomas B. Freeman, who visited Dahomey in 1843, to promote the interests of the Wesleyan Missionary Society under date of March 14th records in his journal, *Journal of various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku, and Dahomi in Western Africa*, London, 1844, p. 265: "When we had proceeded about two miles and a half we passed one of the King's fetish-houses; from whence a fetishman came and pronounced a blessing, begging of the fetish a safe journey for us to Abomi. Though I pitied the people on account of their superstitions, yet I could not help admiring their apparent sincerity."]

{p. 37}

killing one of these reptiles, even by accident. The present King has reduced the capital punishment to that described below. On this occasion three individuals were sentenced as guilty of the murder of this fetish snake. A small house is thereupon made for each individual, composed of dry faggots for walls, and it is thatched with dry grass. The fetish-men then assemble, and fully describe the enormity of the crime committed. Each individual is then smeared over, or rather has a quantity of palm-oil and yeast poured over them, and then a bushel basket is placed on each of the heads. In this basket are placed small calabashes, filled to the brim, so that the slightest motion of the body spills both the oil and the yeast, which runs through the bottom of the basket on to the head. Each individual carries a dog and a kid, as well as two fowls, all fastened together, across his shoulders. The culprits were then marched slowly round

their newly prepared houses, the fetish-men haranguing them all the time. Each individual is then brought to the door of his house, which is not more than four feet high. He is there freed from his burthen, and compelled to crawl into his house on his belly, for the door is only eighteen inches high. He is then shut into this small space with the dog, kid and two fowls. The house is then fired, and the poor wretch is allowed to make his escape through the flames to the nearest running water. During his journey there he is pelted with sticks and clods by the assembled mob; but if the culprit has any friends, they generally contrive to get nearest to him, during his race to the water, and assist him, as well as hinder the mob in the endeavours to injure him. When they reach the water they plunge themselves headlong into it, and are then considered to be cleansed of all sin or crime of the snake-murder."[37]

Mr. Duncan subsequently returned to Whydah in 1849 as Vice Consul to the Kingdom of Dahomey,[38] and it was at his personal request that Commander Forbes was appointed to accompany him

[37. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 195.

38. Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the 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. I, p. 43.]

{p. 38}

to the Court of Dahomey in the interests of the suppression of the slave trade. We may profitably cull some extracts from the Journal kept by Commander Forbes on this occasion.

Thus he writes: "The religion of Dahomey is a mystery only known to the initiated. There is no daily worship, but periods at which the fetish-men and -women dance. They who are initiated have great power and exact much in return. It is a proverb that the poor are never initiated. The Fetish of Abomey is the leopard, that of Whydah the snake. The human sacrifices at the See-que-ah-nee are neither to the invincible god 'Seh,' nor to the fetish Voh-dong,' but to the vitiated appetites of the soldiery. At the Cannah Customs there are sacrifices to the Voh-dong; and at the See-que-ah-nee there are sacrifices to the manes of their ancestors; the Dahomans, like the disciples of Confucius, looking to their departed ancestors for blessing in this life."[39]

March 8, 1849, he records: "The lions of Whydah are the snake fetish-house and the market. The former is a temple built round a huge cotton tree, in which are at all times many snakes of the boa species. These are allowed to roam about at pleasure; but if found in a house or at a distance, a fetish-man or woman is sought, whose duty it is to induce the reptile to return, and to reconduct it to its sacred abode, whilst all that meet it must bow down and kiss the dust. Morning and evening, many are to be seen prostrated before the door, whether worshipping the snake directly, or an invisible god, which is known under the name of 'Seh,' through these, I am not learned enough to determine."[40] In a supplementary chapter on "Religion," however, he states unequivocally: "The 'Voo-doong,' or fetish, represents on earth the supreme god 'Sell,' and in common with thunder and lightning,' Soh."[41]

Humour at times creeps into the *Journal*. On March 10th, Commander Forbes writes: "Called on the viceroy, and had a long conversation with him about trade. . . . On leaving a fetish-man

[39. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 32.

40 Ditto, Vol. I, p. 108 f.

41. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 171.]

{p. 39}

was passing the gate, with two large snakes. State officers in most barbarous countries find it more convenient to remain at home, except when duty calls them abroad. The burly officer, was, according to custom, seeing me beyond his gate-and this was an opportunity not to be lost,-the fetish-man addressed him at great length, in praise of his extraordinary liberality to the fetish, for which he had no doubt to pay handsomely."[42] And again, on July 12th he records: "On leaving the British fort this morning, we learned that an extraordinary instance of the gorging of the fetish snake had taken place in the night. The reptile lay in the kitchen in dreadful pain, trying to force the hind legs and tail of a cat into his distended stomach, now in the shape of the half-swallowed victim. A fetish-woman arriving, carried the deity to the temple."[43]

It is not so surprising then, to find Father Lafitte, who arrived at Dahomey in 1861, and devoted eight years to missionary work, reporting that among those employed in the service of the sacred serpents was a physician, "charged especially to watch over the welfare of their laborious digestion."[44]

Another witness covering this same period is J. Leighton Wilson, who devoted eighteen years to missionary work in Africa and subsequently became a Secretary of the American Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Of the sea-port town of Whydah, he says: "There is no place where there is more intense heathenism; and to mention no other feature in their superstitious practices, the worship of snakes at this place fully illustrates this remark. A house in the middle of the town is provided for the exclusive use of these reptiles, and they may be seen here at any time in very great numbers. They are fed, and more care is taken of them than of the human inhabitants of the place. If they are seen straying away they must be brought back; and at the sight of them the people prostrate themselves on the ground, and do them all possible reverence. To kill or injure one of them is to

[42. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 112.

43. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 201.

44. J. Lafitte, *Le Dahomé*, Tours, 1873, p. 101.]

{p. 40}

incur the penalty of death. On certain occasions they are taken out by the priests or doctors, and paraded about the streets, the bearers allowing them to coil themselves around their arms, necks, and bodies."[45]

This brings us to Richard F. Burton of Arabian Nights fame, who, writing in 1864, more than a century and a quarter after the event, thus details the debacle of the over-trustful devotees of the serpent-god at Whydah. "The infatuated "Whydahs," he says, "instead of defending their frontier line, were contented to place with great ceremony Danh, the fetish snake, Dan-like, in the path. Agaja had retired to levy his whole force, leaving the field army under his general. The latter seeing only a snake to oppose progress ordered 200 resolute fellows to try the ford. They not only crossed it unimpeded, but were able to penetrate into the capital." [46] He has already said: "When the Dahomans permitted

[45. J. Leighton Wilson, *Western Africa, Its History, Condition, and Prospects*, London, 1856, p. 207. Note:-- Wilson says of himself, Preface, p. iv: "The writer has spent between eighteen and twenty years in the country. He has had opportunity to visit every place of importance along the seacoast, and has made extended excursions in many of the maritime districts. He has studied and reduced to writing two of the leading languages of the country, and has enjoyed, in these various ways, more than ordinary advantages for making himself acquainted with the actual condition of the people. He claims for his book the merit of being a faithful and unpretending record of African Society." Of West Africa in general, he asserts, p. 209: "The belief in one great Supreme Being, who made and upholds all things is universal. Nor is this idea imperfectly or obscurely developed in their minds. The impression is so deeply engraved upon their moral and mental nature, that any system of atheism strikes them as too absurd and preposterous to require a denial. Everything which transpires in the natural world beyond the power of man, or of spirits, who are supposed to occupy a place somewhat higher than man, is at once spontaneously ascribed to the agency of God. All of the tribes in the country with which the writer has become acquainted (and they are not few) have a name for God, and many of them have two or more, significant of his character as a Maker, Preserver, and Benefactor." And again, p. 218: "On some parts of the Gold Coast the crocodile is sacred; a certain class of snakes, on the Slave Coast, and the shark at Bonny, are all regarded as sacred, and are worshipped, not on their own account, perhaps, but because they are regarded as the temples, or dwelling-places, of spirits. Like every other object of the kind, however, in the course of time the thing signified is forgotten in the representative, and these various animals have long since been regarded with superstitious veneration, while little is thought of the indwelling spirit. . . The snake at Popo has become so tame that it may be carried about with impunity, and is so far trained that it will bite, or refrain from biting, at the pleasure of its keeper."

46. Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, London, 1864, Vol. I, p. 146.]

{p. 41}

serpent worship to continue, the Whydahs abundantly thankful, became almost reconciled to the new stern rule." [47]

The serpent revered as sacred in Burton's day was clearly of identical species with that first described by visitors to Whydah. For he says: "The reptile is a brown yellow-and-white-streaked python of moderate dimensions; and none appear to exceed five feet. The narrow neck and head tapering like the slow-worms, show it to be harmless; the Negro indeed says that its bite is a good defence against the venomous species, and it is tame with constant handling. M. Wallon saw 100 in the temple, some 10 feet long, and he tells his readers that they are never known to bite, whereas they use their sharp teeth like rats. Of these 'nice gods' I counted seven, including one which was casting its slough; all were reposing upon the thickness of the clay wall where it met the inner thatch. They often wander at night, and whilst I was sketching the place a Negro brought an astray in his arms; before raising it, he rubbed his right hand on the ground and duly dusted his forehead, as if grovelling before the king. The ugly brute coiled harmlessly round his neck, like a 'doctored' cobra in India or Algeria. Other snakes may be killed and carried dead through the town, but strangers who meddle with the Danhgbwe must look out for 'palavers'

which, however, will probably now resolve themselves into a fine." [48] Then follows a description, differing

[47. Ditto, Vol. I p. 96. Note:--According to Burton, Vol. I, p. 61: "The word 'Whydah' is a compound of blunders. It should be written Hwe-dah, and be applied to the once prosperous and populous little kingdom whose capital was Savi. A 'bush town' to the westward, supposed to have been founded and to be still held by the aboriginal Whydahs, who fled from the massacres Dahome, retains the name Hwe-dah. The celebrated slave-station which we have dubbed 'Whydah' is known to the people as Gre-hwe or Gle-hwe, 'Plantation-house.'"--Cfr. also, Archibald Dalzel, History of Dahomey Preface, p. xii: "Whydah," as it is Pronounced by the natives who sound the *w* of it strong, like in whip, the French write Juida; the Dutch, Fida, &c."

Burton also asserts, Vol. I, p. 96: "Ophiolatry in our part of Africa is mostly confined to the coast regions; the Popos and Windward races worship a black snake of larger size; and in the Bight of Biafra the Nimbi or Brass River people are as bigoted in boa-religion as are the Whydahs. The system is of old date: Bosman at the beginning of the last century, described it almost as it is at present. It well suits the gross materialism of these races, and yet here men ought to be tired of it."

48. Burton, l. c., Vol. I. p. 94.]

{p. 42}

only slightly in detail from Duncan's account of two decades earlier. Thus: "In older times death has been the consequence of killing one of these reptiles, and if the snake be abused, 'serious people' still stop their ears and run away. When under former reigns, a native killed a Danhgwe, even accidentally, he was put to death; now the murderer is placed somewhat like the Salamanders of old Vauxhall, in a hole under a hut of dry faggots thatched with grass which has been well greased with palm-oil. This is fired, and he must rush to the nearest running water, mercilessly belaboured with sticks and pelted with clods the whole way by the Danhgwe-no, or fetish-priests. Many of course die under the gauntlet." [49]

Of the "Boa Temple" he observes: "It is nothing but a small cylindrical mud hut-some fetish-houses are square-with thick clay walls supporting a flying thatch roof in extinguisher shape. Two low narrow doorless entrances front each other, leading to a raised floor of tamped earth, upon which there is nothing but a broom and a basket. It is roughly whitewashed inside and out, and when I saw it last a very lubberly fresco of a ship under full sail sprawled on the left side of the doorway. A little distance from the entrance were three small pennons, red, white and blue cotton tied to the top of tall poles." [50] And again: "On the other side of the road the devotees of the snake are generally lolling upon the tree roots in pretended apathy, but carefully watching over their gods. Here, too, are the fetish schools, where any child touched by the holy reptile must be taken for a year from its parents--who 'pay the piper'--and must be taught the various arts of singing and dancing necessary to the worship. This part of the system has, however, lost much of the excesses that prevailed in the last century when at the pleasure of the strong-backed fetish-men, even the king's daughters were not excused from incarceration and from its presumable object. The temple is still annually visited by the Viceroy, during the interval after the Customs and before the campaigning season. He takes one bullock, with goats, fowls,

[49. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 95.

50. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 93.]

{p. 43}

cloth, rum, meal, and water to the priest, who holding a bit of kola nut, prays aloud for the king, the country, and the crops."[51]

Burton relates one incident which shows what a hold the fanaticism had on the people at large even in his day. Speaking of the Catholic Mission Station at Whydah which was located in what was known as the Portuguese "Fort": "In March, 1863, the fort was struck by the lightning-god, Khevioso, the Shango of the Egbas; and they are not wanting who suppose that the fetishers, having been worsted in dispute by the Padres, took the opportunity of a storm to commit the arson. As the inmates impiously extinguished the fire, they were heavily fined; and, on refusing to pay, the Father-Superior was imprisoned. In June of the same year occurred another dispute, about a sacred snake that was unceremoniously ejected from the mission premises, and doubtless this anti-heathenism will bring them to further grief."[52]

Pierre Bouche who spent seven years on the Slave Coast, was resident at Whydah in 1868, where, as he tells us, he witnessed this scene: "One day I was on my way to visit a sick person. The boy who accompanied me suddenly cried out: 'Father, a fetiche!' I turned quickly, and saw a large serpent which had passed by me. Before it, a black prostrated himself, placing his brow in the dust and bowing low. His prayer deeply distressed me: 'You are my father, you are my mother,' said he to the reptile; 'I am all yours . . . my head belongs to you! . . . Be propitious to me!' And he covered himself with dust as a mark of humiliation."[53]

Writing of the same period, E. Desribes tells us: "The cult of living serpents is in vogue at many points along the Coast; but no where have they temples and regular sacrifices as at Whydah. . . . At Grand Popo not far from Whydah, the serpents have no temple, it is true, but they receive a cult even more revolting. There is there a species of large, very ferocious reptiles; when one of these serpents encounters small animals, he mercilessly devours them; and the more voracious it is, the more it excites the devotion of its

[51. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 98.

52. Ditto, Vol. I, p. 71.

53. Pierre Bouche, *La Côte des Esclaves et le Dahomey*, Paris, 1885, p. 389.]

{p. 44}

worshippers. But the greatest honours, the greatest blessings are bestowed on it when, finding a young child it makes a meal of it. Then the parents of the poor victim prostrate themselves in the dust, and give thanks to one so divine as to have chosen the fruit of their love to make of it a repast."[54] We shall have occasion to refer to this incident later.

Our next witness is J. A. Skertchley who tells us: "In the early part of 1871 I left England with the object of making zoological collections on the West Coast of Africa."[55] On account of local wars, he was unable to penetrate the interior at Assinee and Accra and so proceeded to Whydah, where he was induced to visit King Gelele at Aborney, where he was detained as a

"guest" for eight months. Incidentally he relates: "Opposite Agauli, hidden from profane eyes by a thick grove of fig trees which form but a mere undergrowth when compared with several tall bombaxes in their midst, is the far-famed snake house, or 'Danh-hweh,' as it is usually called. The name is derived from Daub, a snake, and Hweh, a residence. It is sometimes called Vodun-hweh, *i. e.* the fetiche house; and again, 'danhgbwe-hweh,' or the big snake (python) house. I was much disappointed at this renowned fetiche, for instead of a respectable temple, I found nothing but a circular swish hut, with a conical roof; in fact, an enlarged model of the parian inkstands to be seen in every toy-shop. There was a narrow doorway on the eastern side[56] leading to the interior, the floor of which was raised a foot above the street. The walls and floors were whitewashed, and there were a few rude attempts at reliefs in swish. From the roof there depended several pieces of coloured yarn, and several small pots containing water were distributed

[54. E. Desribes, *L'Évangile au Dahomey et à la Cote des Esclaves*, Clermont-Ferrand, 1877, p. 184 f. Note:-- Another instance of exaggerated deference to the serpent is given by Mary H. Kingsley, *West African Studies*, London, 1899, p. 483, as follows: "The python is the Brass natives' titular guardian angel. So great was the veneration of this Ju-Ju snake in former times, that the native kings would sign no treaties with her Britannic Majesty's Government that did 'not include a clause subjecting any European to a heavy fine for killing or molesting in any way this hideous reptile."

55. J. A. Skertchley, *Dahomey as it is; being a narrative of eight months' Residence in that Country*, London, 1874, Preface, p. vii.

56. Note:--This fact may strengthen the supposition that the cult came originally from the east.]

{p. 45}

about the floor. The roof was raised above the circular walls by short projecting pieces of bamboo; and coiled up on the top of the wall, or twining round the rafters, were twenty-two pythons. The creatures were the ordinary brown and pale yellow reptiles, whose greatest length is about eight feet. They were the sacred Danhgbwes whose power was relied upon to save the kingdom from the conquering armies of Agajah. It was the tutelary saint of Whydah, and when that kingdom was conquered, was introduced into the Dahoman pantheon. As recent as the late King's reign, if a native had the misfortune to accidentally (for no one would have had the temerity to purposely) kill a Danhgbwe, he was at once sacrificed, and his wives and property confiscated to the church. At the present time the defaulter has to undergo a foretaste of the sufferings of his portion hereafter." [57] Then follows a description of the ordeal by fire which has already been described.

Incidentally, Skertchley gives indication of a decadence having

[57. Skertchley, *l. c.*, p. 54. Note:--Skertchley later observes, p. 461: "The Dahoman religion consists of two parts, totally distinct from each other. First a belief in a Supreme Being, and second, the belief in a whole host of minor deities. The Supreme Being is called Man, and is vested with unlimited authority over every being, both spiritual and carnal. He is supposed to be of so high a nature as to care very little for the circumstances of men, and his attention is only directed to them by some special invocation. He resides in a wonderful dwelling above the sky, and commits the care of earthly affairs to a race of beings, such as leopards, snakes, locusts, or crocodiles, and also to inanimate objects, such as stones, nags, cowries, leaves of certain trees, and, in short, anything and everything. This

deity is said to be the same as the God of civilization; but the white man has a far freer access to Him than the Negro, who is therefore obliged to resort to mediators. Hence the origin of fetishism."

Cir. also, A. Le Herissé, *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey; Mœurs, Religion, Histoire*, Paris, 1911, p. 96: "The Dahoman believe in a Supreme Being whom they call Mahon (God) or Se (Beginning, Intelligence). They have neither statue nor symbol to represent Him, they dedicate no cult to Him; His name is only pronounced in some exclamations or invocations. Mahou has created the universe; He has in particular created the fetishes, Vodoun, and has given them certain forces, certain powers of which they made use in their own way to govern human destinies. These Vodoun moreover, are not, in the strict sense, intermediaries of Mahon, but rather his free and independent agents: 'The fetish is a creature of God'--'Vodoun e gni Mahounou.' Or, again: 'God possesses the fetish--'Mahou oue do Vodoun.' The Vodoun are innumerable for, to the Dahoman, every monstrosity or phenomenon which exceeds his imagination or his intelligence is fetish, a creature of God which demands a cult. The thunder, small-pox, the sea are all fetishes; the telegraph and our railways would most assuredly also be so, if they were not a 'machine of the whites.'" M. Le Herissé was writing as Administrateur des Colonies. He is dealing with ancient Dahomey and consequently independent of the Whydah influence.]

{p. 46}

set in, at least as regards external discipline. That reverence for the sacred serpent, as regards the populace, is becoming subservient to greed oil the part of the custodians of the temple, is evidenced by the following passage: "The doorway being always open, the snakes frequently make excursions after nightfall. Should an unfortunate person of either sex meet the strolling deity, he is obliged to prostrate himself before it, and then, taking it tenderly in his arms, carry it to the priests. Of course he is rewarded by these gentlemen for taking care of the god, says the reader. No such thing! He is fined for meeting the snake, and imprisoned until it is paid to the last cowrie." [58]

Eight years after Skertchley, Colonel Ellis visited Whydah and thus describes his experience: "While at Whydah I stayed at the French Factory, and there I had a rather unpleasant adventure on the night of my arrival. It was a very close night, and I was sleeping in the grass hammock slung from the joists of the roof, when I was awakened by something pressing heavily on my chest. I put out my hand and felt a clammy object. It was a snake, I sprung out of the hammock with more agility than I have ever exhibited before or since, and turned up the lamp that was burning on the table. I then discovered that my visitor was a python, from nine to ten feet in length, who was making himself quite at home, and curling himself up tinder the blanket in the hammock. I thought it was the most sociable snake I had ever met, and I like snakes to be friendly when they are in the same room with me, because then I can kill them the more easily; so I went and called one of my French friends to borrow a stick or cutlass with which to slay the intruder. When I told him what I purposed doing he appeared exceedingly alarmed and asked me anxiously if I had yet injured the reptile in any way. I replied that I had not, but I was going to. He seemed very much relieved, and said that it was without doubt one of the fetish snakes from the snake-house, and must on no account be harmed, and that he would send and tell the priests, who would come and take it away in the morning. He told me that a short time back the master of a merchant vessel had killed

[58. Skertchley, l. c., p. 56.]

{p. 47}

a python that had come into his room at night, thinking he was only doing what was natural, and knowing nothing of the prejudices of the natives, and had in consequence got into a good deal of trouble, having been imprisoned for four or five days and made to pay a heavy fine.

"Next morning, I went to see the snake-house. It is a circular but with a conical roof made of palm branches,[59] and contained at that time from 200 to 250 snakes. They were all pythons, and of all sizes and ages; the joists and sticks supporting the roof were completely covered with them, and looking upwards one saw a vast writhing and undulating mass of serpents. Several in a state of torpor, digesting their last meal, were lying on the ground; and all seemed perfectly tame, as they permitted the officiating priest to pull them about with very little ceremony.

"Ophiolatry takes precedence of all other forms of Dahoman religion, and its priests and followers are most numerous. The python is regarded as the emblem of bliss and prosperity, and to kill one of these sacred boas is, strictly speaking, a capital offence, though now the full penalty of the crime is seldom inflicted, and the sacrilegious culprit is allowed to escape after being mulcted of his worldly goods, and having 'run-a-muck' through a crowd of snake-worshippers armed with sticks and fire-brands."[60] Evidently the ordeal of the burning huts has been mitigated, still another indication of the decadence in ritual.

Ellis continues: "Any child who chances to touch, or to be touched by one of these reptiles, must be kept for a space of one year at the fetish-house under the charge of the priest, and at the expense of the parents, to learn the various rites of Ophiolatry and the accompanying dancing and singing."[61]

Abel Hovelacque, writing in 1889, thus depicts the formal nuptial ceremonies with the serpent which the priestess undergoes when she has attained the marriage age of about fourteen or fifteen

[59. Note:--We must here notice that in the case of the snake-house, the mud hut has given way to one of palm branches. This is another indication that decadence in the worship has begun.

60. A. B. Ellis, *The Land of Fetish*, London, 1883, p. 43 f.

61. Ditto, p. 46.]

{p. 48}

years: "They are brought to the temple. On the following night they are made to descend into a vaulted cellar, where it is said that they find two or three serpents who espouse them in the name of the great serpent. Until the mystery is accomplished, their companion and the other priestesses dance and sing with the accompaniment of instruments. They are then known under the name of wives of the great serpent, which title they continue to carry all their lives."[62]

During the last half of the nineteenth century a rapid decay set in as regards the veneration of the serpent at Whydah, due no doubt to increasing contacts with the white man and consequent European influences. Thus Édouard Foà, a resident in Dahomey from 1884 to 1890, describes conditions as they existed at the time of the French occupation which was completed in 1894. Remarking the extraordinary prestige which Dangbe enjoyed, he tells us: "One being alone,

however, makes exception to the rule: it is the pig. When he meets the god (which happens at every step in Dahomey and Popo) without regard for the veneration of which it is the object, kills it, eats it up, or at least tramples it under foot when he has sufficiently gorged himself with the kind." [63] And apparently there are now no retaliatory measures on the part of the devotees of the serpent.

Finally M. Brunet, who was the delegate of Dahomey at the World Exposition of 1900, while stating that no mother would dare rescue her own child if seized by one of the sacred snakes, asserts later that for some years the cult of the serpent has been on the decline, and adds: "Today, when a black has accidentally killed or injured a reptile, they are content to have the culprit flogged." [64]

[62. Abel Hovelacque, *Les Nègres de l'Afrique Sus-Équatoriale*, Paris, 1889, p. 403. Cfr. also M. Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography*, Philadelphia, 1827, Vol. III, p. 23: "In Whydah a serpent is regarded as the god of war, of trade, of agriculture, and of fertility. It is fed in a species of temple, and attended by all order of priests. Some young women are consecrated to it, whose business it is to please the deity with their wanton dances, and who are in fact a sort of concubines of the priests. Every new king brings rich presents to the serpent. (Des Marchais, II, p. 180. Oldendorp, p. 328)."

63. Édouard Foà, *Le Dahomey*, Paris, 1895, p. 226 f.

64. L. Brunet, *Dahomey et Dépendances*, Paris, 1901, p. 353 f.]

{p. 49}

The evidence adduced in the present chapter shows conclusively that the Ophiolatry as practiced by the Whydahs was worship in the strict sense of the word. Its ultimate object is a superhuman being: we find a well organized priesthood; the snake-house or temple is described by all visitors; sacrifices are certainly employed and there is ritual procedure.

When we first come in contact with the worship of the serpent at Whydah towards the end of the seventeenth century, we find it well organized and in full vigour. Still there are indications that it had not been long established there. Certainly, all traditions point to the fact that it is not indigenous and that it has come presumably from the east. This is in conformity with the supposition that Uganda is the fountainhead of African Ophiolatry.

After the destruction at Sabee of the original centre of Whydah Ophiolatry, it springs up again and is extended to other localities. For the most part, it follows closely at first the old ritual, but as time goes on and European contacts assert themselves, modifications gradually creep in, and we find at one centre at least, Grand Popo, the introduction of a decadent variant. A human child becomes a victim when the sacred serpent sees fit to appropriate one for the purpose. Thus while the worship of the serpent was well regulated and clearly defined, should a child come in contact with one of the sacred reptiles, it was regarded as a sign of vocation to its service, and the little one was immediately attached to the school established for the purpose, where the service of the deity was formally taught. In the decadent days, however, as witnessed independently by Desribes and Brunet, mothers readily yielded up their children not merely to the service of the sacred snakes, but as a living holocaust should one of these reptiles appropriate the little one for the purpose.

We must also notice, that especially in the earlier accounts of the worship at Whydah there is no question of idolatry. The serpent itself is not the object of adoration, it is merely a medium of giving worship to the Supreme Being, whatever concept in the native mind this term may represent. In the present work we are excluding all theological considerations and we must leave to a

{p. 50}

later volume the analysis of what the real divinity was that was usually honoured by the title of Creator or Maker.

Furthermore, there are indications, as noted by Forbes, that the superhuman being to whom the Whydah addressed himself was probably the ancestral spirits, and that these were in some way connected with the sacred pythons.

The Reverend Robert Hammill Nassau, a Presbyterian minister, with a Doctorate both in Medicine and in Sacred Theology, was for forty years a missionary in French Congo, and published in 1904 a work on fetishism in West Africa, wherein he gives us the fruit of his life-study of native customs and superstitions.

Mary H. Kingsley gives due credit to Mr. Nassau for much valuable information on fetish, and then playfully takes him to task for not having thrown open to science the mass of valuable material collected in long years of research. Thus she writes: "I am quite aware that Dr. Nassau was the first white man to send home gorilla's brains: still I deeply regret he has not done more for science and geography. Had he but had Livingstone's conscientious devotion of taking notes and publishing them, we should know far more than we do at present about the hinterland from Cameroons to Ogowe, and should have for ethnological purposes, an immense mass of thoroughly reliable information about the manners and religions of the tribes therein, and Dr. Nassau's fame would be among the greatest of the few great African explorers-not that he would care a row of pins for that." [65] All unknown to Miss Kingsley, Dr. Nassau had been taking the necessary notes and the publication of his book repaired the other shortcoming referred to by his critic who had been so deeply impressed by the Doctor's "immense mass of thoroughly reliable information about the manners and religion of the tribes" he had visited.

Dr. Nassau, it is true, is treating of the Bantu tribes situated for the most part south of the equator, but much that he says is also applicable to the Negroes in the strict sense of the word, namely, those tribes from which the bulk of the slaves were drawn, and which go by the generic term of West Africans.

[65. Mary H. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, p. 394 f.]

{p. 51}

Quite possibly, Miss Kingsley, if asked, might not have given to the finished book the same encomium which she extended to the material in hand. Still as she was like Ellis, whose writings carry great weight with her, to a certain extent a professed follower of Spencer, her general

approval of Dr. Nassau's conscientiousness and ability in his scientific researches, should lend considerable support to the facts adduced as well as to the conclusions drawn.

Dr. Nassau is unreserved in his assertion: 'I see nothing to justify the theory of Menzies[66] that primitive man or the untutored African of today, in worshipping a tree, a snake, or an idol, originally worshipped those very objects themselves, and that the suggestion that they represented, or were even the dwelling-place of, some spiritual Being is an after-thought up to which we have grown in the lapse of ages. Rather I see every reason to believe that the thought of the Being or Beings as an object of worship has come down by tradition and from direct original revelation of Jehovah Himself. The assumption of a visible tangible object to represent or personify that Being is the after-thought that human ingenuity has added. The civilized Romanist claims that he does not worship the actual sign of the cross, but the Christ who was crucified on it; similarly, the Dahoman in his worship of the snake.'"[67]

Again Dr. Nassau asserts: "The evil thing that the slave brought with him was his religion. You do not need to go to Africa to find the fetich. During the hundred years that slavery in our America held the Negro crushed, degraded, and apart, his master could deprive him of his manhood, his wife, his child, the fruits of toil, of his life; but there was one thing of which he could not deprive him,-his faith in fetich charms. Not only did this religion of the fetich endure under slavery---it grew. None but Christian masters offered the Negro any other religion; and by law, even they were debarred from giving them any education. So fetichism flourished. The master's children were infected by the contagion of superstition;

[66. *History of Religions*, p. 129 ff.

67. Robert Hammill Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa: Forty Years' Observation of Native Customs and Superstitions*, London, 1904, p. 48.]

{p. 52}

they imbibed some of it at the Negro foster-mother's breasts. It was a secret religion that lurked thinly covered in slavery days, and that lurks today beneath the Negro's Christian profession as a white art, and among the non-professors as a black art; a modern memory of the revenges of his African ancestors; a secret fraternity among slaves of far distant plantations, with words and signs,--the lifting of a finger, the twitch of all eyelid,--that telegraphed from house to house with amazing rapidity (as today in Africa) current news in old slave days and during the late Civil War; suspected, but never understood by the white master; which, as a superstition, has spread itself among our ignorant white masses as the 'Hoodoo,' Vudu, or Odoism, is simply African fetichism transplanted to American soil.'"[68]

Père Baudin, while labouring as a missionary among the Dahomans, writes: "Their traditions and religious doctrines suggest a people more civilized than the blacks of Guinea of the present day. And on the other hand, many customs, usages, and industries show clearly that they are a people in decadence. The wars, particularly the civil wars, which have laid waste, and still continue to lay waste, these countries, have caused them to lose what they had preserved of their ancient civilization, which was in great part Egyptian, as indicated by many customs and usages. . . .

"Though scattered over an immense extent of country, these fetish-worshippers have a certain uniformity of religious belief;

[68. Ditto, p. 274. Note:--Cfr. also J. J. Cooksey and Alexander McLeish, *Religion and Civilization in West Africa*, London, 1931, p. 82, in reference to Dahomey: "The native fetish priests are not the simple, ignorant men, many in Europe suppose them to be, on the contrary, they belong to the *élite* of the people and are of more than average intelligence. Actually a cunning sage, the fetish priest uses uncanny tricks designed to lead the common people to believe that, by virtue of an initiation of which he holds the secret, he can command the good or evil powers of the spirit world. On all sides in Dahomey, whether around Port Novo, the capital, or away in the northern bush country, wayside shrines, snake temples and sacred groves are seen, all furnished with fantastic objects of veneration. The terrific hold of fetishism which was responsible for the revolting butchery of 'The Annual Customs' still persists in Dahomey, and is the great obstacle alike to civilization and the progress of the Gospel." Then in a footnote is added the remark: "The tremendous hold which this Voodoo worship has over its votaries is seen in its persistence in the Republic of Haiti, in which many people from Dahomey are found."]

{p. 53}

their divinities are identical, differing only in name; and the particular details which we give of the blacks of the Slave Coast of Yoruba, Dahomey, Benin, and other neighbouring kingdoms apply to all fetish-worshipping nations." [69]

Of "The Religious System of the Negroes of Guinea," he asserts: "The religion of the blacks is an odd mixture of monotheism, polytheism, and idolatry. In these religious systems the idea of a God is fundamental; they believe in the existence of a Supreme Primordial Being, the Lord of the Universe, which is His work. Monotheism recognizes at the same time numbers of inferior gods and subordinate goddesses. Each element has its divinity who is as it were incorporated in it, who animates and governs it, and is the object of adoration. After the gods and goddesses there are infinite numbers of good and evil genii; then comes the worship of heroes and great men who were distinguished during their lives. The blacks also worship the dead, and believe in metempsychosis, or the migration of souls into other bodies. They believe in the existence of an Olympus, where dwell the gods and celebrated men who have become fetishes, and in an inferior world, the sojourn of the dead, and finally in a state of punishment for great criminals. They have also their metamorphosis, their sacred animals, their temples and their idols, etc. In a word, their religion is similar in all things to the old polytheism of the ancients; and notwithstanding the abundant testimony of the existence of God, it is practically only a vast pantheism, a participation of all the elements of the divine nature, which is as it were diffused throughout them all." [70]

He then proceeds to go into details: "The idea of God--Although deeply imbued with polytheism, the blacks have not lost the idea of the true God; yet their idea of Him is very confused and obscure. . . . They represent that God, after having commenced the organization of the world, charged Obatala with the completion and government of it, retired and entered into an eternal

[69. P. Baudin, *Fétichisme et Féticheurs*, Lyon, 1884, p. 3.

70. Ditto, p. 5.]

{p. 54}

rest, occupying Himself only with His own happiness; too great to interest Himself in the affairs of this world. He remains like a Negro king, in a sleep of idleness.

"Thus the black renders no worship whatever to God, completely neglecting Him, to occupy themselves with the gods and goddesses and the spirits to which they believe themselves indebted for their birth, and their fate in this life and the next. However, although they seem to expect nothing from God, the Negroes by instinct naturally address themselves to him in sudden danger or in great afflictions. When they are victims of injustice, they take God to witness their innocence." [71] This last statement nullifies in great part what he has just said about God being unconcerned about the affairs of the blacks, and their reciprocal neglect of Him. Elsewhere this condition certainly does not exist. As we shall see among the Ashanti, for example, he actually has his temple and his priesthood.

As regards the demi-gods, Père Baudin gives us the following explanation: "A family establishes itself near a river, a forest, a rock, or a mountain; imagination aided by the fetish-priests soon creates a belief in a demi-god, a tutelary genius of the place, and thus a new divinity makes its appearance in the Negro pantheon, and it is not long before it has its legend also." [72]

"The worship of the dead has greatly aided in augmenting the number of the gods. joined to the worship of nature is that of humanity. The descendants from generation to generation offer presents and sacrifices on the tomb of their ancestor, and end by adoring him as a local divinity, the origin of which becomes more and more obscure and consequently more and more venerable. This occurred at Porto-Novo in the case of the chiefs of families in various parts of the city, of whom the inhabitants are the real descendants." [73]

Concerning the lesser spirits, Père Baudin writes: "After the gods and the demi-gods come: the spirits or genii. The genii are

[71. Ditto, p. 6 f.

72. Ditto, p. 37.

73. Ditto, p. 37.]

{p. 55}

very numerous; some are good and some bad spirits. A certain number serve as messengers to the gods and demi-gods, some are considered nearly as powerful as the gods themselves and have authority over lesser spirits who are their messengers, and these in turn command others, forming a hierarchy which is not very defined. The more ordinary spirits dwell in the forests and deserts." [74]

One of these lesser spirits has its own interest for us. We are told: "Audowido, the rainbow, is a genius, held in great veneration at Porto-Novo. In Yoruba he is called Ochumare. The temples dedicated to this genius are painted in all the colors of the rainbow, and in the middle of the prism a serpent is drawn. This genius is a large serpent; he only appears when he wants to drink, and then he rests his tail on the ground and thrusts his mouth into the water. He who finds the

excrement of this serpent is rich forever, for with this talisman he can change grains of corn into shells which pass for money."[75]

[74. Ditto, p. 40.

75. Ditto, p. 45. Note:--Against the tendency of those who would exclude from scientific consideration the testimony of missionaries, under the pretence that they must of necessity show bias in their views, let us quote Sir James George Frazer, who will scarcely be accused of being prejudiced in their regard. In connection with the anthropological study of still surviving savage or barbarous peoples, he says, *Garnered Sheaves*, London, 1931, p, 244: "The method is neither more nor less than induction, which after all, disguise it as we may under the showy drapery of formal logic, is the only method in which men can and do acquire knowledge. And the first condition of a sound induction is exact observation. What we want, therefore, in this branch of science is, first and foremost, full, true, and precise accounts of savage and barbarous peoples based on personal observation. Such accounts are best given by men who have lived for many years among the peoples, have won their confidence, and can converse with them familiarly in their native language; for savages are shy and secretive towards strangers, they conceal their most cherished rites and beliefs from them, nay, they are apt wilfully to mislead an inquirer, not so much for the sake of deceiving him as with the amiable intention of gratifying him with the answers which he seems to expect. It needs a peculiar combination of intelligence, tact, and good nature to draw out a savage on subjects which he regards as sacred; to very few men will he consent to unbosom himself.

"Perhaps the class of men whose vocation affords them the best opportunities for observing and recording the habits of savage races are missionaries. They are men of education and character; they usually live for many years among the people, acquire their language, and gain their respect and confidence. Accordingly some of the very best accounts which we possess of savage and barbarous peoples have been written by missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, English, French, Dutch, German and Spanish."]

{p. 56}