

Throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s, the study of ritual in the English-speaking world was animated by a certain optimism about ritual's essential function. Victor Turner and others had taught us to approach rituals as essentially life-enhancing ludic experiences, a chance to step outside social structure, even to challenge that structure from within a ritually-created community. Both Bell and Jay, however, are informed by a new suspicion concerning the underlying motives of the ritual process. Ritual, for these authors, is essentially about power.

Nancy Jay looks at a single ritual genre, blood sacrifice, and concludes that it has had one basic function, across history and across cultures: the validation of patriarchal control. Bell's ambitions are larger. She undertakes a sweeping critique of all the important schools of ritual analysis which have emerged during the current century. She argues that the methodologies which have been brought to the study of ritual reinforce hierarchical relationships between observer and observed and obscure patterns of dominance within ritual communities, patterns inscribed in and by rituals themselves.

Jay's book, published shortly after the author's tragically early death, makes its point convincingly and provocatively. Employing a creative juxtaposition of case studies to demonstrate the connection between sacrifice and patriarchy across history and in widely separated geographical and cultural zones, Jay examines sacrifice in Africa and Hawaii, and representations of sacrifice in biblical and classical sources. She also examines its manifestations in later Christian tradition. She concludes that sacrificial tradition, in all the cases she examines, assists in the negotiation of potential collision points between dominance by real or metaphorical fathers and the potential claims to power of mothers (and women generally). In the case of Hawaii, Jay sees an instance in which a successful challenge to an entrenched male line, undertaken with the encouragement of female power brokers, employed a cessation of sacrifice as one of its key strategies. With regard to Christianity, Jay argues intriguingly (and more convincingly than not) that emphasis on and elaboration of the Eucharist has been greatest in periods and denominations characterized by relatively strong (male) priestly control.

I suspect that readers will have different opinions about this book depending on their disciplines and their particular areas of expertise. This reviewer
is an anthropologist, with field experience in Africa, who has also written about some Judaic texts. Although not an Oceanist, I had read, with great admiration, Marshall Sahlin’s *Islands of History* (1985), one of Jay’s key sources for her Hawaiian chapter, shortly before reading *Throughout Your Generations Forever*.

An Africanist, reading Jay’s analyses of African sacrifice, may experience some impatience. It would be difficult to dispute the strong connection between sacrifice and male hegemony in Africa. On the other hand, this facet of sacrifice is no secret. It is apparent in the collective representations described by the classical ethnographers whom Jay cites, like E. E. Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer. Cattle, for the Nuer, are a male possession, exchanged by men to assure male succession. Given to the men of other kin groups, cattle secure women to bear sons in the name of members of a lineage; given as sacrifices they remove supernatural impediments to fertility, and thus give men some control over that process. For the Nuer, cattle exchange is more necessary to establish fatherhood than sexual intercourse itself. The legal father of a child is the person in whose name cattle were given for the mother, even if that person is dead at the time of conception or a biological woman. Every undergraduate anthropology student knows that Nuer men identify with their sacrificial oxen, whose maleness signifies strength and whose castrated status signifies men’s weakness before god.

Jay’s desire to link accounts of human sacrifice in Africa to extreme forms of patriarchy sometimes leads her to accept ethnocentric accounts of colonizers without questioning the motives of those making the reports. For example, she quotes the famous report of the Punitive Expedition to Benin City, Nigeria, in 1897, without imparting any hyperbole to such statements as “Dead and mutilated bodies seemed to be everywhere – by God, may I never see such a sight”.

Benin City happens to be an area of which this reviewer has some direct experience. Although contemporary Bini do not deny the pervasiveness of human sacrifice in the past (and are somewhat ambivalent in their opinions of it), the British, at the very least, chose their emphases in order to justify an interruption to the divine rule of the Oba, the king of the Benin Kingdom, whose power was closely linked to human sacrifice. Accordingly, Jay’s inference that human sacrifice among the matrilineal Ashanti was less severe than in patrilineal Benin because “the British saw no sacrificial victims along the way” (67) is somewhat suspect. She may simply be comparing textual apples and oranges: her source for the Ashanti is Robert S. Rattray, a civil servant and government anthropologist, whose volumes on the Ashanti are anthropological classics. Rattray would be expected to produce a different sort of document from that prepared by the chronicler of a punitive expedition. For all that, Jay’s overriding point that animal sacrifice is an overwhelm-