

Reflections on Sacrifices as Imperatives of Quality Worship of Esu Evil Deity in Yoruba Traditional Religion

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Abstract

Throughout history all over the world, wherever mankind has worshiped Supreme Being, we encounter the practice of sacrifice. Sacrifices play an essential part in African Traditional Religion as in other religions. The paper adopts phenomenological method in carrying out this research. The study therefore submits that sacrifices serve as means of contact or communion between man and God. It is man's best means of establishing, maintaining cordial and intimate relationship between himself and his object of worship. The paper argues that sacrifice is at the centre of most religions, though there is a great variety in the ways in which a sacrifice can be offered, as well as in the functions that it is expected to perform. The paper concludes by saying that sacrifices and offerings in many cases may be directed to the divinities, spirits or ancestors who are regarded as intermediaries between God and man, the Supreme Being remains the ultimate recipient and object of sacrifice. By sacrifice, man acknowledges God's supreme dominion and excellence and offers him adoration, worships him with humility. Hence, adoration, latria, is the intrinsic, immediate end of sacrifice considered in itself.

Keywords: Supreme Being, Religion, Sacrifices and Esu (Evil Deity).

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I. Introduction

African Traditional Religion which is the beliefs and practices that emanated from the African soil is the religious beliefs and practice that has been in existence from the time immemorial and are still being adhered to today by many Africans¹. The practice of African Traditional Religion varies widely from one place to another but it has the same structure of the Supreme Being, yet sees the lesser divinities merely as intermediary between the Supreme Being and man. After the divinities, we have the disembodied spirits, followed by the living dead, that is the ancestors and lastly, magic and medicine. Sacrifices are offered to the Supreme Being through the listed gods, or sometime to these gods for various purposes.

Sacrifice is the religious rites in which materials things or ingredients are offered to an object of worship in order to establish, maintain or restore right relationship between man and the object of worship. Sacrifice has been defined as "an act of external and public worship, made up oblation (offering) and immolation (sacrifice) that signify the interior disposition with which the individual or community acknowledges God's infinite excellence and vows his subjection to God².

In a bid to distinguish between sacrifice and offering, sacrifice refers to cases where animal life is destroyed in order to present the animal in part or in whole, to God, supernatural beings, spirits or the living dead. Offering on the other hand refer to the remaining cases, which do not involve the killing of an animal, being chiefly the presentation of food stuffs and other items³. In some cases sacrifice and offerings are directed to one or more of the following: God, spirits and the Living-dead. Recipients in the second and third categories are regarded as intermediaries between God and men, so that God is the ultimate recipient whether or not the worshippers are aware of that.

Sacrifice as the Essence of Religion

It is inconceivable to have a religion without some form of sacrifice, however modified or refined it may be. Sacrifice is primarily a means of contact or communion between man and the Deity. Sacrifice marks point where the invisible and visible worlds met. During sacrifice, man projects himself to the invisible world.

As said in the introductory part of this paper, there is difference between sacrifice and offering. Sacrifice involves the shedding of blood (human and animal) in order to present them to the deity. Offerings do not involve blood but concern the giving of all other things, such as food stuff, water, milk and so on. This distinction between sacrifice and offering is inherited from Hebrew religion and may not be rigidly applied to

African Traditional Religion. In the African context, the two can be used interchangeably. There are sacrifices where victims are left alive for the deity. Such victims roam the community unmolested and are respected as the properties of the deities⁴.

The two items are not often distinguished but as said above it is important to clarify the distinction. The item in a sacrifice is killed or destroyed by ceremonial immolation, by fire, or by abandonment. The emphasis is on separation by destruction. Items for offerings, are not, as a rule, directly destroyed by the person or community offering them. Instead, these items are simply dedicated to the recipient. They may remain in the household or village, less often; they may also be cast away, like sacrificial items, depending on the nature of offering.

Sacrifices are usually made of items of value, and the ritual involves blood while items of offering are symbolic, and the ritual is usually bloodless. In either case, however, the item is meant to be removed from human possession or use and transferred to the mystical powers, who become the new owners of the sacrificial victim or offered item⁵.

The Purpose of Sacrifice in African Religion

The broad purpose of sacrifice in African Religion is obvious in our definition of sacrifice in this paper. The ontological balance existing between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living must always be maintained and hence, the need for sacrifice. When this balance is upset, people experience calamities, misfortunes and sufferings. Sacrifice is also being offered to make and renew contact between God and man, the spirits and man, that is, generally between spiritual and physical worlds. When these are directed towards the living – dead, they serve as symbols of fellowship, recognition that the departed are still members of their human families, and tokens of respect and remembrance for the living dead.

Households and family groups on the whole, direct their sacrifices and offerings to the living – dead. But larger communities direct theirs to God alone or through divinities. Sacrifice has four general features, which are presentation, consecration, invocation and immolation. If other features, such as libations, aspirations and hymn singing, are added, they are not essential to the form of the sacrificial rite but supernumerary. That is to say that they do not form a necessary part of the fundamental canon of sacrifice, which involves three theological motifs – separation, recombination and reconstruction.

Sacrifice has been broadly categorized into different forms. One of such taxonomy is derived from the Latin expressions namely **dos ut des** and **dos ut abeas**. By implication **dos ut des** is the type of sacrifice made to gain favour from the gods. It is sacrifice for appeasement of the gods and as a result aimed at maintaining a cordial relationship with them. It multiplies the benevolence of the gods on humanity.

On the other hand, **dos ut abeas** has to do with the sacrifice aimed at warding off the evil spirits and their devilish plots. Normally the sacrificial items used for this kind of sacrifice, whether edible or not, are thrown out as a whole or left in a road junction for the spirits.

From another perspective, sacrifice has also been broadly categorized as a voluntary and involuntary. In the former, victims, especially in human sacrifice, willingly volunteer themselves to be sacrificed. An example of this is Moremi Ajasoro who vowed to use her child as a sacrifice to the Supreme Being if she conquered the Igbo people who are tormenting her people.

Four main theories have been advanced to explain the functions and meaning of sacrifices and offerings. Mbiti listed them as follows: gift theory, the propitiation theory, the communion theory and the thank – offering theory. It is not our concern to debate these theories, except to add that these idea or theories are present in the mind of African people when making sacrifices, but none of the theories would explain right away these acts of worship.

Sacrifices and offerings are maintained in African Religions as part of worship because they believe that an ontological balance must be maintained between them and the Supreme Being. Concrete examples from different parts of Africa illustrate this point more clearly. The Aballuyia believe that God is ‘the one to whom sacred rites and sacrifices are made of paid’. They have formal occasions when they make sacrifices to Him, including the time of birth, naming and circumcising a person, as well as at weddings, funerals and harvest time. The Ila have several occasions when they make sacrifices and offerings to God. hunters do so when they have no success in hunting, as well as when they have killed an animal.

The Yoruba make many types of sacrifices and offerings, which constitute ‘the essence of Yoruba religion’. Almost all types of foods and drinks and living things are used for this purpose. Every fortnight Yoruba blacksmiths sacrifice dogs to ogun the divinity of iron and war⁶.

The Nuer are also reported to have many occasions when they sacrifice to God. Cattle are the usual animals for this purpose, and on important occasions the people make long invocations. These are sufficient examples to illustrate how African peoples respond to the spiritual world through sacrifices and offerings.

Types of Sacrifices

There are different types of sacrifices in African Traditional Religion. We shall adopt the eight types given by Quarcoopome.

Human Sacrifice

The act of offering human beings in a sacrificial ritual was one time a normal practice in African religion. This was not in any way aimed at undermining the value of human life. The belief was that it was the highest form of sacrifice and therefore the most potent. This was usually done when there was a matter of communal or national importance, which requires appeasement of gods in order to restore peace and order in the community.

During the burial of kings and other prominent personalities in the society, human beings were offered and the idea behind this was that as a king or prominent man who had servants and slaves while on earth he would also need the assistance of these servants and slaves in the hereafter. This is a further proof of the African belief in life beyond the grave. During the installation of new kings, human beings are also sacrificial as a protective measure to ensure a long period of reign.

Human sacrifice as an accepted African traditional practice is no longer in existence. Though some people still practice this today, it should be pointed out that they do not do it under the name of practicing Traditional Religion; rather they do it secretly to attain quick success and satisfy other selfish aims. Human sacrifice under any disguise today, if discovered, is a punishable criminal offence.

Votive Sacrifice

This type of sacrifice is made in fulfillment of vows or promises made to the deities or ancestors. For instance, a childless couple would vow to offer a goat to the deity if the latter assists to give the couple a child within a specified period of time. If eventually the couple gets a child within the period stated, the couple certainly will fulfill their vow by offering the item promised to the deity for a sacrifice. Failure to perform this sacrifice for benefits received is counted as breaking faith and is usually punished by the divine beings.

Meal and Drink Sacrifice

This is the regular meal and drink offering done almost daily at the shrine or any other place where eating and drinking go on. Oil is poured on the emblems of the divinities. This sacrifice is especially offered on the sacred day of the divinity and his acceptance of it is ascertained in some societies, e.g. Yoruba by the casting of kola nuts. When accepted, a portion of the meal is placed on or before the shrine and the priest and worshippers share the remainder.

Gift or Thanks Sacrifice

This sacrifice is based on the fact of the appreciation of life and other good things that enhance it, both seen and unseen, given to man by ritual beings. The gift or thank offering may be animal, food or fruits. What is offered is guided by the taste of the divinity. Normally people offer what they can afford. One is not under any obligation. It is linked to the Passover feast in which the Israelites were told to pair up for animals that will be used if they may not eat up the remains of the victim.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

The traditional African people make substitutionary sacrifices and offerings when it is required to alter an agreement and sometimes to ward off attacks, evil or misfortune or to appease the spirit of the earth. Every fortnight Yoruba blacksmiths sacrifice dogs to 'ogun' the divinity of iron and war⁷.

Substitutionary sacrifice is also performed when a person is believed to be under the wrath of a divinity or some evil spirit, which could end in the death of the individual. A sheep or goat or cow is offered as a substitute for the victim.

Propitiatory Sacrifice

This is a sacrifice of appeasement or pacification. It is usually prescribed by the oracle or divinity in reply to an enquiry as to what to be done to save situation during national crisis or calamity such as epidemic, famine, floods and so on.

Preventive Sacrifice

This sacrifice is undertaken as a precautionary measure to ward off or avert evil or misfortune Africans dread witchcraft, poison, charms, and the influence of evil spirits, and the belief in their terrible realities. People are constantly in fear of what the evil ones can do and as a result they take preventive measures to ensure that such attacks are avoided. By offering preventive sacrifice, evil spirits are diverted to other places.

Foundation Sacrifice

This type of sacrifice is usually done at the laying of the foundation of a house, village or town or market. It combines propitiatory and preventive sacrifices and the purpose is to appease the spirits of the earth in order that all may be well with that which is being founded. It is also meant to prevent evil from entering the place.

Africans being inextricably tied to religion are still today observing this type of sacrifice even as Christians. They use medals, crosses and holy water to perform this ritual. Foundation rituals are ritual acts performed at initiations of a programme of action. In foundation rituals, people ask for permission from their deity before farming a piece of land for example, or collectively, before establishing a market. In Ghana, the following prayer is uttered before digging a grave:

Earth, whose day is Thursday,
Receive this wine and drink,
It is your grand child that has died,
We have come to beg you for this spot
So that we may dig a grave.

It is therefore necessary to emphasize that sacrifice is very imperative in African religions because it is the religious rite in which material things are offered to an object of worship in order to maintain or restore right relationship of man with the object of worship.

The Importance of Sacrifices in the Societies

Sacrifice in Religious and worship traditions of African in contemporary time cannot be taken lightly. Sacrifice has been at the center of most religions either Christian, Islam, Hindu, or African Traditional Religion. Sacrifices are made to God, the Supreme Being either on daily basis or once or intermittently. It is often performed by the adherents to their ultimate reality or his representatives (the divinities) who reciprocate by giving the people the desires of their hearts.

Sacrifice is fundamental in every religion especially in African Traditional Religion. This religion is known for series of sacrifices are used as offering to honour or to appease a god using slaughtered animal and in an extreme case of person depending on the severity of the situation needing remedy by the understanding of the worshippers.

The purpose of offering sacrifices include: general well-being, comfort, happiness, blessings and misfortune and so on. Recipient of sacrifices include the Supreme Being, divinities, witches, even human beings. Sacrifices are still relevant our contemporary society since it is part of religious traditions. The concern of every human being is the need for safety, prosperity and peace. This is necessary because when there is peace and safety there will be progress and development in the nation. In traditional societies sacrifices occupies a central place in the affairs of the communities. There is no community where sacrifices is not being carried out either to appease the spirit world or to pacify the divinity or to ward off calamity.

In nutshell, a sacrifice occupies a unique place in human religious affairs and it is one of the phenomena that is difficult to eradicate inspite of advancement in technology.

Sacrifices Offered to Esu the Evil Divinity

Although most of gods in Africa are behaved to be benevolent and their favour always assured when sacrifices and appropriate acts of worship are certain spirits or deities which are said to be specifically evil. Opoku (1977:70) observes that many sides to them. They are feared, but they are also worshipped so that their malevolence may be warded off. They are regarded as evil because they antagonistic towards man and can cause untold misery; yet they can come to man's aid when their assistance is sought against enemies.

It is a general belief among the Africans that Esu (Evil deity) is a dread deity. In Yoruba land, the most dread evil deity is Esu, who is not only feared by men but also by divinities, because his evil power can only be curbed or nullified by that of Olorun (the Supreme being) alone. Sacrifices, offerings and prayers are therefore made to avert his malevolence, and care is taken to ensure that Esu is the first recipient when any sacrifice is made, for his pleasure must be sought before anything else can take place. Because of his evil nature, shrines for Esu are generally erected outside the town's, villages and houses, for the Yoruba says "Esu as no good character; his house is made for him in the street". Evil tendencies in man attributed to Esu and he is also generally believed to take pleasure in causing mischief, misfortune and confusion among people.

The worship of Esu is general in Yoruba land. Sacrifices and offerings are made to him with ingredients like Cocks, he-goat, dogs, cowries, palm oil. Esu is worshipped not only to avoid his malevolence but also to secure is beneficence blessings or favour. Yes he is regarded as the protector of times since he will prevent evil from entering the town if his shine receives adequate sacrifices.

It is remarkable that among the Ga whose idea about evil deities are not as developed as those described above are Toby clay images similar to those of Esu and placed outside every town and village.

Another name for Esu is Eḷẹgbera, Eḷẹgba or Ẹgba. He is known and worshiped chiefly by the name Ẹgba among the Fon, Egun, Popo and Ewe, the Western neighbors of the Yoruba.

The Ibo also have a developed belief about evil deity. The name of their evil deity is Ekwensu. Among the spirits associated with Ekwensu the chief is Ogbonuke or Ogbonike. This latter deity is regarded as the agent of Ekwensu and a very active spirit. Sacrifices I offered to avoid his malevolence and through him sacrifices are offered to Ekwensu.

There are other sites to do character of Esu. Whenever I eat is properly honoured, worshipped and propitiated, he can come to the assistance of men. He can protect them and shower benefits on them. People are sometimes named after him in recognition of his benevolence; hence we find such Yoruba names as Esufunmi, Esugbemi and so on.

Esu is evil who thwarts the intention of both man and the gods, but he is benevolent to his worshippers. He hates palm kernel but loves to take the head of black goat, beans, corn, honey etc. his favourite colour is black.

II. Conclusion

Religion, which is a vital part of spiritual life of African people is associated or linked up with sacrifices and offerings. Every event in the life of the people is associated with a supernatural being. There is no limit as to where and when African people perform one or more acts of worship. God is omnipresent, and he is reachable at anytime and anyplace. People worship Him where and whenever the 'need' arises. Sacrifices can be offered to Him alone since he is our preserver and our last end. He alone is God of all things. Nevertheless, where such sacrifices and offerings are given to divinities, ancestors and spirits, the name sacrifice is to be retained but the real object of sacrifice in African Religion remains God.

III. Recommendations

Sacrifices are the essence of the religion in African Traditional Religion as it is in every religion that has ever known. It is inconceivable to have a religion without some form of sacrifice. However, it must not be a sacrifice done with human being.

Sacrifices bridged the ontological balance existing between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living must always maintained and hence the need for sacrifice.

God Almighty is to be praised because man has received innumerable benefits from Him and wishes to thank Him. If the offended God and seeks pardon for his sins he marks sacrifice. He also hopes to have his petitions granted. These ends are also ends of sacrifice. They are, however, not primary but secondary, for they are all obtained through adoration. If other things could be conceived as missing in any sacrifice, adoration is always present in every sacrifice. Worshippers should endeavour take sacrifices seriously in their worship and services to God.

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