

Sacrifice In African Traditional Religion: A Philosophical Overview

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Abstract

Sacrifice is a universal religious phenomenon. However, scholars differ on the idea of what constitute the actual definition of sacrifice. In African Traditional Religion, sacrifice is the most potent means worshippers use to influence divinity to take interest in their affairs. But what is worrisome is the idea of use of human as the object of sacrifice. This work discovered that at some point, this idea was abandoned but what is disheartening today is that the young generation are reverting to human sacrifice in our contemporary society. This work, using the method of hermeneutics, argues that since sacredness of life is one of the cardinal African values and Africans abhor shedding blood, the use of human for sacrifice is not rationally tenable in African ethos. This is because it creates disharmony in African sacred cosmological universe. Again, it suggests that following Kant's principles of categorical imperative, this act cannot be universalized; hence, it needs to be prohibited. It concludes by asserting that any deity or gods that demands human sacrifice should be sacrificed on the altar of another higher deity.

Key words: Sacrifice, Human sacrifice, Africa, Ethos, Religion etc.

Introduction

Every religion of the world belief is in the existence of spiritual realities. This very belief gives rise to another ancillary belief which is that there is a communication between these two realities. This communication comes in form of what is regarded as worship. The idea of worship can manifest in form of prayer or sacrifice. Thus, the idea of sacrifice is a universal religious phenomenon. In other words, every religion of the world practices sacrifice in one form or the other. However, what is distinct is the way it is practiced. History has it that Africans were once using human beings as victims of sacrifice. However, what is minded boggling is that the present generation is gradually reverting to the use of human for sacrifice in the 21st century. It is therefore the onus of this work to expose the irrationality in this practice (the use of human) as the object of sacrifice since Africans abhor shedding of blood. Again, since this action cannot be universalized based on Kant's understanding of categorical imperative, it should be discarded.

Meaning of Sacrifice

Though, all researchers agree on the centrality and importance of sacrifice in the religious life and practices of African Traditional peoples, authors differ when it comes to the definition of

sacrifice, but do not necessarily conflict one another. Here, we shall consider the different views on the definition of sacrifice. The term sacrifice has different senses. There could be ordinary or religious sense of the term. Subscribing to this understanding Aniekan Etim Nana said “In general, sacrifice is understood in two senses, the ordinary and the religious sense.”¹ Going further, he carefully exposed the understanding of the ordinary sense of sacrifice when he said that:

Ordinarily understood, it is the gift of oneself or things. It is the voluntary handing away or over of one’s person or property for the good of someone else. Rendering of service to another belongs to this category of sacrifice. This goes synonymously with self-denial for the sake of another. This is often termed selfless sacrifice, and has to do with dedicating oneself for a course.²

It is this sense that Ebhomienlen and Idemudia alluded to when they said that “The secular meaning denotes the giving up of something valuable or important for somebody or something considered to be of more value or important.”³ In addition, Jude Made citing Arinze (1970) agrees that there are two senses of the term sacrifice. The ordinary sense he describes as the popular sense and of this he said: “Here sacrifice means a renunciation for a motive e.g., a widow sacrificing all that she has for the training of her only son; a man selling off his only car and using the money to see his son through college.”⁴ In sum, whether described as the secular sense, popular sense or ordinary sense, what is clear is that this understanding of sacrifice is not the same as the religious or ritual understanding of sacrifice. Again, one can say that this form of sacrifice no matter its shades boils down to one denying oneself of something or oneself in order to achieve a higher goal. We are however concerned with the religious connotation of sacrifice in this current endeavour.

Like already pointed out, sacrifice is inherent in all the religions of the world and connotes giving or offering of something precious to God/gods. This is designated a ritual sacrifice. Making reference to this idea of ritual sacrifice Jude Made said:

In this sense, sacrifice is restricted to the elicited act of the virtue of religion which is in the genius of oblation. Thus sacrifice in this sense is connected to the sacred... Yes, sacrifice in this sense is an act of offering a victim to the Divine power of or powers.⁵

More still, he said “... according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) sacrifice forms an essential part of every religious ceremony and is fundamental to worship.”⁶ No doubt, Faherty Robert while explaining the meaning of sacrifice said: “[It is] ...a religious rite in which an object is offered to a divinity in order to establish, maintain, or restore a right relationship of a human being to the sacred order. It is a complex phenomenon that has been found in the earliest known forms of worship and in all parts of the world.”⁷ In addition, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* defines sacrifice as “... a rite in the course of which something is forfeited or destroyed, its object being to establish relations between a source of spiritual strength and one in

¹Aniekan Etim Nana, “Ritual Sacrifice: An Essential Element of Ibibio Traditional Religion and Culture” *HOFA: African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* vol.3, no. 1, 120-129, 2018, p.122

²Ibid

³Ebhomienlen, T.O. & Idemudia, M.O. “Sacrifice in Yahwism and African Traditional Religion: the Edo perspective” *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, January-2014 364,

⁴Made, Jude Emeka. “Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion: Differential faith issues in Religions” *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, vol.8, no.1, 20-35, 2016, p. 24

⁵ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷Faherty, Robert L. “Sacrifice” *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacrifice-religion>. Accessed 18 February 2022

need of such spiritual strength; for the benefit of the latter.”⁸ Sacrifice is seen as a source of spiritual strength and a means of establishing and maintaining good relationship between two worlds; the world of spiritual strength and that of spiritual weakness with the aim of making the weaker share in the strength of the stronger. And for the world of the spiritual weakness to gain something from the world of the spiritual strength, it must bring (sacrifice) something, because nothing goes for anything.

It is important that we note that the term sacrifice originally was used in the religious sense alone. This is clear from the etymology of the word sacrifice which is derived from the Latin word *sacrificium*, which is a combination of the words *sacer*, meaning something set apart from the secular or profane for the use of supernatural powers, and *facere*, meaning “to make.” However, the term has acquired a popular and frequently secular use to describe some sort of renunciation or giving up of something valuable in order that something more valuable might be obtained; e.g., parents make sacrifices for their children, one sacrifices a limb for one’s country. But the original use of the term was peculiarly religious, referring to a cultic act in which objects were set apart or consecrated and offered to a god or some other supernatural powers; thus, sacrifice should be understood within a religious, cultic context.⁹

Understanding of Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion

For Metu (1988), “African Traditional Religion is strictly linked with rituals, which are expressed in sacrifice, since it is only in sacrifice that the Supreme Being is reached and the gods and lesser divinities, appeased for man’s peaceful existence in the world.”¹⁰ Therefore, Sacrifice is an essential part of African traditional religion and it simply means the offering of the life of some object, animals or person to the divine being or beings. It is a means of contact or communion between the divine being and man which serves as the best means through which man maintains an established relationship between him and his object of worship. Sacrifice is equally seen as the powerful means used by man to affect the supernatural powers to have interest in human affairs in terms of granting man favours asked as man gives the divinities their dues. It is on this note that Gbenede (1997) in Aniekan Etim Nana, also recognized sacrifice in African traditional religion as:

One of the elements of worship in which material things like cow, goats, fowls, rice, yam, kola nuts etc, are offered to the Supreme Being or through His agents, for good relationship, harmony and communion to heal the wound of trouble and to expect response.¹¹

Again, Sacrifice in African traditional religion is that ritual means through which its members commune and communicate with God and other supra-sensible beings by means of transformed symbolic objects or victims. Such transformed symbolic objects of sacrifice could either be totally destroyed or permanently dedicated to God or his agents or left to roam about in the wild. Whatever form it takes, the traditional African donates himself to the deity by means of

⁸J.O. Awolalu; *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1979) p.136.

⁹Faherty, Robert L. “Sacrifice” *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacrifice-religion>. Accessed 18 February 2022.

¹⁰Metuh, E.I. *Comparative Studies in African Traditional Religion*. (Onitsha: Immico, 1987)

¹¹Anieka Etim Nana, “Ritual Sacrifice: An Essential Element of Ibibio Traditional Religion and Culture” *HOFA: African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* Vol.3 No 1, 120-129, 2018, p.126

a gift which is ritually transformed either by immolation or oblation. Sacrifice is an act of religion, a form of prayer in which animals or products of the land may be offered.

Mbiti (1975) distinguished between sacrifice and offerings. “The distinction between sacrifice and offering is this: sacrifice involves the shedding of the blood of human beings, animals or birds; offerings do not involve blood but concern the giving of all other things, such as food stuffs, water, milk, honey or money.”¹² This distinction reduces sacrifice to the level of immolation, but it can be broader than just immolation or shedding of blood of the sacrificial victim. While shedding of blood of animals, man or birds is part and parcel of sacrifice, offerings deals with such items as foodstuff, money, wine, etc. In African traditional religion, blood symbolizes life and so, sacrifices deal with giving human or animal offering, for instance, when the community life or welfare is at stake, like in a case of drought, epidemic, war, raids, erosion etc. So life could be sacrificed to protect the community. The best are chosen to make sure it will be acceptable. In offerings, it is what people want and are able to give and it serves either for personal, family, or community needs too. Such could be offered in a given place such as shrines, hills, rivers, water fall, cross-roads, etc.

The offering of sacrifice and what is sacrificed is dependent on the taste of the named divinity and situation at hand and the place it must be displayed vary as well. The items of sacrifice range from material objects, edible materials to human beings. It is the situation that warrants what is to be sacrificed. What is sacrificed may be displayed at cross-roads, at market places, may be displayed under the ground or sometimes shared among the community of worshippers as a signification of friendship with their divinities. It is the oracle that determines the fate of the victim.

Sacrifice connotes the offering of one’s best to mark the high esteem one holds the divinity. In this case, what is normally offered is the life of the victim signified by blood. It is this issue of blood that led to the sacrifice of human beings in the past as the best man can offer; depending on the situation, to equate the highest regard man has for God. But these days, animals are offered in place of man with the interest on the life of the victim, signified by blood.

It is important that despite the fact that African world is a spiritual world but there are specific places where sacrifices are performed. It is on this note that Opoku (1997), identifies objects and designated places for the performance of ritual sacrifices often referred to as shrines to include; family compounds, village squares, thick forests, grooves, caves, bank of rivers and streams, the foot of big and significant tree, the foot of mountains and hills and so on.¹³

Types of Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion

There are many types of sacrifice in African Traditional Religion. We are going to examine some of them here.

1. Communion or meal sacrifice – this is done to bring about communion and communication between the deities, divinities with the worshippers. This type of sacrifice is depicted when the

¹²Mbiti.J.S, *Introduction to African Religions*, (Ibadan, Heinemann Education books, 1975), p. 57-58

¹³Opoku, K. A, *West African Traditional Religion*, (London: Feb International Private Ltd, 1997)

Officiate of sacrifice offers boll of fufu or a part of kola nut to the shrine of the said deity that the sacrifice is meant for. Sometimes the object of sacrifice may just be thrown in an open space while the Officiate enjoys the remaining part.

2. Thanksgiving sacrifice – sacrifice offered in gratitude for gifts received from God, and other divinities or ancestors. This sacrifice is often carried out with the logic that when you appreciate God/gods for what He has done, He would do more.

3. Votive sacrifice – sacrifice made to fulfil a vow made to beg a favour from God and other divinities or ancestors. Most times when people are in daring need of something, they often make a vow to god that once the said intention is fulfilled they would offer Him certain gift. Thus, this is a sacrifice done in order to fulfil the said promise.

4. Propitiatory sacrifice – it is offered for known and hidden offences against the divinities or ancestors to avert their anger, to atone for the wrongs and to restore peaceful relationship. It is a sacrifice of appeasement of pacification.

5. Substitution sacrifice - it is the use of another victim or object to redeem oneself, to escape the wrath of the gods. Sometimes, when someone is believed to be under the wrath of a divinity or some evil spirits, which could end in the death of the individual, an animal may be offered to take the place of the said victim.

6. Preventive sacrifice – the sacrifice used to chase away the cause of dangers and the effects on the community or individual. It is done as a precautionary measure to ward off or avert evil or misfortune.

7. Foundational sacrifice – the sacrifice offered at the beginning of important undertakings, such as, marriage, building etc, to protect and grant blessing.

8. Petition sacrifice – it is sacrifice offered with list of favours to be granted to petitioner. There may be other forms of sacrifice in African traditional religion; hence, the ones mentioned here do not claim to be exhaustive of the forms of sacrifice in African traditional religion.

Purpose of Sacrifice

Ugwu and Ugwueye are of the opinion that the primary purpose of sacrifice is to maintain harmony among beings. It is on this note that they said “the broad purpose of sacrifice in African traditional religion is ... [the fact that] the ontologically 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.”¹⁴ Thus, sacrifice serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship.

It is also valued as the most effective means employed by man to influence the divinity to be interested in human affairs. Right relationship with the divinity as well as his favour will be secured by giving him his dues. Again, in sacrifice, man recognizes the supremacy of these powers/forces over himself and that he must endeavour to maintain a harmonious relationship with

¹⁴Ugwu C.O.T and Ugwueye L. E, *African Traditional Religion: A Prolegomenon*, (Lagos: Merits International Publications, 2004),p.79-80

them, a relationship that must necessarily implicate a gift tendency to these forces to elicit their favours.

In addition, through sacrifice, man realizes that he is not alone, but a being in the midst of other beings. He realizes that he occupies a lower vital rank to these forces but that he can manipulate them to his advantage through the instrumentality of sacrifices. Thus in sacrifices, there is human Divine encounter, indeed an ambivalence in which man acknowledges his dependence on the supreme being and at the same time a tool for manipulating the supernatural Being to change his mind in respect of man's wishes.

However, in a very telling manner F.A Arinze, summarises the purpose of sacrifice in African traditional religion. For him, there are four major aims that sacrifices are performed for. To this end he said,

... the various ends of [African] Igbo sacrifice can be grouped under four headings: a. expiation, b. sacrifice to ward off molestation from unknown evil spirits, c. petition and, d. thanksgiving.¹⁵

This in a way articulates the various motives behind any sacrifice in African traditional religion. The questions one may ask are: are these reasons philosophically tenable? If yes, does sacrifice as presented above have any weakness? This will be the focus of the remaining section of this work.

Human sacrifice in contemporary African society

This work has hinted that human sacrifice is a form of sacrifice in African Traditional Religion. Some scholars of African Traditional Religion like Ugwu and Ugwueye believe that this was not intended to undermine the value of human life. However, the logic is based on the belief that human sacrifice is the highest and most potent form of sacrifice one can perform in African Traditional Religion. During this epoch, people were sacrificed to gods to appease them when abomination is committed in the land or to avert a great calamity. Human being was also sacrificed by being buried alive, at the death of prominent personalities like king or queen. The idea behind this is that as a prominent man, that once had the service of slaves while alive that he would necessarily need them at the underworld. This finds meaning when one understands that for the African, death is not the end of life but a transition to the world of the ancestors. Also people were sacrificed to increase the potency of individual or community charms. This is informed by the belief that for one's charm to be powerful, one has to prepare it with human blood. Be that as it may, this work discovered that at certain point, the idea of human sacrifice was condemned as a violation of fundamental human right.

But what is worrisome is that today, most people are reverting to the idea of human sacrifice. This is common in what is called ritual killings. Some may argue that these forms of killing are not done in the context of African religious practices but the truth is that this argument does not hold water. This is because, it is African religious understanding about human sacrifice that informs and drives this practice. It is also most times African traditional religious priests and priestess that require people to perform this act in order to be successful in life. It is on this note that this work will construe ritual killings as forms of African traditional religious sacrifice.

Ritual killing has become so common that it has become a national worry. It is in line with this that minority leader House of Representative called for ritual killing to be declared a state of

¹⁵Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*, (Onitsha: St Stephens Press Inc, 2008), p.84

emergency in Nigeria in his motion titled “Need to curb the rising trend of ritual killing in Nigeria”. It was made clear in this motion that this drive for ritual killing is inspired by the erroneous belief that human sacrifice is the surest route to wealth, safety and protection. This belief resonates with the report in one of the Nigerian dailies Vanguard which reported that in August 2012, in Ebonyi state that seven people were arrested for kidnapping, killing and dismembering a young girl, reportedly for money-making rituals; two suspects confessed to the crime (Vanguard 28/2012). Similarly, leadership newspaper of April 2012 also carried the report that in Ogun State a young man was found dead with his head and genitals severed from his body; a close relation of the man was reportedly arrested in connection with the murder. The source (leadership 30 April 2012) indicates that a herbalist who performs money rituals and two other individuals were also arrested as suspects. Most recently, in Jan. 2022 in Ogun state, police arrested four teenagers in connection with the killing of twenty-two-year-old Sofiat Kehinde. The suspects, one of whom used to be romantically involved in with Kehinde, had decapitated her body with machete and proceeded to burn the head, ostensibly to use the ashes and body in money making rituals (punch, 6th Feb 2022).

From the foregoing one will notice immediately that there is a rising trend in the use of human for sacrifice. This, as already pointed out are practice common with African Traditional Religion in the past that is gradually returning in a more despicable manner. The following section will try to establish that this action is not rationally tenable.

Kant’s Categorical Imperative: Arguments against Human Sacrifice in Africa

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant stated the first formulation of the categorical imperative, namely, “... act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law.”¹⁶ Kant maintains his consistency that a maxim that cannot be made a universal law, either on the account of contradiction of itself or for the reason that it is in discordance with natural order should not be applied. In sum, Kant shows that when a principle of action cannot be universalized, a person is categorically prohibited from performing the action. Going by the above tenets of Kant one immediately sees the absurdity in using human for sacrifice as is obtainable in African traditional religion. This is against natural order. Again, it contradicts itself because the aim of sacrifice is the good of man, how then can man sacrifice himself for the good of himself? Who then benefits from the above sacrifice?

In addition, this law states that any law that cannot be made a universal principle should be abolished. We all know that human beings are self-seeking being. It is on this note that no one would want to be used as victim of sacrifice. Since, we cannot legislate that everybody should be used at one point or the other, then, no one should be used. Based on this inherent weakness this belief this practice should be jettisoned.

Again, Kant in his work went ahead to decree that man has a duty of preservation of the person in him and that of the person in others. In line with this role he asserts:

A human being cannot renounce his personality as long as he is a subject of duty, hence as long as he lives; and it is a contradiction that he should be authorized to withdraw from all obligations, that is, freely to act as if no authorization were needed for this action. To annihilate the subject of morality in one’s own person is *to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can*, even though morality is an end in itself.¹⁷

Thus, man is subject of law as well as a law giver himself and as such has the obligation to act according to moral law. He does not freely act against or contrary to the universal laws, which

¹⁶Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71

¹⁷Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 73-75

emanated from his will and legislated by his practical reason. In line with the above musing of Kant, one will agree with this author that human sacrifice is against moral law. In fact, killing is what the Igbo regard as *nsọani* (an abomination). Therefore, anyone who commits murder under any guise has automatically denounced his own life.

Moreover, while developing rational autonomy argument Kant made it clear that, we are autonomous beings precisely because the source of the laws that determine our exercise of freedom, or free choice (*Willkür*), ultimately resides within ourselves, i.e., within the will (*Wille*) as practical reason itself.¹⁸ Thus, Kant is not mincing words in asserting that unless man gives himself rules, 'it is uncertain whether man will not use his powers to destroy himself, and others, and the whole of nature'. The feasibility of our continued existence depends on our following freely adopted laws. Unlike the non-free nature, if we refuse to adopt and restrict ourselves according to 'objective' rules, that is, rules suitable to be held in common by rational wills, all kinds of lawlessness will result, which will certainly contradict the essential ends of mankind. It is on this note that this work makes bold to argue that Africans should legislate that on no account should human being be sacrificed, because that is what is rational the reverse is irrational.

Furthermore, the fact that Africans revere blood is a common knowledge. This comes out eloquently, when one appreciates African cultural values. One of this values is, sense of sacredness of life. Affirming the above belief E. Amadi said "in many African tribes the killing of a kinsman, the antithesis of caring for him, was not only a crime but also an abomination. After the murderer had been executed, his family would have to perform sacrifices and rites to remove the stain of evil and ward off the anger of the gods."¹⁹ This goes to show that shedding of blood is abhorred in Africa. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to life of others and to the peace of the community. In such, cases the principle that it is better for one man to die than for all the community to perish, applied.

Conclusion

This work exposed the understanding and practice of sacrifice in African Traditional Religion. It first of all established that sacrifice is a universal religious phenomenon. However, it pointed out that what is abhorrent is the re-emergence of human sacrifice in our contemporary society. It did establish that this re-occurrence of human sacrifice shows that people still think that human sacrifice is the most potent means of attracting the blessings of the gods. It therefore, through the use of Kant's categorical imperative establishes that the act of human sacrifice cannot be universal; hence, it needs to be prohibited. It is also against African religious ethics that abhors shedding of human blood.

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¹⁸Ibid. p. 213

¹⁹Amadi, Elechi. *Ethics in Nigerian culture*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Education books, 1982), p.58

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