

THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE IN YORUBA RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Abstract

Sacrifice occupies a fundamental place in the practice of African traditional religion. It is through sacrifices that the African relates to the spiritual beings, both good and bad, that surround him. His offerings of thanksgiving to the gods are offered through the making of sacrifices. When the time comes for the appeasement of the gods and other spiritual beings, it is through sacrifice that is done. However, this paper is concerned about sacrifice among the Yoruba people. In the traditional Yoruba religion and culture, sacrifice is referred to as (Ebo). It connotes offering something to a particular deity or cult in order to be in communion with them or to seek favours. It was very common and regular because sacrifices have both positive and negative effects. It is believed that Olodumare-God in Yoruba belief has deities that are mediators between him and human beings. It is then very important to offer sacrifices to these gods in order to represent them well in the presence of Olodumare. Items for sacrifices are regularly prescribed by the Ifa priests and how to carry out the approved sacrifice. This paper therefore gives explanation about the meaning and importance of sacrifice in the traditional Yoruba culture. It, however, observed that civilization has reduced the frequency of this practice, not making an

emphatic statement that they are no longer in practice but that they are done most of the time in secret. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry would be employed.

Key words: Sacrifice, Concept, Yoruba, Deities, Gods, *Olodumare*, *Ifa*, *Ebo* and Appeasement.

Introduction

Sacrifice is a way of offering something to gain another thing. It has meaning when someone renounces or gives up something to be rewarded with another object. The concept of sacrifice sounds like trade by barter- making exchange for something. Sacrifice is to give away something valuable for the possibility of gaining something of a great value in return. This can come in form of self-respect, trust, love, freedom, favours and prosperity. It may even be for the purpose of avoiding greater loss, which means, retaining what is of value to someone. “The giving up or foregoing of some valued thing for the sake of something of greater value or having a more pressing claim” Nu (2013). It can also be the offering of food, objects or the lives of animals to a higher purpose, in particular divine beings, as an act of propitiation or worship. Therefore, sacrifice is made for the purpose of worship and appeasement, for avoiding loss and for attaining a better thing. When it comes to worship in Africa however, sacrifice is the most primary and basic form of ritual and Nu (2013) upholds that “The Africans believe that verbalization is not enough in one’s relationship with the supernatural. Ifa divination serves as a preamble to prayer. Via Ifa divination we can ascertain how to pray, to whom to pray and for what.”

Sacrifice in African religion according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) is the act of offering the life of animal, person or object to the divine power or powers. Nu (2013) is of the opinion that For the Yoruba, divining (Ifa) serves as an approach to prayer and shows one why they need to pray and shows one the best procedure for elevating one’s prayer via some form of sacrifice. In this world of many choices, this complex and varied approach is still miraculously accurate and effective. In this world of choices, this complex and varied approach is necessary. The write up on Ifaglobal network in (2018) presents this definition to sacrifice (ebo) in Yoruba culture. “Ebo means sacrifice. Ebo is a ritual. Ebo is the prescription that is given within the IFA divination. It is the medicine used to solve problems. Ebo is a combination of materials that symbolically has meaning to a person’s situation.”

This is very important in every religious celebration and worship. Sacrifice is mainly for the purpose of contact or communion between the divine and man and to maintain relationship. Man has always employed

this means to pay dues to divinity, to ask for favours and to influence the divinity to be interested in the affairs of man. Africans hold sacrifice in high esteem because it is being directed to God. Blood sacrifice is the most important and efficacious of all sacrifices in the understanding of African rituals. This is evident in the offering of animal and human beings.

Human sacrifice is also predominant in Yoruba culture and religion. "This is a practice found in every race and culture throughout the world" Awolalu and Dopamu (1979).

It has its relevance in offering the best to the divine to satisfy him, especially in difficult times like the loom of epidemic, drought, war, flood, earthquakes or calamity. Human sacrifice was also done to accompany the dedication of a new temple or bridge, upon the death of a king, high priest and great leader. The sacrificed were supposed to serve or accompany the deceased leader in the next life. The story of *Moremi*, a Yoruba woman is relevant here. *Moremi* was a very brave and beautiful woman who, in order to deal with the problem facing her people, pledged a great sacrifice to the Spirit of the river *Esimirin* so that she could discover the strength of her nation's enemies. *Moremi*, following the war she returned to her first husband, King Oramiyan of Ife (and later Oyo), who immediately had her re-instated as his queen. In order to fulfil the pledge she made to *Esimirin* before embarking on her mission, her son *Oluorogbo* was given in sacrifice to the Spirit because this is what it asked her for when she returned to its shrine.

Who are the Yoruba?

Yoruba people according to Atanda (1989) one of the major ethnic groups in modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos State and a substantial part of Kwara State. A considerable number of Yoruba people also inhabit the South- Eastern part of Republic of Benin (formal Dahomey). In the same vein, Ogunyemi (2015) affirms that Yoruba, one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of that country. Much smaller, scattered groups live in Benin and Northern Togo. The Yoruba numbered more than 20 million at the turn of the 21st century. Yoruba people have shared a common language and culture for centuries.

Most Yoruba men are farmers, growing yams, corn (maize), and millet as staples and plantains, peanuts (groundnuts), beans, and peas as subsidiary crops; cocoa is a major cash crop. Others are traders or craftsmen. Women do little farm work but most of them sell produce from their husband's farm and they also do other trades like weaving, dyeing and midwives. Each community has leaders generally known as

Oba or *Kabiyesi* with his chiefs. These people are held in highest honour and in some cases, they are ritual leaders.

Yoruba as a group dwell in a world of myths, metaphors, poetry, and they strongly believe in *Ifa* divination system, which guides their steps and decisions. “Yoruba philosophy is best understood as a folk philosophy, a set of narratives and cultural practices that attempt to explain the causes and the nature of things affecting the corporeal and the spiritual universe.” Ogunyemi (2015). Yoruba people are community people; this is visible in their interaction with others especially during celebrations. Their communal life is also visible in their mode of dressing uniformly and sharing of common diets. Ogunyemi (2015) explains their communal life thus “the Yoruba also have several kinds of voluntary associations, including the *egbe*, a male recreational association; the *aaro*, a mutual-aid association of farmers; and the *esusu*, whose members contribute a fixed amount of money and from which they can receive loans.” *Iwofa* was also a practice among Yoruba people where a son or daughter is used as collateral until loan is paid. They also value honesty, humility, respect for others and diligence. All these are transmitted from generation to generation through oral traditions.

Yoruba Concept of Sacrifice

Sacrifice known as *Ebo* is very common in indigenous Yoruba culture. Indeed, it is part of their daily activities and likely items like: sheep, goat, food, fruits, eggs and any other prescribed stuff by the priest of the particular god to offer sacrifice to are used for sacrifices. After all, the write up on Ifaglobal network in (2018) shows that “all of the *ebo* materials come from the *Odu Ifa* that was cast, each condiment represent an important part of solving the clients problems, there is no condiment that should be left out. Basic condiments that are always present during any *ebo* i.e Cool water (*omi tutu*), honey (*oyin*), and gin (*oti*). Each one of these condiments are agents that supports the *ebo*, each condiments has its roll that it plays in the *ebo* ritual.”

These sacrifices are either exposed in the shrines, cross-roads, market places, some may even be buried, at times Yoruba eat or share sacrifices together with friends or community. However, how to go about the presentation of a particular sacrifice depends on the prescription of the diviner. These gods have their taste and taboos as well. Sacrifice is offered everyday by individual families so as to be in communion with the divinity. Community sacrifices are equally preformed regularly.

It is part of the belief of Yoruba that one’s a sacrifice is offered for a given purpose, through the consultation with *Ifa* that the solution is provided for the problem in question. Sacrifice must be offered regularly

both in good and bad times. Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016) carefully explain this as follows: “In a culture with strong beliefs in fairies and mystical causation, protective rituals and sacrifices are regularly performed. People must be protected from the wrath of fairies, and fairy-human social relationships must be harmonized. Therefore, whenever any misfortune occurs in Yorùbá society and the source remains unknown, both humans and invisible spirits are subjects of divination by the people concerned. To complete any divination process, there is always a prescribed sacrifice. Whether the prediction of the divination is good or bad, the client must always offer a sacrifice. If the prediction is good, a sacrifice will quicken a positive outcome; if the prediction is evil, a sacrifice will help dispel the ill effects.”

In addition to this, Obara-meji (2014) affirms that “It is important that the sacrifice be given on time, as a matter of fact immediately, as it is prescribed. Ifa says, “There is no difference between the person that refuses to offer sacrifice on time and the one that did not offer at all”. The write up on Ifaglobal network in (2018), settle for this in attempt to respond to what happens if Ebo is not done after consultation with the oracle? “Then you run the chances of making another problem occur stronger than your first problem you started with. It is not advisable to delay your ebo process especially when the *odu* has appeared. You should follow the guidance and wisdom of IFA and your IFA Priest who did the consultation. Once you have done IFA Divination you must always know that you have to do *ebo*, they both work hand in hand together. The *ebo* helps to shift one' circumstance to a balanced outcome.”

Types or Categories of Sacrifice

There are seven types or categories of sacrifice in Yoruba culture as Idowu (1969) affirms, this was later re-echoed by Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) as follows: Meal and Drink sacrifice is offered daily by individual and families to continue to appreciate the deity or divinity and to be in communion with the god. The head of the family is responsible for coordinating this sacrifice which can be termed as Morning Prayer for a particular household. Libation is poured here and prayers are offered. Individual present or interested members may be asked to add some intentions while all in attendance respond in resounding amen. This is equally done at feast days where food and drinks are prepared for sharing; all present must partake in it. There is no prearranged food; it depends on whatever the community can afford.

The second type is thanks –offering. This is done whenever a favour is received, like at the arrival of a new baby or one escaped from a misfortune or danger. This type of sacrifice can also be performed when one is asking for a particular blessing. Items like animal, fruits, vegetables

or articles that may be useful in the shrine are presented for sacrifice. At annual festival however, this is important as everybody would be encouraged to come with voluntary items for sacrifice.

The third one is votive offering. In the process of making a request, one may make a vow. This vow is an agreement between the god and the receiver of gift. In Yoruba culture, any vow made must be paid, if not the receiver may not be able to cope with the consequences. The case of *Oluronbi* can be applicable here, who in the process of asking for a child promised to return this child to *Iroko* tree after a while. Her request was eventually granted with the gift of a handsome baby boy which she did not want to release as promised. One day according to this story, as she was returning from the market in the company of this boy, passing under *Iroko* tree, the boy disappeared and was nowhere to be found. It was latter interpreted that *Iroko* tree claimed what was its own and *Oluronbi* went home sorrowful.

Another category of sacrifice is propitiation or expiation. This is done when the fury of the divinity is at its peak. Sacrifice here is offered to appease the god in pacification. Asking for forgiveness of past sins and promising to live a better life. It has its purpose in gaining back the favour of the deity. Sacrifices offered here are not shared! It is mainly for the divinity and must be treated as the divinity instructs. After the sacrifice has been duly offered, the person in question is relieved from the anger or chastisement of the divinity.

The fifth category of sacrifice is substitutionary sacrifice or offering. This is done as soon as a person is marked to die or there is a revelation that a particular person will die. An animal is used to substitute for the person. Other agreed items may be added. The items are rubbed against the body of the person in this situation and parked like a corpse for burial. This takes the place of the person that this type of sacrifice is prescribed for. It is then understood that the person is dead as pronounced. Obara meji (2014) gives a beautiful analysis of this type of sacrifice using his personal example thus: “When I did my initiation to *Ifa* (*Itefa*) I was told that my father would die, this was many years ago, this came out on the seventh day of my initiation which is called *Ije*, this is when all the Babalawos gather around and each of them tell you something from the *Odu*, your destiny, which comes out for you during initiation, I was told that in order for the death to be removed from my father, a female Goat had to be given as sacrifice to *Orunmila* otherwise known as *Ifa*. It was given and accepted. The life of the Goat was given instead of the life of my father. I would say that was a fair exchange.”

In the preventive sacrifice, it is done to avert sudden attack on a person or a community. An oracle may predict this beforehand or it may come through a consultation with the oracle when there is a problem like

epidemic or a chain of adversities. A preventive sacrifice is performed to stop it. The last is foundation sacrifice. This is done at the start of any important step or stage in one's life, for example, at birth, at puberty, during weeding, starting a building, settling down in a new town or when a new object has just been purchased. This type of sacrifice is to request for peace and progress in this new phase of life.

Although Nu (2013) states in contrary to the above that "The variety of sacrifice includes time, song, dance, money, change and life force offerings." This may not be totally acceptable in Yoruba context in the mind of the researcher. Nu's ideas are more of actions that accompany worship and celebrations rather than what sacrifice (*Ebo*) means in Yoruba perspective. Except if **variety** in his definition does not denote types and categories. Considering the write up of *Ifaglobal* network in (2018), it has been concluded that types of *Ebo* has no perimeter as against the assertion of Idowu (1969), Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) above that agree on seven types or categories. "There are *ebo* for long life, prosperity, wealth, victory, health, money, peace of mind, honour, and respect and so on; there is no limit to *ebo*."

In general, sacrifices are means of existence for Yoruba people. It is part of their belief that some spirits control the world. They must constantly and regularly connect to these spirits so that the world will be a peaceful place for human beings to stay. Regarding this, Akíntúndé and Fálólá (2016) remark that "Broadly speaking, four forces are at play in Yorùbá ritual: gods, ancestors, witches and other supernatural powers, and human beings. The function of sacrifice is to enlist the support of these four forces to achieve the desired ends and to ensure that none of the forces work against one's purpose." Human beings must be part of it because most of the food prepared for sacrifices will be consumed by them and they must be rewarded for being witnesses at the shrine.

At whatever time a sacrifice is prescribed by a deity through the priest or priestess, how to carry it out and items to be used will be recommended as well. This is particular to individual situation or in relation to those concerned. At times, *ifá* priest may carry out the sacrifice himself while the person drops money or items. It may be that the person should carry the sacrifice to a particular place to be accompanied by the priest. It could be the mother or friend of the person in question that would be asked to do it. There is no fixed person for this. *Ifá* must guide and the priest or priestess who is interpreting the mind of the deity must lead and see that it comes to a success.

Conclusion

This paper on sacrifice in Yoruba culture gives the meaning, types and importance of sacrifice (*ebo*) to the people and community. It is very

important to offer sacrifice since the world is being ruled by spirits and gods according to their belief and these spirits and gods must be regularly appeased so as to gain favour from *Olodumare*. Within the traditional African worldview in general, you are mainly responsible for your own self-improvement. If you want to change your condition you must make sacrifice. Since the deities guide the steps of the indigenous Yoruba people, they must make consultations before taking any decisions. After consultation with *ifa*, the next step is to prescribe a type of sacrifice that will march the request of the one in quest of insight. This sacrifice must be performed to avoid calamities.

Worship in Yoruba culture attracts a lot of, singing, drumming, and dancing especially during festivities. Worship can be a private affair whereby an individual venerates his or her personal deity, or it can be a public one, which was very common. Blood sacrifice was considered to be the uppermost hence the need to offer human beings and animals in the past. People would be ritually killed in a manner that was supposed to please or appease a god or spirit. Nowadays, human sacrifice is not very common since civilization has considered it as a murder. This has been replaced by animal sacrifice. Sacrifice is not celebrated as before either, this not to say that it is no longer in practice, but that it is not as popular as ever. We still have cases of seeing *Ebo* at cross roads and in front of some shines that are not hidden, without seen the person that put them there. Diviners are even consulted in secrets today; unlike before that it was done as a life style. In this age of civilization, *ebo* in Yoruba culture is done in secret.

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