

# **SACRIFICE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: DIFFERENTIAL FAITH ISSUES IN RELIGIONS**

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## **Introduction**

One interesting novelty about religion the word over is its absolute claims, claims which defy all rational explanations or scientific proofs. Infact, in all the claims, religion imposes upon man certain propositions which he finds himself adhering to without bothering to assess the credentials of such claims, such claims as (a) that God exists (b) that prayer is a conversation between God and man (c) that sacrifices are pleasing to the gods and a host of others are the ingredients on which religions rotate. Surprisingly, these claims point to the ultimate or the transcendental reality, which logically focuses on the supra-mundane as another side of existential reality. Two worlds indeed, nay the sensible and the supersensible worlds. That man finds himself making cult to these supernatural realities presupposes his belief and commitment to these spiritual forces, an indication as Ejizu (1985) would say that man's value scales and attitudinal orientations are basically the functions of his beliefs (P.138). There is no doubt therefore that belief is foundational to action and as such man's actions cannot be divorced from the situation in life that gave birth to the beliefs. I am inclined to think that this situation in life is subsumed within the matrix of a world-view which as it were is the driving force on which man's actions rotate. This is true with African world view vis-à-vis Igbo world-view which is the lens through which the mysteries of existence can be articulated and explained and a such becoming a framework through which time-space events can be given meanings.

Indeed it becomes the lens through which the harmonious co-existence between the supra-sensible and the sensible realities

within the cosmic order can be understood, appreciated and interpreted. Ejizu (1985) commenting on Igbo world view lends credence to this when he said that:

Man's existence, his welfare and destiny, are totally caught up with the general behavior of the forces above and around him. So while deploying the power of his reason and utilizing his mental and physical skills to better his lot, man expends as much energy and ingenuity in trying to sustain the delicate balance between the various orders of his world-view in order to ensure the continued welfare of his life and that of his family.

The question arises as to the methods on which man must adopt in order to maintain the cordial and harmonious relationship with these supra-sensible realities. This is where the Igbo, using his ingenuity and skills developed the principle of symbolisms which are portent power houses in the activity field of any religious discourse. Again oracles and divination are developed as aids of explanation and control of any mysterious occurrences. One must remark here that the aftermath of any oracular consultation/divination is information about an issue at stake as well as spiritual cum physical prescription or remediation of the mysterious occurrences which most often involves prescription of sacrifices.

Oracular consultations, no doubt implicate human-divine encounter in which man believes that there is above him a supra sensible reality, who as, it were, can reveal to him through the instrumentality of a diviner the hidden mysteries or occurrences that can affect his life for good or for bad. This belief and knowledge influence his life styles and attitudinal orientations. Thus the prescriptions of a diviner to a client in a bid to offset his problems are accepted whole heartedly even if when such prescription may seem unreasonable, illogical and may not be susceptible to any empirical proof.

This is indeed the case of sacrifice especially from its ritual sense

which falls within the ambiance of virtue of religion. When one, for instances, accepts and believes that sacrifices are pleasing to the gods and goes ahead to perform some sacrifices to the gods for one reason or the other, he is only demonstrating the reality of the efficacy of sacrifices.

This paper argues that humanity, all over the ages, by virtue of the mysteries of existence have come to assume/believe that there is a supra-sensible reality who as it were can give answers to these mysteries. And in his bid to reach this reality, he had developed symbols, rites and rituals as instruments of communion and communication with him. Sacrificial rites and rituals are major avenues and these are universal to all religions of the world. The only differences amongst religions of the world will be on the modus operandi of these sacrificial rituals and rites.

Thus this paper will among other things base its discourse on the following:

- The paradox of the “one and the many” in Religions
- The meaning – content of sacrifices in African traditional Religion  
Sacrifices in Judaism, Christianity and one Eastern Religions  
(Hinduism) .
- Towards a synthesis
- Summary and conclusions.

### **The Paradox of the “One and the Many” in Religions**

Man's awareness of the supra-sensible realities constitutes what I call virtue of religion. From the ontological perspective, man accepts the reality of the existence of the Supreme Being and thus moves forward to know this supreme reality. It is this search for God that has given birth to the numerous religious systems that we have in the world today. Watch Tower (1990) elegantly paints the picture in this way:

During the thousands of years of mankind's history, man's search for god has led down to many pathways. The result has been the enormous diversity of religious expressions found world-wide, from the endless variety of Hinduism to

the monotheism of Judaism, Islam and Christendom and to the oriental philosophy of Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. In of the other vast religions, mankind has turned to animism, magic and spiritism (p. 1).

Of course, one would envisage the above submission since the awareness of God in man is within the periscope of what he feels that God is. This is understandable bearing in mind that God is spiritual and immaterial and cannot be observed, cannot be subjected to empirical proof and as such perceived, conceived and understood, in different ways by difference peoples. It is not therefore surprisingly that man's quest for the supernatural and the means to reach him must be basically and fundamentally on individual subjective perceptions and conceptions. Within this framework, man's evolution of sacrificial rites and rituals must equally and necessarily be moulded within his perceptive categories.

From the above dimension, certain insights can be gained.

- That there is one supreme being whom man is aware of and believes in his supremacy. This implies that religion qua religion is one.
- That there are many pathways to reach this supreme being by man. This implicates the numerous religious systems we have in the world today.
- That these religious systems are only the different branches of the same “religion qua religion” and are therefore brothers and sisters from the same stem/parents.
- That “religion qua religion” is eternal and universal but religion as systems are borne in time and space in accordance with the founder's perceptions, historical and geographical undercurrents etc.
- The insight above will definitely open up some visits of light or road map on fundamental differential and similar faith issues in religious systems. Such a major issue as sacrifices in religions becomes very ad rem and germane in a paper

like this. I say this without any fear of contradiction since I believe that the issue as sacrifice and its import in the life of man in his quest for cosmic harmony is wholistically encompassing in all aspects of man's life in the cosmos.

### **The Meaning-Content of Sacrifices in ITR**

The word "Sacrifice" can be used in two senses, namely (Arinze, 1970).

- (a) The popular, personal or secular sense
- (b) The ritual/religions sense.

### **Sacrifice in the Popular Sense**

Here sacrifice means a renunciation for a motive eg, 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.

### **Sacrifice in the Ritual Sense**

This has its strict and proper sense only in public religious worship. 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 and it is in this ritual sense that we shall use sacrifice in this paper. Yes, sacrifice in this sense is an act of offering a victim to the Divine power of or powers. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) sacrifice forms an essential part of every religious ceremony and is fundamental to worship.

### **Sacrifice in A.T.R**

According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) Sacrifice means, sacrifice is primarily a means of contact or communion between the Divine and man. It 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.

The scholars above focused on the functionality of sacrifices in the dynamics of human life in relation with the spiritual forces. Firstly, is that man recognizes the supremacy of these powers/forces over himself and that he must endeavour to maintain a harmonious relationship with them, a relationship that must necessarily implicate a gift tendency to these forces to elicit their favours. Secondly, 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. Sacrifice, in the above understanding, seems to be the basis on which E.B. Tylor anchored his gift theory of sacrifice in African Traditional Religion. Although this theory has been criticized by an array of African scholars, all the same, one must realize that African Traditional religion Centres on man and man's relationship with the spiritual powers are usually expressed in maternalistic terms. Since man can maintain horizontal harmonious relationship through exchange of gifts, so also does he extend this to the Deities to maintain his balance and harmony with these spiritual forces.

In sacrifice in African Traditional Religion therefore, the web of relationship of forces in Africa's ontological hierarchy makes the African universe a complete fluid in which reality is viewed as a unity. Thus in African Traditional Religion, sacrifices of which of ever type are basically and primarily made by man to create or restore harmonious relationships within the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the cosmic order. This indeed tallies with the goal of interaction of beings in African world-view Mutuls (1987) corroborates this as he remarks;

The goal of interaction of beings in African World-view is

the maintenance of the integration and balance of the beings in it. Harmonious interaction of beings lead to the mutual strengthening of the beings involved and enhances the growth of life. A pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the integration and harmony of the whole ...man strives to be in harmony with God, the deities and his fellow man... He must constantly consult oracles and divination to assure himself that he is in the right relationship with all the forces in his world. He must frequently engage in sacrificial rituals to reinforce his communion with the forces to repair any interruptions that may have occurred. (PP.78-79).

Metuh's view eloquently validates my earlier assertion of ambivalence in any sacrificial act in African Traditional religion vis-à-vis Igbo Traditional Religion. I can say therefore, without any fear of contradiction that in sacrificing to God by man, he underscores his centrality in Igbo Traditional religion. I can say therefore, without any fear of contradiction that in sacrificing to God by man, he underscores his centrality in Igbo cosmic structure. He underscores the supremacy of the Supreme Being and the other spiritual; forces in Igbo ontological hierarchy, all existing for the sake of man. Thus man admits the transcendency of God as well as this malleability. He can therefore be manipulated to dance to man's own music. This brings out the religio-magico dimensions of sacrifice among the Igbo of Nigeria. In A.T.R/I.T.R, sacrifices can be distinguished between the religious and the magical. On the religious dimension, the supreme Being, Chukwu is the sole beneficiary of sacrifice in which man acknowledges His supremacy while on the magical dimension, the supreme Being Chukwu (God) is open to manipulation by man. Sacrifice is ATR/ITR from the above analysis cannot but be viewed as a Religio-Magico network.

### **Sacrifice in Judaism**

Commenting on sacrifice in Judaism, Okpalike (2008) has this to say, "Sacrifice is at the centre of the Jewish expression of faith in the one God. It is the most complicated but dynamic area in the study of

Judaism and could be described as the most consistent element in Judaism” (P.27). Okpalike seems to have maintained this view against the backdrop of the overwhelming despair of the Jews after the catastrophes of the vandalism of Nebuchadnezzar in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the total destruction of the temple by Vespasian in 70AD. These indeed affected the national pride of the Jews as a covenanted and elected children of God. These catastrophes were interpreted by the deuteronomistic writers to be the results of the Jews betrayal of their covenant bond with Yahweh their God. Thus it became necessary in this situation to evolve a platform or framework to appease Yahweh so as to restore the covenant bond. This reconstruction in later Judaism could not but have been a re-enactment of the garden of Eden episode in which Adam's loss of favour from God as a result of his disobedience necessitated the declaration of “mea culpa” as were evident in the responses of both Adam and Eve to the questions of deeds of commission posed to them by God. Despite their smartness in shifting blames of their action, the necessary consequences of breaching the terms of their garden of Eden covenant with God was not negotiable. As was said earlier, it was loss of favour from God, nay a curse, indeed a course that eventually was extended to all humanity, engulfing man to bondage and loss of his rights and dignity. I am inclined to think that it was this loss of God' favour by man that necessitated appeasing and pacification of God by man in early Judaism. Okpalike (2008) anchoring his endorsement and validation of the above statement on Gen. 4:3-5 has this to say: “According to biblical accounts, it was this fall of man and his consequence incapacitation to interact with God that necessitated sacrifice” (P.29).

In the above instance, sacrifice must have originated in early Judaism to restore broken relationship between Adam and Yahweh. Although we are not told anywhere where Adam performed a sacrifice, but it could be deciphered from the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, Adam's progenitors that they got the idea of sacrifice from their parents.

However, we may not rule out the fact that the practice of sacrifice to appease the gods was a common phenomenon amongst Israel's neighbours and in which case Israel might have borrowed this from them or vice versa. This can be attested to by an array of scholars.

McSrath and Inschoot (1963) echoed the above view thus:

The ancestors of the Israelites and indeed many of the later Israelites thought, as did the Babylonian, the Egyptians and other peoples of the Ancient Near East (ANE) that the deity has need for food and drink and therefore the best food and drink which they, themselves used was proper to bring in sacrifice (P.2085).

The above world-view and practice must have been premised against the backdrop of man's quest to maintaining a harmonious and cordial relationship with the deities who were believed to occupy higher vital ranks than man and as such would use their exalted powers to help man. Thus man uses sacrifices to elicit the patronage of the deities. The idea of sacrifices as veritable tools for appeasing and placating the deities among the Jews has also been underscored by Rattray (1985) as quoted by Okpalike (2008) that "Israelites, like their Mesopotamian neighbours, admitted of their natural task of feeding, placating, appeasing and worshipping the gods" (p.42).

Going by the above view, one cannot but acknowledge the fact that even before the systematization of sacrificial rites in Judaism; sacrifice was already an important part of the lives of Jewish Progenitors and patriarchs (Okpalike 2008). For the Israelites therefore, sacrifices bordered on the virtue of religion through which man showcased or demonstrated the supremacy and Lordship of God to who man depends for his life and sustenance.

In Judaism, there is no singular mode of expression of sacrifice. It could mean a gift offered to men (Minhah) Gen (32) or anything dedicated or set aside for God (Qordban) in the form of farm produce or solid treasures and a sacred slaughtering (Zebah) in which the life of an animal was offered to god. It seems that this life-

giving sacrifice was the most pronounced in Judaism. Rattray (1985) in Okpalike (2008) echoes this thus:

The most important of any animal sacrifice was the disposal of the blood at the altar. Whether dashed against its sides or smeared on its horns this ritual act made the sacrifice valid, in fact, it distinguished sacrifice from mere slaughter. (P.42).

In this sacrifice, blood is the central element, a symbol of life and as such in this sacrifice the victim, the sacrifice and god merge into a unity in a mysterious way. Sacrifice in Judaism therefore implicates man's endorsement of the Lordship of God and man's utter hopelessness and helplessness outside God. Thus in Judaism sacrifice implies man's reciprocal obligation of offering victims to Yahweh for His patronages to him. It entails man's total submission to Yahweh.

### **Sacrifice in Eastern Religion's vedic Religions**

Sacrifice in the eastern religion can only be understood within the framework of the vedic world-view. This is so, considering the fact that world-views are foundational to a people's value scales and altitudinal orientations. In vedic world view, there is only one eternal and uncreated reality-the soul which permeates all things, man and beasts alike, and thus nothing is created and nothing annihilated for everything is in a continuous movement, changing from one state to another in an endless manner. Thus Okpalike (2008) citing prabhupada (1984) corroborates the above thus: "The uncreated individuals' soul continues in an eternal journey, manifesting in different bodies, physical and spiritual" (p.23). This implies that the same spirit soul is there and does not undergo any change. At death, the individual soul changes the body and transmigrates to another body in the next birth, either material or spiritual. The Vedic religions endorse the above position insisting that it is this knowledge that constitutes self-realization, a realization in which man knows that the spirit soul is enclosed in the body and that all of man's desires and aspirations are subsumed within this soul. Arazu (2003) echoes this as he writes: The mystery is that everything man has ever looked for or aspired to is within his

very core. Not knowing this truth, he wastes his time looking for them outside. Knowing this truth is knowing that by which every other thing is known.

Vedic religion endorses this inner power in man as God. Okpalike (2008) echoes this thus: “God is understood precisely as this same Soul-Kirishna. God is not an objectified reality but all encompassing absorbing all and absorbed by all” (p.42). Murphet (1967) had earlier expressed the idea elegantly and poetically thus: “That which is one in many, many in one, yet neither one nor many-I bow to that” (p.126). In the light of the above, Okpalike asserts, Okpalike asserts that man is this soul. He remarks:

Being this soul, man seeks God precisely in that which lies within. The more he seeks the truth within, the more he abandons or forsakes that which is material. The essence of Vedic religion is the renunciation of materiality and the embrace of the spiritual within. (p.42).

Getting the knowledge that God is within man therefore is the ultimate search in Vedic religions. It is against the backdrop of this search and the modus operandi of the search that sacrifice takes its bearing. The search for this knowledge becomes so vital in Vedic religion as it is through this knowledge that man can be liberated from materiality which is a stumbling block to the purification of the soul. Okpalike corroborates this as he notes:

Sacrifice in the Vedas must be understood against the backdrop of man's eternal journey and immutability. The votary of the vedic religions strives for liberation from materiality through a series of sacrifices that purifies the uncreated and unchangeable soul. In Vedic understanding, that which is scarified is always and constantly material, directly or indirectly. The nature of sacrifice is the giving up or burning down of materials for the purification and liberation of the spirit. The sole purpose of this sacrifice is to attain ultimate knowledge. (p.42).

Although, sacrifices are generally performed in Vedic religions to attain knowledge, there is another type of sacrifice specifically done to the Demigods who are appointed ambassadors of Krishna (God) to manage material affairs. The demigods are (Indra, Candra and Varuna) are believed to be parts and parcel of the supreme personality of God-head. These demigods, according to Prabhupada (1984) receive sacrifices for their satisfaction for anticipated favours. This seems to tally with E.B. Tylor's gift theory of sacrifice in which sacrifices are offered to the deities in order to elicit their patronage. This is implied in Prabhupadas assertion that: The Vedas direct sacrifices to satisfy these demigods so that they may be pleased to supply air, light and water sufficiently to provide good grains B. (p.3.14).

One can observe two strands of sacrifices from the submissions above – one a loving transcendental service to God (Krishna) and the other, the gifts to the Demigods for patronage. In this wise, sacrifice in Vedic religion can, like in African Traditional Religion be adjudged to be religio-magical. However, it should be stressed that the religious dimension of sacrifices in the Vedic religions is more pronounced than the magical dimension. This is echoed by Okpalike as he writes: “Sacrifice is in fact, all about devotion to the Lord-Krishna. It is the means through which the devotee is constantly purified for Sadhana or Nirvana” (p .46).

### **Sacrifice in Christianity**

Sacrifice in Christianity can only be understood and appreciated against the backdrop of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, a fall which early Judaism orchestrated to affect all humanity. According to Jewish thought, man, from this moment was exposed to a serious predicament, the original sin, from which he could only be released or liberated by a vicarious redeemer. The centrality of Jesus Christ in Christianity is hinged upon this thought pattern.

Thus Okpalike (2008), corroborates this as he maintains:

Beyond the interpretations of Judaism, Christianity elicited from the same source the idea that humanity and

the whole creation were in divine need of salvation, having established the universal effects of original sin (p. 50).

The incarnation of God in human form in the person of Jesus, who as it were identified with man in the world and his eventual brutal assassination by the Jewish authorities marked Jesus out as an extraordinary figure. In fact, his death was so significant to Christendom that it was adjusting by early and later Christians as a supreme sacrifice in which the sacrificer became the sacrificed. In Christian theology, Jesus emptied himself totally and entirely to God, his father. Christian religiosity and spirituality are hinged on this sacrifice, a sacrifice that totally and wholly bordered on the virtue of religion.

For Christianity therefore, there is one sacrifice and one victim and one priest. (Okpalike 2008). It is one sacrifice that sufficed for all things, and for all times, and that this sacrifice cannot be repeated (Heb 10:12). The sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist therefore encodes in itself a universal sacrifice. Christ is explicitly sacrificed, and the people in turn make themselves a spiritual sacrifice in union with Christ. It is Christ who is offered and who offers himself on behalf of humanity and all creation to the father. Thus in the Eucharist one includes himself in the sacrifice of Christ thereby being a partaker of the salvation wrought by Christ in his death on the cross. Okpalike summarizes this position thus: “By including oneself in the sacrifice of Christ, one is offered in such a manner that the former disobedience he inherited in Adam is atoned for in the obedience of Christ” (p.53).

So we can say that Sacrifice in Christianity, strictly speaking is ones' total submission to the will of God in all things. It is against this backdrop that Okpalike categorically maintain that:

Sacrifice (in Christianity) is the unflinching obedience one offers to God through Christ, who is the ransom for the sin of humanity. All other practices of fasting, abstinence,

almsgiving and self denial are physical forms of spiritual conformity with the sacrifice of Christ. (p.54)

### **Towards a synthesis and Conclusion**

This work as it were, did not go into the nuances of the conceptual analysis of the word sacrifice since this would bring confusion as a result of the illusive and enigmatic nature of the word. Instead we studied the term sacrifice from an unbiased and phenomenological stand points and discovered that the meaning-content cum the functionality of sacrifice in the different religious systems studied can only be understood within the framework of the cultural and cosmological backdrops of the religion.

Judging from the four religious systems studies. African Traditional Religion, the Vedic Religions, Judaism and Christianity, we observed that sacrifices hinge on the dynamic process of Divine-human encounter. It is a ritual action which is a kind of drama in which the hidden terrain of the cosmic order is made manifest by the human performer. This can be done on the basis of man's total submission to God or manipulating God to his own advantage. Thus the religio-magical dimensionality of sacrifices. The magical domain of sacrifices is very prominent in both African Tradition Religion and The Vedic Religions. However, in both Judaism and Christianity, sacrifice border on the virtue of religion. Again, in sacrifice, there is alienations and renunciation of human goods and this is common on all the religions under study and the nature of the goods differ from culture to culture. It must be remarked also that apart from the renunciatory nature of sacrifice, they also play mediatory roles between the divine and the humans. The sacramentality of sacrifices in all the religions studies id quite evident for a sacrifice, its hidden and visible dimensions are made manifest-all moving towards union with the supernatural reality.

All religions therefore tend towards a centre-God, and in all man's religious practices within the framework of any religions one cannot but be geared towards this single theme. So, we can say that religion

qua religion is one but religion as systems are many. This brings up the principle of the “one and the many” in nature, a principle which underscores the principle of unity-in-diversity and vice versa. Man should acknowledge and appreciate this principle in religions vis-à-vis religious practices.

In this work, we have established how faith expresses itself in different cultures and these differences add colour and glamour to our world since each complement the other to form a unity. It is against this backdrop that we can say that the seeming differences in sacrificial rituals in all the religions studied complement each other. Thus we can equally say that the differences in sacrificial rituals among religions mark out the distinctiveness and identity of such religions while their similarities mark out their unity of purpose. This was echoed by Stendahl (1978) when he wrote:

Humankind is one family. But if we are truly brothers, and if we feel safe in that knowledge, then, we can afford to be different. Indeed, our differences become increasingly important lest our identity be swallowed up. Given the global oneness, our pluralism is not a liability but an asset. God may be one, but religions are many. They centre their power where the culture is most distinct. (p.7).

All religions indeed centre their power on sacrifices and this explains why sacrifice has become the dominant and paramount principle by which people all over the world interpret religious beliefs and practices.

Egbocha and Onu (2008) write:

Sacrifice is central in all religions of mankind and it is a symbolic act that establishes relationship between man and the sacred order. It is indeed the very heart of all religions of the world. It is the medium through which different religions are emergized, nourished and sustained. (p.66).

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