

## A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF MODERNITY ON SACRIFICE IN CONTEMPORARY YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGION

By

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### Abstract

*In the ancient world, sacrifice has been at the centre of most religions and affairs of the community. In other words, traditional sacrifice as an integral part of African culture is as old as human history. It occupies a unique place in human experience because from different cultural backgrounds, man always engage in it on regular basis. Previous studies of sacrifice in Yoruba traditional religion always examine the phenomenon from religious, ethical and psychological perspectives with little attention paid to the sociological study of the subject matter. The universal prevalence of sacrifice shows that it has been primeval and deeply rooted in the instincts of humanity. Whether it was first enjoyed by an external command, or whether it was based on the issue of sin and lost communion with God which is stamped by His hand on the heart of man, is an historical question which cannot be determined. This sacrificial practice varies from one religion to another, but similar in its purposes in Yoruba traditional society. This article examines the paramount position of sacrifice within Yoruba traditional religion, its types and the influence of modernity on it. The relevance of sacrifice in the modern society and recommendations that will be of great help to our contemporary Nigerian society are also considered.*

**Keywords:** *Sociological study, Influence, Modernity, Sacrifice, Yoruba Traditional Religion.*

### Introduction

The work is a sociological study of the influence of modernity on sacrifice in contemporary Yoruba traditional religion. As Yoruba often say “sacrifice is prayer”. This is to say that it is the very essence of religion. It is a means of communion between a worshipper and the object of worship. There is a sense in which every act of worship may be described as a sacrifice. It must be observed also that every act of worship has an element which may be described as a sacrifice. What is offered in sacrifice, according to African Traditional Religion, depends on the occasion of sacrifice and the taste of the particular divinity to whom the sacrifice is offered<sup>1</sup>.

For the meal offering, all kinds of food may be offered: fowls, sheep, pigeons are among the living creatures which are commonly offered. It must be noted that there are certain things called taboos to particular divinities – things that are never done or eaten. These must be avoided during sacrifice. As it has already been observed, the taste of the divinity must be taken into consideration. Thus there are certain things which by tradition are offered in sacrifice.

Among the Yoruba it is believed that Ogun – the god of iron – is fond of dogs, cocks, roasted yams, palm oil, kolanuts and palm wine. Orisanla prefers snails cooked in sheer butter; although animal may be offered according to need or prescription. When a victim is offered, the extremities and entrails are laid on the emblems of the divinities or exposed in a vessel or on the

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ground before the temple or shrine. There are occasions in which the whole animal or fowl is exposed before the shrine. Certain sacrifices are to be treated as prescribed by an oracle.

With regards to the general treatment of things offered, they may be exposed burnt, buried or shared as communion between the divinity and the worshippers. There is no doubt that human sacrifice has been offered in the past and probably being offered even now. In the olden days, it was an open suffering. Human sacrifice was an item of worship everywhere in the world at one stage or another in the development of religion and no nation can claim exemption to this.

Human sacrifice was an attempt to give the best possible in a given situation to the divine power as Abraham or Jephthah offered his own child to Yahweh. Always behind this type of sacrifice there is a spiritual motive. Human sacrifice is inevitable but it is properly understood. It is a spiritualized sacrifice, and this could mean self – sacrifice for the progress of a community, society or nation.

### **Methodology**

The methods adopted in this study are the sociological and interactive models of enquiry. These methodologies are appropriate due to the nature of the study, which is multi-disciplinary. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Sociology is the scientific study of the nature and development of society and social behaviour<sup>2</sup>. It can also be defined as a scientific study of relationship existing among people living together in a given society<sup>3</sup>. In other words, sociology is the study of human, environmental and ideological components of society. Sociological model of enquiry becomes an appropriate tool because the study dealt heavily on social interactions. Here, fourteen people of different categories were orally interviewed using both structured and unstructured methods as the need arose. Therefore, interactive model of investigation is of paramount importance when multi-disciplinary subjects like the case at hand is being discussed. It helps the researcher to freely move from one discipline to another, wearing as it were, dual lenses.

### **Types of Sacrifice in Yoruba Traditional Religion**

It has been established that sacrifice is a tribute paid by the dependent to his lord, an offering to deity. It equally means to give up something important for some good purpose. Hence, various materials are brought forward as sacrifice or offering to God. According to Adewale<sup>4</sup> (1988) and Nabofa<sup>5</sup> (2002), the common types of sacrifice in Yoruba traditional religion are as follows:

#### ***Thanksgiving sacrifice***

This is done when what one has asked for is granted or when one escapes a danger or it might be end of a season such as harvest time. It might be that one is saved from accident, danger, sickness or success in business. This is usually done in appreciation of prosperous issues for which the divinity is being thanked. When it is a gift, it is a token of recognition in which a worshipper appreciates what the tutelary divinity did for him; it is a means of buying a favour. This offering could be in form of ornaments for shrines or temples, a dog or animal, fruits or

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vegetables. These are usually given to the tutelary divinity and occasionally the animal gifts may be shared with the divinity by the people.

### ***Foundation sacrifice***

This sacrifice is known as *ipinle* among the Yorubas. It is a kind of preventive sacrifice which is done when or before one starts farming cultivation, building of a new house, village or town and other similar things. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that the world belongs to God. This means that man's life and his undertakings cannot prosper unless they are blessed by the owner or Lord of this universe.

### ***Substitutional sacrifice***

This sacrifice has element of propitiation, prevention and substitution. It is using animal to avert the death of a man through ritual of touching the man's fore-head on the animal before offering (the animal) it to God or deity. Hence, the animal dies in place of the man. Also, a man targeted for death could be replaced by another man that sees first the sacrifice offered. Sometimes, something of value to the person (e.g. clothes or gold or the best cap or even money) is buried with sacrifice; again the person may be advised to change his house for another.

### ***Votive sacrifice***

This is payment of vow, promise or covenant. This type of sacrifice is not prescribed by an Ifa Priest. It is not compulsory but once a vow is made, it must be fulfilled otherwise the wrath of the deity will fall on the person. The sacrifice when carried out has become a sort of thanksgiving. A good example of this is when a sterile woman makes a vow with Ogun and she has the child before the next Ogun festival, she is bound to fulfil her vow during the next Ogun festival.

### ***Preventive sacrifice***

This sacrifice is being offered when there is a warning of an impending danger. Thus, it averts danger ahead or evils that would have happened to someone. This sacrifice is done before one embarks on an enterprise, journey or marriage. In this case, there may be traditional prescriptions for the sacrifice but very often the oracles say what the offering is and how it is carried out. It is carried away by the priest and treated according to tradition.

### ***Propitiatory or expiatory sacrifice***

When some wrongs had been committed, Africans express their sorrow for the offence by propitiatory sacrifice. It is a corrective sacrifice to settle wrong doings. It can be simple or not expensive; where an individual is concerned, it may not be elaborate. When a whole community is concerned, the prescription is high or of several articles or victims. This offering is never shared with the divinity; it is either burnt, buried, treated with oil and exposed at crossroads (Orita) or open place. In consequence the wrath of the divinity is withdrawn from the person or the community.

### ***Meal and drink offering***

This is commonly offered almost every day but particularly on the sacred day of the divinity and during festivals. This is the kind of food that people eat in their homes although it is usually richer in quality; the meal is offered first to the divinity and a token portion is placed on the sacred emblem or before the shrine and the rest is shared among the worshippers. Drinking offering is every day and all acts of worship are observed; the drink offering could be ordinary water, palm wine or any kind of wine.

### ***Human sacrifice***

This is an act of killing human beings as sacrifice. It is believed that those who died in sacrifice ascended to the paradise of the sun, as opposed to the relatively gloomy underworld.<sup>6</sup> Thus, sacrifice is a daily activity as contact with deity, ancestors and divinities are equally daily activities. Man cannot survive without sacrifice to Supreme Being whom they rely or depend upon for survival and eternal life.

### **Sacrifice and Modernity**

The word 'sacrifice' comes from two Latin roots, *Sacer*, meaning 'sacred', and *facere*, meaning to make' or to do. So sacrifice would mean, to make sacred in this context. According to Abe, sacrifice is a gift given or offered by an inferior to a superior.<sup>7</sup> It can also be referred to as the killing of an animal or person or giving up of a possession as an offering to a god or goddess. Sacrifice itself is a part of worship. On worship, Arinze says: The word worship includes such phrases as, "to pray," "to offer sacrifice" and "to make offerings<sup>8</sup>." The Yoruba have the word "sin or isin or esin," to refer to service of men. A person who is served by another can say "O sin mii." He served me. The objective phenomena of West African Traditional Religion are the cults of the divinities. All this suggests that a(n) good definition for the word 'sacrifice' might be to make something set apart from ordinary reality'. Throughout the globe, sacrifice has been used as a way of appeasing and pleasing the gods, repaying them for human sins, and even for becoming one with them. Rene Girard defines sacrifice as "an act of mediation between a sacrifice and a deity"<sup>9</sup>

Modernity is the state or quality of being modern. Therefore, modern according to Webster's Dictionary is coined from the Latin 'Modus' which means to 'measure'.<sup>10</sup> It is a state of or characteristic of the present or recent times; not ancient: often used to designate certain contemporary tendencies and schools of art, music, literature, etc. it connotes up-to-date; not old fashioned, anti-quoted or obsolete. Blankenship (2005) defined the concept of modernity as "the idea of a modern world brought into existence by science leading to an ideology of materialistic beliefs". The two major concepts of modernity, according to Blankenship, are humanity and progress.<sup>11</sup> Humanity by itself is not sufficient; with it comes the need to progress. In order for people to see the meaning of humanity, they need a sense of progression towards a better life on this world. This becomes the ideology of modernity. In his own view, Aylward opined that change in modern Africa is both structural and organizational.<sup>12</sup> By organizational we mean a change in the scale of social relationships.

### **Religious Use of Sacrifice**

According to the people interviewed, sacrifice is an act or action of making an offering of animals, vegetable life, of food, drinks or incense of some precious object to a deity or spiritual being<sup>13</sup>. That is, something consecrated and offered to God or to a divinity or an immolated victim or an offering of any kind laid on an altar or otherwise presented in the way of religious thanksgiving, atonement or conciliation. It is like the voluntary offering by Jesus of himself to

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reconcile God and man. It is destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else, giving up some desirable thing on behalf of a high object.

We can distinguish between internal sacrifice and external sacrifice. Internal sacrifice is the internal offering of ourselves to God who is the creator and final end while external sacrifice is the external manifestation of this interior act when “something is done” to the things offered to God<sup>14</sup>. It is necessary to say that the virtue of sacrifice lies on the dictum that the result you get (after making sacrifice) is higher than what you had offered as sacrifice.

### **The Influence of Modernity on Sacrifice**

There is no doubt that sacrifice is at heart of Yoruba traditional religion. It is not surprising that increasing research in religion over the past decade has led to a renewed interest in sacrifice as well; when modern people use the word ‘sacrifice’ today, they usually mean something negative and uncomfortable. The word had a quite different meaning in the religious lives of the ancients. The question now is: why did the word sacrifice come to have such a negative meaning?

The answer may be in the Christian re-making of the word based on the crucifixion of Jesus. This sacrifice on the cross summed up all the sacrifices of the Old Testament and is seen as the last sacrifice ever needed, as it created a new relationship between man and God. So, sacrifice came to mean giving up one’s life, or at least giving until it hurts. The concept of ‘giving up’ here rather than the ancient religious concept of ‘giving to’ is of paramount importance to this discussion.

Thus, the contemporary usage of the word sacrifice has portrayed the operational sacrifice as something evil. Many over-zealous missionaries used pejorative or derogatory terms to devalue some of our traditional beliefs and practices in which sacrifice is one. It is highly painful, however, that this imported or preached religions that have criticized every aspect of traditional religion later engaged in human sacrifice in the New Testament. This is reference to a point in time where Jesus Christ was made the last sacrifice for the Christians.

Besides, there is a process of social change from operational or traditional form of sacrifice to practicing or contemporary modern sacrifice. It connotes different meanings of great value in interpretation. Improvement in medical facilities has really affected the practice and activity of sacrificial rites in contemporary Yoruba society. Many of the things Yoruba people used to sacrifice on are no longer there. Some of these sicknesses and diseases are now treated in the hospital without resulting to sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

Another influence of modernity on sacrifice in contemporary Yoruba traditional religion is the influence of new religions. That is, the imported religions such as Christianity and Islam (has) have portrayed the activities and involvement of sacrifice as a negative phenomenon with negative implication. The adherents of these two religions with the orientations they have got from their over-zealous missionaries used a lot of pejorative and derogatory terms to devalue the indigenous traditional practices in which the issue of sacrifice is not an exception.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of urbanization on sacrifice has adversely affected the practice and effective operation of the phenomenon. According to Oso, one of the common problems emanating from urbanization is the breakdown of African kingship and family life in cities.<sup>17</sup> The obvious consequence is a gradual collapse of extended family rites and inevitable damage to Yoruba

<sup>14</sup> R.N. Arinze. 2005. *The Theology of African Traditional Religion*, Enugu: Rabboni Pubs. International, p.159.

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traditional practices such as sacrifice. For the Yoruba, that is a tragic reversal of sacrificial obligations and rites since families in Yoruba land are close-knit. Since Yoruba traditional religion has no written literature; beliefs, practices and formulations are taught orally to their descendants who also pass them on to other generations. It is painful today that the few elders who are the custodians of the sacrificial rites are left in remote villages.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the impact of Western culture cannot be over-looked in this matter. Olalere argues that African have become cultureless as a result of acculturation.<sup>18</sup> He opines that every mistake in London is a style in Nigeria. Many of the old customs and practices are disappearing though they served useful purposes. As a result, some of these ancient practices can in no way stand the test of modern life. The response of various people interacted with in the course of this work shows that sacrifice is no more a popular rite. It is generally considered as old school phenomenon with little or no importance in the contemporary society.

### **Relevance of Sacrifice in the Modern Society**

The idea and practice of sacrifice are as old as man himself. Indeed, to sacrifice seems as natural to man as to pray. Later on, sacrifice became divinely instituted and made a vital aspect of world established religions. It is an aspect of worship. Thus, sacrifice involves the destruction of a fiction for the purpose of maintaining or restoring a right relationship of man to the sacred order.

It is noteworthy that if sacrifice is evil and negative, it would not have featured prominently in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. In fact, sacrifice cannot be separated from the Old Testament teachings. That God Himself could allow human sacrifice implies that traditional sacrifice is biblical and acceptable in all religious traditions. Traditionally, sacrifice has the following importance such as:

- To show appreciation or expression of gratitude for benefit received.
- ii. To propitiate i.e. to settle wrong doing
- iii. To seek for superlative favour, security and assurance
- iv. It is a way of showing dependence of human being upon Supreme Being
- v. A means of establishing right relationship with the divinities
- vi. It is a means of warding off manivolent attacks of enemies
- vii. A means of preventing imminent dangers.<sup>19</sup>
- viii. One of the most obvious and even scientific relevance of human sacrifice is population control.
- ix. A more socially oriented benefit would be the disposal of criminals. It would save the nation time and money to donate criminals to religious organizations to be sacrificed.
- x. Not only may human sacrifice be used in disposing of criminals, but its very presence could actually lead to lower incidents of violence in our society.

From modern point of view, sacrifice has a multi-dimensional benefits. With sacrifice, there will be harmony, success, advancement progress, peace and peaceful co-existence in the society. The society that do not embrace sacrifice especially to the young ones will end up in social disorder.

One of the major problems of this country is that many of our leaders are not ready to render any sacrifice. Sacrifice is a two-way phenomenon. Not only do we offer to sustain the cosmos, but we can also use sacrifice to transfer the power of the universe into our own bodies.

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Thus, life is not about who you are, what you gain or make from it; but about how many lives you have touched or influenced positively. This is sacrifice in practice per excellence.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

In the recent times, it could be argued that people attach little or no importance to sacrifice as an inevitable output of modernity. Doubtless to say, sacrifice occurs in all religions of the world because it is also a moral necessity for our contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> The interview conducted are strongly in support of this assertion.

Here is a country blessed with abundant human and material resources, good climate conditions that permit the production of virtually any agricultural plants or animals, tourist attractions, minerals, energetic people, abundant rainfall, numerous religious leaders, plenty of sunshines etc. yet fifty-five years after independence the people are still suffering and far from living as human beings. Part of the reasons for these is that many innocent blood had been shed; ordinary citizens are grossly cheated, oppressed and exploited. This in other way round calls for sacrifice in order to obtain divine forgiveness.

The situation of the country and individual experiences in our society today calls for operational or traditional sacrifice. Thus, sacrifice in the modern usage has many phases and should be a daily endeavour or activity if our society will survive and progress. We need to sacrifice our time, money, family, property, wealth, education, status, position, life influence and affluence if only one will affect this generation positively. I will suggest therefore, that operational sacrifices should remain within individual religions and not cross barriers. If a particular religion wanted to practise it, they would have to take sacrifices from their own members. This would prevent sacrifice from becoming an excuse for religious persecution. Hence, sacrifice should be voluntary this will certainly assist such an individual to be responsible responsive and accountable for his actions.

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**ORAL INTERVIEW CONDUCTED**

| <b>S/N</b> | <b>NAME</b>             | <b>AGE</b> | <b>OCCUPATION</b> | <b>ADDRESS</b> | <b>DATE</b> |
|------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1          | Chief Adegoke Ajayi     | 63         | Farmer            | Ikere Ekiti    | 10/7/2015   |
| 2          | Mrs. Omowumi Idowu      | 37         | Nurse             | Ikere Ekiti    | 10/7/2015   |
| 3          | Mr. Oluwasegun Adekunle | 46         | Civil servant     | Ado Ekiti      | 13/7/2015   |
| 4          | Miss Grace Ogulari      | 26         | Students          | Eksu, Ado      | 13/7/2015   |
| 5          | Pa. Alagbe Gabriel      | 69         | Farmer            | Ado Ekiti      | 13/7/2015   |
| 6          | Mr. Ademola Adebayo     | 43         | Teacher           | Ado Ekiti      | 17/7/2015   |
| 7          | Dn. Festus Ayodeji      | 60         | Public Servant    | Ado-Ekiti      | 17/7/2015   |
| 8          | Mr. Gbenga Ojo          | 38         | Businessman       | Ado Ekiti      | 17/7/2015   |
| 9          | Mrs. Idowu Julianah     | 45         | Trader            | Ikere Ekiti    | 20/7/2015   |
| 10         | Elder Ilesanmi Alaba    | 72         | Retiree           | Ikere Ekiti    | 20/7/2015   |
| 11         | Malam Yusuf Jimoh       | 67         | Priest            | Ikere Ekiti    | 20/7/2015   |
| 12         | Mr. Ojo Aladejana       | 83         | Retiree           | Ado Ekiti      | 20/7/2015   |
| 13         | Chief Ayodele Ige       | 86         | Herbalist         | Ikere Ekiti    | 25/7/2015   |
| 14         | Master Joseph Afolabi   | 28         | Student           | Ikere Ekiti    | 25/7/2015   |