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## **The Interface Between Sacrificial Rites in Yoruba Religion and African Indigenous Churches**

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### **Abstract**

*The idea of sacrifice which by definition has remained multi-dimensional and generalised has continued to be an attractive concept in religious and theological discourse. The reason is that sacrifice seems to connote different meanings to different people, especially adherents of different religions. Even in the same religion such as Christianity for instance, people express divergent understanding of the concept. To some groups of Christians, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ epitomise the sacrifice sufficient for all generations. But some Christian denominations share the view of African Religions, which is similar to Judaist religion on sacrifice as a daily and practical offering of food, objects or the lives of animals to God, the ancestors or spirits for the purpose of achieving individual or general well-being of the society. This paper therefore seeks to bring to the fore some sacrificial practices among the African Indigenous Churches which have resemblance in Yoruba religion with a view to determining the validity of such practices within the biblical context and the history of African Christianity.*

**Key words:** Sacrifice, Yoruba Religion, African Indigenous Churches

### **Introduction**

For proper engagement of this study, it is worthwhile to make a brief introductory explanation on the concepts of Sacrifice, Yoruba Religion and African Indigenous Churches. Sacrifice is

a universal religious phenomenon that either depicts human's reverence for the sacred and expressed in worship or an attempt to restore harmony between the humans and supernatural forces. Ringgren and Awolalu believe that we encounter sacrifice whenever human beings come to God in worship<sup>1</sup>. Awolalu posits further that "while prayer is a vocal or silent appeal to a divinity with a view to achieving certain ends, sacrifice is an additional concrete method of serving the same purpose"<sup>2</sup>. This view is corroborated by the New Encyclopedia Britannica which describes "Sacrifice as a religious rite in which an object is offered to a divinity in order to establish, maintain or restore a right relationship of man to the sacred order"<sup>3</sup>. This definition has variously been elaborated by scholars, like Kuukure<sup>4</sup> and Arinze<sup>5</sup>. However Olomola explains sacrifice from the perspective of sin. According to him, the essence of expiatory sacrifice is to avoid divine wrath<sup>6</sup>. Hence sacrifice has become an integral element of African indigenous thought.

Other dimensions of sacrifice see the phenomenon as an act of depriving oneself of something for the sake of someone or a cause that is precious. This is Awolalu's secular definition of sacrifice which he argued from the attitude of some parents

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<sup>1</sup> J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, London, Longman Group Ltd, 1979. 136.

<sup>2</sup> J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. 1979. 108.

<sup>3</sup> The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Sacrifice", 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, Vol. 26, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.. 2007 & 791.

<sup>4</sup> E. Kuukure, *The Destiny of Man, Dagaaba Beliefs in Dialogue with Christian Eschatology*, New York, Frankfurt, 1985, 89.

<sup>5</sup> F. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Ibadan, University Press, 1970. 31.

<sup>6</sup> C. Olomola, *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith*, Achimota, African Press, 1993. 47.

who deny themselves of certain pleasures and comforts of life in order to give their children sound education<sup>7</sup>. Arinze likewise sees the act of consecrating one's life to God as a sacrifice since it involves offering of something. From the points discussed, we can deduce that though sacrifice is expressed in various ways but in its religious dimension, there is a ritual act of offering someone or something<sup>8</sup>.

Yoruba religion, a branch of African Indigenous Religion, expresses varieties of beliefs of which the following remain central: belief in the Supreme Being, in divinities and spirits, in the ancestors and in the mysterious powers. In order to achieve a peaceful existence on the planet earth, the Yoruba religion expresses the essentiality of sacrifice which comes in different modes. In Yoruba society, just as in any African society, the preservation of life and enjoyment of the same in its fullness hinges on maintaining communion with the Supreme Being and spiritual powers. Hence the expediency of thanksgiving and communion sacrifice, *ebo ope ati idapo*. On the other hand, sacrifices are also offered to ward off the wicked machination of the powers of destruction. These are called *ebo ojukuribi*, meaning a preventive sacrifice.

The nomenclature of African Indigenous churches is a variety of overlapping terms for African initiated, independent or instituted churches that emerged on religious landscape in Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It has been observed that there is a great influence of African world view on these churches which accounted for the demonstrative

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<sup>7</sup> J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 1979, 108.

<sup>8</sup> The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, "Sacrifice", New York: Lexicon International Publishers Guild Group, 2004. 876.

syncretism between elements of Christian beliefs and indigenous religion. This is evidenced in their belief system which includes belief in angels, spirits, demons and ancestors beside their Trinitarian confession and belief in the efficacy of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Prior to their emergence in religious parlance in Africa, Mission or Mainline churches seemed to have understood the concept of sacrifice within the context of sacramental practices devoid of shedding of blood, but identified the redemptive death of Jesus Christ as an absolute, total and efficacious sacrifice required to reconcile humanity with God or restore peace and order in the society. However, the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have a different cosmology, thereby maintaining regular sacrificial rites similar to that of indigenous religions through which they believe life will be celebrated in its fullness and societal tranquillity maintained.

### **Debates on Sacrifice in Christianity before the Emergence of African Indigenous Churches**

The basic understanding of sacrifice among Christians right from history is expressed by Jesus' death on the cross where He offered Himself for a sacrifice of redemption. This idea is explained from Jesus' utterances where he himself indicated that his death has to be an expiatory sacrifice.

The early Christians recognized the memorial character of Jesus' instruction, when He instituted the Holy Communion with the words "Do this in remembrance of me". Therefore the Eucharist was seen just as a commemorative meal until the shift in its meaning starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries when the Eucharist was interpreted as a sacrifice with the early

quoted instruction of Jesus now translated by the Roman Catholic Church as “offer this a memorial offering”<sup>9</sup>.

Hence Rahner posited that the celebration of the Eucharist at the institution pointed prophetically to the sacrifice of the cross. He saw a remarkable relationship between Jesus’ sacrifice on the altar (where He offered himself in a mystical and unbloody manner) and His sacrifice on Calvary where His blood was poured out.

No wonder the prevalence of themes such as anamnesis, nourishment and sacrifice during the patristic period. Cyprian of Carthage and Gregory of Nyssa were unequivocally in their interpretations of the Eucharist as a re-actualization of Christ’s death and resurrection. Therefore the elements are not mere representation of his body and blood but real and actual body and blood of Christ. This is the doctrine of transubstantiation. This position is succinctly stated by St. Augustine in his “City of God” where he argued that in the Eucharist, the church performs a sacrifice which is part of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross<sup>10</sup>.

However this position was debunked in the Medieval Period up to Reformation era because the reformers didn’t equate the Eucharist with sacrifice. For Luther, the Eucharist was not people’s offering to God, but God’s offering to men<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Sacrifice-[www.catholic.com/tracts/the-sacrifice-of-the-Mass](http://www.catholic.com/tracts/the-sacrifice-of-the-Mass). (Accessed 2 August 2015).

<sup>10</sup> J. Obada-Obieh, *Understanding Christian Doctrines in African Context*. Lagos, Badapast Publications, 1998. 65

<sup>11</sup> S.M. Mepaiyeda, *Church Reformation: A Historical Reflection*, Ibadan, Aflame Publishing, 1998. 66.



The Council of Trent upheld the Eucharistic mystery shared by some Church Fathers by affirming that the Eucharist and sacrifice of the cross were one. In addition the sacrifice of the Eucharist was said to be propitiatory which the Council identified the priest and the victim as the one and the same with Christ. By this affirmation the Eucharist is not merely seen as a service of thanksgiving or memorial of the sacrifice on the cross. It is a propitiatory sacrifice offered for the living and the dead for the remission of sins and punishment due to sin, as satisfaction for sin and for other necessities<sup>12</sup>. The Second Vatican Council (1954 - 1967) lending support to the stand of the Council of Trent, described the Eucharist as a sacrifice, not only a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection but a re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice that apostles (and priests) are expected to offer.

The aforementioned position of the RCC initially generated conflicts with the Protestant churches because the latter do not believe that at Eucharist, Christ is being offered again and again. The very word of Jesus Christ during the institution of Eucharist which clearly states "my body given to you, and my blood poured as sacrifice..." is a pointer to his death which overrides any other sacrifice. This position is clearly presented in Article XXXI of the Anglican Communion of the thirty-nine articles of religion thus:

The offering of Christ once made, is perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that

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<sup>12</sup> Eucharist as Sacrifice- Sacrament, [www.therealpresence.org/eucharist/link/e-litur.html](http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharist/link/e-litur.html). (Accessed 5 August 2015).

alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said that the priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits<sup>13</sup>.

Till date, the divergent positions of the RCC and other Mainline Churches on sacrifice still subsist with each arguing from theological standpoints. However one truth is basic about the two traditions, Christ's death upon the cross is the sufficient and perfect sacrifice, sufficient to broker peace between God and man and sufficient for all human existential conditions.

But to what extent is this view understood and upheld by African Indigenous Churches, some of which still perform daily sacrificial or ritual rites commonly practiced by traditional religions, is the focus of the next discussion.

### **Some Sacrificial Rites in Yoruba Religion Replicated by African Indigenous Churches**

This section of the paper tries to highlight four sacrificial rites of the African Indigenous Churches that resonate with rites in Yoruba Religion. The first rite is substitutionary sacrifice. This is common among some African Independent Churches especially the white garment churches. In most cases, animals are used as substitutes for men's lives. The animal may be killed and its blood used for rituals in order to ward off the evil intentions of the wicked ones either physically or spiritually. Fatokun posited that this ritual sacrifice is prevalent most

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<sup>13</sup> J. Obada-Obieh, *Understanding Christian Doctrines in African Context*, 1998. 68-69.

especially in the Cherubim and Seraphim Churches and it is tagged *femi r'emi*<sup>14</sup> (which means substituting life for life).

In some cases, a coffin is procured in which the cloth of the sick or victim of attack and some other materials like sponge are contained. After the deliverance rite has been performed, the coffin will be buried to substitute for the death of the person. This is similar to what obtains in Yoruba religion whereby in substitutionary offering, a ram of sheep is slaughtered or clubbed to death according to the dictate of Ifa oracle<sup>15</sup>. A piece of cloth or banana throng or mat is used to bury the dead animal. What is more important in this ritual is that an animal substitutes for the life of a human being. There is a similarity of this rite in the Old Testament concept of scapegoatism.

The second area of commonality is ecological sacrificial rite. This is what Awolalu describes as propitiatory sacrifice<sup>16</sup> which is performed in Yoruba Religion in response to drought, famine, outbreak of disease or flood calamity. The essence of such propitiation is to appease the god associated with any of the ecological phenomena. Olaleye corroborates this assertion by giving a practical example that in some Yoruba societies. In case of lack of rain, an altar is established, with the traditional priest performing some rites during which men are required to pour water on the altar. The result is that after few hours the

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<sup>14</sup> S. A Fatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook*. Ibadan, End-Time Publishing House Ltd, 2014. 203.

<sup>15</sup> S. K. Olaleye, *Interview Respondent*, Lecturer in African Traditional Religion, University of Ibadan, 5 August 2015.

<sup>16</sup> J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 1979. 152.

cloud will gather and torrential rain will ensue<sup>17</sup>. Such propitiatory sacrifice is meant to restore peace for the well-being of the society.

The African Indigenous Churches also have similar sacrificial practice. Whenever a member is facing hardship or misfortune in business, the prophet may ask that for peace and progress to be restored, the person would need to appease his/her ancestors through some rites. Hence it is a common thing to see some Yoruba (who are members of these African Indigenous Churches and even non-members) carrying bean cake or other rites to the graveyard of their dead parents. It is believed that such peace or propitiatory offering will appease the aggrieved parents and result in positive response. At other times, the rite may be in form of a gift to the beggars in the street or the needy or in form of provision of food items for little children. This is known as *ipese*.

The third sacrifice similar in both religions is associated with rite of passage. This has to do with an attempt to determine the mind of God concerning the choice of husband or wife and birth of child among others. In Yoruba Religion, people consult the oracle on *Akosejaye* divination. In most cases it is the husband of the pregnant woman that consults the oracle in order to know the destiny of the child to be born. This becomes necessary so that adequate preparation could be made either before or after the birth of the child. If the divination predicts good future, fine but if it is negative, certain rites will be prescribed. All these are to guarantee the well-being of the child.

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<sup>17</sup> S. K. Olaleye, *Interview Respondent*, Lecturer in African Traditional Religion, University of Ibadan, 5 August 2015.

Closely related to this is *Esentaye* – a divination through which the father of the unborn child tries to know the ancestor that is coming back through the pregnancy. This is also necessary in order to determine what name(s) that the family will give to the child and the kind of treatment to be accorded to the child.

This type of sacrifice also relates to marriage. Before marriage is contracted, certain rites have to be performed for its success because it is believed that some young ladies who have a link with spiritual husbands are likely to be barren after marriage. Therefore a sacrificial rite becomes imperative in order break the link such prospective wives have with the spirit world.

Some African Indigenous Churches are not left out in this kind of sacrifice. Under the influence of the Spirit, the prophet or the prophetess may prescribe ritual birth for a pregnant woman whose delivery portends danger due to attack from some spiritual forces. The same goes for young men or women of marriageable age who have problems in choosing partners or who have unstable courtship. They may be required to carry out ritual bath, known as *ori wiwe* - washing of head, most especially beside a flowing river. In this case it is believed that any bad luck attached to the destiny of the person concerned is being washed away. The sponge and cloths and other items are therefore thrown into the river to ward off reoccurrence of misfortunes or disappointment.

The final sacrificial rites common to both traditions is what Awolalu describes in its broad sense as foundational sacrifice<sup>18</sup>. However, this paper focuses on preparation in building a house, starting a business or setting out on a journey.

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<sup>18</sup>J.O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 1979. 159-160.

The first two have similar rites prescribed. Normally the site of the building has to be cleared and likewise the site of a shop needs to be tidy up. In the process of doing this, E.O James opined that the spirit that inhabits such ground or site may be angry and might want to disturb the project on it<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the Yoruba elders or diviner are always invited to appease the spirit to prevent any calamity.

Some African Indigenous Churches also indulge in the practice of not just praying on such sites but if occasion warrants according to the dictate of the Spirit, an animal may be killed and its blood used in redeeming the land from the stronghold of spiritual beings who are original inhabitants of the place.

Furthermore, in case of embarking on a journey, both Yoruba religion and indigenous Churches perform some rites for people for protection and favour. For instance, in the case of the former, there may be incisions on the body or giving of amulets and other protective devices. Whereas in the latter, a prepared mixture of soap and oil may be given to the members to bath with before they embark on such a journey. Thus far, we can see glaringly that ritual sacrifice which in some cases involves blood is a practice in some African Indigenous Churches.

### **Biblical and Ecclesial-Historical Views of Sacrificial Practices in African Indigenous Churches**

This aspect attempts an assessment of the sacrificial practices in African Indigenous Churches within the purview of the scripture as well as history of Christianity. First and foremost, one cannot shy away from the fact that the concept of sacrifice

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<sup>19</sup> E.O. James (N/D), *The Beginnings of Religion*, London, Longman. 97.

is rooted in the Bible. In the Old Testament, sacrifice has a long tradition traced to Abrahamic root. The preponderance of evidences reveals that within the patristic and priestly traditions of the Jewish religion, sacrifice is a *sine qua non* for the Jews either as an individual, a community or a nation. These are typified in peace offering, burnt offering, substitutionary offering, meal or cereal offering, thanksgiving offering, purifications offering, and propitiatory sacrifice among others.

From the ecclesial history, however, there is a belief that all the forms of sacrifice in the Old Testament foreshadow the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. This is because Jesus Christ is a descendent of Abraham and also the expected Messiah. Although many Jews will refute this argument since they do not accept that the messianic prophecies had been realized in Christ. According to Kevin Knight, in the New Testament, the generation of Jesus Christ is traced back to Abraham by St. Matthew. Therefore, right from the early Church, there is the notion that since Jesus Christ has made the highest sacrifice on the cross, it is perfect and efficacious for all existential situations of humankind. Corroborating this notion, Hamilton posits that though Jesus's death has made sacrifice obsolete, the practice continues in some places around the world especially in Taybeh, Lodd, Jaffa and al-Khadar<sup>20</sup>, all around Jerusalem where the local Catholics, Greek Orthodox and other churches still uphold animal sacrifice. He attributes the persistent ritualized sacrifice to the influence of ancient Canaanite religion and numerous pagan cults and berates the

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<sup>20</sup> J. Hamilton, "There is no Role for Animal Sacrifice in Christianity" [www.Christianity/belief](http://www.Christianity/belief). (Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2015).

invocation of the Trinity during the slaughtering of the animals.

During the missionary era, this notion or idea was transmitted to the church in Africa, that is, Christianity without any bloody sacrifice. The reference to sacrifice means any act of denial of self in order to render service to other people or for the attainment of spiritual growth. Therefore, within the mainline churches, the idea of sacrifice is epitomized by the atoning death of Jesus Christ which the celebration of the Eucharist reminds the believers often and often. Even the stand of the Roman Catholic Churches in Nigeria is not totally different from that of other established Churches, because the nature of sacrifice remains bloodless. The questions raised by this paper therefore are, one, is the sacrificial practice of the AICs rooted in the Judaic religion as well as Eastern Church traditions? Two, to what extent would the practice be justified as an attempt to indigenize Christianity which is one of the reasons for their emergence? Three, to what extent has these sacrificial practices eroded the sanctity of Christianity in Africa? These questions become imperative owing to reactions from various quarters that in trying to practice Christianity within the garb of African culture, some AICS have strayed into syncretism. Economic reason, that is the survival of the priest or prophet, have been advanced for the practice by critics just as the pagan priest derive economic benefit from his duties.

One underlining response that has emanated from the AICs is that since their sacrificial practices are rooted in the Bible they have not committed any religious crime; more so that their members are getting positive results.



## Recommendations and Conclusion

As much as this paper is not aimed at judging the practice of ritual sacrifice among the African Indigenous Churches, it is desirous to point to the fact that about 70% of the other Christian denominations in Africa generally, and Nigeria in particular try to indigenize Christianity without ritual sacrifice. This is because of their belief in the scriptural teaching that the blood of Jesus Christ shed on Calvary is the apex of all human or animal sacrifice. Christians should be encouraged to base their belief on this spiritual notion of Christianity rather than ephemeral things.

Secondly from the Pauline injunction, in Roman 12, 1-2, Christians are advised to offer their bodies as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God which means on daily basis, they should give themselves up to God without blemish. The Bible as the rule of faith should be treated holistically, not partially, and since the death of Jesus Christ has overtaken the sacrificial rites in the Old Testament, it stands reasonable that the latter takes priority over the former.

In conclusion, in an attempt to Christianize African continent, or respond to people's existential concern, Obieh sues that such must have biblical basis<sup>21</sup>. This paper also believes that such an attempt must also have the approval of wide spectrum of the church.

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<sup>21</sup> J. Obada-Obieh, *Understanding Christian Doctrines in African Context*, 1998. 199.