

# A Literary Survey of the Phenomenology of Sacrifice

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## Abstract

Throughout the world, many adherents of different religious traditions still believe, especially in times of crisis, in the effectiveness of traditional religious sacrifices designed to meet their diverse needs. This paper is a literary survey of the opinions of foremost anthropologists on the phenomenology of sacrifice. It reveals that sacrifice is a complex phenomenon that has been universally found in the earliest known forms of worship and that an offering does not become a sacrifice until a real change has been effected in the visible gift by slaying it, shedding its blood, burning it or pouring it out. The paper proposes that as the meaning and importance of sacrifice cannot be established by *a priori* methods, every admissible theory of sacrifice must shape itself in accordance with the sacrificial systems of each religious tradition.

## 1. Introduction

Early anthropologists in their bid to explain the religious practices of pre-literate people and societies arrived at a spurious conclusion that sacrifice is of value mainly or only for the pre-literate societies. They failed to realise that sacrificial practices form the heart of different religious traditions. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the postulations, opinions and suggestions of different scholars on sacrifice, with the view to determining where the evidences lead to, and the gap created by their works. Literature on sacrifice could be divided into three groups, namely, theories of origin of sacrifice, biblical investigations and scholarly findings on Africa traditional sacrifices. Scholars in the first group include E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer, G. Vander Lecuw, Evans Pritchard, and W. Schmidt. Works of R.B. Dillard, D.F. Harrison, William Lessor and G.A. Anderson fall into the second category. The third group has scholars such as E.B. Idowu, J. Mbiti, J.D. Awolalu and P.A. Dapamu, F.A. Arinze and E. Ikenga-Metuh. Different theories of the origin, significance and practice of sacrifice would be examined. The following are the analysis of the theories of the origin of sacrifice.

## 2. The Gift Theory

The gift theory of the origin of sacrifice proposed by E.B. Tylor (1871) held that sacrifice was originally a gift to the gods to secure their favour or to minimise their hostilities. This later developed into homage in which the sacrifice no longer expressed any hope for a future; and from homage into abnegation and renunciation, in which the sacrifice more fully offered itself. This theory proposes that higher forms of religion, including monotheism, gradually developed out of animism. A major fault of this theory is that it sees sacrifice as an activity without moral significance (324). It fails to observe that even between humans the giving of gifts establishes a personal relation between giver and recipient. Hence, sacrifice needs not be interpreted as efforts solely aimed to circumvent the higher beings.

W. Smith's (1996) understanding is different from that of Tylor. The original meaning of sacrifice, according to him, can be seen more clearly in firstling sacrifices of primitive hunters and food gatherers which are sacrifices of homage and thanksgiving to the Supreme Being to whom everything belongs, and who, therefore, cannot be enriched by "gift sacrifices" (233). These sacrifices of food are often quantitatively small but symbolically important. Smith's (1997) historical reconstruction, according to which firstlings sacrifices are the earliest form of sacrifice, has not been sufficiently demonstrated (84). From the phenomenological standpoint, this kind of sacrifice in which the gift has symbolic rather than real value and is inspired by a consciousness of dependence and thanksgiving, does exist and, therefore, should not be taken into account in any general discourse on sacrifice.

Smith (1996) developed a theory of sacrifice for the Semitic World that he regarded as universally applicable. He proposed a theory of sacrifice whereby the earliest form of religion was belief in a theomorphic tribal divinity with which the tribe had a blood relationship. Under ordinary circumstances, this totem animal was not to be killed, but there were rituals in which it was slain and eaten in order to renew the community (122). Sacrifice was thus originally a meal in which the offered entered into communion with the totem. Smith's (1996) theory is valuable for its criticism of the grossly mechanistic theory of Tylor and for its emphasis on the communion (community) aspect of sacrifice. However, it is not sufficient because totemism is not a universal phenomenon in its relationship to sacrifice as described by Smith. Smith's theory of sacrifice also contributed to Freud's conception of the slaying of the primal father, which Freud saw as the origin of sacrifice and other institutions, especially the incest taboo.

Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964) rejected Tylor's theory because of its mechanistic character. Smith's (1996) theory was rejected because it arbitrarily chose totemism as a universally applicable point of

departure. They themselves began with an analysis of the redic and Hebraic rituals of sacrifice. The victim is not holy by nature (as it is in Smith's theory); the consecration is effected by destruction, and the connection with the sacral world is completed by a sacred meal. Implied here is the view of the French sociological school that the sacral world is simply a projection of society (333). In consonance with Evans-Pritchard (1965), they held that sacrifice is an act of abnegation by which the individual recognises society; it recalls to particular consciences the presence of collective forces, represented by their gods. Hubert and Mauss (1964) considered the recipient of sacrifice to be simply a hypostatization of society itself.

According to Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1920), sacrifice conceived as gift constitutes a transfer of magical force; the "*do ut des*". The formula does not describe a commercial transaction but the release of a current of force "*do ut possis*", (I give power to you so that so you can give it back). In this instance, the recipient is strengthened by the gift; the two participants, deity and human beings, are simultaneously givers and receivers, but the central role belongs to the gift itself and to the current of force that it sets in motion. This theory combines to some extent, the gift theory and the communion theory, but it does so from the standpoint of magic. Although sacrifice and magic differ in nature, and influence each other, they can neither be derived from each other. The personal relation that is established by a gift is fully intelligible without bringing in an element of magic (Vander Leeuw 1920).

In Adolph E. Jensen's (1951) (in Owete 1990) view, sacrifice cannot be understood as gift. Its original meaning is rather to be derived from certain myths found in the cultures of cultivators. These myths maintain that in primordial times there were as yet no mortal human beings but only divine or semi-divine (*dema*) being. This state ended with the killing of a dema divinity from whose body came plants useful to man. Consequently, the ritual slaying of humans and animals, headhunting, cannibalism and other blood rites are ceremonial repetitions of that killing in primordial time; they affirm and guarantee the present world order, with its continuous destruction and re-creation, which would otherwise be unable to function. Once the myth had been largely forgotten or was no longer seen to be connected with ritual, rites involving slaying were reinterpreted as a giving of a gift to divinities. Blood sacrifices thus became "meaningless survivals" of the "meaningful rituals of killing" of earlier food gathering cultures. The weakness of this theory is that it takes account only of blood sacrifices. It failed to notice that in the firstlings sacrifices there is no ritual killing, and bloodless offerings are widespread in many African cultures (Henninger 1955).

With respect to sacrifice as an anxiety reaction, Vittorio Lanternari (1976) in Nyoyoko (2000) gives an interpretation that is completely different from Smith's (1996). His point of departure is the analysis of a certain form of neurosis provided by some psychologists. According to this analysis, this kind of neurosis finds expression in the underlining of successes earlier achieved and is at the basis of certain religious delusion. Lanternari (1976) in Nyoyoko (2000) maintains that a similar psychic crisis occurs among "primitives" when they are confronted with success and that this crisis leads them to undertake a symbolic destruction of what they had gained. According to Lanternari (1976) in Nyoyoko (2000), a firstlings sacrifice is the result of anxiety, whereas for Smith (1996) it is an expression of gratitude.

Critics of the psychological explanation have pointed out the essential differences between the behaviour of neurotics and the religious behaviour exhibited in firstling sacrifices. In the psychically ill, efforts at liberation are purely individual; they are not part of a historical tradition; they are not organically integrated into a cultural setting and do not lead to inner deliverance. For this reason a psychopathological explanation of sacrifice must be rejected. This is not to deny that fear or anxiety plays significant part in certain forms of sacrifice. Such feelings result primarily from the ideas of the offers about the character of the recipient in question (Henninger 1955).

While discussing sacrifice as a mechanism for diverting violence, Rene Girard (1986) proposed a more comprehensive theory that explains not only sacrifice but the sacred itself as resulting from a focusing of violent impulses upon a substitute object, a scapegoat. According to him, the peaceful co-existence of human beings cannot be taken for granted. When the desires of human fasten upon the same object, rivalries arise and with them a tendency toward violence that endangers the existing order and its norms.

This tendency can be neutralized, however, if the reciprocal aggressions are focused on a marginal object, a scapegoat. The scapegoat is thereby rendered sacred: it is seen as accursed but also bringing salvation. Thus, the focusing of violence on an object gives rise to the sacred and all that results from it (taboos, a new social order). Whereas the violence was originally focused on a randomly chosen object, in sacrifice the concentration takes a strict ritual form. As a result, internecine aggressions are constantly being diverted to the outside and cannot operate destructively within the community. At bottom, therefore, sacrifice lacks any moral character. A critique of this theory is that it does not distinguish between sacrifice and eliminatory rites. Girard's (1986) concept of sacrifice is too narrow. Its reference is solely to stratified societies and high cultures.

### 3. The Old Settlement Concept of Sacrifice

In recent scholarship, the sacrificial cult of the Hebrew Bible has received much attention. This attention is

justified because sacrifice is a basic category of its reality religion. The overall significance of sacrificial rituals rests on the fact that various types of impurities disturbed Yaweh's ordered universe. Sacrificial rituals were the mechanism by which disruptions within God's world were acknowledged and made right. The various rituals of purification brought one closer to the state of holiness so that one could live in proximity to God. This is the purification model of sacrifice as postulated by Milgrom (1991).

This emphasis on sacrifice is not at all surprising since it is the most important activity of formal worship during the Old Testament (Daly 1990). From Daly's (1990) viewpoint, it is clear that sacrifice is the bedrock of the worship of the Jews. It is part and parcel of their daily worship to Yaweh. William (1999) affirmed that the meaning of Old Testament sacrifice centres on the Hebrew cultic worship. Bratcher observes that in the worship rituals of the Old Testament, especially in blood sacrifice, there is the recognition of the magnitude of sin and the enormity of the disruption human beings have deliberately brought into their world. Sin was very real to the people of the Old Testament (Bratcher 1983). Bratcher believes that the real significance of Old Testament sacrifices anchors on the Israel's realization that in a liturgical act of worship, the offering of the sacrifice acknowledges that were it not for the grace of God, it is the worshipper who would die. Yet, it is also a symbol of the grace and mercy of God, the recognition that God has chosen to accept less than the life of the worshipper, less than absolute retributive justice (Bratcher 1983).

From Bratcher's (1983) assertion, we agree that sacrifice provided a graphic symbol of the removal of the disruption or pollution that unfaithfulness to God had introduced. That removal served to affirm the continued relationship between the worshipper and his/her community and God. The Mercy of God was also portrayed not in the cleansing of sin alone but in making provision for the poor. If a person could not afford an animal, there were provisions made for substitution of a grain offering (Lev. 5:11-13). This suggests that it was not just the killing of an animal and the shedding of blood that was important, but the act of worship itself. This casts doubt on a commonly accepted idea that God rejected Cain's offering because it was not blood sacrifice (Gen. 4:5). Either a grain or blood sacrifice symbolised the future of life itself as an atonement (cleansing, covering) for the violation.

Gerry Bernard (2002) in Adubasim (2005) stated that, in the Pentateuch, the fundamental idea of sacrifice is that of substitution, and under the Mosaic Law, the offering of sacrifice was a covenant duty, with the materials of the offering and the ceremonies described in minute detail. The ground on which the legal offering of sacrifices is based is the commandment. Bernard maintains that no religious act in the Old Testament was complete unless accompanied with sacrifice; the system was designed by God with the intention of awakening a consciousness of sin and uncleanness and of showing the possibility of obtaining the forgiveness of sin and becoming righteous before God.

According to Knapp in Nyoyoko (2000), sacrifice was the object of God in appointing the different forms of sacrifices, that the people of God should be released from the civil punishment of certain crimes. The commission of crime rendered one unworthy of the community of holy people, and excluded him from it. Knapp in Nyoyoko (2000) further stressed that the offering of sacrifice was the means by which he was externally readmitted to the Jewish community, and rendered externally pure; although he did not, on this account, obtain the pardon of his sin from God.

Another end of the sacrifice appointed by Moses was to point the Israelites to the future, and to prefigure by types the greater divine provision for the recovery of the human race, and to excite in the Israelites a feeling of their being led for such a provision. V.G. Nyoyoko (2000) commenting on the sacrificial system in his work, *The Stereological Significance of Sacrificial Substitution in Israelite Religion and Culture*, stated that it is a shrine gift to the covenant people. Nyoyoko (2000) in his work argued that it is here that one comes face to face with the very nature of the Israelite sacrificial system which is integrally a part of the covenant itself. Through it, covenant relationship is preserved (Nyoyoko 2000).

Odumuyiwa (1986) in his work, *Introduction to Sacrifice in the Old Testament: A Historical Analysis*, stated the purposes for the Old Testament sacrifice. He said that the people of the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods of the Old Testament offered sacrifice for many purposes. He presented the purposes as follows:

1. For the purpose of giving a gift to God
2. As a means of entering into communion with God
3. As a means of releasing life, whether for the benefit of God himself or of the worshipper.

Odumuyiwa said: "... in the Old Testament sacrifice offered by the people are either as a gift to God, or for atonement" (Odumuyiwa 1986).

#### **4. The African Views on Sacrifices**

The work of F.A. Arinze (1970), *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, was a thorough work on Igbo sacrifice. The author stated clearly the objects of Igbo religious belief and worship and how the Igbo respond to their object of worship. Arinze believes that sacrifice plays an important role in Igbo religion. "Sacrifice is the soul of Igbo cult. If it is removed, Igbo traditional religion is almost emptied of its content" (Arinze 1970).

In Arinze's (1970) view, the Igbo recognises that he is not master of the world. There are superior powers, invisible spirits, the ancestors, and there are also human spirits of wicked deceased people. Every Igbo believes it is up to him to propitiate these forces and to treat them with courtesy and deference. This was the fundamental reason why he had such a penchant for sacrifice in all its many forms. He further grouped the ends of Igbo sacrifice into four.

- a. Expiation
- b. Sacrifice to ward off molestation from unknown evil spirits
- c. Petition
- d. Thanksgiving

In his comment on the object of Igbo sacrifice, Arinze (1970) observed that many people, even Igbos at first sight say or think that there is no Igbo traditional direct sacrifice to God. But a close investigation has revealed that there is the "*ajaEzeEnu*" (Sacrifice to the king of heaven). Meek in Adubasim (2005) speaks of a similar sacrifice in Agwu division, but says it is offered to "*Chukwu*" (God) through the spirit *Anyanwu* (the sun). Anyanwu is expressly asked to take the offering to God. Meek did not call it *AjaEzeEnu*.

Talbot (1967) spoke of libation to God among the Agbaja and Nkanu of Enugu area. At Arochukwu, he says, a person offers to God a white fowl at the two great festivals of seed-time and harvest whilst amongst most Abam Edda and Ngwa, an egg is offered tip every eight day. Uzodinma Nwala (1985) in *Igbo Philosophy*, outlined items for sacrifice among the Igbos. He stated that the item used for sacrifice in traditional Igbo communities includes, human beings (especially criminals, foreigners, captives etc.), animals (cows, goats, tortoise, sheep dog, lizard etc.), birds like fowls, pigeon, eagle, etc, in addition to eggs and feathers. Other items for sacrifice according to Nwala (1985: 126) includes palm wine, gin water, *aja* (sand), kennel, pepper, alligator pepper, oil, kola, salt, *omu* (palm leaf), *nzu*, (white chalk), money (manila, cowries, pennies, halfpennies), plates, pots etc.

Mbiti (1969) commenting on sacrifice in African traditional societies stated that, "Sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples and examples of them are overwhelmingly many". Mbiti (1969) further observed that the materials for sacrifice differ from communities to communities. To him, the African uses almost everything that man can get hold of for sacrifice and offerings to God and other spiritual beings. As a rule, there are so many sacrifices without prayers. Sacrifices and offerings are silent responses; prayers are the verbal responses. Ikenga-Metuh (1999) sees sacrifice as an integral part of worship. For him, this worship may be public or private, formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, direct or indirect. In this worship, sacrifices and offerings of diverse kinds are offered to the object of worship.

## 5. Conclusion

The scholarly works so far examined reveal that sacrifice is a complex phenomenon that has been universally found in the earliest known forms of worship. It is universally understood as the offering of a sense-perceptible gift to deity as an outward manifestation of veneration with the objective of attaining communion with deity. Their studies further reveal that an offering does not become a sacrifice until a real change has been effected in the visible gift (by slaying it, shedding its blood, burning it or pouring it out). As the meaning and importance of sacrifice cannot be established by a priori methods, every admissible theory of sacrifice must shape itself in accordance with the sacrificial systems of each religious tradition.

Sacrifices are not only directed to deities alone but also to the Supreme Being. The humanity has several reasons for offering sacrifice. It is also clear that there are materials for sacrifice as well as places where sacrifices are made. Sacrificial practices form the heart of religious adherents. Throughout the world, many adherents of different religious traditions still believe, especially in times of crisis, in the effectiveness of traditional religious sacrifices designed to meet their diverse needs. It would be grossly misleading, however, to conclude from this evidence that sacrifice is of value mainly or only for the pre-literate societies.

Sacrifice, as noted by many scholars, is of the very essence of all known religions worldwide from the earliest times. Its purpose is variously to establish, regulate or rectify the relationship between humans and the divine or to appease the ancestors and the land. Through sacrifice, humans seek to encounter the divine, project themselves into the invisible world, penetrate into divine presence and commune with the deity. Sacrifice creates a bridge between humans and God and serves as a means of sustaining the established relationship. Its different forms depend on the nature of the relationship or favour sought from the deity. Ultimately, sacrifice is a human activity, its primary beneficiaries are the humans who offer them, not God or the deities to whom the offerings are made. Underlying the practice of sacrifice is the awareness that sin in its diverse forms (the destruction of right relationship with God, the ancestors, the land) creates a barrier between God, the invisible world and humans.



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