

African Sacrificial Ceremonies and Issues in Socio-Cultural Development.

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Abstract

The paper is on understanding the basic cultural practice of African kinship system and its development through sacrifices at various periods. The beliefs of the people determine to a greater extent their relationship(s) within and outside the area, which directly or indirectly affects human living. The paper concentrated on some ethnic groups in Nigeria where cultural sacrifices/ceremonies are still being practiced. It uses the ethnographic method of data collection – interview (structured and unstructured), and also questionnaires to reach both the practitioners and other groups of people in these cultural settings. The results showed that various ethno-kinship relationships are being closely emphasized by those who believe on the working power of their ancestors through sacrifices. This could take place twice a year, or once a year depending on the decision of the headship of that kinship group. It was also reveals that sacrifices does not really portend evil as erroneously held by some people, it paves the way for spiritual and physical cleansing. The sacrifice as a practice is still being carried or practiced till date in different forms. The research recommends that members of the kinship group must encourage good sacrifices, while “evil” ones are discouraged. There are religious and cultural sacrifices that are serving different functional and dysfunctional purposes today in society depending on the intent of the performing persons or groups. Social change have really not affected society, people’s activities and cultural sacrifices, rather the various methodologies are being improved upon thereby showing different levels of development.

Key Words: Culture, Sacrifice, Ceremonies, Development

Introduction

Cultural practices in Nigeria and African society today are not only functional but create a sense of belonging to the practitioners. Ethnologically, leaders of the various kinship groups maintain these practices as passed down from the Elders or older members of society. One of such cultural practices that this study seeks to discuss is the sacrifices in African settings. Drawing full relevance of this paper, the author decided to concentrate on some of these sacrifices (like religious, cultural, and spiritual forms) in some selected ethnic groups in Nigeria and world, stressing the reasons behind these, the functions they play and the significance to individuals and the society.

Different sacrifices as performed, according to Offiong (1989) serve different purposes and have different meanings to the practitioners as well as the believers of such acts. Sacrifices are one of the ways most African people use to connect or relate to their spiritual “fathers” or gods for help, healing, direction and guidance, etc, hence creating such spiritual recognition and potency for functioning and the attainment of effective results. Though sacrifice seems to represent supernatural acts, it has practical manifestation in society too. Sacrifice and other such practices among African peoples vary greatly in terms of doctrinal differences and processes of enforcing these. The process and method is passed down as a cultural need or practice from one generation to another. Fundamentally, the dual reasons for these practices are to receive some physical, material or spiritual goods or rewards, and elevated or placed in diverse positions so as to also achieve proper relationship with the sacred power. It is by extension carried out to consolidate or improve on the social, religious or spiritual position and status of an individual or group of individuals. Sacrifice could be seen as an important cultural practice upheld in religious, economic, political, social, marital or family context. But as earlier highlighted, this paper looks at it as a cultural concept. There are however religious rituals/sacrifices, human, animal, festivals among others being practiced at one point or the other each performing its distinctive role in the development of the society, and in meeting the needs and desires of such performers or participants.

Conceptually, a sacrifice is an act of offering something to a god in order to benefit the person or to gain something more important (Akams, 2002). It is the giving up of something valuable for somebody or something else considered being of more importance. This act must cost the performer some great level of inconveniencies and comfort with the intent of having a better result or rewards. Here, certain items (such as animals or properties and sometimes human beings), are used as part of these sacrificial materials. Sacrifices are either physically (humanly) or divinely directed or instituted due to certain ill feelings, expected good results and experiences noticeable in the family or organizational cycles. Religious sacrifices are done as an offering to honour or appease a god or God especially of a ritually slaughtered animal or person. Fundamentally, one need to understand what roles do these practices really play to help “societal” development? This and other questions form the bedrock of this study.

Culture can be generally seen as a totality of a people’s way of life. This could be determined by the individuals that are found in such areas and who are seen as culture bearers. For a practice to be qualified as culture it must be teachable, learned, flexible, durable and transferable from generation to generation, which the practice of sacrifices stands the test of time. Ayodele (2004), define sacrifice as an act and means of getting speedy results and answers from the supernatural spirits. Arlong (2003) also see sacrifice as any act that cost an individual something precious in order to achieve a more desired thing or position. Generally, the sacrifices embarked upon are tied to the belief system of the people or the individual about the effectiveness of such an action. In other words, researchers such as (Asu, 2003, Agbor, 2002) have also shown that sacrificial acts wrongly done or embarked upon attract certain negative consequences rather than the desired blessings, such as those individuals who have committed an abominable (cultural) act; an individual or group of individuals caught in incestuous behaviours

(taboo). A general and more common consequence could be family member(s) perennially becoming sick with certain unexplainable sicknesses or diseases, a family or kinship group with strange problems, conflicts and even persistent death experiences. However, a man or woman seeking kingship position or willing to consolidate his leadership or kingship position etc engages in different types of sacrifices and each producing different results.

What then is Kinship? This concept has concrete relationship with the importance of sacrificial activities. Kinship refers to a relationship of individuals from the same parental lineage or family. It could refer to a relationship by blood or marriage to another or others. This relationship must of necessity be rooted on common characteristics and also founded on social differences and cultural creations. In all societies, the links between blood relatives and relation by marriage are assigned certain legal, political and economic importance that does not depend on biology.

Statement of the Problem

From time past, Africans in their various cultural activities have engaged others in different forms of sacrifices and for different purposes to serve ceremonial needs and demands. Some of these are also done to perform some traditional or cultural and social needs or activities. These sacrifices stem from animal to human as well as other non living things in society. Most often, these sacrifices are carried out in shrine houses by traditional practitioners as a covenant potent force for the attraction of certain desired fortune in life expedition. Some of these were seen as national concern in Nigeria recently as seen in the Okija, onslaught of South Eastern state, South-South and the Delta region of Nigeria. One major worry here is that: does these human objects or otherwise freely and willingly present themselves for sacrifices? What are the criteria for the choice of person or objects? Are these for national or global development or not? Who determine the criteria for choice? Who determines the qualification or quality of such and how does this infringe or not on the fundamental human rights of the people? These and other issues are the driving source of this paper for a detailed discourse.

Literature Review

Anthropological studies have found out that almost all African practices, ceremonies and gatherings are accompanied with one type or form of sacrifice or the other apparently to produces smooth and effective results. Latin refers to it as “sacrificium” which originally means “something made holy” (i.e. a ritual act in which a consecrated offering is made to a god or other spiritual being in order to establish and perpetuate or restore a sacred bond between humanity and the divine offerings which may consist of human/animals) or fruits, crops, wine or money etc. These rituals are very symbolic not only of religious aspirations, but of the daily lives of those who take part in them (Saliba, 2005, Asu, 2003,). Sacrifices undertaken by family members or kinship group’s members have or may be of diverse significance to the people involved. In African settings, it is a means of communicating and involving ancestral powers to do something (positive or negative), heal a sick kin group member, get breakthrough and dominion in a desired area of business or die (Adeyemi, 2000; Agbor, 2003; Ayodele ,2004). It has been noted that the practice of sacrifice is strictly tied down to the religious and belief – system of the people (Mbiti, 1970).

Discussing the central theme of the Ibibio religion, Offiong (1991), asserts that they worship an all “Powerful” deity called “Abasi”, who rules over the physical universe etc. To him, “in order to successfully control the universe and regulate human conduct, “Abasi” is aided by numerous spirits (Ndem)... Each spirit performs a special task for the deity and inhabits a shrine (iso ndem) where prayers and sacrifices are offered...” (Offiong, 1991:9). During sacrifices, prayers are also offered to

ancestors by the elders to press their case with “Abasi” (god) (Maguet, 1972; Idowu, 1973; Murray, n.d., Okodike, 1983).

The changing societal nature in terms of religious practice and activities have also influenced and change the nature of sacrifices and the participation of members of a family. Most dominant of these as earlier stated are the traditional religious practitioners, Christian and even among the Islamic worshippers. The western Christian religions have de-emphasized the initial method of sacrifice (using animals blood, humans etc.) to somewhat personal denial of something material resources to get their desires. Another aspect of change along this line is westernization, education and cross-cultural relationship/development thus, having immensely impact on the people (Dahli, 1999).

Furthermore, in Christian religious practice, taking from the Kings James Bible version, asserts that the death of Christ on the cross is considered an exemplary and perfected sacrifice offered to expiate the sins of humanity. The entire St. Paul’s writing showed Christ identity as a sacrificial victim just to help humanity (as seen in the book of 1corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrew 10:12-13). The Eucharist has been associated from the beginning of the Christian church with the sacrifice of Christ and in some Christian churches as a form of participation in Christ sacrifice on the cross. Sacrifice played a central role in many ancient religions. The ancient Greek sacrifice animals, sometimes consuming part of the offerings in a celebratory meal as a way of establishing communion with the gods. Ojua (1996) asserts that almost every African ceremony is preceded with certain sacrifices. These sacrifices are made mostly by male members of the kinship group as a means of cleansing and recognition of the potent power and submission to these spirits that seek to control and protect the believers. In Boki kingdom for instance, Asu (2000) asserts that before new yams are eaten at harvest periods, the entire people (representing various kinship groups) gather on a specific date with certain cultural materials/items to make sacrifices to ancestral spirits/gods, recognizing their importance and help for a glorious harvest. Also this is done in anticipation for another bumper harvest season ahead as well as for the preservation of the seeds for the forth coming season.

Materials/Items for Sacrifice

In undertaking sacrifices, there are certain items that are generally noted used in the successful performance of different sacrifices across cultures. Each is however determined by the nature of the sacrifice whether for victory, in war, or fruitfulness (Farm yield, human etc). Some of these items are native cola nut fruits, water, palm wine, small/kitchen knife, cutlass, powder, native fowl, goat (native) etc. These items could vary depending on the differences in the purposes for such sacrifices. At some times, due to the dominant patriarchal society, only male adult family members are allowed to participate in such sacrifices, the children and women are mere observes (Adeyemi, 2000). In warfare sacrifices as obtainable among the Yakurr, Mbube and Boki people of Cross River and among Ijebu people of Osun and Ondo people respectively, the day before the sacrifices are made, the participants are not permitted to lie or sleep with their wives (i.e. have sexual relationship with their partners) or eat food prepared by women (Adeyemi, 2000).

Functions of Sacrifice to Kinship/Human Development

The practice of sacrifice has multi dimensional functions to the individual or people that have such needs or performs such acts. Again these functions or rewards are seen in the nature of such sacrifices being undertaken whether religious, cultural, material, spiritual or otherwise. From whatever dimension, kinship/family members seek to experience family peace, fruitfulness and goodwill.

Sacrifices help keep ancestral links and togetherness. Here Asu (2000) asserts that when sacrifices are done, there is a spiritual link of unity between the spirits whose sole responsibility is to protect the living and those within their domain.

It helps to maintain peaceful condition of the health of those alive. It waves off unexplainable sicknesses and diseases in kinship members.

It helps to produce and maintain both human and non-human fruitfulness. This is real to the believers of ancestral spirits that seek certain items for sacrifices before or at the end of each year. When this is done, they believe that it increases farm yield (especially for agriculturally dominant area) and other fruitfulness.

It gives victory in battle, maintains both community peace and kinship through, waves off epidemic outbreak, attract supernatural successes among other things. One noticeable fact remains that, the whole essence of sacrifices in the society is to help the participants obtain better livelihood and socio-cultural development. Very few cultural practices in this dimension results to destruction of lives and properties. From this aforementioned reason, sacrifice is part and parcel of human living, especially in African settings. One question for consideration is, what empirical reality and validity with developmental potency does human sacrifice for instance has, if not to satisfy diabolical needs?

Theoretical Understanding of Sacrifice

Various theories/approaches give an intellectual explanation of the conceptualization of sacrifice in society. These are:

The Filiatory Approach: This theory, which was propounded by Fortes (1968), Malinowski (1965) and others, talks of the insatiable desire of Africans or humans to live together. That certain things are consciously taken to consideration and practiced to maintain the family and kinship togetherness, and one of such is sacrifice, which is carried out in different forms. That most rural people stay happily together due to the efficacy of certain sacrifices been done to ancestors at various times of their existence. The nature of the people's needs determine the nature of sacrifices ranging from animal to human slaughtering to appease ancestral beings or spirits. Some are done to have increased in farm yield or productivity, others to achieve peace on the land, while others are carried out as a customary action in honor of a dead chief in the land. All these points to the fact that more conscious but diverse steps are taken by kinship members as a collective unified family to experience peaceful co-existence.

The Cognatic/Amity Theory: This theoretical postulation was propounded by Socrates (1886-1952), Eliot (1946) amongst others. It also gained prominence in cultural anthropological studies around the 1960s and early 1970s respectively. They view humans as always having in their consciousness their "brothers" and improved relationships. That everyone seek a thorough improvement, growth and development of his/her relationships. That this must be achieved only when the friendship ties are cognates or made to be tighter. For them, one of such ways towards understanding and improving this is through sacrifice.

The Functionalist Theory: The structural functionalists see sacrifice as functional to not only society but also its practitioners. Prominent among these theoreticians were Malinowski (1884 – 1942), and Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) who first developed the analysis of society as an integrated system of interrelated parts. Durkheim stressed that culture (which sacrifice is one) is a function or product of a community (kinship), not of single individuals.

Radcliffe-Brown on the other hand, likened society to an organism an integrated whole, dependent on the proper functioning of its constituent parts in order to exist. It therefore, follows that for society and members to co-exist, there is the need for all forms of cultural practices to be functional, that is, producing and performing its part of responsibilities to help develop the entire system.

A major pioneer of this approach is Bronislaw - Malinowski (1884 – 1942) who conducted research on the Trobriand Islands, between 1915 and 1918 respectively (Asu, 2003). According to this theoretician, all people share requirements for some basic needs such as food, shelter and means of defense and reproduction. They are derived needs – such as economics and Law – and these are ultimately traceable to more basic needs associated with the fundamental requirements for biological survival.

Generally therefore, these theories as briefly summarized help explain this cultural practice (sacrifice) which seek to maintain societal functioning and individual's level of affinity and cooperation. Differently looked, these theoretical underpinnings help us to understand the role sacrifice play to us as individuals, our family and kinship within our human cultural development. This paper therefore, adopts the Amity/Cognatic and the functionalist perspective to better understand the issue under consideration.

Methodology:

The research is generally descriptive in nature and content, which made use of oral interview (structured and unstructured) and along with the non-participant observation method. The respondents were categorized into observers in the community and practitioners of such sacrifices to get their various views. The non-participant method afforded the researcher the opportunity to get the first hand information about the people's sacrifices. These data collected are thematically analyzed. Three focus group discussions of 14 members each who were randomly selected and used across ages of respondents to give an objective report or data on the needed information.

Population Sample:

The paper made use of all categories of people that were used as samples to help direct the path of the work, - youths and Elders in the various ethnic groups to get divergent views that gives a balanced response to the issues under investigation. A total of one hundred and forty - two respondents were interviewed for the study selected through the "fish bowl" method. All the respondents were given equal opportunity to be interviewed and rendered their contributions. A total of eight sacrifice points and shrine houses were visited to draw empirical analysis with other sacrifices carried out that are instituted or offered on permanent basis by the people. This investigation revealed further that some sacrifices are annually done or carried out by kinship and community members, as community sacrifices. Some of these sacrifices are; Ekubimi as practiced by the people of Kefub in Beebo, Biakwan, Efamgba, and Efare by the orimekpang and Biajua communities respectively in Abo clan Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State- Nigeria. Others are Mpantor in Akparabong, Ntuokwa in B/Ekiem; Enare in Etaka and Ofum in Etara groups all differently gather to offer animal sacrifices to the gods of fruitfulness in Agriculture before and after the planting season. At the end or beginning of every year, sacrifices are been made to usher members of the families and communities into an era of human fruitfulness for both men and women. Sacrifices are also made to gain victory in warfare against others. Others are made to bring high and good quality farm produce among other things (Asu, 2000; Kayode, 2001).

Data Presentation and Analysis

The research work attempts to find out the level of participation of individuals in these various communities and kinship groups. The information was articulated and presented on simple percentages as seen in table one and two below.

Table 1: Participation of members to community sacrifices and ceremonies.

s/n	OPTIONS	YES	%	NO	%
1	More people are attracted/participate	80	80	20	20
2	NO difference in population and attendees	20	20	20	20
3	Fewer people always attend	-	-	60	60

Source: Fieldwork 2009

The table 1 above showed that 80 (80%) respondents affirm that more people often attend these sacrificial ceremonies while 20 (20%) respondents say no. Also, 60 (60%) respondents refuse that the ceremonies bring in fewer people. It therefore follows that a high number of people are seen as participating in these sacrificial festivities.

Table 2: Sacrificial ceremonies and socio-cultural Development

	OPTIONS	YES	%	NO	%
1	Sacrificial ceremonies bring more economic activities.	74	74	18	18
2	It brings large participants in high number to the village	24	24	10	10
3	It causes socio-cultural hindrances and relationship	02	02	72	72

Source: Fieldwork 2009

The above table show that 74 (74%) respondents agreed to the fact that sacrificial ceremonies to a large extent bring socio-economic and cultural development, while 18 (18%) respondents responded negatively. Also, 72 (72%) respondents maintained that sacrificial ceremonies as a cultural practice does not in any way hinder socio-cultural relationships and development. From this data therefore, we can now infer that sacrificial ceremonies attracts socio-cultural improvement and development.

Discussion of Findings

The importance of sacrificial ceremonies and practices to socio-cultural development is not farfetched and can never be emphasized. The paper found out that the cultural sacrifices and which are often followed by elaborate ceremonies attracts a large number of people to the communities thereby bringing high or increased economic boom for business operators in the area. One major discovery is that the practitioners of these ceremonies and sacrifices clearly believe in the efficacy of these rituals which to them have certain spiritual potency and ancestral relevance. The sacrificial imperativeness which involves killing an animal or human being and using its blood or part of the body for assignments is looked upon as an indecent and outdated behavior and practice in the phase of global western civilization.

Community, Kinship and festival sacrifices create a sense of belongingness, togetherness etc of the participants and others alike. During these sacrificial periods, example, during new yam festivals, fish festivals and cassava festivals among others, brings people from all works of life to the communities.

It strengthens cultural and religious bonds amongst ethnic group members, hence, seen as an avenue for re-socialization, re-union and reenactment of cultural responsibilities and sense of responsibility towards mapping out ways of collectively developing the entire society.

There is an increase of farm yield, increased birth and deliveries in the communities etc. A typical example is the Biakwan community whose community god is the Ekubumi. The sacrificial ceremonies of these community often last for about three days. This is really a pointer to the fact that this practice is functional and developmental in nature not only in the spiritual but physical strength of the people.

Conclusion

Culture is the general way of life of a people. When the people's ways of lives are understood, it shows their beliefs, and other perspectives to living. One of such perspectives and ways of doing things is sacrifice. It becomes cultural because it is learned, sustained, passes from generation to generation among other variables.

The performance of these sacrifices at various times seek to produce for the "believers" or participants expected good or fruitful results and this has conditioned its continued existence or maintenance of the cultural practice in almost 98% of African societies (Agbor, 2003), even in this contemporary age and beyond. Most practitioners see sacrifice as one cultural aspect that engineer's development in society and help to maintain and sustain socio-cultural unity especially among rural dwellers.

The paper asserts clearly that sacrifice is a concept well as a way of life of a people, which plays multiple roles. It is an act that is used to help and even destroy human and non-human existence and a means of communication with the spirits. But this paper concentrated basically on the functionality of the African conceptualization of sacrificial practices which also play a cleansing role in the family and society against evil occurrences and plaques. Sacrifice could be made in religious and spiritual matters, economic, political, social and cultural reasons, health and material influences that help to give life meaning, and directions to members of a society or kinship group.

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