

# **SACRIFICE IN YAHWISM AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE EDO PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A close look at Yahwism and African concept of sacrifice and sacrificial rites will immediately reveal to an observer, some stunning similarities. These similarities re-echo the point that “the soul of religion is one”. The African generally express their worship to God through the agencies of the divinities and other spiritual intermediaries. Yahwism however claim a direct worship of God. Both people subscribe copiously to sacrificial rite as means by which it is believed that the Supreme Being can be reached. The preponderance of sacrificial rites as a core in both religion foregrounds our attempt in this paper. As can be inferred, the work adopts evaluative and analytical methods and submits that sacrifice is a core in both religion and that striking similarities exist in both conceptions. The writers discover that these similarities are not well appreciated by adherents of Christian religion which is an offshoot of Yahwism, and command large subscription in Nigeria. This paper concludes with the note that if religions in Nigeria emphasize these commonalities in religious beliefs, this will engender peace and unity which forms the bedrock for ideal national development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sacrifice is the heartbeat of every religious ritual. It is not surprising that sacrifice has become the dominant paradigm by which scholars of religion analyze and evaluate religious ritual in all religions of the world.<sup>1</sup> Sacrificial rites exist virtually everywhere there is religion. It is a universal phenomenon. The idea of the practice of sacrifice is as old a man’s existence on earth. Every religion of the world whether ancient or modern, subscribes to the rite of

sacrifice as a core aspect of their worship. Sacrifice is among the numerous elements of worship through which man expresses himself to higher beings in worship. Awolalu has well stated that every act of worship has distinct element. In discussing the prominent among these elements, he enumerated; liturgy – which consist of ritual form and its contents including prayer, music, and dancing; sacrifice – offering for different purposes; cultic functionaries – the official and attendant at worship; sacred places – where worship is carried out including shrines, temples and altars, as most significant aspects of worship in all religions.<sup>2</sup>

As a distinctive element of worship, sacrifice features prominently in both Yahwism and in African Traditional Religion among which, the Edo people stands out in a class of their own. The very high premium accorded sacrifice among both people is the object of our search light in this engagement.

### **Yahwism**

For the purpose of clarity, Yahwism according to Abe:

Is the religion of the Jews. It is their beliefs and practice in Yahweh – the personal God of Israel...The beliefs of the Jews depending solely upon the redemption activity of God in concrete historical experience<sup>3</sup>.

He further states thus:

It is imperative to state that Yahwism as contained in the Old Testament tradition is not the Rabbinical Judaism that emanated from the political epoch of Persian and Greco-Roman period of intertestamental dispensation...<sup>4</sup>

These excerpt appropriately put Yahwism in perspective as it is used in this work.

Although there may be traces of affinity with other religions of Ancient Near East, Yahwism is distinguished in the light of its interpretation of the various worship elements. Abe interestingly noted that:

The Old Testament affirms that since the meaning of the personal name of Yahweh was given to Israel in her special historical experiences, as interpreted by a series of prophetic figures beginning with Moses, Yahwism was therefore understood in a completely different sense from prevalent beliefs among Babylon, Egypt, Canaan, and other Ancient Near East world.<sup>5</sup>

The import of this extraction is far reaching as it clearly set the context upon which our work is situated.

### **Edo (Benin)**

The Benin people are also known as the Edo people. Edo is also the vernacular name for Benin City, the centre of the Benin kingdom which flourished from 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> They are among the most coherent of the peoples in Africa. The importance of their contribution in arts and religion is very well attested throughout the world<sup>7</sup>. The Benin traditional worship system is a veritable source for the understanding of African Traditional Religion.

These general statements suffice at this moment because we intend to give a fuller detail later. However, the wealth of information available in Yahwism and Benin, on sacrifice as a worship element is what we are concerned with.

### **SACRIFICE: AN OVERVIEW**

We have earlier noted that sacrifice is a universal phenomenon. The following will give a detailed overview. The secular meaning denotes the giving

up of something valuable or important for somebody or something considered to be of more value or important<sup>8</sup>. We are however concerned with the religious connotation of sacrifice in this current endeavour. Thus, sacrifice implies, a gift offered by an “inferior” to a “superior”. It is a tribute paid by the dependant to his lord, an offering to deity. It could be an offering with or without blood.<sup>9</sup>

Etymologically the term sacrifice is derived from two Latin words, *sacre* which means “holy” and *facere* which appropriately translates, “make”. They both form *sacrificium* to mean “sacrifice”.<sup>10</sup> This Latin rendering originally connote something made holy or sacred.

Sacrifice is a ritual act in which a consecrated offering is made to god or other spiritual being in order to establish, perpetuate, or restore a sacred bond between humanity and the divine. Abe’s work is quite illuminating here as he opines thus:

Sacrifice involves the destruction of a victim for the purpose of maintaining or restoring a right relationship of man to the sacred order. It may effect a bond of union with the divinity to whom it is offered, or constitute a piacular expiation and propitiation to ‘cover’ ‘wipe out’, neutralize or carry away evil and guilt contracted wittingly or unwittingly.<sup>12</sup>

Awolalu, summarily captioned the meaning of sacrifice thus:

Sacrifice is an art of making an offering (animal or vegetable life, of food, drink or of any objects) to a deity or spiritual being. In another sense, sacrifice can be seen as something consecrated and offered to God or a divinity. In other words, an offering of any kind laid on the altar or otherwise presented to a deity or divinity for definite purpose.<sup>13</sup>

Awolalu's definition in the foregoing, very well prefigures the concept of sacrifice in Yahwism and among the Benin traditional worship system in Africa which our search light is currently focused. On the overriding influence of sacrifice as a universal phenomenon, Ringgren remarks:

All over the world, and throughout history, whenever mankind has worshipped divine beings, we beings encounter the practice of sacrifice. The Babylonian sufferer who gives a lamb to gods to ransom himself from sin he supposes to be the cause of his suffering; the Mexican Aztec who kills a young man and offers his hearts to the sun-god in order to secure the vital forces of the sun for his land; the Moabite king who offers his son to his national god in order to win a victory (2 kings 3:27); all these and thousands of others are examples of the world-wide religious practice we refer to as sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

An attempt to trace the origin of sacrifice will see us to the very beginning of human existence on earth. Egbucha and Onu had enumerated up to eight theories on the origin of sacrifice. The prominent ones includes; the gift theory of sacrifice; the totemic theory; magic theory – propagated by Sir James Frazer, etc<sup>15</sup>. Abe, proposes that the origin of sacrifice is connected with ancestral worship, but concluded that:

It is not easy to determine categorically what the very origin of sacrifice was, but the essential basis remains that sacrifice was and is natural to man. It was not imposed on him, his experience determined the when? Where? How? Why? Which? And to whom sacrifice was to be offered.<sup>16</sup>

The answer to these fundamental questions as stated above is determined by ones religious association. The Jews –Yahwists answer these questions more or less like the Benins of Africa.

## **SACRIFICE IN YAHWISM: A BACKGROUND**

Fundamental to Jewish world view was the understanding that Yahweh is the source of everything. According to Bratcher, the Israelites lived in a culture dominated by Canaanite Baal worship. The religion of the Canaanite like most Ancient Near East revolved around the cycles of the natural world and personified those processes into gods. There were gods for virtually everything – Rain, crops, death, etc. They had to be constantly appeased and made happy with sacrifices to bring order into the uncertainty of human life.<sup>17</sup>

The Israelites is perhaps the only nation known in ancient world to have championed monotheism. Yahweh was the only one true, great and holy God.<sup>18</sup> By implication all sacrifices made in the course of their religions as ceremonial engagement were directed to Yahweh. Sacrifices were attached to one form of ceremony or the other. According to Abe, festivals and sacrifices were prominent features of the Hebrew religion. It was necessary in order to maintain and renew constantly, the corporal bond between God and the people.<sup>19</sup>

## **TYPES AND AIMS OF SACRIFICE IN YAHWISM**

Two principal types are noted; the gift sacrifices and the communion or meal sacrifices.<sup>20</sup> From practical as well as theoretical point of view, the

*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* classified Hebrews sacrifice and offering by their motivation. Hence, four classes are named;

- a) Gift and tributes – They may be propitiatory; Tributary (first fruits and tithes); votive (vow); thanksgiving or freewill offerings.
- b) Media of alimentation – will include the sustenance of the god on the one hand and the priest on the other hand. In this class falls; the daily fair of God i.e. the continual offering; the schedule of offerings (see, Number 28-29) and also the bread of the presence (see Exodus 25:30).
- c) Media of communion: In this class belongs, sacrifices that enact or re-enact the covenant relationship of Yahweh with his people. The Old Testament bears record to the belief that the god participated in communion feast especially in those held to cement alliance (see Deut 12:7) (see also Exodus 18:12).
- d) Media of expiation – which embraces both substitute and surrogate for individual “sinner” and vehicle for eliminating impurity from the community as a whole. A good example here is the “scapegoat” (see Leveticus 16: 8, 10). The sin offering – *chata'ah* or *chatta'th*; the guilt offering – *asham*; also falls in this category.<sup>21</sup> (see Leveticus 5: 16, 19; 7:1-7 etc).

As can be inferred from the foregoing, the Old Testament is replete with sacrificial rites of variegated forms. It is from the above classifications that we can fully appreciate the significance of sacrifice among the Hebrews.

## **DEVELOPMENT AND MODE OF SACRIFICE IN YAHWISM**

In the patriarch culture the head of the clan or family offered public sacrifice; later, those rights were reserved for the priestly caste; while finally, only consecrated priests might offer sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> This is very synonymous with the development of sacrificial rites among the Edo people. However, we must note that the order has not changed much as it has in Yahwism.

Sacrifices in Yahwism usually follow some patterns. Yahweh is the one who dictates the pattern. Immolation or destruction of the victim is usually part of the sacrificial oblation, taking or eating of it only symbolizes a communion with the deity<sup>23</sup>. In this regards, the bond or union between the deity and the worshipper was renewed or strengthened.

In the course of any sacrifice the Hebrews attention, like the Benins was focused on three aspects or parties i.e.; the deity to whom the sacrifice is offered; the worshipper who offers the sacrifice; and the sacrifice which is the victim.

Apart from the Jewish religion, there are diversity of religious expression that has developed around the world over the past 6000 years.<sup>24</sup> It is expedient at this juncture to give attention to the African Traditional Religion with the Edo concept of sacrifice in focus.



## **SACRIFICE AMONG THE EDO PEOPLE**

The traditions of the Edo people are reputed among the African Traditional Religion. It is from these traditions we have chosen to evaluate the thematic concept of sacrifice. Let's quickly note that:

The Benin people occupy the heartland of the territorial patrimony of the Edo race and they constitute the people of the Benin kingdom. The principal town of the Benin people is Benin City and it is the ethnic rallying point of Edo race.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the Hebrews which favour monotheism, the Edo people believe in the Supreme Being which they conceive of as high king who can be reached or worshipped only through intermediaries – divinities and ancestors. To the Edo people like the Hebrews sacrifice is a *sine qua non*; so significant is its place that it permeates every aspect of their religious and even social engagement.

### **THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE AMONG THE EDO PEOPLE**

Sacrifice is not uncommon among the Edo people. Sacrifice is usually preceded by divination from where it is prescribed. The act of divination in Edo is *bọ* it means “to seek to know especially something out of human sphere of knowledge by magical art”. The art can be performed by one or a group. For example, an entire village can decide to divine. This group divination is termed *Ukpebọ* in Edo and *Ibhuebo* in Esan respectively. Divination is fundamental to sacrifice in most African culture and, Edo is not an exception.

The generic name used to refer to sacrifice in Edo is *Ese* (pronounced ‘aysay’). It is from this root that *ese*, (pronounced ‘essay’) meaning “gift” is

gotten. “*Ese*” has a wide range of application among the Benins. The following briefly captions the applications:

The Benin refers to the act of sacrificing as “*Izo -Ese*. When a person is faced with inexplicable misfortunes or perhaps, experiences unusual occurrences, it may be said of such person that *ese muyan ohen* or *nese muyan* meaning “one who need to sacrifice”. A popular proverbial expression, *ese muede* means “sacrifice cannot prevent the dawning of a new day.”<sup>26</sup>

We have earlier noted that the Benins like their other African counterparts have a defined structure off beliefs. Succinctly put, this structure follows the pattern below;

Belief in the Supreme Being – The creator;

Belief in divinities – His massagers;

Belief in spirits; and

Belief in ancestors.<sup>27</sup>

Central to the Benin belief system is the fact that these entities are higher than man and must be worshipped in order to secure their good will. It is also believed that these high beings are repositories of powers which can be accessed by sacrifices. The very rich tradition of festivals and masquerades through which the people either appease the various gods and goddesses, is a case that strengthens our positions.<sup>28</sup> *Ema-Olokun* – “festive meal of *Olokun* – the water goddess among the Benins” and *Ema-Ovia* – “festive meal of *Ovia* cult in Benin”, are few of the numerous communion sacrifices in Benin.

## **CLASSIFICATION OF SACRIFICE IN BENIN**

There is almost a parallel in the Benin classification of sacrifice as the one presented of the Igbos of Nigeria in the work of Ikenga. Thus, among the Edos, we have; Sacrifice of consecration – This will also include that of initiation; Propitiatory sacrifices; Purificatory sacrifices; Exorcist sacrifices; and Communion sacrifices,<sup>29</sup> some examples of which are noted above.

It is quite interesting to note that the classification above compare favourably with that of Yahwism. Let's state however, that the full analysis of the Benin classification of sacrifice is not possible in this current endeavour as we consider that, a detail that requires another paper.

Before delving into the functions of sacrifices to the Benins and the Yahwists, let's attempt a trope of a type of sacrificial rite that runs almost parallel in Yahwism and among the Benins.

## **THE HEBREW AZAZEL (SCAPEGOAT) AND THE BENIN ISUSU IN DIALOGUE**

The sacrifices for the complete atonement and reconciliation of the Israelites with their God, was not complete without the scapegoat – *Azazel*. It was upon this goat, the sins of the people were confessed and then, it is sent by an able young man into the wilderness. This account is clear in the Bible:

Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the sins, of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send away by the hand of a

chosen man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear their sins to a land in which no one live.<sup>30</sup>

It is at the completion of the above ritual that the Israelites relationship with Yahweh could be said to have been restored.

On the other hand, *Isusu* among the Benins in Africa, literarily mean “that which causes misfortunes and inexplicable occurrences especially negative ones”. To *b’isusu* means “to send or push out *Isusu*.”<sup>31</sup> This kind of sacrifice appropriately fit in exorcist and purification classification.

The Benins like most Africans trace any unnatural occurrence to some evil force which they believe can be driven away or appease by the right kind of ritual or sacrifice. We had observed in a Benin village – Iguagban in Uhumwode Local Government Area of Edo State that the conditions that could motivate *Isusu* sacrifice varied from premature deaths, infant mortalities and miscarriages, unusual sicknesses both of human and animals, consistent poor harvest occasioned by lack of rainfall or other climatic problems, etc. The sacrificial rite is always performed on the entire village or town. We had observed also that after consulting with the diviners, the material for the sacrifice is named (it is usually a white cock of considerable years). At the direction of a priest and the elders, the victim is slaughtered amidst some other rituals. The blood is sprinkled on the village shrine and the lifeless cock is thereafter tied to a cluster of palm fronds by the *Ighele* –the middle aged men. After this ritual, the *Irhoghae* or *Ikpologhe* – the youths, and the *Ighele*

proceeds with small drum sets and bells to dance through the village or town. The sacrificed material is usually handled by a very strong *eghele* – a middle age man, who drags it on the ground as the dance progresses through the village. At their approach to any house, the household quickly forms a little cluster outside and the sacrifice is dragged around the house. Finally the sacrificed material is waved across the heads of the household until the entire village is covered. At the end the sacrificed material is taken completely out of the village and buried. With this process completed, it is usually believed that evil and malevolent spirits are driven away and the land purified and restored.

## **PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRIFICE IN YAHWISM AND AMONG THE EDO PEOPLE**

We have attempted a holistic evaluation of sacrifice in both Yahwism and the Benin beliefs system. Some of the stunning parallels have been made obvious in the foregoings. Let's now concern ourselves in this section with the importance of sacrifice in both Benin and Hebraic conceptions. The following are some of the significance of sacrifice;

It was a basic notion among the ancient world as well as Benin that the sacrifices of agricultural products to a deity enable the crops to grow well and yield abundantly. It is by the means of such sacrifices that the divine power is accessed for human interest. Although the Hebrews does not hold the view that Yahweh needed those sacrifice to sustain Him like other nations of Ancient

Near East,<sup>32</sup> they however subscribe to the notion of divine influence in the fecundity of their land by means of such sacrifices.

Again, the thought that the Supreme Being possesses the power to sustain humanity was also very prevalent in ancient world like in Benin. Such force could be offended and the anger of the deity incurred. It was therefore necessary to avert the devastating effects of such anger by sacrifice. The Hebrew concept of atonement is a glaring accentuation to this point.

Also, it is by the means of sacrifice that mystical unions are believed to be established with the deity. The covenant was very vital to the Israelite.<sup>33</sup> There were ceremonial meals – sacrifice among the Hebrews that strengthened their union with Yahweh their God. According to Abe:

At the communion meal, which is *Zebah Shalami*, Yahweh and the worshippers share a common life, which is the slaughtered animal. It was a two-in-one offering of combining the element of *Minahah* (A gift to Yahweh) and *Shelamin* (Peace to the worshippers).<sup>34</sup>

The Benins also subscribe copiously to this kind of sacrifice and it also accepts the same significance. The Hebrew traditionally presents an animal to die in their place whenever they sinned and wanted forgiveness. This concept of animal substitute also features prominently in Benin sacrificial rites. Animals offered at cross road or junction – *Ada* often time serve as a substitute to the one who make such offer. Junction sacrifices *Izobo*, is still very popular among the Benins. The Aduwawa community in Benin derived its name from the combination of *Ada* and *Uwawa* meaning, “junction” and “native pot”

respectively. It is by extension, a junction where native pots of sacrifice – Izobo, are always found.

Whether in Yahwism or among the Benins sacrifice serves basic purposes and meet the aspiration of men in varying capacities. From expression of gratitude to fulfilling a vow; from establishment of communion to averting of anger of the spirits; from exorcism to purification, sacrifice has been the single most powerful tool in the hands of man in addressing his spiritual needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although our task in this paper was not to prove like Mahatman Ghadhi that “the soul of religion is one”,<sup>35</sup> we have, however, been able to arrive at a safe ground in the discourse of sacrifice in Yahwism and Benin conception as a preponderance element that finds expression in every aspect of their lives. We have also seen the phenomenon as one that has survived past generation and continues into the future of man.

The Study has demonstrated the clear similarities between the conception of sacrifice in Yahwism and in African Traditional Religion. These similarities, to us, are supposed to bind religious adherents together in faith toward God. We also discovered that there are areas of divergence and although the paper is not a comparative endeavour, it suffices to note however, that such areas should not serve as dividing factors, but rather, they should be seen as divine act of uniqueness in God’s creation. As earlier stated in the paper, emphasizing areas of differences will do us no favour but instead, will encourage strife, crises and

rancor which every religion preaches against. As sacrifice has been discovered to be the most significant religious element of seeking peace with the divine, if we will pay the sacrifice of enduring and tolerating our neighbours, religion will begin to play a reconciling role among nations and thereby promoting global peace and atmosphere for sustainable development.

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