

**ANTHROPO-ONTOLOGY OF SACRIFICE IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION, ITS RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.2.21005.15840](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21005.15840)

**Abstract**

*This is an anthropo-ontological study of traditional sacrifice and its challenges. The research is ethnographic using the Okun, a sub-Yoruba group as a case study. This methodology is adjudged as best for the study of traditional societies which have come under the onslaughts of foreign influence. It uses qualitative research in which Participant-as-Observer, In-Depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used in data gathering. The paper adopts ethnography as research orientation because it is capable of examining the underlining phenomena of culture and structures of traditional religions. The study reveals the anthropological and ontological relevance of sacrifice in traditional religion of the Okun. It also examines the dynamism, resilience and vulnerability of traditional religion. The report is presented in narrative and descriptive ethnographic format. The paper opines that it is apropos that anthropological enquiry be made into traditional religions before they are completely eroded or obliterated.*

**Keyword:** Anthropology, Ethnography, Ontology, Sacrifice, Traditional Religion

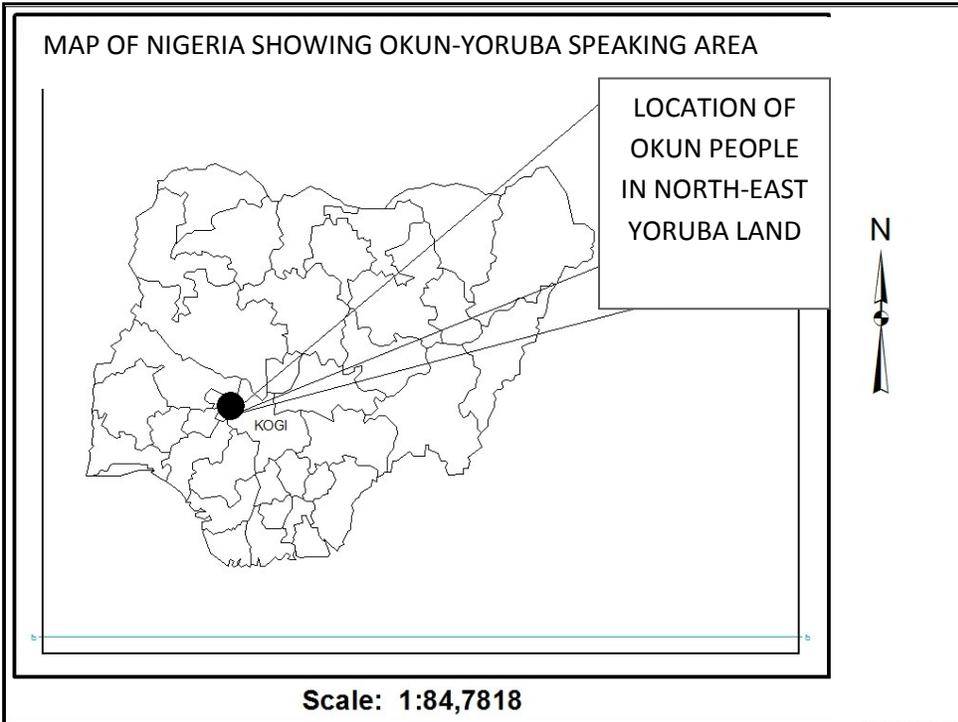
**Introduction**

This anthropo-ontological study uses anthropological paradigms to examine the existence and practice of sacrifice within African traditional religions and its relevance and multiple challenges by using the Okun-Yoruba, Nigeria as a case study. Sacrifice is a pious act which is intended to connect humans with the deity/deities. Sacrifice is an integral part of all religions. Tubi (2015) defines human beings as *homo religiosus* (religious man). Religion indeed pervades all aspects of life of mankind especially in traditional societies in which sacrifice plays important part. Yet its precise definition has eluded scholars. Religion is an almost undefinable concept. Indeed, there is no general definition of religion. This made Ibenwa (2014:49) to asset that "Religion is elusive in nature and this makes it difficult to have a universally accepted definition". Durkheim (1995) and Weber (1993, 2019) treat religion as a social reality which performs social

functions within a community/society. Tubi (2015) defines religion as “a most sublime activity in which the Deity is inseparably linked with man/woman in a covenanted relationship”. Thus religion is the most sublime human activity which is an aggregation of human endeavours that links humanity with the Other Thou/Ultimate Being. Religion has received critical reviews from scholars such as Marx (1967) who argues that it is an opiate given to the common folks to aid their suppression by the powerful. Detailed study of traditional religion of Africans have been undertaken by scholars like Awolalu (1979), Arinze (2008), Ekwunife (1992), Idowu (1973), Mbiti (1982, 1999), Parinder (1974), and Tubi (2015), amongst others. Sacrifice has been observed by Arinze (2008) as intimately linked to every act of worship in African and as integral part of African worship.

### **Focus of Study and Methodology**

The study focuses on the Okun speaking people of Northeast Yorubaland. Okun is a collective term for a subgroup of the Yoruba language spoken in parts of Ekiti, Ondo, Kwara and Kogi States of Nigeria. They are divided into six linguistic clusters namely, Bunu, Kiri, Owe, Oworo, Ijumu and Yagba based on tonal differences. Earlier study by Tubi (2015) asserts that they retain a higher degree of their pristine culture than most of their Yoruba kins and kiths, where neither Islam, Christianity nor modernization has been able wipe off their culture.



**Source: Original to Researcher**

Ontology is here construed as the nature of reality, being and essence. This focus on ontology is in relation to sacrifice within traditional African milieu. Its ontological examination is concerned in simplest form with sacrifice as a reality in African society. Anthropology is taken in this study as the science of humanity. This focus is on culture of the Okun speaking people.

Malinowski (2014) has rendered ethnography compulsory for any meaningful study of traditional societies. Ethnography is a major anthropological methodology, which scholars adjudged as suited for an in-depth study of culture (Tubi 2015). Ethnography directs observation of culture in its natural setting. Thus, ethnographic understanding of the religious practices and tenets of the Okun-Yoruba people has helped to bring out the underlining structures of their beliefs. This methodology because it is holistic, and integrative, it brings out in clear perspectives the orientation, meaning and focus of their traditional religious practices like sacrifices. By using ethnography, the different types of sacrifices, the methodology of sacrifices and the reasons for sacrifices come out with clarity.

The study relies on Focus Group Discussion and In-Depth interviews as sources of data. A period of insertion was undertaken by the researcher in which he lived within the Okun-Yoruba community in line with Participant-as-Observer methodology. This enabled him to obtain first-hand information on the subject matter. The researcher is a culture-bearer who understands the language of the people and their general culture. He uses this advantage as a professional anthropologist.

### **Understanding Sacrifice in Okun Traditional Religion**

Sacrifice is the soul of African worship. Africans in traditional setting cannot worship without offering sacrifices. Traditional sacrifice in traditional African religions is a pious act of worship. Traditional sacrifice involves rites of integrated cultural practices that link humans with the deities. They are highly coordinated rites that demand faithfulness in formulae, gesture and matter. Any deviation or omission of any part may render a particular sacrifice ineffectual, an offence or outright abomination. Ethnographic studies by Tubi (2015) among the Okun, indicates that traditional sacrifices touch political, social, economic and religious activities like rites of passage from birth to death, seeking for fortunes, contest for political offices, protection from evil, healing etc. Importantly traditional African sacrifices involve participation of persons, objects of sacrifice, place of sacrifice etc.

The fundamental meaning of sacrifice in traditional religion is that of effecting an efficacious relationship between human beings and the deities. This understanding is based not on metaphysics but on anthropology. Here sacrifice is interpreted as an anthropological reality with deep ontological meaning. Sacrificial rites within traditional religion have varieties of forms and intentions. This research establishes that sacrifices are keystones of traditional religion. They provide the steps to reach the deities. Using the Okun-Yoruba as a case study, traditional religion conceives of all spiritual beings in their hierarchical order beginning with Olodumare (Supreme Being) who is considered as the highest, the greatest and grandest, the deities and ancestors in descending order. Okun's traditional religions respond to the deities according to their hierarchy and influence, duties and values, authority and legitimacy, (Tubi 2015).

### **Findings: Anthropology and Ontology of Sacrifice among the Okun**

Traditional African societies have come under the onslaughts of debilitating foreign influences in forms of westernization, *sinoization* (Chinese influence) and globalization. African traditional religions have also had to cope with the invasions of Islam and Christianity and the recent influx of Eastern religions like Hare Khrisna, Guru Maharaji and schools of mysteries like Eckanka and Grail Message. Yet traditional sacrifices by Africans remain unabated despite these foreign influences.

This study's findings are concisely explained by illustrating the anthropological and ontological data of sacrifice. The basic ontology of traditional sacrifice and its relevance can be accessed under four sub-themes as variously enunciated by scholars like Arinze (2008), Awolalu (1979), and Mbiti (1982).

(a) Requirements for Sacrifices, (b) Purposes of Sacrifices, (c) Types of Sacrifices, (d) Materials for Sacrifices.

**(A) Requirements for Sacrifices:** In Okun traditional religious set up, there are four basic requirements for sacrifices: (i) Things offered (victims) must be clean and not defective. (ii) Priests are needed to offer sacrifices. (iii) Sacrifices must follow prescribed rites. (iv) Sacrifices must be offered at prescribed spots. These four basic requirements are considered necessary and non-negotiable among traditional people because of the reverence they have for the deities.

**(B) Purposes of Sacrifices:** Data gathered from researches indicate that traditional religionists offer sacrifices for several purposes. Scholars like Awolalu (1979), and Arinze (2008) opine that Africans offer sacrifices for several purposes. Arinze (2008) identifies four purposes of offering sacrifices among the Igbo of Eastern-Nigeria. Tubi (2015) identifies six purposes of sacrifices among the Okun-Yoruba.

(i) Expiation: People offer sacrifices to expiate or atone for sins committed either collectively or individually. The origin and anthropological relevance of expiatory sacrifices derive from African belief that objects of worship can adequately substitute for their evil deeds.

- (ii) Votive offering: Africans also offer sacrifices to fulfill vows made to the deities. In dire situations, an individual can express a vow, wish or desire to the deities which becomes binding and must be fulfilled after the request has been granted.
- (iii) Petition: People also offer sacrifices to beg, implore and seek favour from the deities. It is believed that God left the running of the affairs of the world to the deities, thus, people may petition a deity for fecundity, healing, prosperity, and other sundry purposes.
- (iv) Thanksgiving: All Africans play premium on thanksgiving. A Yoruba axioms say *eni ti a se lore ti ko dupe, o da bi eni ti olosa ko leru lo* (the one who refuses to be thankful after receiving a favour is worse than a thief) and *eni ba dupe ore ana a ri omiran gba* (the one who is thankful will always receive more). Therefore, people give profuse thanksgiving to the deities and even to the chief priests who are intermediaries between humans and the deities. Thanksgiving can come in various forms. It can be done with material things, verbally, songs, dances, drama, and so on.
- (v) Purification: Traditionalists also offer sacrifices for the purposes of carrying out purificatory rites. These are done when an abomination is committed or a taboo is committed or breaking a prohibition imposed by social customs such as suicide, incest, murder and desecration of sacred persons or places.
- (vi) Warding off evil: Another reason for offering sacrifices among the people is that they believe that one can offer sacrifice to ward off evil in all forms and manners. To achieve this, sacrifices are offered to ward off evil spirits, sicknesses, famine, danger, mishaps, epidemics, premature death, barrenness, and so on.

**(C) Types of Sacrifices:** In traditional Africa, the people place emphasis on typology of sacrifices. This research identifies six typologies.

(i) Thanksgiving Sacrifice: People are want to offer sacrifices in thanksgiving for favours received. Thanksgiving sacrifices have cosmological relevance because they link humans with the ancestors and the deities who are believed to have granted them their requests. It is considered the height of ingratitude not to acknowledge the blessings/favours from the deities.

(ii) Communion Sacrifice: There are certain sacrifices that are offered to establish communion in the community. This type of sacrifice is meant to be a joyful celebration for all members of the community. Sacrifices of this nature are also

meant to achieve reconciliation in the community. As part of the celebration, people share a common meal and enact a renewal of their living together. This involves carnival-like festivity or an ordinary feast.

(iii) Votive Sacrifice: Another type of sacrifice is the votive sacrifice which is made in fulfillment of a vow which an individual entered into with the deities and ancestors. The people believe that vows must be fulfilled, thus, votive sacrifices become a necessity for those concerned.

(iv) Propitiatory/Expiatory Sacrifice: The cosmological reality of traditional Africa is dotted with frictions, aberrations and sins. To achieve reconciliation between man and his community, on one hand, and between man and the ancestors, on the other hand, it becomes imperative to offer propitiatory or expiatory sacrifices.

(v) Preventive Sacrifice: Data from researches also indicate that people offer preventive sacrifices. Preventive sacrifices can be described as those that are offered by individuals or communities to ward off evil. The people believe that the Supreme Being created a good world but evil spirits, evil people and irascible deities can cause mishaps and endanger people's lives. To curb this, preventive sacrifices are offered.

(vi) Substitutionary Sacrifice: Traditionalists believe that animals can be substituted for human beings. In cases where a person faces imminent death, diviners can be approached to offer animals, e.g, goats in place of the person. Sacrifices of this nature are not performed in clear view of people; they are usually done in secret. Substitutionary sacrifices are also believed to be capable of prolonging life, averting danger, ameliorating punishments and diverting repercussions.

**(D) Materials for Sacrifices:** The people offer varieties of materials/objects for sacrifices. Materials for sacrifices are based on two premiums: (1) The material or object offered must be clean, (2) The material offered will depend on the taste of the deities and it must be as prescribed by the deities. Generally, there are four types of materials used for sacrifices in traditional Africa, namely, food such as yams, kolanuts, beans, pounded yam and soup; drinks such as palm wine (*emu*), sorghum beer (*burukutu*), spirits (*ogogoro*); animals such as goats (*edegbe/ewure*), dog (*aja*), chicken (*adiye*); and objects such as cloth (*aso*), coins (*owo*), cowries (*owo eyo*), among others.

### **Ritual meals**

Meals and drinks play anthropo-ontological roles in African traditional religions. Using the Okun as a case study, the following data emerged. *Edegbe* (goats), *aja* (dogs), *ere were* (small type beans), *isu/usu* (yams), *obi* (kolanut), *epo pupa* (palm oil), *emu* (palm wine) and *orogbo* (bitter kola) are the most prized for ritual purposes.

*Isu/usu* (yam) is the king of food, the main traditional meal to be eaten with relish. It is celebrated and it is used for marriages, chieftaincy rites and funeral rites. Yam is inseparably linked to *Ogun* and the Earth-spirit. *Obi* (kolanut) equally plays significant socio-cultural roles among the Okun. There are three principal types of kolanuts found among the Okun. *Obi afin* (white kola), is highly prized for ritualistic purposes.

Next is the *obi alawe merin* (four lobes kolanuts), which are used both for eating and *ifa* divination. *Obi abata* (two lobes kola), which are useful for their ability to prevent thirst and to keep one alert due to its nicotine content. Also, kolanuts have social relevance because they are used to entertain guests. Those to whom kolanuts are given are told that they are warmly welcomed. To receive a guest in one's house without offering him kolanut is deemed to be contrary to good hospitality.

*Epo pupa* (palm oil) is a condiment for man and a chief meal of the deities. Libation is performed with pouring of palm oil at shrines. *Emu* (palm wine) is another ritual drink. Earth receives palm oil and palm wine regularly from devotees and no one drinks them without giving little to the earth. *Orogbo* (bitter kola) is relished for its medicinal purposes. Also it is held to be very portent; when chewed, it gives efficacy to the chanting of incantations as well as pronouncement of blessings and curses. *Ere were* (small beans) is the favourite meal of the deities. *Eran aja* (dog meat) is the favourite of *Ogun*, the deity of iron.

### **Impact of Foreign Influence on Okun Traditional Sacrifice**

Okun's contacts with foreign influences have brought many practical changes in their religions. The contact with Islam came with changes. The impact of the Nupe-Fulani Jihadists from 1840-1897 was highly destructive. The Jihadist under the pretense of spreading Islam declared war of slavery on the people, which resulted in massive depopulation, despoliation and near total annihilation of the

Okun and their traditional religious system. The jihad did not succeed in converting the people, who rather loathed the religion that brought so much hardship on them. Conversion to Islam however, was achieved due to missionary activities of itinerant Islamic preachers later on. Today, Islam has a sufficient number of followers among the people. Muslims also have impacted positively with their health institutions, care-giving centres and educational institutions (primary, secondary) in Okun-Yorubaland. Due to the influence and activities of local and foreign missionaries, Christianity now constitutes the largest religion among the people of Okunland. Christianity has made tremendous impacts on the people especially through their numerous schools and medical services.

The impacts of westernization, Christianity and Islam on traditional religion of the Okun have resulted in serious weakening of the indigenous religion, and they are imposing their codes of ethics on the populace such that many see participation in traditional religion as fetish and superstitious. Invariably, this has led to social isolation of some youths and adherents of Christianity and Islam from their lineages and communities.

Another observed impact of modern religions and modernization on the populace is the relegation of traditional passage rites. A key informant among the Okun expresses her fears saying that, traditional religion is dying off as their children are all going to Church. She complained that they are all old and now no one wants his/her son to be initiated into *oro* again and no one wants to initiate her/his daughter into traditional cult of women. Traditionalists all want their children to go to schools and churches own the schools (Tubi 2015)

Modernization has also brought changes to traditional religion in relation to the works of priests. The priests, apart from their sacral role in the community, they are also adept as health care givers. Due to modernization, there are technological changes in the accoutrement of traditional religious practices such that body creams manufactured by modern industries have become ingredients for traditional herbs, modern bottles have replaced traditional gourds, plastic containers have replaced earthen wares. Yet, data from the research indicate that traditional religious practices appear to be fading away. Priests are less numerous, public traditional rites for the gods are not as frequent as before.

In addition, the impact of modernization on the religious system can be identified in the imposed environmental crisis on Okunland. This is noticeable with the gradual disappearance of sacred forests and grooves once held sacrosanct for the deities. Ethnographic data obtained by the researcher among the Okun-Yoruba show that traditional grooves of malign spirits were given to the early missionaries by the kings to build their places of worship. It was envisaged that such malign spirits will annihilate the missionaries. However, such places of worship have now become centres of huge socio-religious activities in the communities. In addition, modernization has severely affected the environment as sacred forests and grooves have been encroached upon by activities of modern lumber contractors, constructions of roads, and houses.

Another observation made from the study is that the anthropo-ontological roles of the deities in bestowing prosperity, health, fecundity and protection are being ignored. Coupled with this, the denial of the role of the ancestors in the community has affected collective responsibility and solidarity of the lineages.

Anthropologically, Okunland can be said to be going through a transitional phase in which it is difficult to classify many people as either traditionalists, Muslims or Christians. Acephalousness seems to be a common trend that unites many of the people because many Christians and Muslims are also active participants in traditional religion. However, Christianity and Islam are not the sole causes of the erosion of traditional lores, mores and ethos. Another cause is the modern economic system which stresses individualism rather than communalism. The Colonial educational system has also impacted on the entire traditional system, which suppressed the traditional method of impacting knowledge to the impressionable minds.

## **Conclusion**

From the data presented above, the people believe that sacrifices are an integral part of their religious system in which libation and offering go on simultaneously. Sacrifices, according to the chief priest of Ogidi, help them to receive supernatural assistance, restoration, maintenance and sustenance from ancestors and deities. The *Oba* of Mopa states that sacrifices play important roles on their political, economic and social systems in the community. Their religion

impinges on all aspects of their life ways and forms the interconnectivity of all their cultural systems.

The Okun highlights the dilemma of a traditional African community which is coping with the influence of modernization and foreign influence. Overwhelmed with such intrusive cultures like westernization, sinoization, globalization and foreign religions, yet the people celebrate their unique identity by maintaining some elements of traditional practices, one of the iconic being traditional sacrifices.

The study has helped to reveal the underlining structures of traditional religious practices of the people, thus it has proved highly valuable in this research, but it could not reveal all the internal workings of a complex religious system like the Okun. The study could not reveal the power of non-linguistic symbolism of the Okun traditional religion, and it could not furnish data on the rich variety, flexibility and subtlety of traditional sacrifice of the Okun. Furthermore, adherents of traditional religions did not reveal all the details of their practices, because, the researcher was considered a non-initiate into *oro*, (traditional mystery).

Sacrifices continues to play important roles in the lives of the Okun people. Evidence of votive offerings at road junctions, sacrifices at river sides, slaughtered chickens beside baobab trees, and deliberate placing of cowries with white cloths are indications that traditional sacrifice continues among the people. The Okun enjoys religious freedom in which a person might be an adherent of one religion, yet he/she has no inhibition in visiting a cleric of another religion for help when confronted with the vagaries of life.

The paper concludes that traditional African has survived despite the continuous opposition of foreign influence. It has maintained a reasonable resilience despite its vulnerability. The people of Okunland typify a resilient culture in which traditional sacrifices continue among the people irrespective of religious affiliation, educational background, political position, economic status and social standard. This paper opines that the practice of offering sacrifice at traditional shrines might persist for a longer time among Okun-Yoruba because of the perceived relevance of sacrifices to their existential reality.

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