

## REEXAMINING THE NON-TRANSACTIONAL NATURE OF SACRIFICE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION: ITS CHALLENGES TO YOUTH RITUAL MATERIALISM

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### Abstract

The conventional and increasing troubling shifts in the understanding of sacrifice among Igbo youths as a means of making money or creating wealth runs contrary to the beliefs of traditional Igbo religion. It is well established that the traditional Igbo conception of sacrifice is deeply embedded in a non-transactional worldview, in which ritual acts are primarily expressions of reverence, communion with the spirits, and the restoration of cosmic balance and communal harmony. However, in contemporary Nigerian society, there has been a significant shift, particularly among the youth, towards a transactional understanding of sacrifice. This paper critically reexamines the non-transactional nature of sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion and explores its challenge to the growing phenomenon of youth-driven ritual materialism. It traces the philosophical, theological, and ethical foundations of traditional Igbo sacrificial practices and contrasts them with the distorted motivations underlying modern ritual abuse. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines indigenously African religious thought, cultural anthropology, and contemporary ethical analysis, the study exposes the spiritual, moral, and social consequences of this shift from sacred duty to economic transaction. The research argues that this false understanding of sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion among modern youth stems from the erosion of traditional moral education, the glamorization of wealth in Igbo culture, and the “get-rich-quick” syndrome. The study concludes that this trend calls for a revival of indigenous ethical consciousness through intergenerational dialogue, economic revitalization, and the re-engagement of traditional custodians of religion and culture.

**Keywords:** Igbo Traditional Religion, Sacrifice, Non-transactional Ritual, Ritual Materialism, African Spirituality, Ethical Values

### Introduction

Sacrifice in different world religions is not done on the basis of transaction but to atone or to appease the Divine, who in turn may reward the devotees in different ways. According to Arinze (2008), “sacrifice plays a great part in the religion of the traditional Igbo. It is really the essence of their worship, and the heart of their traditional religion” (p. 214). Recently, the interpretations or rituals of sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) are geared or seen as a direct exchange to gain material wealth or personal gain through human sacrifice, no longer as a ritual for moral and spiritual obligation rooted in communal ethics and the maintenance of spiritual and cosmic balance. With this view, it means that sacrifice in ITR and Africa in general has a foundational theoretical basis, upon which sacrifices were made in the past by the Igbo forefathers. Though, it was known that there was human sacrifice in Igbo traditional religion, for Leonard (1906) affirms that:

Human sacrifice is the substance, spirit, and practice of their religion, the first and principal in importance of their religious rites, . . . in their own eyes it is the oldest, as it is the most mysterious and indispensable custom in existence. (p. 441).

Parrinder (1954) also confirms “that it is now recognized that the human ‘sacrifices’, which so shocked early observers, took place nearly always in connection with funeral and memorial ceremonies, and more rarely in the cults of the gods” (p. 127). This is why Arinze (2008) remarks that most of these killings were not sacrificial and were in no way transactional. So, by restoring the non-transactional essence of sacrifice, Igbo society can resist the use of sacred as a means of commodification and redirect its youth towards a more authentic, value-driven spirituality. The negative impact is seen or observed in the rising cases of ritual sacrifices for money, that is, where sacrificial acts are performed with the sole aim of acquiring wealth, fame, or power, often through harmful and unethical means, including human sacrifice.

Sacrifice, within the context of Igbo Traditional Religion, is a sacred act embedded in the cosmological and ethical fabric of the society. Traditionally, sacrifice was performed not as a transactional means to an end, but as a sacred obligation to maintain harmony between the spiritual and physical realms (Metuh, 1981). Initially, Badsen (1966) observes that:

The idea of sacrifice amongst the Ibo people is very similar to that of many other primitive peoples, i.e. sacrifices are offered, not from any desire to give, but because of the fear that, unless they are offered, their lives and interests will be blighted. . . . Sacrifice is offered solely to

appease a malignant god whose imperative demands are indicated by the god's executive, i.e the medicine-man (*dibia*). (p.223).

Here, offerings were made to the gods, ancestors, and deities not with the expectation of material gain, but in gratitude, atonement, or supplication for communal well-being. The non-transactional nature of sacrifice reflected the Igbo understanding of life as a shared moral and spiritual journey, where actions were oriented toward the greater good of the community rather than individual gain (Iroegbu, 2005).

However, in recent decades, there has been a cultural and social distortion of this practice, especially among Nigerian youth. Influenced by globalization, economic hardship, and the glorification of wealth through popular media, many young people have adopted a transactional view of religious rituals, including human sacrifice. This distortion is most apparent in the rise of ritual killings, "money rituals," and spiritual consultations that promise wealth in exchange for sacrificial acts, sometimes involving grave immorality or violence (Ajibade, 2021). This phenomenon not only undermines the original spiritual intent of Igbo sacrificial practice as an atonement or appeasement, but also led many youths to be priests and priestesses (*ezenwanyi*) acting as messengers to the gods of wealth. It also brought among the Nigerian youths the culture of moral crisis and decadence with regard to spilling of blood without fear.

This study tries to reexamine the original non-transactional nature of sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion, and trace the reasons for human sacrifice as found in the early times in the life of the Igbo youth. And critically analyze how this understanding can serve as a corrective measure to the current misuse of sacrificial rituals among Nigerian youth. By engaging both historical and contemporary sources, this paper seeks to illuminate the ethical dimensions of sacrifice in indigenous Igbo thought. The significance of the study lies in its potential to foster cultural and spiritual reorientation among the Nigerian youth and to contribute to the ongoing discourse on African religion, youth moral development. Moreover, it offers practical insights towards solving the worrying shift to get-rich-quick syndrome among the Nigerian youth who are embracing this syndrome as a new culture.

### **Human Killings or Human Sacrifices in the Early Igbo Traditional Religion**

The question arises whether there is any time in history when, there is something like human sacrifice in the ITR, and for what purpose? To the above question, most scholars affirmed the practice of human sacrifice, just like in other world religions, but the scholars differ greatly on the purpose or the aim of the human sacrifice in question. While the dominant narrative in African traditional religion in general, emphasizes the non-transactional and symbolic nature of sacrifice (Metuh, 1981; Kanu, 2015), historical evidence from both indigenous sources and early colonial documentation affirms that human sacrifice did exist in certain Igbo communities. Badsen (1966) affirms that:

Probably, there is no part of West Africa in which the offering of human sacrifices has not been customary at some period. Only by the advance of Christianity and civilization and the power of good government is the practice being stamped out. Amongst the Ibo, the custom was widespread. (pp. 230-231).

These instances, though limited and largely context-specific, reveal much about the cosmological worldview, social structure, and moral codes that informed early Igbo religious practices. This is why Jordan (1948) comments that:

This was not regarded as a real sacrifice. It was just a question of doing the correct thing. Would not the spirits of great chiefs of old sit down and laugh in derision if they found a modern chief making his way into the next life without a shadow of a retinue? (p. 127).

One of the most well documented forms of human sacrifice in early Igbo religion involved burial rituals. When titled chiefs, kings (*eze*), or wealthy nobles died, it was customary in some regions to kill slaves, servants, or close attendants so they could accompany their masters into the spirit world. These individuals were believed to serve their master in the afterlife as they did in the physical world. According to Talbot (1926), "in some central and northern Igbo communities, retainer sacrifice was part of the burial process, seen as necessary to ensure the deceased's comfort in the ancestral realm" (p. 32). Badsen (1938) similarly documented the ritual killing of slaves during burial ceremonies, noting that "it was believed the master could not continue life properly in the spirit world without his earthly retainers" (p. 179). Such sacrifices were not driven by transactional gain but rather by communal and spiritual obligations tied to death and continuity. Isichei (1976), however, offers a critical view, noting that the practice was not universal across all Igbo communities and was gradually replaced by symbolic substitutions such as the burial of figurines or objects. It is worthy to be noted here that Arinze (2008) states that:

It is most necessary to note that such killings were not at all sacrificial. Those killed were called *ndi eji kwa ozu* (those used in funerals) and were not in any sense sacrificial victims; they were killed solely in order to accompany their masters as he entered the great beyond. (p. 172).

This demonstrates an evolution of sacrificial meaning, showing that human life, while once ritually significant, became less central over time.

Another context in which human sacrifice occurred was in cases of spiritual crises such as epidemics, droughts, or natural disasters believed to signify the anger of the gods or the desecration of the earth (Ala). In such cases, traditional diviners might prescribe the ultimate form of appeasement: a human sacrifice. Echeruo (1979) writes that “the Earth goddess, Ala, could demand a human life when a serious abomination had occurred, particularly in cases of incest, murder, or when cleansing rituals had failed” (p. 88). The belief was that such acts polluted the land, and only blood, sometimes human, could atone for the desecration. This form of sacrifice was not transactional, in the sense of seeking wealth or favor, but was **cosmic and restorative**, intended to cleanse and protect the community. It was part of a deeply spiritual system that prioritized the balance of moral order over individual needs. Arinze also relates that:

The ancient custom of offering a good-looking girl to the Niger Water Spirit at the celebration of the *Ofala* of the Obi of Onitsha. The water spirits, more than any others, seem to have received human victims. Bishop Shanaham once rescued a girl from a howling mob who were dragging her to a nearby river for sacrifice. But the rescue was short-lived, for the unfortunate girl was overtaken away to death. (p. 175).

Another symbolic but still grave example of human sacrifice involved the ritual killing of humans during the laying and consecration of community shrines, gates, or town walls. The idea was that the spirit of the victim would guard the structure and imbue it with mystical protection. Basden (1966) notes that in such cases, “the victim, usually a slave or outcast, would be buried alive or killed and placed at the foundation of a building to ensure its stability and spiritual security” (p. 154). Though this appears gruesome by modern standards, it was embedded in a sacrificial logic of permanence and spiritual guardianship. It is important to note, however, that such practices were localized and not representative of widespread Igbo belief.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of human sacrifice in Igbo history is associated with the Arochukwu oracle (Ibini Ukpabi). During the precolonial era, this oracle wielded both religious and political power across a wide region. People accused of crimes or handed over to the oracle for divine judgment were often never seen again. Nwoga (1984) comments that “many of these judgments were politically motivated, and while some victims were sold into slavery, others were killed as ritual acts to maintain the oracle’s spiritual authority” (p. 101). The blurred line between ritual justice, human sacrifice, and economic exploitation has led scholars to critically assess the oracle’s function. Yet, within the religious logic of the time, these killings were considered sacrifices to uphold divine law and communal balance. Most scholars, remark that it is essential to note that human sacrifice was not unique to the Arochukwu Oracle or the Igbo people, for various forms of human sacrifice have existed across cultures and historical periods.

In the past, some Igbo communities viewed twins or children born with deformities as abominations (*nso ani*). These children were sometimes ritually abandoned or killed, especially in the absence of adequate explanations for such births. While not always being regarded as “sacrifice,” these actions were spiritually justified as purification rituals necessary to preserve societal harmony were performed after. Onwuejeogwu (1981) explains that “children born with certain abnormalities were considered signs of divine displeasure, and ritual actions including infanticide were taken to avert spiritual catastrophe” (p. 112). Over time, however, such practices diminished and were replaced by symbolic rites of cleansing or outright rejection of the belief. Achebe (1958) in one of his novels shows that twin killing is depicted as a deeply ingrained practice in Igbo culture, driven by superstition and fear.

While historical evidence clearly shows that human sacrifice existed in certain Igbo traditions, it is essential to interpret these practices within their indigenous moral and cosmological frameworks, not through the lens of modern moral absolutism. The intent behind such sacrifices was largely communal, spiritual, and restorative, not exploitative or wealth-driven. Many African scholars emphasize that Igbo religious ethics eventually evolved mechanisms for substituting humans with animals or symbolic items, reflecting a growing ethical sensitivity. Kanu (2012) asserts, “Igbo moral thought promoted progressive alternatives to human sacrifice, especially as symbolic representation became more accepted in spiritual rituals” (p. 94). Moreover, Uka (2010) stresses that Christianity, colonial governance, and internal religious reform led to the total abolition of such practices by the early 20th century. Thus, while human sacrifice existed, it was neither dominant nor foundational to the religious identity of the Igbo. Its non-transactional purpose stands in stark contrast to the ritual materialism practiced by some modern youth today, which seeks personal enrichment rather than communal harmony.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion**

Sacrifice in Igbo traditional religion is not an arbitrary ritual act; it is grounded or hinged in a coherent set of cosmological, religious, and social theories that give meaning to its practice. These theoretical foundations help to explain why sacrifices were performed, the logic behind their forms or types, and the values they were meant to uphold in religious practices and social engagements. Some of the theories will be described briefly, especially the ones that relate to the issue at hand on non-transactional nature of ITR

#### **The Gift Theory of Sacrifice**

The gift theory is rooted in the anthropological works of Marcel Mauss (1900), which views sacrifice as a form of gift exchange between humans and spiritual beings. In the Igbo context, sacrifice is conceptualized as a voluntary offering (*àjà*) to the gods (*chi*, *alusi*, and *mmuo*) to maintain cordial relations and ensure reciprocity. As Metuh (1981) observes, “the Igbo believe that what is given to the deity in goodwill returns as blessings to the giver” (p. 108). However, unlike the transactional model of modern ritualism, this exchange is covenantal, embedded in gratitude and communal harmony rather than a business-like trade.

#### **The Propitiation and Expiation Theory**

Drawing from Hubert and Mauss’s (1898) classic formulation, the propitiation theory posits that sacrifice functions to appease deities and avert misfortune, while the expiation theory focuses on cleansing pollution and restoring moral order. According to Ifesieh (1989)

Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss researched Hindu and Hebrew sacrifices and came to the conclusion that sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned. In comparative note, Hubert and Mauss, believed that sacrifice is a sacred rite which establishes a vital relationship between the sacred and profane world. (p. 242).

Among the Igbo, certain sacrifices (*ikpu aru*) were performed to remove taboos or ritual offenses, thereby restoring the balance between the human community and the spiritual realm (Ekwunife, 1992). This underscores the Igbo belief in the interdependence between moral conduct and cosmic harmony. This means that cosmic balance should always be maintained by the man who is at the center of all manipulations in the order of beings

#### **The Communication Theory of Sacrifice**

Here, sacrifice is also understood as a medium of communication between the human and spiritual worlds. Nwoga (1984) notes that in Igbo cosmology, “sacrifice is a speech-act expressed in material form” (p. 57). Through specific ritual actions such as the pouring of libations or the presentation of kola nuts, the community transmits petitions, thanksgiving, and allegiance to the deities. In this way, sacrifice functions as a liturgical language, reinforcing both spiritual devotion and social cohesion. This theory of sacrifice is mostly used by the family priests while praying in the morning or offering sacrifices. In fact, this theory is used to express the minds of votaries to the gods, who in turn carry the petition or sacrifices to the High God. This medium of communication can take other forms of expression by the votaries through gifts, ritual communication, and symbolic interactionism.

#### **The Covenant Theory**

In covenantal thought, sacrifice seals a mutual commitment between humans and the divine. Abanuka (1994) emphasizes that Igbo sacrifice is “primarily relational, rooted in a moral contract with the deities, ancestors, and the cosmic order” (p. 83). Breaking the moral terms of this covenant invites calamity, while keeping it ensures divine favor. This theory explains why traditional sacrifices were accompanied by moral injunctions and public declarations. Achebe (1958) highlights the sacrifice of Ikemefuna as a peace offering, which serves as a symbol of the community’s commitment to the oracle’s decree and maintenance of cosmic balance. Again, the Igbo people believe in making covenants with their gods and goddesses, where they offer sacrifices in exchange for protection or other benefits. This mutual covenantal commitment is central to their religious practices in Igbo land.

#### **The Social Cohesion Theory**

From a sociological perspective, sacrifice in Igbo society functions to reinforce group identity and solidarity. Most scholars proposed that religious rituals serve as collective representations that bind communities together. In the Igbo case, sacrificial rites, especially those tied to agricultural festivals like the *Iri Ji* (New Yam Festival), coronations, *Nze na Ozo* title ceremonies, are occasions for communal gathering, reaffirmation of shared values, and redistribution of resources (Uchendu, 1965). This view highlights sacrifice as both a religious and social institution of Igbo communities. This social cohesion theory of sacrifice binds the community together whenever these ceremonies are celebrated among the people.

Though, these theories of sacrifice overlap, but these theories demonstrate that Igbo sacrificial practice was historically non-transactional, but is rooted in relational, communal, and moral frameworks. As Oguejiofor (2010)

warns, the current shift toward purely transactional sacrifice among youth strips these acts of their foundational meanings and values, turning sacred rites into mere economic exchanges. Understanding these original theories and others, is essential for confronting such distortions, and it also alludes to the types of sacrifice seen in Igbo traditional religion.

### **The Degradation of Igbo Sacrifice to Commercial Enterprise: Its Implications**

The theoretical foundations of sacrifice in Igbo traditional religion seen above, are rooted in gift exchange, propitiation, communication, covenantal bonds, social cohesion, and ontological balance, revealing a ritual system that was deeply relational and morally grounded. Sacrifice was never intended as a mere economic transaction in African traditional religion in general; rather, it was a holistic act, integrating spiritual devotion, moral responsibility, and communal solidarity.

However, the recent rise of transactional sacrifice ritualism among Nigerian youth represents a fundamental rupture when compared with these traditional theories. In modern southeastern Nigeria, the activities of ritual Yahoo boys, cult members, or gangs of rubbers, ritual killers, and kidnapers are seen in the streets and paths of the communities in the South-East of Nigeria. They inhabit the thick bushes all over the South-East of Nigeria to perform sacrifices with fake traditional priests and priestesses for getting rich quickly. In this way, this distorts the central aims of traditional sacrifice among the Igbo people. Sacrifice for cash blessing is not an expression of gratitude or covenant, but calculated investments expecting immediate material return. This model of sacrifice mirrors a capitalist exchange more than the sacred reciprocity envisioned by Mauss (1990) and Metuh (1981).

Similarly, the propitiation and expiation theory, originally concerned with restoring cosmic and moral balance, is reduced to a mechanical appeasement of spiritual forces for personal gain, often without regard to the moral state of the votary. Where traditional expiation (*ikpu aru*) cleanses pollution for the sake of the entire community, modern transactional rituals may deliberately create pollution (through blood sacrifice or harm to innocents) to serve individual ends. The expiation rituals done to appease the gods have degenerated to the extent that some priests and priestesses of the Igbo traditional religion are going house to house when invited into different houses, taking a lot of money from those households in the name of expiation of the sins of the forefathers. The new generation pastors have joined in doing this ugly phenomenon, where they charge a lot of money and buy a lot of articles in the name of doing *olu ezi na ulo*, which helps to destroy and cast away evils done by the forefathers. This phenomenon became a trending issue that most Igbo believe that evils or unprogressiveness in the family are caused by the evils of the forefathers. This later led to the belief that there is need for healing of family and town roots from the evils done in the past.

The communication and covenant theories of sacrifice, deal extensively with the efficacy of the rituals through the moral obligations of the traditional priests and votaries, where cosmic balance must be maintained. But as of today, in the Igbo traditional settings, moral obligations and ancestral expectations, are largely absent in the everyday interactions and transactions of the people. Instead of maintaining spiritual relationships with the gods, which promote being dependent on gods, a situation which often reflects a purely symbiotic worldview is created, where spiritual beings are viewed as service providers in a commercial arrangement. This abandonment of covenantal morality is part of what Oguejiofor (2010) describes as the “secularization of the sacred” in Igbo traditional religion. The communication theory, which treated ritual acts as sacred speech directed toward the divine realities, is now degraded into a one-way command-and-control model in which the ritualist or traditional priest attempts to manipulate spiritual powers for selfish purposes. This is a profound reversal of the humility and reciprocity embedded in Igbo religious language (Nwoga, 1984). Its devastating effect, is a situation where votaries of Igbo traditional religion see traditional religion as magic where gods can be manipulated for wealth, and used for negative intentions.

The turning down of the sacrifice into yielding to personal gains in Igbo traditional settings, rather than more of communal gains, has breathed into the modern society unconventional attitudes that lead to the destruction of life and fear among the people. This is basically what the ontological balance theory of sacrifice in Igbo settings tries to maintain and control in the interactions of people. In Anambra state, the high rate of cultism, kidnapping, organ harvesting, and robbery carried out by unknown gunmen is escalating daily. Obianeri (2025) reports that:

Some yet-to-be-identified assailants have abducted three siblings, a boy and two sisters, in Amansea, Awka Local Government Area of Anambra State. It was gathered that the incident, which occurred in the early hours of Friday, also led to the killing of the boy after he was allegedly forced to sleep with two sisters by the gunmen. The hoodlums invaded the victim’s residence. Took the three siblings, and, after trying to force the boy to sleep with the sisters, whisked them away to an unknown destination. (no. p).

The above case study, is an example of what society has been turned into due to the inverted notion of sacrifice in Igbo land. It creates another society, different from a normal living situation, with its multiple negative implications. The above study, involved killings, desecration of life, family, and society at large. This aligns with the ontological balance theory, which saw sacrifice as a means of sustaining harmony between the seen and unseen worlds. Many of these new rituals deliberately disrupt cosmic order and societal values among the youths. In traditional Igbo settings, these negative acts had already bred the rotten fruits of character seen in society among the youths.

From the above, one can deduce that the rise of transactional sacrifice, predominantly rife among Nigerian youth, reflects a degradation of Igbo culture and tradition, stemming from a theoretical collapse of the core Igbo sacrificial system. That is why it is noticed and seen today in society, traditional sacrifice replaces covenant with contract, communion with consumption, and moral reciprocity with material opportunism, which should not be the case. Addressing this phenomenon has taken from the Igbo governors in the southeast of Nigeria and Nigeria at large, a lot of economic resources, resetting of values, and a cultural and theological re-education that can reconnect younger generations to the authentic theoretical and practical foundations of Igbo sacrifice. This can help to curb the situation to make a livable society possible. The law enforcement agents alone cannot salvage the situation without proper re-education among the youth who have engaged themselves in the abnormal Igbo transaction.

### Conclusion

The transactional interpretation of sacrifice in the Igbo society has generated numerous negative consequences, many of which have been effectively controlled or managed by the government and the law enforcement agencies across Nigeria. As a result, concerns about insecurity have been widely expressed both within and outside the country, with some situations escalating into large-scale violence in certain areas. Religion is deeply intertwined with the life of the Igbo people; hence, to exist is to be religious. Consequently, any disruption of religious processes-particularly sacrifices- constitutes a disruption of the identity and moral fabric of traditional Igbo society.

Within the non-transactional framework of traditional Igbo religion, sacrifice is not about giving in order to receive. Rather, it is a covenantal and spiritual obligation that reaffirms one's alignment with divine and communal order. As Kanu (2015) explains, "Igbo sacrificial practices are embedded in relationality; they are not contractual but existentially communal" (p. 49). Conversely, transactional form of sacrifice that has recently emerged in the Igbo society driven by the desire for material gain, is perceived as a means to self-serving ends, often involving expectations of wealth, power, or protection. This distortion reduces the sacred ritual of sacrifice to a mere bargaining tool. Ekwunife (1992) describes this as a modern deviation in which "the sacred has been commodified; rituals are now performed for wealth, promotion, or victory over enemies, rather than for reconciliation or thanksgiving" (p. 118). This approach is fundamentally antithetical to the spiritual ethos of Igbo traditional sacrifice.

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