

**THE SUBSTANCE OF BEING AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BLOOD SACRIFICE
IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WORSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

Blood sacrifice has long occupied a controversial position in discussions of African traditional religion, often seen as a materialistic, irrational, or morally deficient practice. The dismissals typically arise from interpretive frameworks that compel external metaphysical and ethical assumptions upon African ritual life. This study uses a multidisciplinary methodological approach putting together interpretive anthropology, comparative metaphysics, ritual process theory, and African philosophical hermeneutics to examine the ontological and ethical grounds of blood sacrifice in African traditional worship. It preaches that African ontology conceives blood as the bearer of life-force—the substance of being—while material elements such as flesh function only as secondary or accidental components. When looked at within this ontological framework, blood sacrifice emerges as a coherent and morally monitored practice aimed at regaining relational balance between the human, ancestral, spiritual, and cosmic orders. The study questions reductionist interpretations inherited from early anthropological theory and demonstrates that African sacrificial ritual embodies a sophisticated ontological–ethical system rather than a crude material exchange.

Keywords: African Ontology, Blood Sacrifice, Ritual, Life-Force, Metaphysics

INTRODUCTION

Blood sacrifice remains one of the most persistently misunderstood elements of African traditional religion. From early missionary accounts to classical anthropological theory, the practice has frequently been portrayed as a primitive attempt to placate supernatural beings through material offerings. Such interpretations often assume that African ritual lacks internal logic and philosophical depth, limiting sacrifice to either magical manipulation or irrational appeasement. This article contends that these interpretations fail precisely because they approach African ritual from conceptual frameworks unknown to African metaphysical thought.

Within African traditional world-views, blood is not just a biological substance but the very bearer of life-force. Across diverse African cultures: Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, Ewe, Shona, and others blood is seen as the means through which vitality circulates between the visible and invisible realms. Life is not conceived as a sole possession of the individual but as a shared and relational force linking humans, ancestors, divinities, and nature into a continuous ontological network. Consequently, sacrificial practices cannot be adequately understood without first examining the African conception of being itself.

Early anthropological theorists such as Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer played a vital role in ordering Western perceptions of sacrifice. Tylor's evolutionary theory of religion framed ritual as an early and defective stage in humanity's intellectual development, rooted in animistic misinterpretations of natural phenomena.¹ Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, intefirm sacrifice as a magical or quasi-economic transaction in which offerings were made to influence divine powers or natural forces.² Though these theories were groundbreaking in their time, they imposed linear evolutionary assumptions that positioned African religious practices as intellectually inferior or historically obsolete.

The enduring influence of these perspectives has added to the widespread assumption that blood sacrifice is fundamentally materialistic that its efficacy lies in the physical substance offered rather than in any deeper metaphysical or ethical significance. This article challenges that assumption. It argues that blood sacrifice is

intelligible when looked at from an African ontological framework that prioritizes force, vitality, and relational being over material substance in the Western sense.

Contemporary anthropology and philosophy provide tools for reassessing these earlier interpretations. Victor Turner's theory of ritual as a process of liminality and transformation shows that sacrificial rites function as structured moments of ontological transition rather than static religious performances.³ Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology further demonstrates that ritual practices embody a worldview enacted symbolically and practically within a cultural system of meaning.⁴ However, while Geertz emphasizes symbolism, African sacrifice operates not merely at the symbolic level but at the level of ontological intervention.

Robin Horton's intellectualism approach offers an especially important corrective. Horton argues that African traditional religion constitutes a rational explanatory system aimed at making sense of causal relations in the universe.⁵ Within this framework, ritual practices respond logically to perceived disruptions in the moral and metaphysical order. Sacrifice, therefore, is not an irrational act but a reasoned response to existential imbalance.

African philosophers and theologians have further clarified the internal coherence of sacrificial practices. Placide Tempels' articulation of African force-ontology shows a metaphysical universe composed of interacting vital forces rather than inert matter.⁶ John Mbiti emphasizes the fundamentally communal structure of African existence, where being is realized through relationships rather than individual autonomy.⁷ Laurenti Magesa situates sacrifice within an African moral vision centred on the preservation and enhancement of life.⁸ Together, these perspectives establish that African sacrificial ritual is grounded in a sophisticated ontological–ethical system.

This article argues that blood sacrifice must be interpreted from within the metaphysical and moral categories that give it meaning. To force external criteria of rationality or morality without first understanding these categories is to misplace the practice entirely. The central thesis advanced here is that blood sacrifice is not a materialistic or illogical act but a metaphysically grounded and ethically regulated practice through which African communities look to restore balance, continuity, and life within the cosmic order.

Ontological Foundations of Being in African Thought and the Misreading of Materiality

A proper understanding of blood sacrifice in African traditional worship must begin with African ontology, which conceives reality as dynamic, relational, and force-driven rather than as static substance. Being is defined by participation in life-force and by relational potency within a network linking humans, ancestors, divinities, and nature. As Placide Tempels argues, reality is a hierarchy of interacting forces in which existence is measured by the capacity to influence and be influenced; a diminution of vital force signifies a diminution of being itself.⁹

Within this metaphysical framework, disturbances such as illness, infertility, misfortune, or social conflict are interpreted as imbalances in the relational order of forces. Ritual practice, including sacrifice, thus emerges as a rational ontological response aimed at restoring equilibrium. John S. Mbiti's relational conception of personhood "I am because we are", reinforces the communal character of being, showing that individual life is inseparable from the community, ancestors, and the cosmos.¹⁰ Similarly, Ifeanyi Menkiti's normative view of personhood highlights ritual participation as both a moral and ontological act through which communal harmony and personhood are reaffirmed.¹¹ Most of the activities of African people are entrepreneur in nature, be it ritual practices, skills and ancestral reverence which identifies the connection between the personhood in African cosmology and the dignity of being African.¹² Blood occupies a privileged ontological status within this system as the bearer of vitality, continuity, and power. Across cultures, such as among the Dinka, Igbo (ọbara), and Yoruba (èjè as carrier of èmí), blood signifies life-force rather than mere biological substance.¹³ Its ritual use therefore reflects a shared metaphysical intuition rather than arbitrary convention. Robin Horton's intellectualist theory further clarifies that African religious systems operate as rational explanatory models addressing causal disruptions attributed to invisible forces; sacrifice, in this context, functions as a logical mechanism for restoring balance.¹⁴ Victor Turner's analysis of ritual process separation, liminality, and reintegration shows how sacrifice occurs within liminal space as a transformative act that redirects vital forces and enables ontological reintegration.¹⁵

This ontological perspective challenges the persistent misreading of African ritual, especially blood sacrifice, as materialistic. Such interpretations arise from a narrow model of material causality that reduces ritual to physical manipulation of objects. In African traditional worship, however, ritual is not a material transaction but an ontological

intervention. Material elements like animals, blood, food, and libations derive significance from their capacity to mediate life-force, not from their physical properties. Blood, in particular, is offered not as a commodity but as essence, symbolising the transfer and restoration of vitality within a disrupted order.

While ritual is symbolic, it is also performative. It does not merely represent harmony but actively reconstitutes it. Clifford Geertz's view of religion as a symbolic system is helpful, yet African ritual exceeds symbolic expression by engaging directly with the structure of being itself.¹⁶ The integration of belief and action further distinguishes African religious epistemology from traditions that subordinate ritual to doctrine; knowledge is enacted through disciplined practice rather than abstract assent.

Moreover, sacrificial rites are governed by strict procedural and ethical norms regarding timing, intention, selection of offerings, and communal consent. These regulations underscore the disciplined and rational character of ritual action and counter claims that sacrifice is arbitrary or crude. Properly understood, blood sacrifice addresses ontological disruptions at the level of being, with material elements functioning as conduits of metaphysical engagement rather than ends in themselves.

Consequently, the portrayal of African ritual as materialistic reflects the limitations of external interpretive frameworks rather than the nature of the practice. Interpreted through African metaphysical categories of force, relational being, and communal responsibility, blood sacrifice emerges as a coherent expression of ontological rationality embedded within a disciplined philosophical and religious system.¹⁷

Frazer, Tylor, and The Problem of External Rationality

The tendency to interpret African blood sacrifice as a materialistic or irrational practice reaches its most systematic expression in the works of early anthropologists, particularly Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. While their contributions to the comparative study of religion are historically significant, their theoretical frameworks imposed an external rationality upon African ritual life,¹⁸ one that failed to apprehend the metaphysical assumptions underlying sacrificial practice. A critical engagement with these thinkers is therefore necessary, not to dismiss their work outright, but to expose the limitations of their interpretive lenses.

Tylor's theory of animism, often regarded as the foundation of modern anthropology of religion, defines religion as belief in spiritual beings and interprets ritual practices as early attempts to explain natural phenomena through imagined agents.¹⁹ In this schema, sacrifice appears as a misguided effort to communicate with or appease spirits conceived through faulty inference. Although Tylor acknowledged a form of rationality in animistic thought, he ultimately situated it within a unilinear evolutionary framework that regarded such practices as intellectually inferior to scientific explanation.

Frazer's analysis, particularly in *The Golden Bough*, reinforced and expanded this reductionist tendency. Frazer distinguished between magic and religion, arguing that sacrificial practices originated in magical attempts to mechanically influence supernatural forces through material means.²⁰ Blood, in this context, functioned as a material substance whose efficacy was presumed to operate through sympathetic or contagious principles. Although Frazer later acknowledged the religious dimensions of sacrifice, his overarching framework continued to treat ritual as a primitive technology rather than as a philosophically grounded practice.

The fundamental flaw in both Tylor's and Frazer's approaches lies in their failure to interrogate their own metaphysical assumptions. Both thinkers operate within a framework that privileges material causality and linear rationality, treating deviations from this framework as evidence of error. African conceptions of reality that is, where force, vitality, and relationality constitute the fabric of being are thus translated into categories that distort their meaning.

Later anthropological developments expose these distortions. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic study of Azande witchcraft demonstrated that African belief systems are internally coherent and rational when understood within their own explanatory premises.²¹ Witchcraft beliefs, he argued, do not replace empirical explanations but supplement them by addressing questions of ultimate causation and moral responsibility. This insight applies equally to sacrificial ritual. Sacrifice does not deny natural causation; it addresses disruptions perceived at the metaphysical level.

The persistence of Tylor's and Frazer's influence nonetheless continues to shape contemporary critiques of African ritual, particularly ethical objections that presuppose irrationality or moral deficiency. Such critiques often proceed without recognizing that they inherit the same external rationality that underpinned early anthropological reductionism. To challenge these critiques effectively, it is necessary to demonstrate that African sacrificial practices operate within a distinct ontological horizon, one that cannot be evaluated solely by the criteria of material causality or evolutionary progress.

By situating Frazer and Tylor within the history of anthropological thought and exposing the metaphysical assumptions that constrain their interpretations, this chapter does not deny their scholarly importance. Rather, it repositions their work as part of an interpretive tradition that must be critically transcended. Only by doing so can blood sacrifice be understood not as a vestige of primitive religion but as an expression of African metaphysical reasoning enacted through ritual practice.

Blood Sacrifice as Ontological and Ethical Practice

Having established the ontological foundations of African thought and clarified the misinterpretations introduced by early anthropology, it is now necessary to examine blood sacrifice as both an ontological and ethical practice. In African traditional worship, ontology and ethics are inseparable; moral action is evaluated not in abstraction but in terms of its effect on life-force, relational harmony, and cosmic balance. Sacrifice occupies a central position within this integrated framework.²³

Within African metaphysics, moral disorder is understood as a disturbance in the network of forces that sustain existence. Wrongdoing, neglect of ritual obligations, broken covenants, ancestral displeasure, or social injustice are believed to weaken communal vitality and invite misfortune. Blood sacrifice functions as a means of repairing such disturbances by restoring equilibrium between the human, ancestral, spiritual, and natural orders. The ritual does not erase wrongdoing mechanically; rather, it acknowledges rupture and actively works toward reintegration.

Laurenti Magesa articulates African ethics as fundamentally life-centred, arguing that moral goodness consists in whatever promotes and preserves life in its fullness.²⁴ From this perspective, sacrifice is not an end in itself but a means toward ethical restoration. The shedding of blood symbolizes and enacts the seriousness of moral disruption and the communal commitment to renewal. Far from trivializing life, sacrifice affirms its supreme value by recognizing that restoration demands cost, responsibility, and accountability.

This ethical seriousness is reflected in the stringent conditions under which sacrificial rites are performed. Sacrifice is neither routine nor casual. It is invoked in response to specific crises: prolonged illness, repeated misfortune, infertility, communal conflict, or the violation of sacred norms. Ritual specialists, elders, or diviners determine the necessity of sacrifice through established procedures, ensuring that ritual action is proportionate to the perceived disturbance.²⁵ These safeguards undermine the claim that sacrifice is arbitrary or ethically reckless.

The communal dimension of sacrifice further reinforces its ethical character. Sacrificial rites are rarely private acts; they are collective responses to shared threats against communal well-being. Participation signifies collective responsibility for both the problem and its resolution. In this sense, sacrifice functions as a moral pedagogy, reminding participants of their obligations to one another, to the ancestors, and to the moral order that sustains life.

Mary Douglas's analysis of ritual purity and danger illuminates the ethical logic underlying such practices. Douglas argues that rituals addressing pollution and disorder serve to reassert moral boundaries and restore coherence within a symbolic and social system.²⁶ African sacrificial rites similarly address moral pollution not as mere symbolic concerns but as real disruptions with tangible consequences. Blood sacrifice, in this context, operates as a means of reconstituting moral and ontological order simultaneously.

It is important to emphasise that African sacrificial ethics are not absolutist in the sense of rigid rule-following. They are situational and relational, attentive to context, intention, and consequence. The ethical validity of sacrifice depends on its orientation toward life, not merely on adherence to ritual form. When sacrifice ceases to serve restorative purposes, it loses moral legitimacy. This internal criterion of evaluation demonstrates that African ritual ethics possess reflexivity and moral discernment.

Moreover, the sharing of sacrificial meat following the ritual underscores the life-affirming orientation of sacrifice. The communal meal symbolizes reconciliation, reintegration, and the restoration of social bonds. Victor Turner's concept of ritual reintegration is particularly relevant here: after liminality and transformation, participants return to ordinary life renewed and reconnected.²⁷ Sacrifice thus culminates not in death but in shared life.

Understanding blood sacrifice as an ontological and ethical practice challenges simplistic moral critiques that equate it with violence. Violence, in African moral reasoning, is characterized by the unjustified destruction of life-force and the breakdown of relational order. Sacrifice, by contrast, is justified precisely by its aim to preserve and enhance life through controlled and meaningful ritual action. The ethical distinction lies not in the mere taking of life but in the intention, regulation, and outcome of the act.

This integrated ontological–ethical framework prepares the ground for addressing the most persistent contemporary objection to blood sacrifice: the claim that any ritual involving killing is morally indefensible. To engage this objection seriously requires moving beyond abstract moral universalism and examining how ethical reasoning is grounded within African conceptions of life, responsibility, and relational existence.

Responding to the Ethical Objection: Killing and the Moral Status of Sacrifice

Contemporary critiques of African traditional religion often condemn blood sacrifice on the grounds that it involves the deliberate taking of life and is therefore morally indefensible. This objection, however, presupposes a universal ethical framework that prioritises the inviolability of individual life without sufficiently engaging African moral ontology. Within many African ethical systems, life is not conceived as an isolated possession of the individual but as a shared, circulating life-force linking persons, community, ancestors, divinities, and nature. Moral reasoning is thus relational and life-centred rather than strictly individualistic.

From this perspective, the central ethical question is not merely whether life is taken, but whether the overall life-force of the community is preserved, restored, or enhanced. Sacrificial killing is neither casual nor arbitrary; it is typically undertaken in situations interpreted as threats to vital equilibrium such as illness, infertility, persistent misfortune, or communal disharmony and functions as a last resort aimed at preventing greater diminishment of life. Its moral justification therefore lies in restorative intention and communal necessity rather than in abstract rule-based prohibition.

As Laurenti Magesa observes, African morality is fundamentally life-centred: moral good promotes abundant life, while moral evil diminishes it.²⁸ Within this ethical horizon, sacrifice is evaluated teleologically by its orientation toward the restoration of life, health, fertility, and harmony rather than by an absolute interdiction against killing. Where sacrifice fails to achieve these ends, it is subject to internal critique and possible abandonment.

Anthropological scholarship further shows that African sacrificial systems are governed by strict moral regulation. Mary Douglas's analysis of ritual order underscores how practices involving blood and death are tightly classified and controlled, reflecting ethical seriousness rather than indifference.²⁹ Such systems prescribe authorised animals, regulate frequency, and require communal sanction, thereby preventing arbitrary or excessive killing. Similarly, E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of Nuer religion demonstrates that sacrifice operates within a moral framework oriented toward reconciliation and cosmic balance, reintegrating the animal's life into communal continuity rather than celebrating destruction.³⁰

Comparative theorists such as René Girard and Walter Burkert further suggest that ritual sacrifice historically functions to regulate violence and acknowledge the moral reality that human survival involves the taking of life.^{31 32} In this light, the ethical issue is not simply the fact of killing, but the manner, intention, and regulation of the act. Accordingly, African moral ontology sharply distinguishes sacrifice from uncontrolled violence. While violence signifies the unjustified destruction of life-force and the breakdown of relational order, sacrifice is marked by ritual control, solemn intention, and communal accountability. Its legitimacy depends on its capacity to restore harmony and affirm life in its collective sense.

Modern critiques grounded in universalist rights-based ethics possess internal coherence but risk philosophical reductionism when uncritically imposed upon relational moral systems. Ethical evaluation, therefore, must remain attentive to underlying ontological assumptions. This does not render sacrificial practices immune to critique; indeed,

African societies have historically reinterpreted or discontinued rituals in response to changing moral and social conditions. Yet such reform typically emerges from within the culture's own ethical logic rather than from external moral absolutism.

When assessed within its proper ethical and ontological framework, blood sacrifice cannot be simplistically equated with immoral killing. Rather, it represents a morally regulated, life-oriented practice embedded in a relational worldview in which the preservation of communal vitality, not the isolated individual, constitutes the highest ethical concern.

Communal, Social, and Reintegrative Dimensions of Sacrifice

Blood sacrifice in African traditional worship is fundamentally communal rather than merely metaphysical. Its meaning and legitimacy derive from collective participation, shared recognition, and moral responsibility, reflecting the African conviction that existence itself is relational. Sacrifice therefore serves not only to restore cosmic balance but also to repair and reaffirm social cohesion.

Ritual in African societies is a public moral act embedded in communal life, not a private spiritual exercise. Sacrifices are typically prescribed in response to disruptions affecting the whole community such as illness, famine, infertility, unexplained death, or social conflict thereby requiring a collective ritual response. In this sense, the practice reinforces shared norms, identity, and responsibility.

John S. Mbiti's emphasis on the corporate nature of African identity, extending to ancestors and future generations, illuminates the broader communal scope of sacrifice.³³ The ritual addresses obligations within this expanded community and functions as a bridge linking the living, the ancestral, and the cosmic order. Similarly, Ifeanyi Menkiti's account of personhood as achieved through moral participation in communal life explains why sacrificial rites must be collective: participation signifies responsibility for communal harmony and membership in the moral community.³⁴

Victor Turner's notion of ritual reintegration further clarifies the social function of sacrifice.³⁵ In many African contexts, reintegration is expressed through the communal sharing of sacrificial meat, symbolising reconciliation, restored harmony, and renewed social bonds. The shared meal is ethically central, transforming the life taken into shared life and countering interpretations of sacrifice as wasteful. Rather than destruction, the act signifies redistribution of life and the strengthening of unity.

Anthropological observations among communities such as the Igbo and Yoruba confirm that sacrificial rites are often accompanied by public feasting, music, and collective prayer, all of which reinforce solidarity and moral commitment.³⁶ The communal structure of the ritual also provides internal regulation: elders, ritual specialists, and participants collectively evaluate the necessity and legitimacy of the rite, preventing excess and ensuring that sacrifice serves communal rather than individual interests.

Beyond restoration, sacrifice performs a pedagogical function. Through repeated participation, younger generations internalise values of interconnectedness, moral obligation, and the seriousness of disorder within the communal life-force. Its reintegrative significance is especially evident in conflict resolution rituals, where sacrifice symbolises reconciliation and the renewal of trust.

Seen holistically, sacrifice operates simultaneously at metaphysical, moral, and social levels: it restores cosmic balance, reaffirms moral order, and strengthens communal bonds. Isolating any single dimension obscures its full ethical and ontological significance within African traditional thought.

Conclusion

This study has argued that blood sacrifice in African traditional worship has often been misinterpreted through frameworks grounded in material causality, individualistic ethics, and evolutionary notions of rationality. Viewed from such perspectives, sacrifice appears irrational or morally deficient. Yet these readings dissolve once the practice is situated within the ontological and ethical categories of African thought.

Grounded in African metaphysics, the analysis has shown that being is conceived as dynamic life-force sustained through relational networks uniting humans, ancestors, divinities, and nature. Within this ontology, blood signifies vitality—the bearer of life-force—while material elements such as flesh are secondary. Blood sacrifice is therefore

best understood not as material exchange but as an ontological intervention directed toward restoring disrupted relational balance.

The study also demonstrated that African ritual is both symbolic and performative. Ritual does not merely signify harmony; it actively reconstitutes it. Knowledge, belief, and action are integrated, and metaphysical truths are enacted through disciplined ritual practice rather than abstract doctrine.

A reassessment of early anthropological accounts revealed that figures such as Tylor and Frazer interpreted sacrifice through external evolutionary and materialist assumptions, thereby obscuring its internal coherence. Later scholars, including Horton, Turner, and Geertz, offered corrective insights by recognising the rational, symbolic, and transformative dimensions of ritual. Nevertheless, anthropology remains interpretive and cannot substitute for African metaphysical categories when evaluating ritual meaning.

Ethically, the study has established that African moral reasoning is inseparable from ontology and is oriented toward the preservation of life-force, relational harmony, and communal well-being. Sacrificial killing, when understood within life-centred ethics, is regulated, intentional, and restorative rather than destructive. It affirms the value of life by recognising that restoration entails responsibility, cost, and communal accountability.

Furthermore, the communal and reintegrative dimensions of sacrifice underscore its moral seriousness. Sacrificial rites function as mechanisms of social repair, moral education, and communal renewal, transforming disruption into cohesion and redistributing life within the community rather than wasting it.

Taken together, these findings challenge the portrayal of African ritual as materialistic or illogical and instead present blood sacrifice as a philosophically coherent practice embedded in a robust ontological–ethical system. Properly understood, African traditional worship represents a profound engagement with questions of life, death, responsibility, and communal existence, and blood sacrifice stands as a significant expression of African philosophical and ethical thought rather than a primitive anomaly.

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