

*The Interplay Between Divination, Sacrifice
And Healing: The Yoruba Tribal Group
Experience
AARC Second Quarter 2025 Lesson Edition*

By

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1. Introduction

- In African cosmology, man lives in a spiritual world where his ways and welfare are intercepted by the activities of both the benevolent and malevolent spirits.
- In these interactions, he suffers various kinds and degrees of mysterious misfortunes resulting into, among others, sicknesses of the body and mind.
- The attempt in this paper is to look into the ways and manners in which the Yoruba probe into the mysteries of their lives and how they attempt to find solutions or answers to those things that are beyond their knowledge and understanding.
- It addresses how they use such spiritual guidance and discernment to better or sustain their welfare and specially the healthcare delivery system.

2. Phenomenological Method in the Study of Religion

- An undeniable fact in dealing with a religion in which one is not an adherent is the tendency to be subjective, for inability of the researcher to present the data without biases.
- However, in comparative study of religion, such gaps are covered by employing a methodology called, phenomenology, which is an objective and systematic study of fact/event (in this case religion), as it manifests itself.
- This gives a clearer picture and structure of what a particular religion is since the practitioners are allowed to make claims about their religion.

.... Phenomenology

- Dealing with religion phenomenologically means being **neutral** and **never taking a side** or **assuming what should be** and **what ought not to be**.
- Therefore, I shall attempt to frame my presentation within these principles as a scholarly work If, therefore, you observe anything that sounds incompatible to common faith we profess (Christianity), consider it as part of the academic exercises geared towards the approved principles.
- It focuses on the Yoruba tribal group who are majorly found in the South-Western region of Nigeria.

3a.Orunmila and the Yoruba Religion

- Yoruba believe that Orunmila is the 'prophetic' voice of Olodumare, declaring His will and directive. To the divinity, the present, and future are of equal clarity.
- He is usually referred to as "Eleri-Ipin", meaning the one who witnessed the sealing of man's destiny.
- He, Ifa, knows everything as far as human destiny is concerned. He is therefore qualified to serve as man's advocate "with regards to man's destiny and can intercede with Olodumare on man's behalf."

....Orunmila

- The Oracle Divinity Orunmila is believed to be the most popular and of unique importance among the deities in Yorubaland.
- For hundreds of years, it has made so much contributions to the culture of the people that the popularity and prestige of its cult could not be overwhelmed by the "increasing Christian and Islamic evangelical activities in West Africa."

3b. The Priests in Orunmila Cult

- Divination, in the cult of Orunmila, is normally carried out by the Babalawo (Ifa Priests). They are of three categories.
- The **first** has the privilege of worshipping their Ifa as often as they desire but should neither divine with it nor allow anyone to do so. The **second** group of priests are called Elegan. They have the right to worship, divine and allow others to divine with their Ifa.
- The **third** set of priests, are called Olodu or chief Babalawos. They do not only have the right both to worship and divine Ifa, but also with the right "to eat of any sacrifice that may be offered to or before the Igba Odu... a privilege which is denied to those of the first two grades".

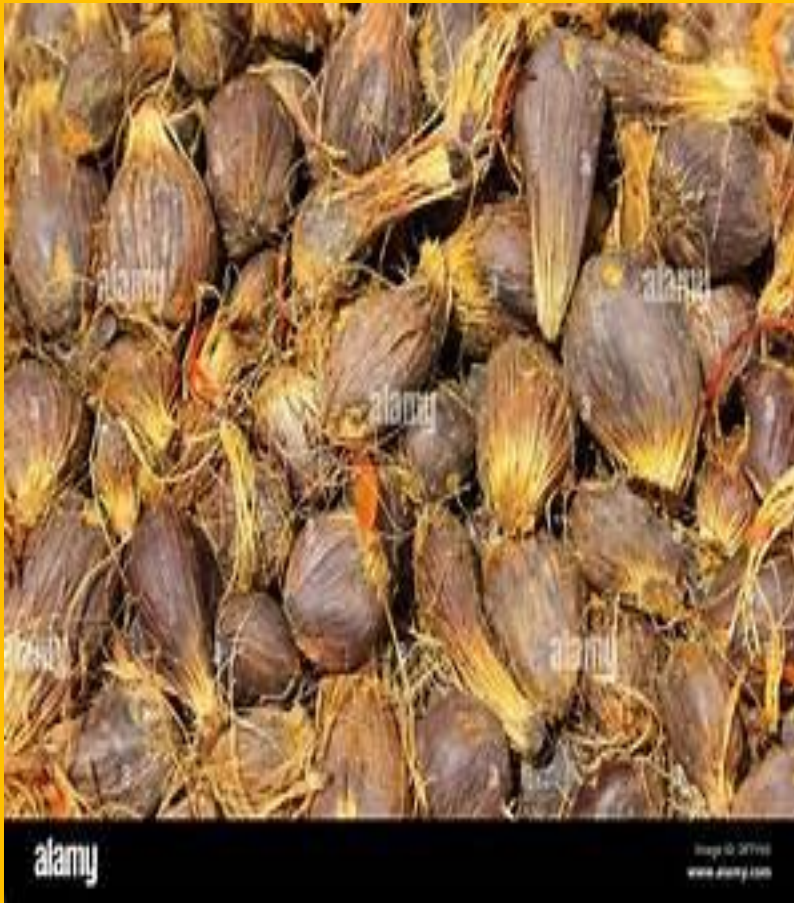
4a. Divination in Orunmila Cult

- Consultation with Ifa could be done in **two ways** based on the same principles of marking and interpretation, depending on the importance of the issues.
- *For very crucial matters, the consultation is done using Opon Ifa which contains a yellowish powder, Iyere Osun, from irosun tree.
- The divination is carried out with sixteen sacred palm-nuts called Ikin Ifa - with number of eyes ranging from three to six.
 - These are produced by special palm trees; are considered sacred, and receive sacrifices for they "symbolize Orunmila's transformation...."
- *The second method of consultation makes use of opele - a cord or chain with eight half-nuts." Diviners use it more frequently on minor occasions.

Divinatory Apparatus in Orunmila Cult



...Divination in Orunmila Cult



4b. Other Divinatory Processes

Apart from divination through Orunmila, there are other ways through which the Yoruba get to know whatever they desire about the world around them.

*The first among these is called *Eerindinlogun* and it consists of **sixteen cowries** from where the name is derived.

Among those of other cults using this divinatory tool are the Adahunses (herbalists) and Oniseguns (traditional doctors).



*Another method through which the people consult with the invisible is by the use of **kolanut** – using those with four valves.

➔The belief here is that they need come from Olodumare himself and is passed to them the through the Orisa (deity).

All of these "are believed to yield revelations, each in its own way, by inspiration traceable ultimately to Olodumare."



5a. Multidimensional Definitions of Sacrifice

- In technical sense, the word sacrifice is a religious term; but has a secular meaning when used in a general sense.
- From the secular perspective, it means foregoing a particular cause that which is precious; denying oneself certain benefits and advantages for a particular purpose.

...definition

- Whatever the motive, it suggests that something is renounced for a desired purpose.
- That is, something precious is giving up for the sake of another that is more valuable.
- For example, a parent may forsake certain luxury to provide sound education for the children.
- The meaning of sacrifice provided so far, should be regarded only as the extension of the religious or metaphorical meaning of the term, sacrifice.

...definition

- From the religious sense, sacrifice can be defined as a rite through which something is forfeited or destroyed, for the purpose of establishing relations between a source of spiritual strength and one in need of such strength.
- In this process, it is for the benefit of the one providing the sacrifice.

5b. Purpose & Categories of Sacrifice

- Broadly speaking, the purpose of sacrifice in African Religion is to provide ontological balance between the physical and spiritual world – God and man, spirits and man as well as the departed and the living. To upset this balance is to invite diverse calamities, hence the sacrifices to avoid the upset and maintain the balance.

- In relation to the stated major purpose, there are **several types** or categories of sacrifice in Yoruba culture. Among these are:
- **Human Sacrifice** - In ancient time, human sacrifice was more common in practice than this modern day. The practice was not due to devaluation of human life rather because it was regarded as the highest form of sacrifice and hence the most powerful. Such are the practices when communal and national issues are involved. For instance, at the burial of Kings human sacrifice is carried out with the belief that such would serve the traditional ruler in the hereafter.

- ***Meal and Drink sacrifice** is offered daily by individual and families to continue to appreciate the deity or divinity and to be in communion with the god.
- The head of the family is responsible for coordinating this sacrifice which can be termed as Morning Prayer for a particular household. Libation is poured here and prayers are offered.

- *The second type is **thanks sacrifice**. This is done whenever a favour is received, like at the arrival of a new baby or one escaped from a misfortune or danger.
- This type of sacrifice can also be performed when one is asking for a particular blessing.
- Items like animal, fruits, vegetables or articles that may be useful in the shrine are presented for sacrifice.
- At annual festival however, this is important as everybody would be encouraged to come with voluntary items for sacrifice.

- ***Votive Sacrifice** is another category. In the process of making a request, one may make a vow.
- This vow is an agreement between the god and the receiver of gift.
- In Yoruba culture, any vow made must be paid, if not the receiver may not be able to cope with the consequences.

- *Another category of sacrifice is **propitiation or expiation**. This is done when the fury of the divinity is at its peak.
- Sacrifice here is offered to **appease** the god in pacification. Asking for **forgiveness** of past sins and promising **to live a better life**.
- It has its purpose in gaining back the favour of the deity. Sacrifices offered here are not shared!
- It is mainly for the divinity and must be treated as the divinity instructs.
- After the sacrifice has been duly offered, the person in question is relieved from the anger or chastisement of the divinity.
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- Another category of sacrifice is substitutionary sacrifice or offering. This is done as soon as a person is marked to die or there is a revelation that a particular person will die.
- An animal is used to substitute for the person. Other agreed items may be added.
- The items are rubbed against the body of the person in this situation and parked like a corpse for burial.
- This takes the place of the person that this type of sacrifice is prescribed for.
- It is then understood that the person is dead as pronounced.

- ***Preventive sacrifice** is carried out as a precautionary measure to ward off or avert evil or misfortune on a person or a community. Africans are constantly in fear of sudden attacks through witches, wizards, charms, malevolent spirits, etc and as a result, take preventive measures to ensure that such attacks are avoided. Preventive sacrifices are carried out to stop or divert the calamity to other places.

- *The last is **foundation sacrifice**. This is done at the start of any important step or stage in one's life.
- For example, at birth, at puberty, during weeding, starting a building, settling down in a new town or when a new object has just been purchased.
- This type of sacrifice is to request for peace and progress in this new phase of life.

5c. Blood Sacrifice

- Every religion has one form of sacrifice or the other. In fact, sacrifice is the most universal of all rituals.
- General speaking, there exists a difference between sacrifice and offering. The former refers to situations where the life of the victim (e.g. animal, man, bird, etc) is destroyed by shedding its blood in order to present it in part or in whole, to God, supernatural beings, spirits or the ancestor.
- Offering on the other hand refer to the remaining situations, that do not involve the shedding of blood, but mainly involve the presentation of food stuffs, water and other similar items.

... Blood Sacrifice

- Blood sacrifice is primarily a means of contact or communion between man and the Deity. It marks the point where the visible meet with the invisible worlds.
- A blood sacrifice is a displacement of mystical forces made possible by God himself.
- The blood of the victim, when poured on the altar, releases the vital force contained in it and feeds the spiritual beings directly alerted by the words of the priest.



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5d. Sacrifice and specifications

- At whatever time a sacrifice is prescribed by a deity through the priest or priestess, **The what, how, who, where** and **when** shall be recommended as well.
- This is particular to individual situation or in relation to those concerned.
- At times, ifa priest may carry out the sacrifice himself while the person drops money or items.
- It may be that the person should carry the sacrifice to a particular place to be accompanied by the priest.
- It could be the mother or friend of the person in question that would be asked to do it.

- The process taken by the **Oloogun** (Traditional Healer) in diagnosing is very similar to that of the Babalawo (Herbalist).
- He also carries out consultation with the spirit world. However, the divination here is done using eerindilogun to trace the root of the problem.
- In this and any other situation where sacrifice is required, the specification is received using only two cowries as aforementioned

6a. Traditional Healthcare Delivery System

- In relation to the treatment of ailments, two classes had been identified, namely: arun (**diseases**) and aisan (**illness**).
 - The term **arun (diseases)** refers to any unhealthy conditions resulting from "germs, worms, insects, bad food, weather, carelessness on the part of the sufferer."
 - They are usually visible, recognizable and understandable, hence, they can be treated. Examples from are headache, measles, fever, etc.
- *Usually, though not necessarily always, the healing power of nature will be enough to treat diseases of natural causation.

- *On the other hand, **aisan (illness)** is an ill-health condition caused by some spiritual agencies such as witches, sorcerers, etc. It is more serious than arun, affecting the sufferer both physically and psychologically, and can easily lead to death.
- When death does not result immediately, the victim may be bedridden for a long period of time.
- Arun (diseases) may be aggravated to aisan and the Yoruba may explain this in terms of preternatural causation (sorcerer or witch) or mystical causation (aggrieved spiritual agencies or some faults by the sufferer).“
- ➔ In situations where "a common arun" becomes "too serious" with no apparent natural causation or diagnosable symptoms by the orthodox doctors, the aforementioned causes may be suspected.

- At this level, the traditional healer can no longer rely on his own knowledge of diagnoses and treatment.
- Invariably, divination and ritual (sacrifice) enter the practice of the Yoruba healer in his total management of diseases.
- What we know as divination in religion now appears to be diagnoses, while what we analyse as ritual (sacrifice) in certain circumstances is nothing but therapy.
- Divination reveals the root-cause of diseases and serves the purpose of etiology.... Ritual (diseases) , on the other hand, is used to remove the cause.

6b. Superiority of Sacrifice over Medicine

- Yoruba believe that Olodumare declared sacrifice as superior and it could positively influence the efficacy of medicine.
- By its nature, sacrifice can influence the desired effect, protect both the healer as the client, appease Olodumare and "many other unseen spirits for perfect tranquil life.

...Sacrifice over Medicine

- The importance of sacrifice in healing is further established by a minor Odu Ifa (Oturatikun) which says,

Ebo die Oogun die

Oogun lo ni ojokan iponju

- *Ebo lo ni ojo gbogbo*

- A small sacrifice A little Medicine
- While the medicine is for a trouble day
The sacrifice is for all days.

7. Conclusion

- *From the foregoing, one can conclude that the traditional Yoruba healers are blessed with the oracular means of unravelling mysteries.
- *With these, they can get, not only to the roots of their clients' ill-health, but also know the specific sacrifice that would bring about the desired healing.
- * It has been shown that since sacrifice is therapeutic in nature, healing depends on it but the former is also brought about by divination.
- *In essence, a traditional healer who lacks the knowledge of divination would be greatly limited in his art of healing.
- *With these methods, the Yoruba traditional healers in general, are able to carry out effective healings for their clients through sacrifices.

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