



## Teofilo Kisanji University

## TEKU Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (TJIS)

<https://www.teku.ac.tz/tjis.php>

## The Contribution of African Traditional Sacrifices Towards Solving Existential Problems: A Case of the Sukuma People in Shinyanga Region, Tanzania

Marco Edward and Elia Shabani Mligo\*

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Teofilo Kisanji University, P.O. Box 1104, Mbeya, United Republic of Tanzania.

\*Correspondence: [eshamm2015@gmail.com](mailto:eshamm2015@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Sacrifice is a worldwide phenomenon. It is a renowned way for people showing solidarity among themselves and between them and supernatural beings. In African context, sacrifice serves as a means of contact to the Supreme Being through divinities and ancestors in order to maintain peace in families and communities at large. This article reports the findings of a research conducted among the Sukuma of Shinyanga Region in regard to the issue of sacrifice. The study sought to find out the major reasons for the Sukuma offering sacrifices. By the use of Communion Theory (the theory of origins of sacrifice) proposed by William Robertson Smith as a perspective, a case study design, a qualitative approach and telephone interview as a method, the study discovered that most of the Sukuma people, even among Christians, offer traditional sacrifices as a means of restoring peace to their families and community at large through thanksgiving, requesting for success in their daily requisites, atonement purposes and protection from harm. The study suggests that Christianity should find a possible way of contextualizing African traditional sacrifices in its doctrines in order to prevent Christians from practicing them secretly.

**Keywords:** African traditional sacrifice; The Sukuma people; Qualitative approach; Christian missionaries

### 1. Introduction

African traditional sacrifices are conceptualized as cultural offerings based on blood, animal lives, food to the deceased, money, and grain crops. Offering sacrifices is an indigenous (African) oriented practice that was done even before the coming of Christianity. Most African societies offered sacrifices at the period of experiencing difficulties such as diseases, drought, consecutive deaths, lack of children in the family, poor economy in the clan, and the existence of unnecessary conflicts in societies. In the event of a family, clan, or community going through hardships beyond their human capacity, most people turned to the spirit realm, including ancestors, whereby sacrificial rites took place under big trees, rocks, tombs, forests, and many other terrifying places.

In the Sukuma tribes found in Shinyanga, Geita, Simiyu, and Mwanza regions, if a person is in a difficult situation, the family, especially elders, take the initiative to go through the rites of animal sacrifices. On the basis of this background, this article creates awareness to people about the importance of offering African Traditional sacrifices. It seeks to provide

awareness because there has been a large group of people in society that opposes this kind of offering while other religions perform similar sacrifices; for instance, in Christianity Abraham had to offer Isaac when God told him to take his only son Isaac whom he loved to go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt sacrifice on one of the mountains (Gen 22:2; cf. Danam, 2018; Tatlock, 2011). If Isaac was offered as a burnt sacrifice, such sacrifice could have been similar to that which takes place in African traditional religion in terms of human sacrifices.

Njibwakale (2016:23) attests the importance of this kind of human sacrifices conducted among the Bukusu people of Western Kenya: "the Bukusu believed in the *omufumu* (witch doctor), a diviner-priest who later became the savior of the Bukusu people. This witch doctor would ask that one of the offending members of the community be offered as a sacrifice to redeem the Bukusu people from whatever constant calamities affected them or their property. The act of the *omufumu* (witch-doctor) was not an organized occasion or annual event, but a once for all life sacrifice for all purposes to save the people." The "once of all" notion of the Bukusu African traditional sacrifice is what is purported by the Christian religion. According to Christianity, God sent Jesus

Christ to die and his blood saved humanity from original sin once for all. In the African Traditional Religion of the Bukusu, such a sacrifice is called blood sacrifice and is also done once for all.

Boaz (2019:2) emphasizes that “The ritual slaughter of animals is a worldwide phenomenon, practiced by countless faiths for a variety of reasons. In some cases, such as with Islam and Judaism, ritual slaughter is performed because certain guidelines must be followed and certain prayers must be recited in order for meat to be fit for human consumption. In other religions, such as Hinduism and many African diaspora religions, ritual specialists offer the life-blood of animals in reverence of spirits or deities.” Basing on the above description of sacrifices, this article defends the thesis that the coming of missionaries and other religions in Africa, such as Christianity and Islam, did not respect the foundations built by African Traditional Religion (ATR) about issues of sacrifices among the Sukuma people. They jeopardized the local religion and its sacrificial practices, claiming that it to be the religion worshiping gods and not God the creator of heaven and earth. In reality, it will be argued in this article that ATR worships and sacrifices to the true God. In contrast to other religions; for example, Christians who pray to God through Jesus Christ, ATR prays to God through spirits (ancestors and divinities). Evenly, ATR offerings and sacrifices are provided to God through spirits in cemeteries and on large trees unlike Christians whose offerings are provided to God in the church. In defending the above-stated position, this article discusses five main issues apart from this introduction. First, it surveys the meaning of ATR sacrifice in the African worldview. Second, it discusses the theoretical perspective that guided the study. Third, it presents the methodological perspective used in collecting and processing research materials. Fourth, it presents and discusses the themes obtained from research. The themes presented and discussed include reasons for giving African traditional sacrifices and importance of sacrifices to the Sukuma people. Lastly, it provides a conclusion and recommendation.

Several researches have been conducted to demonstrate the missionaries' attitude towards African culture, especially their claim of Christianity as being superior to ATR and the failure to recognize the centrifugal force centered on African traditional worship and sacrifices. Examples of such studies include, but not limited to Amanze, 2014; Fast, 1991; Gundani, 2004; Nkomazana & Setume, 2016; Nwafor, 2016; Strayer, 1976; Tugume, 2015; however, most such studies are more general ones. They hardly focus on the question of African sacrifices, in particular, a thing which this article does to the Sukuma ethnic group in Tanzania.

## 2. Meaning of Sacrifice in African Traditional Societies

After introducing the article in the previous section, this section grapples with the definition of sacrifice according to ATR. The word “sacrifice” has multifaceted meanings built upon the foundations of people's environments and experiences. There is no self-sufficient meaning; every meaning has its limitations and advantages. The complexity of the concept of sacrifice is mainly caused by the existence of multifaceted ethnic groups within the African continent: the Bantu, the Nilo-Saharan, the Afro-Asians, etc. At this point we agree with Owete (2015:1) that “sacrifice is a complex phenomenon that has been universally found in the earliest known forms of worship and that an offering does not become

a sacrifice until a real change has been effected in the visible gift by slaying it, shedding its blood, burning it or pouring it out.” However, some attempts to define sacrifice may suffice to illustrate its possible meaning.

According to Wiafe *et al.* (2016:2519), “sacrifice in general terms, is defined as the act of offering something to a deity in propitiation or homage especially the ritual slaughter of an animal or a person. Usually, the thing or person is a victim of the process of the sacrifice. It could also be defined as the forfeiture of something considered to have yet a greater value or claim” (cf. Evans-Pritchard, 1954). We accept this meaning as being plausible because it touches on things and animals that are crucial for the sacrificial act to take place. If a person lacks a slaughtered animal he/she can provide things such as money, minerals, and food. Although the meaning of this author refers to the things and animals, it fails to speak about sacrifices of species of birds such as chicken. Some communities, especially in Africa, use chickens and cocks to offer sacrifices; white chickens and cocks are very popular in such activities. To illustrate this fact, Wiafe *et al.* (2016:2520) attest: “In the traditional religion, the Fetish priests sacrifice cocks, sheep, goats and even bulls depending on the seriousness of the situation.”

However, it should be born in mind that meaning is different between sacrifice and offering; “an offering is that act of presenting something to a supernatural being, a sacrifice [is] an offering accompanied by the ritual killing of the object of the offering” (Van Baal, 1976:161). This meaning seems too narrow since killing is only applicable to “living beings, animals, human beings and not to some other sacrificial materials such as foodstuffs, drink offering and libations” (Eliade, 1987:544). Therefore, the term ‘sacrifice’ should be defined as an offering of objects and living beings which includes the ritual killing of living beings in order to obtain blood-shedding, offering of objects based on money, food, and any other valuable things such as minerals. It is important to note that sacrifices do not have specific items to offer but items change according to availability. The most important link between the two acts – sacrifice and offering – “is that they both form an important means of communication with the supernatural via giving up or presenting something in order to attain its (his/her) favor” (Ekroth, 2014:28 - 29; Oras, 2013).

Bukuluki & Mpyangu (2014:15), cite Mbiti's words who assert that “in African societies sacrifice was very common and that most, involved shedding of the blood of a human being or an animal.’ He adds that in African societies, ‘life is closely associated with blood. So, when blood is shed in a sacrificial context, it implies that human or animal life is being provided back to God who is, in fact, the ultimate source of all life.” This meaning of sacrifice is similar to that of Mbiti (1991:61 - 62) who purports that “Sacrifices are defined as blood offerings. There is mention of sacrificing in time of requisite an animal of one color, belonging to an upright person. What has been sacrificed may be consumed by priests, by participants in the ritual, left at the ritual site, or returned to the owner. There are intermediaries, gods [divinities] and spirits, between God and humans”. It is possible that the meaning of this concept of sacrifice is correct; now it has been discussed by two academics though both are based on only animal blood. Both of them have hardly spoken about the sacrifice of objects, which is done on a large scale in some societies. Generally, in African context, sacrifice is the act of

giving valuable things and living organisms to God through gods (divinities) and spirits. The sacrifice includes rituals of killing animals, human beings, bird species and things like stuffs, drinks and libation. Most sacrifices are connected with blood shedding or giving up blood in order to fulfill, solve, restore and maintain harmony upon people's problematic situations.

However, things changed when missionaries came to the African soil. Missionaries had a different conception of sacrifice. Missionaries saw sacrifice in ATR as a sin; they believed that only Jesus was sacrificed once and no one else should offer or be offered a sacrifice. Missionaries believed that African traditional sacrifice was provided to gods (untrue gods) but the Christian sacrifice was provided to the true God directly. In addition, "missionaries argued that African people neither had any religion nor any form of beliefs (...)" (Tugume, 2015:194), and that "Missionaries thus often preached that African beliefs were devilish, satanic, demonic to mention but a few (...)" (Tugume, 2015:194). Therefore, these scholars advocated the missionaries' claim for over ATR and its beliefs and practices. Such attitudes are hardly acceptable because they signify contempt for ATR. In this situation one can ask: if missionaries say that the African supremacy God was not real, were they the ones who brought the true God in Africa? We argue that before the advent of missionaries, Africans had a religion to worship the true God, the same God worshiped in Christianity. There was also their system of offering sacrifices to God through spirits, which was very good and provided answers to their problems and requisites in a timely manner.

### 3. Theoretical Perspective

The argument of this article is guided by William Robertson Smith's (1894) Communion Theory (the theory of the origin of sacrifices for the Semitic world). Smith, a Scottish and scholar of Semitic issues popularized this theoretical perspective in a series of his lectures on the "Religion of the Semites at Aberdeen from October 1888 to 1891" (for similar theories in psychology and sociology see (Durkheim, 1912; Freud, 1913). He purported that the major origin of sacrifice was the demand for the communion of group members among themselves and the communion of group members and their deity. In order for members to have communion among themselves and their deity, they had to have a sacrificial meal. Smith developed his theory starting with the idea of totemism, a system of beliefs whereby a mystical animal or plant (an emblem) came into close kin relationship with a particular group of people. A totem, or emblem of the community, was in most cases a taboo. It could not be slaughtered and eaten by group members to which it was in a mystical close kin relationship.

However, Smith asserts that in some special cases the totem was slaughtered and eaten by members of the group that that totem had a close kin relationship as a sacramental meal to symbolize unity between the group of people and the totem animal or plant, hence ensuring the well-being of the group and its members. Owete (2015:1) states Smith's theoretical idea more blatantly: "He proposed a theory of sacrifice whereby the earliest form of religion was the belief in a theomorphic tribal divinity with which the tribe had a blood relationship. Under ordinary circumstances, this totem animal was not to be killed, but there were rituals in which it was slain and eaten in order to renew the community. Sacrifice

was thus originally a meal in which the offered entered into communion with the totem" cf. (Njibwakale, 2016:22). According to Smith, the shared meal of the sacred animal or plant was a symbol of communion through the flesh and blood of that sacred animal serving as an intermediary to join together between the sacred and the profane. Sharing the sacramental meal indicated the immanence of god; people communed with god through the offered sacrifice of the totem that made god immanent in their midst.

Smith's theory is criticized by scholars for being so myopic in its outlook. First, it uses totemism as if it is a universal phenomenon; however, not all ethnic groups in the world who offer sacrifices perform them in a totemic way (Owete, 2015). There is even no such idea of totemism among the Sukuma where this study was conducted. Second, Smith's theory offends and violets the sacredness of the totem. Eating a totem is taboo because it stands on behalf of the supernatural. Hence, instead of making the totem to be a supernatural ally, it makes it a sacrificial victim. Third, Smith's theory hardly provides substantive explanations about the holocaust sacrifices whereby most of the Semitic people died sacrificial deaths but were not communally eaten; instead, they were consumed by fire. Fourth, the eaten totem hardly serves the purpose intended by the respective community—to unite them with the respective deities (cf. Njibwakale, 2016). Due to these weaknesses, most scholars consider Smith's theory to be almost outdated and with little use.

However, despite its weaknesses, Smith's theory suggests something important as far as traditional African sacrificing is concerned. This aspect is the communal approach to sacrifice (Owete, 2015). This aspect is found in most African traditional sacrifices, including those of the Sukuma ethnic group in Tanzania. When African people offer sacrifices, they do that for the well-being of the community, not only of the individual. Hence, this theoretical perspective is important in this article because it acts as a lens in interpreting the findings basing on the way Africans, and the Sukuma in particular, relate to the Supreme Being as a community and for the community's common good.

### 4. Methodological Perspective

Having stated the theoretical perspective underlying this article in the above section, this section outlines the methodological perspectives used to execute the study. Social science scholars distinguish between method and methodology. According to Jackson II *et al.* (2007:22), a "Method refers to *how* data is collected, and methodology refers to the identification and utilization of the best approach for addressing a theoretical or practical problem (...). In short, as has been said elsewhere, the method is about 'how to' and methodology is about 'why to' collect data in a certain way. Both are pertinent to research design" (cf. Mligo, 2016). Jackson II *et al.* words indicate that a method refers to a specific tool used to collect data and the methodology includes the tool and the underlying approach and philosophy or paradigm. The philosophy can be positivism, pragmatism, or interpretivism; and the approach can be quantitative, mixed methods, or qualitative, while the method can be questionnaire or interview (Corbetta, 2003; Mligo, 2013). The choice of a particular method of investigation depends on the selected paradigm, philosophy, or epistemology and the approach to be used.

This article uses a qualitative approach to ascertain the possible meanings and experiences about the phenomenon of sacrifice and the way it is practiced in African traditional peoples. It also uses this approach to ascertain the possible reasons for practicing African traditional sacrifices among the Sukuma of Shinyanga Region despite the missionaries' disregarding attitude. Jackson II *et al.* (2007:22-23) state that "understanding human beings' richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences. Rather than relying on a set of finite questions to elicit categorized, forced-choice responses with little room for open-ended replies to questions as quantitative research does, the qualitative researcher relies on the participants to offer in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience" (cf. Mligo, 2013). Basing on the idea stated in this quotation, we used a qualitative approach in this article being convinced that it is an important approach in exploring how the Sukuma elders, leaders, and practitioners of ATR understood and expressed their experiences.

Two districts were selected for study (Ushetu and Kahama districts), and were selected based on their having a large number of people holding on African traditional values and customs as compared to other districts of the region. Data were collected through telephone interviews conducted between January and February 2021 and a sample of eight (8) people was purposefully selected based on interviewees' roles in traditional religious practices. Interviewees involved in this study were leaders of the Sukuma traditional society. They served in various sectors of traditional practices: being chiefs, elders with experiences on traditional matters, had widely transmitted the African heritage to the Sukuma generations, and others were witch-hunters to restore peace within the society. In using qualitative approach, we were quite aware of its weaknesses of using a very small sample of interviewees making it difficult to generalize the results to larger populations. In this case, only eight interviewees were used. However, since the purpose of the study was to ascertain the way in which the interviewees understood and described their experiences, the interview method enabled us to obtain rich and in-depth information about their lived experiences. Moreover, their experiences and positions in society facilitated researchers to obtain rich data for the study (cf. Corbetta, 2003; Jackson II *et al.*, 2007; Mligo, 2013).

Raw data or research information in Swahili or Sukuma language were recorded in the mobile phones used to talk to interviewees and were later transcribed into English, organized, and analyzed qualitatively by drawing themes from the organized materials. The collection of research data was done after telling interviewees about the purpose and objectives of the study, the way issues of anonymity and confidentiality would be handled and informed consent was provided by each interviewee. After analysis, most themes explained the purposes for the Sukuma people practicing African traditional sacrifices and were the basis for the discussion of how missionaries considered African traditional sacrifices and their practices. The following section presents and discusses the obtained findings.

## 5. Reasons for Offering African Traditional Sacrifices

After stating the methodological perspective adapted by the study in the previous section, it is important to know the reasons that lead the African society perform traditional

sacrifices because many societies perform them for different purposes. The section presents and discusses the findings from the telephone interviews conducted among the Sukuma people of Ushetu and Kahama districts of Shinyanga region in Tanzania. The offering of sacrifices varies from place to place and community one to another; so the reasons cannot be matched. As stated in the methodological section above, this article relied more on ideas from elders, traditional leaders, and stakeholders from the Sukuma ethnic group who benefited from the sacrifices to justify the reasons for performing traditional sacrifices. The following are detailed discussions of some of the reasons for offering sacrifices, especially to the Sukuma tribe of Shinyanga region, obtained through telephone interviews.

### 5.1. Sacrifice as Means of Atonement

Interviewee A (personal communication, December 17, 2020), one of the traditionalist elders living at Butende village in Ushetu district, reported that they offered sacrifices for atonement purposes. In his own words, interviewee A said: "if it happens in the family that one person fails to find a compromise with any of the parents or relatives, he/she has to provide a white goat with alcohol for adults. The goat is slaughtered and burned at the stake and eaten by all people as they stand and run. This exercise involves taking shower to eliminate all the things that cause discord in the family." In addition, according to interviewee A, the Sukuma society sometimes offers sacrifice as a way of apologizing to God for the committed evils to ancestors or fellow society members. Therefore, atonement is very important in the family, community, and society because it creates true love from one person to another.

If atonement cannot be given a chance, the misunderstanding from one generation to another may continue taking part in society. Moreover, without seeking an apology, the anger of God may continue, and God can inflict punishment through ancestral spirits. We personally find such sacrificial action plausible and has to continue being practiced by anybody regardless of religious perspectives because they aim at removing all unnecessary conflicts in society. However, some questions raised are the following: Is it right for Christians to practice atoning sacrifice? Is atoning sacrificing the duty of God or human beings?

In response to the above crucial questions, Njibwachale (2016:24) provides a description of atonement in sacrificial practices according to the Hebrew Bible saying: "The Hebrew word *kippur* means to make atonement. The biblical meaning of the word may be rendered as 'covering up' (Exodus 25:17; Leviticus 16:2); it can also mean to 'ransom' (Exodus 30:17; Numbers 35:31-32) or 'purging' (Isaiah 27:9; Jeremiah 18:23). Typically, atonement involves the process of covering up sins or expiatory deeds meant to divert divine wrath and to bring about reconciliation." Moreover, Njibwakale (2016), sees that the major point in atonement is the restoration of relationship between God and Israelites through the blood of an animal, while in the New Testament this restoration of relationship was through the blood of Jesus Christ. Hence, as Njibwakale (2016:26) states, "a biblical understanding of atonement is concerned above all with the restoration of a mutual understanding and an unpolluted divine/human relationship, not with the appeasing of a God angered by the misdeeds of his [sic] creatures."



Christians believe in the atonement sacrifice performed by Jesus in order to fulfill their requisites, especially in times of misunderstanding between two individuals; however, the church fails to provide a proper solution to most people's worldly problems. On its side, African society puts more emphasis on good deeds, and proper behavior. Once the Christian fails to obtain solutions from church elders and leaders, he/she decides to engage in African atonement sacrifices which bring quick answers to them. We think it is appropriate for Christians to perform African traditional atonement sacrifices to eliminate strifes in society.

One may argue that Christians' participation in traditional atonement sacrifices is being syncretistic and sinful according to Christian teachings. If one says that the African traditional atonement sacrifice of reconciliation is sinful, that person likely means that even dispute resolution councils should not exist; only God should solve people's disputes, an assertion that hardly makes sense. According to Wiafe *et al.* (2016:2520), "atonement sacrifice is the act by which God restores a relationship of harmony and unity between Himself and human beings". Moreover, Wiafe *et al.* (2016:2520) add that "atonement is, generally, understood as the state of being at one or reconciled after two parties have been estranged from each other." These two quotations make it very clear that people have the right to make consensus with one another and with God because all human beings on earth are not the same God. Therefore, people, whether Christian or ATR believers, should offer sacrifice as a means of reconciliation due to the fact that unity and solidarity are important aspects of the purpose of God in our midst. It is our contention that if atonement sacrifice is harmless to society, it should be further improved and continue being practiced; and if it is harmful, it should be avoided for the betterment of individual people and society at large.

Together with Njibwakale (2016:27-28), we contend that "atonement is essentially an all-inclusive soteriological concept which involves the entire scope of God's redemptive work in Christ from the incarnation to Christ's present heavenly ministry and even beyond." According to this statement, God's reconciliation or atonement is not only limited to an individualistic and exclusive Christianity, but to ATR and other world religious traditions. If a Christian uses the Bible, believes that Jesus did not come to abolish even a single *yod* of the Law, that the divinity of Jesus is limitless and his atoning work is boundless, then that Christian should probably not hesitate to believe that the same Jesus working in Christianity (where there is a special revelation) works in ATR (where there is a natural revelation).

The almighty God, the creator of the world, created human beings with the mindset to determine right and wrong issues taking place in the community. If one determines that he/she has mistaken the neighbor, it is his/her duty to find a solution or agreement so as to continue living peacefully with each other. In ATR, anything agreed in the society to be performed (including traditional sacrifice) is performed in the presence of God. When some people go against it, they are termed as going against God's wills.

The God of missionaries was considered never late in giving answers and that God's response not immediate. So the God of the missionaries did not respond in a timely manner while the African God responds in a timely manner as the community requires a quick response on something through

the existing intermediaries: spirits, divinities, and ancestors. Ekeopora & Ekeke (2010:2015) support this notion saying that the intermediaries of the Supreme Being in ATR "are given functions to perform: Divinities do not perform duties against the will of the Supreme Being rather they are obedient to the command of the Supreme Being. Various communities of Africa who believe in divinities have their local names for each divinity depending on the function which the divinity performs. Ekeke & Ekiopara (2010:2016) state that "African traditional religion is unitary 'monotheism.' This is a kind of unitary theocratic government (...). A government where powers are delegated to various deities or divinities for the governance of the universe, and they bring a report to the Supreme Being at intervals." We agree with these cited writers because they show that human beings have the opportunity to resolve conflicts in the sense that each one has divinity in it. Hence, contrary to missionaries' point of view, if the atonement sacrifice is made and brings harmony and solidarity in the community without bringing about negative consequences, that sacrifice is good.

## 5.2. Sacrifice as Thanksgiving

Interviewee B (personal communication, December 19, 2020), one of traditional chiefs of the Sukuma community in Ushetu district, explained that they offered sacrifice for thanksgiving. In their tradition, thanksgiving was accompanied by the offering of animals to the graves or any other place to thank God for all the good deeds done for them. Owete (2015:4) writes that "It is also clear that [in every community and tradition] there are materials for sacrifice as well as places where sacrifices are made." Likewise, among the Sukuma, people often slaughter animals and bird species like "*ngoko yape*" (meaning white chicken) which are left in the wild or in cemeteries, and provide valuable items to thank God through ancestors, deceased people, and spirits. In that sense, as Owete (2015) emphasizes, "Sacrifices are not only directed to deities [divinities] alone but also to the Supreme Being." Ndemanu (2018:73) further emphasizes: "the ancestors and gods [divinities] serve as the intermediaries between human beings and God. Therefore, the sacrifices and prayers they receive are ultimately received by God."

Thanksgiving, in Sukuma traditional sacrifices, usually does not require payment from anyone or from God. As a tradition and custom, thanksgiving is very similar to Christian rituals. However, some issues to be considered are the following: how is thanksgiving conducted? Where and to whom is thanksgiving provided? Normally, thanksgiving cannot be requested because it is a voluntary duty whereby human beings offer sacrifices for their own wishes. In this respect, sacrifice is not a reward for something one has done, rather, it is something offered to God as thanksgiving for God's deliverance from situations of crisis.

According to interviewee B, the Sukuma traditional sacrificial thanksgiving has a lot of religious connotations. It is also characterized by a lot of dancing and singing. Dancers wear traditional masks and outfits and celebrate ceremonies by giving offerings and sacrifices to God through ancestors and spirits. Dancing and beauty competitions are organized during the entire week, increasing the enjoyment of the native people. Bullfights, snakes fights and bird fights are other major sources of attraction, and entertainment during the week long celebration. A thank you note is important because it shows how much you appreciate what God has done for

you. Mvunabandi (2008:77) supports this by telling what happens among the Xhosa of South Africa: "People's thanksgiving sacrifices are mostly associated with harvest celebrations, journey mercy acknowledgment upon a safe return, and salvation from danger. These 'festivities are normally accompanied with beer drinking and every person has his own festival.'" These examples from the Xhosa tribe are very similar to the thanksgiving sacrifices provided in the Sukuma tribe due to the fact that, to a large extent, the environment is similar even though some traditions and customs are highly intertwined.

### 5.3. Sacrifice as Means of Protection

Interviewee C (personal communication, December 19, 2020), one of the traditionalist elders living in Ibelasuha village in Kahama district, states that sacrifice is provided among the Sukuma for protection. "If the family is plagued by diseases, deaths, and any other natural calamities from time to time," interviewee C reports, "the community decides to offer animal sacrifices accompanied by the shedding of blood for protection against enemies. The family can face some challenges like economic crises, infertility, and improper behavior. Such problems are solved through sacrifices done annually or at the middle of the year." The words of this interviewee indicate that sacrifice is provided purposely to establish a harmonious relationship between the human beings and the deity. Owete (2015:4) amplifies this notion more clearly:

Its purpose is variously to establish, regulate or rectify the relationship between humans and the divine or to appease the ancestors and the land. Through sacrifice, humans seek to encounter the divine, project themselves into the invisible world, penetrate into divine presence and commune with the deity. Sacrifice creates a bridge between humans and God and serves as a means of sustaining the established relationship. Its different forms depend on the nature of the relationship or favour sought from the deity. Ultimately, sacrifice is a human activity; its primary beneficiaries are the humans who offer them, not God or the deities to whom the offerings are made. Underlying the practice of sacrifice is the awareness that sin in its diverse forms (the destruction of right relationship with God, the ancestors, the land) creates a barrier between God, the invisible world and humans.

A similar picture is vivid among the Sukuma. In offering sacrifices, the Sukuma are protected from various natural and human calamities.

However, the question one can ask is whether the protection must be encouraged through sacrifices or is God's duty to release it to living beings. In whatever response to this question, the Sukuma traditions strongly encourage people to offer sacrifices in order to protect themselves from emerging calamities. The sacrifice for protection is very acceptable in society in the sense that without security development can hardly take place. Therefore, we find it necessary for traditional Sukuma leaders, such as elders and chiefs, to provide sacrifices once problems exist in the family, community, and society.

Protection is very important in life. Human beings strive hard to protect themselves in order to be safe through offering sacrifices. We strongly agree with the concept of protection through sacrifice among the Sukuma provided by the above interviewee because in that ritual the blood of living creatures and precious things are provided through spirits and deities touching the inner being of God. Only God heals and protects all people from diseases, enemies, bad economy, etc. Hence, God has the authority to decide whether living beings should continue to live or die.

According to Mbiti (1991:61-62), common routines like "good health, healing, protection from danger, safety in traveling or some other undertaking, security, prosperity, preservation of life, peace, and various benefits for individuals" have religious connotations. Mbiti adds that "for the community at large, prayer may ask for rain, peace, the cessation of epidemics and dangers to the nation, success in war or raids, the acceptance of sacrifices and offerings, and fertility for people, animals and crops." Therefore, sacrifice for protection should be widely used in other communities, apart from the Sukuma of Mwanza, Shinyanga, Geita, and Simiyu regions, because it delivers timely responses without delay. The problem was that Christian missionaries came in defiance of African traditions and customs because they believed that the God of Africa was not real; a thing which is hardly endorsed in this article.

### 5.4. Sacrifice as a Means of Attaining Individual and Societal Requisites

Interviewee D (personal Communication, January 03, 2021), one of the traditional witch-hunters in Igelasanga village in Ushetu district, commented that sacrifice was provided among the Sukuma for attaining their requisites. People are problem-oriented; which means that there is no society or individuals in this world without problems. However, requisites differ from one individual to another within the same society. For instance, if the Sukuma society is faced with the absence of rain during the winter season, every member suffers from his/her own suffering as a consequence and has to contribute some amount of money to buy animals for sacrificial processes in order to restore rain. Moreover, people who suffer due to economic depravity and require economic prosperity may be required to sacrifice a close relative like mother, father, son, wife, and husband for their prosperity. In this sense, sacrificing becomes a means for gaining individual or social requirements.

A similar practice is done by the Bukusu people of Kenya. Njibwakale (2016:23) reports: "the Bukusu organized a 'rainmaker' festival if there was a long period of the dry season. The elders of the community would assemble the community for a ritual cleansing in which an animal (especially a black goat) is killed and blood is sprinkled on the people's heads to ward off all their human miseries which prevent rain from coming on time. Apart from offering sacrifice and sprinkling blood, they would also pray to the gods to grant them a long life in line with the Christian concept of eternity in union with God." This practice becomes a means to acquire both individual and societal requisites for rain.

However, the coming of Christian missionaries condemned all such sacrifices to be against the word of God. Missionaries believed that Africans were dark in their mind and worshiped

untrue gods. Missionaries saw ATR as a religion with no relationship with God and their God was not concerned with sin. The perception of missionaries was mostly wrong and aimed at undermining Africans. Islam and Islam (2015:1) state that “God is the Supreme entity to the adherents of the traditional religions of Africa and is considered to be the origin of everything in this universe. In Africa, God is viewed in both immanent and transcendent dimensions. This very idea of Oneness of the Supreme Being is core to the followers and this belief creates no place for the atheists in their traditional concept of God” cf. (Ekpatt, 2021). We concur very much to ideas of the above quotation that the Supreme Being whom Africans worship is known as the creator of the universe and everything found in it. Therefore, Christianity hardly grows up strong in the hearts of Africans if the missionaries’ spirit continues to ignore the indigenous traditional religion. If the missionaries-oriented ministers do not respect the foundations of African religion, the roots of Christianity will hardly grow up; instead, it will have many branches that float. It means that Christianity in various ethnic groups of Africa, including the Sukuma of Tanzania, will be embraced by nominal Christians who practice it as a mere part of civilization, not for a meaningful relationship with God.

The advent of the missionaries brought about a conflict between African religious sacrifice and Christianity, something that has divided people to this day because some believe that only Jesus was sacrificed and no human being was allowed to sacrifice or be sacrificed after Jesus. Other people still offer sacrifice as a way to clean up their mistakes so that they can achieve their goals. Through the provision of sacrifice, the community achieves its goals in a timely manner. This division indicates that Christianity has not succeeded to uproot the foundations of ATR, and has to respect them for it to flourish in Africa.

Another problem for Christian missionaries was that they introduced a more radical form of Christianity through which practices such as monogamy were heavily emphasized, which influenced a cultural and sacrificial system of Africans. Nolte-Schamm (2006:144), quoting Grimes, comments that sacrificial “ritualization” processes ‘tend to be seasonal, agricultural, fertility, diviner, and healing ones because they make explicit the interdependence of people with their physical environments and bodies (...).’ They are rituals with ‘inescapably biological and natural’ roots, and include (...) mannerisms and gestures.” The above quotation tries to explain the system used in the offering of African sacrifice whose events often resemble Christian rites. Therefore, the main issue is that methods and periods of giving sacrifice are very different between Christians and African religion.

Strictly speaking, many African people have built their faith upon traditional sacrifices due to the fact that it helps them in solving various problems pertaining to their requisites. The coming of Christian missionaries undermined some values of traditional sacrifices which helped Africans even before the arrival of missionaries. In our point of view, it is very crucial to African elders, traditional leaders, and other sacrifice beneficiaries to maintain and restore traditional values of sacrifices by providing education to the community. In the following section, we discuss the importance of traditional sacrifices to Africans and to the Sukuma people in particular, and the way missionaries disregarded them.

## 6. Importance of Sacrifices to African people

To African people, sacrifices help to bring up life. Shabangu (2004:68) states that “In many cultures, blood equals life. Blood is the substance of life. Its spilling brings death. As a symbol ‘blood’ represents the place where life and death meet, and because it marks the frontier between life and death, it has often been a pathway of communication between people and God (...).” and also “Blood symbolizes in its fullest extent the life of the individual (...).” (Shabangu, 2004:68). These two quotations highlight what is exactly conceived among most African ethnic groups, including the Sukuma people of Tanzania

Most Sukuma people perform traditional sacrifices when encountering difficult situations such as unemployment, illnesses, deaths, and even other natural disasters. For instance in the event of a crisis such as a series of catastrophes leading to the deaths of many people, traditional elders decide to take a white cow for slaughtering in the cemetery where ancestors were buried. The blood of an animal is shed on the graves as a link of communication between the dead and the living, the communication that takes place involves asking the dead to pray to God for forgiveness if people have offended God. Hence, in Sukuma, that act is called *kwisenga*. In the act of *kwisenga*, the blood of sacrifice comes into play, especially between the living and the living dead. The blood which is shed symbolizes the restoration of life and peace in society.

To African people, sacrifice is a means of reassurance and security. Living members have to reassure themselves that ancestors, who are believed to be nearer to God, are appeased. They are believed to be closer to God because they can sin no more. Their sins are presumed forgiven. An animal is slaughtered and its blood is used to communicate a message of reconciliation. It is used on behalf of the entire family or tribe. After a death of a family member, an animal is also slaughtered. Its blood is used to seal off or heal the wounds or pain of loss. So, while ancestors are reconciled with the ‘new arrival’ of the sacrificed animal, in the ancestral midst, living members’ wounds heal up from the loss through the sacrificial blood. In so doing, the family becomes reassured of its life. Hence, it is our contention that other religions out of Africa should respect the offering of sacrifices provided a unique priority in Africa in solving Africans problems.

## 7. Conclusion

This article focused on a major debate on the contribution of African traditional sacrifices towards solving the problems of African people. The main thesis defended throughout this article was that the coming of missionaries of other religions in Africa, especially Christian missionaries, did not respect the foundations built by ATR on issues of sacrifices. Basing on a study conducted among the Sukuma ethnic group of Tanzania, several points have been discussed in this article, including the meaning of sacrifices, reasons for giving African tradition sacrifices, and the importance of sacrifices to African people. The article defended the point of view that the coming of other religious faiths such as Christianity spoiled the good view of traditional sacrifices ever practiced by African people. It has been vivid in this discussion that many people fail to understand African traditional sacrifice because of unfounded prejudices and claims of Christian missionaries. This article suggests that it is high time now for Christianity to find a way



of justifying the African traditional system of giving sacrifices instead of leaving people offer in secret. Many people have been preaching in churches about following principles of Christianity; however, their being Christian is mostly by names while their actions are in the ATR. Moreover, many prominent preachers of prominent missionary religions secretly draw strength from ATR, especially through the offering of traditional sacrifices. Therefore, it is our opinion that each religion respects the traditions and customs associated with other religions regarding the practice of sacrifices and the worship of God.

We further suggest that African traditional sacrifices, which do not endanger human life, should be improved and practiced for the common good of African societies, whether Christian or traditional religious believers and those harming the African society be neglected because African traditional sacrifices, as just seen in this study, are not problem creators but mostly problem solvers. Posing this suggestion, we are quite aware of the possible challenge: If ATR sacrifices are still valid, why do we need Jesus and his atoning work on the cross? Despite this challenge, we are also aware of another counter-challenge: If Jesus' atoning work is enough for humanity, why do most African Christians turn to ATR sacrifices secretly in times of problems? Hence, these two challenges indicate that the two religions have never worshiped different Gods since their inceptions and need to respect each other on issues of sacrifices putting aside the missionaries' religious arrogance.

## Funding

Self-funded.

## Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that may arise regarding the publication of this article. The research was done for authors' interests and funding initiatives.

## Acknowledgments

This article is the result of research conducted among the Sukuma of Shinyanga in Tanzania. Authors are grateful for the contributions made by all informants. Moreover, researchers appreciate the contributions of Second Year Bachelor of Divinity degree students (2020/2021) at Teofilo Kisanji University for the various discussions held in class regarding the African Traditional Religion, and the concept of "sacrifice" in particular. Their contributions were invaluable.

## References

- Amanze, J. (2014). Conflict and Cooperation: The Interplay between Christianity and African Traditional Religions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in: Trajectories of Religion in Africa. In *Trajectories of Religion in Africa* (pp. 281–304). [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401210577\\_019](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401210577_019)
- Boaz, D. N. (2019). The "abhorrent" practice of animal sacrifice and religious discrimination in the global south. *Religions*, 10(3), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030160>
- Bukuluki, P., & Mpyangu, C. M. (2014). The African Conception of Sacrifice and its Relationship with Child Sacrifice. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 41, 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ilshs.41.12>
- Corbetta, P. (2003). *Social Research: Theory, Methods and Techniques - SAGE Research Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209922>
- Danam, G. (2018). *The Sacrifice of the Firstborn in Hebrew Scriptures* [University of Sheffield]. <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/21729/>
- Durkheim, É. (1912). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The Free Press. [https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Durkheim\\_Emile\\_The\\_Elementary\\_Forms\\_of\\_Religious\\_life\\_1995.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Durkheim_Emile_The_Elementary_Forms_of_Religious_life_1995.pdf)
- Ekpatt, A. A. O. (2021). Concepts of God, Divinities, Ancestors, and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Thought: Conceptual Analysis. In *Phenomenological Approaches to Religion and Spirituality* (pp. 18 – 43). IGI International, Information Science Reference. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4595-9.ch002>
- E Kroth, G. (2014). Animal Sacrifice in Antiquity. In G. L. Campbell (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life* (pp. 324–354). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589425.013.020>
- Eliade, M. (1987). Enclopedia of Religion. In *Vol. 12* (pp. 282–293). Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Emeka, E., & Ekeopara, C. (2010). God, divinities and spirits in African traditional religious ontology. *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, 1(2), 209–218. <https://doi.org/10.5251/ajms.2010.1.2.209.218>
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1954). The Meaning of Sacrifice Among the Nuer. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 84(1/2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2843998>
- Fast, H. H. (1991). *African perceptions of the missionaries and their message: Wesleyans at Mount Coke and Butterworth* [University of Cape Town]. <https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/14237>
- Freud, S. (1913). *Totem and taboo*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Gundani, P. H. (2004). Views and attitudes of missionaries toward African religion in Southern Africa during the Portuguese Era. *Religion and Theology*, 11(3–4), 298–312. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157430104X00140>
- Islam, D., & Islam, S. (2015). African Traditional Concept of God: A critical Analysis. *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, 2(1), 1–18.
- Jackson II, R. L., Drummond, D. K., & Camara, S. (2007). What Is Qualitative Research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 8(1), 21–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459430701617879>
- Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African Religion* (Second Edition). Praeger.
- Mligo, E. S. (2013). *Doing Effective Fieldwork: Doing effective fieldwork: A Textbook for Students of Qualitative Field Research in Higher-Learning Institutions*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource.
- Mligo, E. S. (2016). *Introduction to Research Methods and Report Writing: A Practical Guide for Students and Researchers in Social Sciences and the Humanities*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource.
- Mvunabandi, S. (2008). *The communicative power of blood sacrifices: a predominantly South African perspective with special reference to the Epistle to the Hebrews*



[University of Pretoria].  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2263/29248>

- Ndemanu, M. T. (2018). Traditional African Religions and Their Influences on the Worldviews of Bangwa People of Cameroon: Expanding the Cultural Horizons of Study Abroad Students and Professionals. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 30(1), 70–84. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1169262>
- Njibwakale, W. S. (2016). Atonement in African Pluralistic Context: Examples from the Luhya of Western Kenya. *Perichoresis*, 14(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/perc-2016-0002>
- Nkomazana, F., & Setume, S. D. (2016). Missionary colonial mentality and the expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900. *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 29(2), 29–55.
- Nolte-Schamm, C. M. (2006). *A comparison between Christian and African traditional paradigms of reconciliation and how they could dialogue for the benefit of South African society*. [University of KwaZulu-Natal]. <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/handle/10413/1980>
- Nwafor, M. I. (2016). Integrating African values with Christianity: A requirement for dialogue between Christian religion and African culture. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 1–9. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/mjas/article/view/142402>
- Oras, E. (2013). Sacrifice or Offering: What Can We See in the Archaeology of Northern Europe? *Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 55(55), 125–150. <https://doi.org/10.7592/FETF2013.55.oras>
- Owete, K. I. (2015). A Literary Survey of the Phenomenology of Sacrifice. *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 10, 1–6.
- Shabangu, A. (2004). *The gospel embodied in African traditional religion and culture with specific reference to the cult of ancestor veneration and the concept of salvation: an inculturation hermeneutic* [University of Pretoria]. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/27650>
- Smith, W. R. (1894). *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (J. Day (ed.)). Adam and Charles Black.
- Strayer, R. (1976). Mission History in Africa: New Perspectives on an Encounter. *African Studies Review*, 19(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/523849>
- Tatlock, J. (2011). The place of human sacrifice in Israelite cult. In C. A. Eberhart (Ed.), *Ritual and metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (pp. 33 – 48). Society of Biblical Literature.
- Tugume, L. H. (2015). Attitudes of Christian missionaries towards African traditional religious beliefs in East Africa during the British colonial rule. *African Journal of History and Culture*, 7(10), 193–199. <https://doi.org/10.5897/ajhc2015.0276>
- Van Baal, J. (1976). Offering, Sacrifice and Gift. *Numen*, 23(3), 161–178. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852776X00094>
- Wiafe, F., Anson, B., & Enam, O. S. (2016). The Ghanaian worldview: Relevance for the modern Ghanaian Christianity. *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention*, 3(8), 2349–2031.

## Authors' Biographies



**MARCO EDWARD** was born on 14 March 1989 at Kahama in Tanzania. He received his Bachelor of Arts with Education (BA Ed.) degree from Tumaini University Makumira in 2016. He is currently a Second Year student in the Bachelor of Divinity program at Teofilo Kisanji University in Mbeya, Tanzania.



**ELIA SHABANI MLIGO** was born on 23 June 1969 at Wanging'ombe District, Njombe Region in Tanzania. He received his Bachelor of Divinity degree (1999) from Tumaini University in Arusha Tanzania, a Master of Philosophy in Contextual Theology (2004), and Ph.D. in Contextual Theology (2009) both from the University of Oslo in Norway. His areas of research interests are Contextual Theology and Social Sciences. After his doctoral studies, he worked as a Lecturer of Contextual Theology and Social Science Research at various institutions in Tanzania, including Kidugala Lutheran Seminary in Njombe, Amani Centre of the University of Iringa, and Mbeya Centre of Tumaini University Makumira. Currently, he is an Associate Professor of Contextual Theology and Research at Teofilo Kisanji University in Mbeya Tanzania. Prof. Mligo has published extensively in areas of Contextual Theology and Research. His currently published books include, but not limited to, the following: *Women within Religions: Patriarchy, Feminism and the Role of Women in Selected World Religions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource, 2020), *Rediscovering Jesus in Our Places: Contextual Theology and Its Relevance to Contemporary Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource, 2020), *Writing Effective Course Assignments: A Guide to Non-Degree and Undergraduate Students* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource, 2016) and *Introduction to Research Methods and Report Writing: A Practical Guide for Students and Researchers in Social Sciences and the Humanities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Resource, 2016).