

# An Analysis of The Luo Sacrificial Rite: A Phenomenological Approach

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## I. Introduction

As we prepare to handle the concept and practice of sacrifice among the Luo community in Kenya it is important for us to outline the difficulties appertaining to the concept of sacrifice as a religious act in general. There are many theories that have been propagated about sacrifice. These theories are just but an attempt to give an explanation to the reason as to why sacrificial action has to be performed, and in some cases they are not getting to the real background of the sacrificial event. Despite all this, sacrifice has always remained one of the most problematic issues in the history of comparative religions, not exactly because it puts in doubt its real existence in history, but first, because it is difficult to find a consensus on the nature and concept of sacrifice, in as much as this category is not able to define a class of homogeneous and distinct phenomena.

Secondly, sacrifice has remained a problematic issue because beyond the stipulated definitions, the interpretations that revolve around the phenomenon “sacrifice” are totally diverse and hence do not give any safe conclusions, thereby not granting any possibilities to have any common ground among scholars.<sup>1</sup> The range of phenomena to be included under the heading ‘sacrifice’ is so enormous that it may be doubted whether any single theory can do justice to it all.<sup>2</sup> Again, many participants in sacrificial rituals, including the Luo society, seem peculiarly unable to explain what they are doing in ways that are relevant or satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, then, modern anthropological theories have been very varied, and like those of participants themselves, they show a tendency to reduce rituals to a branch of some other and more comprehensible activity, such as technology, or gift, or communion. These theories, exemplified in the writings of Frazer, Tylor and Robertson Smith respectively,<sup>4</sup> fail as general explanations because they seek to apply directly to the sphere of symbolic action a description in terms of the contents of ritual, derived from some other, value-charged but comprehensible, activity which has been weakened or stretched to be sufficiently inclusive or precise to fit the facts.<sup>5</sup> Some of these theories and descriptions of these authors about sacrifice shall be discussed below at the religious connotation of sacrifice. However, it is in this complex background that we have to discuss the Luo concept and practice of sacrifice, looking into their old traditions and looking into their actual situation today in Homa Bay Diocese.

From what we have seen above, how can we today speak of sacrifice in a society that has a diversified connotation of what sacrifice entails? How can the term sacrifice be relevant in a society in which animal immolation has become a very rare practice, and even in some places in which it no longer exists?

## II. Analysis of the Luo Sacrificial Rite

### a) Selection of the Animal

This was a very important aspect of the Luo traditional sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> When the medicine man had announced the impending disaster and the type of sacrificial animal that would be required, the elders in their meeting would identify one of them who had the specific

<sup>1</sup>Cf. HUBERT, H. – MAUSS, M., *Saggio sulla natura e la funzione del Sacrificio*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1981, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> For surveys of theoretical treatments of sacrifice, see BOURDILLON – FORTES, *Sacrifice*, London 1980, pp. 1-25; E. O. JAMES, *Sacrifice and Sacraments*, London 1962, pp. 13-35; J. VAN BAAL, *Offering, Sacrifice and Gift*, in *Numen*, 23, 1976, pp. 161-178; T. P. VAN BAAREN, *Theoretical Speculations on Sacrifice in Numen*, 11, 1964, pp. 1-12; J. H. M. BEATTIE, *On Understanding Sacrifice* in BOURDILLON – FORTES, *Sacrifice*, pp 29-44; V. W. TURNER, *Sacrifice as Quintessential Process – Prophylaxis or Abandonment?* in *History of Religions*, 16, 1977, pp. 189-215.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural Anthropology*, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 18; R. G. ABRAHAMAS, *Spirits, Twins and Ashes in Labwor, N. Uganda*, in J. S. LA FONTAINE (ed), *The Interpretation of Ritual*, London 1972, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. BOURDILLON – FORTES, *Sacrifice*, pp. 17-21; ROGERSON, *Anthropology*, pp. 47-51 (on Frazer); VAN BAAL, *Offering, Sacrifice and Gift*, pp. 161-178 (on Tylor). Some of these theories and descriptions about sacrifice shall be discussed below at the religious connotation of sacrifice.

<sup>5</sup> DUNNILL, J., *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1992, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup>This sacrificial process was witnessed among the Gwassi people in July 2021. Sacrificial activities in this area are performed with a lot of enthusiasm as there is a long preparative period. The day of the sacrifice is awaited with anxiety as the people look to it as a day of liberation and salvation. It is always referred to as ‘the time’. It is not unusual to hear the people talking of *saochopo*, meaning, *the time has come*. In some case, this could be compared to the *Yom Kippur* of the Old Testament.

animal required. The owner had to agree to offer it, first for his own life and that of his family and second, for the life of the whole community. This was an honor which would not easily be turned down. Anyone who was asked to give a sacrificial animal would do so willingly. The life and welfare of the community would depend upon this sacrificial animal. It was a good sign that *Nyasaye* and spirits were choosing from his flock, and the owner would only be happy that he was found worthy. Only morally upright persons would be approached to give an animal. The evil people in the society would not be asked for any kind of sacrificial animal since they were conceived to be close to the evil spirits. The evil spirits were not working towards the good of the clan but ruined it. The animal from any evil person was therefore conceived to carry evil intentions or evil spirits.

When the owner of the sacrificial animal had accepted to offer it, the medicine man together with a group of elders would come to have a good look of it and approve of it. *The medicine man/diviner would then give it a pat on the back,*<sup>7</sup> uttering some words asking *Nyasaye* and the spirits to be pleased with it *a sign that the animal had been selected, approved, set apart and consecrated for a definite purpose, i.e., for divine use.* From that moment onwards the animal no longer belongs to the person but is set aside for *Nyasaye*, and it would only be used for the purpose of sacrifice. It would no longer be used for domestic purposes like ploughing or transportation. Neither could it be sold or killed for any other purpose. The animal could be well treated, fattened and handled with a lot of attention for it had become sacred. A breach of any of these norms would result into a wrath of *Nyasaye* and his spirits, first upon the family and second upon the whole community.

#### b) Prayers and Invocations

From the above mentioned sacrifice, we realize that the Luo traditional sacrifice was accompanied by vocal prayers which spontaneously expressed the desire of the community.<sup>8</sup> Here the presiding elder made an earnest appeal to *Nyasaye*, inviting him to be present in the sacrificial activity and to listen to the humble cries of his children. The forefathers, the ancestors and the sun (*chien'g*) form part of the court of the divinity and are not forgotten either. Their intercessory and protective roles are called upon. It is necessary to underline the attention which the presiding elders pay towards the Creator, the Controller of the daily happenings. The Luo does not have a concept of a remote divinity who created the world and all that exists and then left it for its fate. The *Nyasaye* is ever present to his creation and controls all the daily happenings. He can punish when the people are not keeping his laws and orders; He gets angry, but He also forgives when asked for pardon and is easily appeased by the sacrifices and supplications. This anthropomorphic conception of the divine justifies the sacrificial practice. The natural forces (sun, moon) manifest *Nyasaye's* ruling power over the world. These are also to be mentioned as they dispense the divine actions of either rewarding or punishing the humanity. The ancestors or the forefathers play a very central role as they can intercede on behalf of their living kins and they can as well bring misfortune if not respected and if their homage is not kept. They are invoked in the prayers so that they may convince *Nyasaye* to accept the prayers of the community. They also have to accept the supplications addressed to them. Once such attention is paid during prayers and invocations the people hope and believe that the sacrifice will be accepted.

Again it is important to note that the Luos do not have fixed words for any kind of sacrifice. They spontaneously and innocently pray for the needs at that particular time. Hence the words and formulas change according to the needs of the sacrifice. We should understand the importance of spontaneity during the prayers. This would underline the expressive role of prayer. The heart's desires are communicated directly to the divinity, who sees directly what is in the heart of the one offering the sacrifice.

#### c) Presentation

As it can be seen from the above sacrificial process, one person has to bring the main sacrificial animal on behalf of the community and others have to bring other smaller animals. The first to be presented was the bull which was to be tied under the tree of the sacrifice. Then the other small animals would also be tied close to it. Presentation here is done through prayer so that *Nyasaye* and the ancestors may accept the sacrifice. The acceptance of the animal by *Nyasaye* and the forefathers is indicated by the defecation of the bull (above all) and even that of the small animals. At times it could only be symbolized by the fact that the animal urinates on the sacrificial ground. The sooner any of these acts takes place the faster the acceptance of the sacrifice. This is a very important aspect in the sacrificial event since the acceptance of the sacrifice meant that the request would be granted. Therefore, the signs of acceptance of the victim by the divinity (defecation or urination) opened the door for the sacrifice itself, as it symbolized the participation of the divinity in the sacrificial event. With the acceptance of the sacrifice, as we have said above, the divinity is compelled to dispense the benefits to the subjects offering the sacrifice.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the act of giving a pat on the back of the animal is very important and significant for it was a sign of selection, approval, setting the animal apart and consecration. It could be compared to the laying of hands upon the sacrificial animal in Jewish sacrifices, as well as consecration in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

<sup>8</sup> These sacrificial prayers are confirmed by Kabuoch, Kanyamwa and Mfangano people among whom we carried out our research. Although the words are not exactly the same, but the sacrificial process and prayers are more or less similar in these three different parts.

However, presentation, as can be seen, is accompanied by prayers and supplications. It is from this moment of presentation that the intense process of sacrifice takes effect. At that point no one else utters a word except the few chosen elders who offer prayers on behalf of the whole clan. The rest of the people are to stay in silence and watch, except if they are to play other minor roles like slaughtering and making other sacrificial items like fire. But all this has to be done in silence for the presence of the Holy One is to be feared.

#### d) Immolation

This is a very important part of the rite of sacrifice. After presentation then comes the killing of the sacrificial victims. In many cases the animal had to be killed in a strange way to show that the activity being carried out is an extraordinary one. As can be seen above, they could knock the forehead with a club and smaller animals could simply be strangled.<sup>9</sup> These were the most common methods of killing the sacrificial animals. In some other cases, the elders intensively prayed while beating the cow around the sacrificial place until the cow could drop down dead, especially in sacrifices to divert a looming death. They could do this praying and cursing the death, that it may be averted to the far territories, and asking the ancestors to bring them salvation. In some cases, especially for family sacrifices, they could cut the throat of the animal in a normal way and slaughter it. In any case, it was important to handle the blood, the meat and the bones with a lot of care. Each had to be well guarded and had to be given its special treatment.

#### e) Treatment of the Sacrificial Victims

All the parts of the sacrificed animals have to be given a special treatment and are disposed of in different ways. Among the Luo community, just as for the other people, blood is regarded as an indispensable constituent of sacrifice. The life of the victim is in the blood; and as a consequence the blood that is poured out is always given first to the divinity, that is, poured on the sacrificial ground where *Nyasaye* and his collaborators would come and consume their part offered to them. In offering blood, the Luos know and believe that they are offering the life of the animal. And when they give the life of the animal, they want life in exchange. In other words, they want the deity to take the blood or the life of the animal offered in order that they, the supplicants, may have life, live long and enjoy prosperity.<sup>10</sup> This view is compatible with that of Edwin. O. James that, "the outpouring of the vital fluid in actuality or by substitute, is the sacred act whereby life is given to promote and preserve life, and to establish thereby a bond of union with the supernatural order."<sup>11</sup> This fact shows how the Luos see sacrifice mostly as a form of expiation. The sacrificial blood purifies the community of her past iniquities and brings back that union and communion which had been lost through the breach of the taboo. Instead of *Nyasaye* taking away their life because of their disobedience, the life of the animal is taken up in their position. A new life begins as they look forward to the future and not back in the past, unless the deity did not accept their sacrifice. Divinities and the spirits drink blood and this is their main share of the sacrificial victims. Among the participants, no one else takes blood. When the divinities take blood, they are believed to be taking the whole victim since when the blood is drained from a living creature it dies. It is believed that blood invokes the pleasure and the blessing of the divinities and the spirits, and blots out sins, and averts illnesses and death.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the blood of the sacrificial victim, other parts of the victim are treated in special ways. The internal organs – the liver, the kidney, the lungs, the heart and the intestines – are also regarded as vital portions which, on many occasions, are offered to the deity. Where sacrifice involves the preparation of the flesh and entrails for food, little bits of the parts enumerated above are usually offered to the divinities, while special people like the diviners, healers community leaders and other respected elders of the society may have the rest of these internal organs.

The head of the sacrificial animal is regarded as very important. It is important to note that the head goes with the blood in the expiatory event. *The blood (which is life) of the animal, and its head (which is the symbol of the essence of being) are given in exchange for man's life and head.* In fact, the presiding elder says, '*yiemondoikawchiaye ma wamiyini kendo iwewiwaobedkodkwe*' (Please, accept this victim and let our heads remain in peace).<sup>13</sup>

It should be well pointed out that burning of the parts of the sacrificial victims was majorly done to dispose off the unutilized portions of the sacrifice. This should not be taken as part of burnt offering which is a foreign practice to the Luo society since the bones, the hides and skins were to be burnt so that an evil person could not have an access to them and manipulate through magical practices the sacrificial event. This could be detrimental to the clan. That is why these parts were to be burnt and no parts of the

<sup>9</sup>In one instance in Kabuoch at Yadh Obel, on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021, the participants expressed that the more extraordinary form of killing the victim, the more fruitful and successful the result of the sacrifice. The sacrificial victim is never killed in an ordinary manner, i.e., through normal slaughtering.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. OMOSE AWOLALU, J., *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, p. 177. This view is also confirmed by the elders in Wakula Village, Mfangano Island in an oral interview on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. JAMES, E. O., *Origins of Sacrifice; A Case Study in Comparative Religion*, pp. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. OMOSE AWOLALU, J., *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup>This were very important utterances at a sacrificial event in Gwassii Village, Homa Bay County, on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

animals were to be carried home either. There was, however, a common practice of roasting of some chosen portions of the sacrificial animal. These were the portions consumed and shared between the *Nyasaye* and his collaborators on one hand, and the devotees on the other hand. But this was not reduced to ashes.<sup>14</sup>

#### f) Consumption and Communion by the Participants

As it has been mentioned above, the blood and internal parts of the victims were commonly reserved to the deity together with his collaborators.<sup>15</sup> However, they were also to take part in the consumption of the ordinary meat together with the people. The main concern with sacrifices are their unitive, reconciliatory, expiatory/atonement aspects as well as that of communion. The act of eating some parts of sacrificial victims involves a great and intimate union of humanity, spirits, ancestors and *Nyasaye*. It shows the highest form of prayer. One shares the same food with the divinity, a sign of full communion and union regained especially after it had been lost. This point brings the aspect of vertical communion where man is reunited with the divinity.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, there is the horizontal aspect of the sacrificial communion. No one should participate in the community sacrifice if he still has a quarrel with another member of the clan. He must be ready to relent and pardon or else he would face the wrath of the divinity and that of the ancestors. The participants, who come together to pray with one accord, with one voice, do so for the well-being of the community. This brings the aspect of the horizontal communion and union of the devotees themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The participants must, therefore, rid themselves of any grudges of the past quarrels. All the hostilities between members and groups within congregation are expected to be stopped. In sacrifice, the worshippers acknowledge not only the ritual collaboration but a common tutelage. This is why a Luo would not participate if he had a grudge and is unwilling to reconcile or heal it. They strongly believe that bad feelings and grievances in the heart spoil the sacrifice and endanger the living.<sup>18</sup>

The act of eating from one source, one offering, one gathering indicates an aspect of togetherness, union, reconciliation and familyhood. It is an indication that any barrier between the people with God, with the ancestors and between themselves has been removed. This shows why one cannot eat with his adversary or offer a sacrifice together with him if he is not remorseful and ready for reconciliation. Although this culture is now dying out, it has been very important in the Luo society, and its disappearance is quite detrimental to the social and spiritual life of the Luo people.<sup>19</sup>

As we can see above, the Luo sacrificial event is a cosmo-theandric reality that unites the divinity and humanity. It unites the two worlds, the world of divinity and that of humanity. It is a reality that gives life and dynamism to the society guarded and guided by the divinity. According to the Luo thought system, it is the divinities that render the efficacy to the sacrifice. The humanity plays a very subordinate role. The principal actors are *Nyasaye* and the ancestral spirits (intermediaries). We can, therefore, say that the Luo sacrificial action is a vital-dynamic event. It is an action that gives back vitality to a lifeless community. It is a dynamic reality since it renders the effectiveness and *dynamis* to the society.

#### g) Sacred Places

For the Luos, sacrifice, as any other sacred activity, is not performed in any given place, but in a secluded place meant for religious functions. Just as Romans originally used the Latin word *fanum* to mean "sacred precinct" for other cultic sites that did not contain a temple, the Luo community used the word *thim* referring to a thick forest treated with both respect and fear and used as shrine meant for sacrificial activities.<sup>20</sup> Here the word *fanum* could be used in opposition to *profanum*, i.e., what is not sacred (profane). For the Luos *fanum* could refer to the secluded place reserved for only and strictly religious functions which had sacrifice at the peak, and could be used in opposition to the daily frequented areas for normal things of life (*profanum* or profane). Sacred or holy places are found in different cultures, past and present, all over the world. Such places are frequently marked or embellished by architectural structures and art. It can be shown that for the Luo people, sacredness of a place is linked in some way to natural objects and features such trees, stones, water, mountains, caves, and forms in the landscape. It can further be shown that these natural objects and forms lie at the root of the forms and shapes employed to mark or embellish a sacred site. These same sacred forms and shapes derived from natural objects and features become symbolic or emblematic of the sacred or divine. For the Luo community, when they are articulated, well-kept and cleaned, these sacred places become not only the 'abode' of the divine, but

<sup>14</sup>Observation during the sacrificial event in Gwassii Village on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>15</sup>The importance of blood will also be seen in the Jewish sacrificial account. This importance of blood should be seen in the light of the salvific notion of the blood of Christ, the cup of eternal salvation, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant that will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.

<sup>16</sup>According to an elder in Kanyamwa, during an interview on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2021, sacrifice is destined to reach the spiritual world. It is not simply a mundane activity. *Nyasaye* and ancestral spirits are to be appeased first before the human communion.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. HEALEY, J. - SYBERTZ, D., *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1996, pp. 256-257.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. ONGONGA, J. J., *Life and Death; A Christian/Luo Dialogue*, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London 1969, pp. 58-61.

<sup>20</sup>All sacrificial places the researcher visited were all in thick, isolated forests and none was in an ordinary field.

also serve as a means to entice the divine either to continue to reside at a given place or to take up residence at a new site. The same idea is also found in Devereux and Grey.<sup>21</sup>

In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade (1987) explains that the sacred always manifests itself as a reality different from normal realities. The Luos become aware of the sacred when it shows itself as something different from the profane. The presumption of the Luos is that the divine (*Nyasaye*) or some supernatural or spiritual force is manifesting itself to the community, who feels privileged thereby. The perception of the divine is usually convincing to the Luo community which come to believe in whatever supernatural force of divinity (*Nyasaye*) is being made manifest thereby. It is a feature of manifestations of the sacred that they are invariably interpreted or identified within the context of the religious beliefs of the Luos.<sup>22</sup> However, *Nyasaye* manifests himself not in any ordinary place but in an extraordinary one. It is the sacred place or space in which the sacred-religious activities take place; it is the meeting point between the divinity and humanity.

We would wish to mention that in connection to the sacred place, the Luos never had any built structures for their purpose of worship and sacrifices. The concept of the immensity of God (*Nyasaye*) made them feel that He cannot be confined into a human-built structure. The Luos, therefore, preferred to carry out their ritual-sacrificial activities as a clan in a large and open place which could accommodate the divinity as well as his collaborators (the sun, the moon, the ancestral spirits) and the community as a whole. Such communal sacrifices were carried out in secluded places like on top of high hills and mountains, under big religious trees called *n'gou* or the fig tree (*Ficus Sycamorus*), in big and thick forests, near rivers, lakes and caves. Some of these natural and special sites or areas that have one or more attributes which distinguish them as somehow extraordinary, usually in a religious or spiritual sense, and are often seen to be sacred places. They tend to evoke a feeling of some awesome, mysterious, and transcendent power that merits special reverence and treatment. Individuals may experience a sacred place in different ways as a site of fascination, attraction, connectedness, danger, ordeal, healing, ritual, meaning, identity, revelation, and/or transformation.<sup>23</sup>

A sacrificial rite, as an extraordinary performance, requires an extraordinary ground secluded from daily happenings and operations, a ground where no body frequents except for the function to which it is preserved. The sacrificial ground, therefore is treated as a holy ground, not even cows were allowed to graze over it, neither could trees be cut from such forests, lest one faces the wrath of *Nyasaye* and that of the spirits. A practical example is found in Kabuoch Location nearby a primary school called Mariri. Here there is a very big forest full of large *n'gou* trees, popularly known as *YadhObel* (the Tree of Obel).<sup>24</sup> Obel is believed to be one of the ancestors who was a very powerful medicine man and whose spirits still rest in the forest where he used to cure people and offer sacrifices for the community. In this forest the villagers still believe that if one cuts even a branch of the *n'goutree* it oozes blood for the spirits of the ancestors still live in it. The forest is treated with respect, honour and fear. Neither should one pass across the forest after the sunset for the spirits of the ancestors are hovering round guarding the community from any evil occurrences.

Another practical example is found in Mfangano Island in the middle of Lake Victoria in a village called Wakula, where there is a lagoon along the lake full of big fig (*n'gou*) trees. Here, the villagers always frequent only when there is a very strong drought and they offer a whole-day sacrifice after which comes the great torrents.<sup>25</sup> This is also confirmed by the Gwasssi people who still offer sacrifices to God and their great ancestors Kiboye and Muruga on two different mountains in the neighbourhood. A field research tells us that these sacrificial grounds are not ordinary places which anybody could frequent at any time. They were and are still guarded by taboos, a breach of which terrible consequences may follow both to the person and to the clan. Strangers are not allowed to step on that ground for they may provoke the anger of the divinities. This fact was confirmed during our field research. The elders could not allow the researcher initially to enter the holy ground since he was a stranger, but only after a very long pleading is when they granted the request. In any case, the researcher had to buy a ram in order to purify the place, since he was not a member of that community and the divinities had to be appeased for having allowed a stranger to step upon the preserved holy ground.<sup>26</sup>

#### h) Sacred Time

In close connection with the sacrificial activity is the *sacred time*. Sacred Time is worth examining here because it offers a world religion perspective on the sacred and raises various issues of particular interest for our work for it is an instrument for understanding of Luo sacrifice. For the Luo people, sacred time is depicted by the sacred event in which the community participates. The idea of sacred time goes hand in hand of the sacred place. Sacrifice as a sacred event is performed in a sacred place within a sacred time.

<sup>21</sup>DEVEREUX, P., *Places of Power: Measuring the Secret Energy of Ancient Sites*, Blandford 1999, pp. 27-55; Cf. GRAY, M., *Sacred Earth - Places of Peace and Power*, Sterling, 2007, pp. 43-47.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. ELIADE, M., *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religions*, Harcourt, New York, 1987, pp. 61-89.

<sup>23</sup>These views are confirmed and explained by the elders after a sacrificial event in Kabuoch, YadhObel, next to Mariri Primary School, a traditional shrine on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

<sup>24</sup>This information was gathered by the researcher during the site visit on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

<sup>25</sup>This information was gathered by the researcher during the site visit at Wakula, Mfangano Island on 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2021.

<sup>26</sup>An interesting experience by the researcher at Gwasssi Hills, Homa Bay County on 24 May 2021.

The sacred time for the Luo is, however, founded upon the past events which influence the life of the community at present and may cause detriments in the future. To atone for the past iniquities, the Luo carries out the sacrifice in the present, and tries to evade the future calamities by one and the same sacrifice. Therefore, the present is very important in Luo religion since it unites the past and the future. The present, however, is not just of a single day but a continuous present. Sacrifices are performed first to save life now, today, at this moment, as well as to evade the calamities that would come. This notion can explain why sacrifices were done once after a very long time. The day of the sacrifice is awaited with anxiety as the people look to it as a day of liberation and salvation. It is always referred to as ‘the time’. It is not unusual to hear the people talking of *saoochopo*, meaning, *the time has come*. The effects of sacrifice were expected to be felt within the society for a long time. Therefore, the sacrificial event for the Luo can be compared to the notion of *Yom Kippur* of the Jews to which they referred as “the Day”; or the ‘Today of Salvation’ in Christianity, where the Church celebrates the saving action of the Lord in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

### i) Sacred Ministers

The Luo people have different spiritual leaders who often preside over their sacrificial activities. The chief person who presides over sacrifices is referred to as *Jadolo*, a term which could be used in reference to a priest. However, this is not a permanent office among the Luo culture. This office of *Jadolo* was often accompanied by that of a medicine man. *Jadolo* was to offer prayers which were very effective, perform sacrifices to *Nyasaye* and to the ancestral spirits called *liswa* or *misango* through the process of *dolo*. *Dolo* could, therefore, be understood as the Luo term which is used to refer to the ritual process of offering sacrifices. Besides, *jadolo* could also be a medicine man, *jabilo* (diviner), who is the most powerful and respected of all the medicine-men. He is a specialist in dispensing medicine and magic. He can diagnose illnesses that are usually difficult to determine because they involve the superhuman world of the spirits. He can prescribe cures that involve appeasement of the spirits by means of sacrifice or cleansing. When going to diviners, one must carry with him a present (*chiwo*). The diviners primarily deal with the spirits of those who have died. They can foresee the future, cure people of diseases, and help the community against drought, plague, and enemies (especially in tribal wars in former days). They conducted most of the public sacrifices to *Nyasaye*. The term *bilu* means “magic power” in Luo. The prefix *ja* denotes a person who possesses or practices the role in question. Therefore, *jabilo* literary means a person who possesses and practices *bilu* (the magic power).<sup>27</sup>

Next to *jabilo* in rank and power is *ajuoga* (who is also a magician but that lower to *jabilo*). He also possesses a very strong magical power. He predicts the future, conducts family sacrifices to *Nyasaye* and the ancestral spirits. He usually assists the *jabilo* in public and communal sacrifices.<sup>28</sup>

Some authors include *jadolo* as a distinct personality who was central in sacrificial activities. According to Hauge, *jadolo* is hired by the people to conduct family sacrifices to a particular ‘*jachien*’ or to *Nyasaye*, and adds that *dolo* means sacrifice. But the title of *jadolo* is always connected to either *jabilo* or *ajuoga*. These two personalities are assuming the role of performing sacrificial rite and therefore assumed the title due to their practice. We may put it clearly that the priestly (*jadolo*) figure as such did not exist distinctively, but was connected to the role of *jabilo* or *ajuoga*. And again the word *dolo* has been translated by Hauge to mean sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> However, sacrifice could either mean *liswa* or *misango*. *Dolo* is the process or act of offering the sacrifice. *Jadolo*, therefore, could refer to the one who officiates the sacrificial process; the one who conducts the rite of sacrifice. The Jewish notion of priesthood as practiced by a distinct group of people does not exist among the Luo people.

### III. Importance Of Sacrifice

After the analysis of the sacrificial rite in the Luo community, one may ask: how are the Luo of today understand the concept and practice of sacrifice today in a world in which animal immolation is almost ignored or not practiced at all? With the spiritualization of the concept of sacrifice, are the members of the Luo community getting satisfaction with the contemporary forms of sacrifice?

Almost all archaic religions practice/practiced animal sacrifice. This shows that sacrifice was/is an integral part of human society. Various forms of sacrifice were performed to address various issues within the society. Today, many societies have abandoned the practice of offering sacrifices to their deities. This has brought a vacuum in the hearts of the members of society. Some societies have fully abandoned their traditional sacrifices, while others have either merged both the traditional form and the contemporary ones (inculturation), or still practice both the old and the new depending on the circumstances (syncretism). This continuous persistence in the practice of sacrifice shows that the concept of sacrifice is still deeply rooted in the human heart.

Human problems and anxieties will always be there. The contemporary society needs to embrace the satisfactory forms of sacrifice so as to bring solutions to human problems and anxieties. The religious leaders need to deeply understand the situation of the people

<sup>27</sup>HAUGE, H., *Luo Religion and Folklore*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup>Obunga (not his real name), one of the Luo elders in Kanyamwa, explains role of *ajuoga* during an interview on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. HAUGE H., p. 50.

so that they may offer solutions to human spiritual and social problems through satisfactory sacrificial practices. For the contemporary person, the old is too archaic and old-fashioned and the new is very unreal and therefore not satisfying, creating a very wide vacuum in the human hearts today.

#### IV. Conclusion

Sacrifice is an act of offering something precious to one's deity, especially when presented in a sacred place. The Luo concept of sacrifice is deeply rooted in the sense of the sacred which comprises the spiritual world of *Nyasaye* and the ancestors on one hand and the living on the other. As it has been seen, the Luos, like many other African communities, use animals for their sacrificial functions. The centre of these sacrificial events is based upon the need and desire for harmony between the human world and the divine or spiritual world. The idea of sacrifice also expresses man's relatedness to the higher world of the divine.

At the core of the Luo sacrifices is the desire for abundant life and harmony within the community. Life of an individual is always connected to the community and to the spiritual world. Hence a sacrificial event is always a vital-dynamic action. Sacrifice generates, preserves and orientates life towards the world of the ancestors. Here the horizontal and vertical dimensions are to be taken into account in any sacrificial action. This, as it has been seen, explains the cosmo-theandric aspects of the sacrifice.

A similar idea is found in the OT. The different sacrificial offerings with the cultic use of blood for expiation had life-giving, cathartic, sacramental and nutritive functions among Israel's neighbours. However, the four important areas in which blood was used in the OT include Covenant sacrifice, the Paschal blood rite and the rites of expiation. It is the blood of sacrifice which possesses the expiatory virtue and not blood as such. The use of blood for atonement is attested by *Lv* 17: 11-14, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of life." The close connection of blood and life is seen in many cultures including the Luo community. It is for this reason that no one took any sacrificial blood for they gave up the life of the animal (blood) in place of their own life.

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