

What is Sacrifice? Towards a Polythetic Definition with an Emphasis on African and Chinese Religions

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Bony SCHACHTER
Yuelu Academy, Hunan University, Changsha
Email: bonyschachter@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-1809-0959

Abstract

This paper asks a simple and yet extremely relevant question for scholars of religion: what is sacrifice? Rejecting monothetic definitions of sacrifice, I argue that the phenomenon must be understood as a polythetic class. In its two first sections, the paper discusses the evidence from African religions and Chinese religions, respectively. The last section is devoted to a comparative exercise through which I highlight the polythetic nature of sacrifice.

Keywords: Sacrifice, African Religions, Chinese Religions, Daoism

Introduction

Let me commence this brief research note with the following passage from Genesis:

Some time afterwards, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Ready," he answered. And he said, "Take your son, your beloved one, Isaac whom you hold so dear, and go to the land of Moriah, where you shall offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." (SPEISER 1964, 161)

In the passage above, at least two key terms relate to the notion of sacrifice. The most important is the Hebrew noun *olah*, or "burnt offering." This term occurs more than 200 times in the Masoretic text. (SCHWARTZ 2011) The Hebrew word *ha'alehu* is translated above as "offer him". This rendition occurs in several modern editions of the Christian Bible, including the King James version (FREEDMAN & SIMON 1961). Perhaps due to its association with the noun *olah*, the word *ha'alehu* has been consistently translated in certain Christian editions of the Old Testament as "sacrifice him". The meaning of *ha'alehu* is far from self-evident. Accordingly, it has attracted the attention of rabbinical authorities throughout history:

When I bade thee, "Take now thy son," etc., I will not alter that which is gone out of My lips (Ps. loc. cit.). Did I tell thee, Slaughter him? No! but, "Take him up." Thou hast taken him up. Now take him down (FREEDMAN & SIMON 1961, 498).

According to this rabbinical source, *ha'alehu* means simply “take him up”, not “sacrifice him”. What is more, Isaac’s story remains an important *locus classicus* through which Western audiences have come to interpret any form of sacrifice. Not coincidentally, the dominating paradigm associates sacrifice with violence. Scholars of religion and ritual tend to assume that sacrifice is synonymous with animal and blood offerings. In interpreting Girard’s work, for example, Catherine Bell claims that “Sacrifice, as the ritualized killing of substitutes, is itself a substitute for the violence that continually threatens to consume society.” (2009, 173) This premise informs the greatest ritual theories of the twentieth-century, including works by Girard, Hubert, Mauss, and Burkert (MCCLYMOND 2008, 65). The assumption that sacrifice is the slaughtering of substitutes seems to have influenced even the most systematic works on ritual theory, which have failed to produce a working definition of sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a mere notion, rather than a precisely defined concept. In asking “What is sacrifice?”, my goal is to explore, even in a preliminary manner, the nature of the phenomenon. Accordingly, I argue that in order to leave the status of mere notion, sacrifice must be conceptualized as a polythetic class. Understanding the polythetic nature of sacrifice is important for scholars of religion, ritual, and religious history. Indeed, in his *Tractatus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that “There must be something identical in a picture and what it depicts, to enable the one to be a picture of the other at all.” (2001, 10–11)

A polythetic definition of sacrifice is desirable because, like the picture in Wittgenstein’s sense, it shares structural similarities with the empirical phenomenon of sacrifice. The polythetic class of sacrifices may or may not share a set of given properties, in accordance to the principle of fuzzy sets, i.e., classes of objects whose membership in a given set is determined by continuum gradation, rather than the unequivocal presence of certain absolute traits (SNOEK 2006).

In order to explore the polythetic nature of sacrifice, I examine evidence from African and Chinese religions. The first section summarizes how Igbo-Africans approach sacrifice. The second section brings into discussion the place of sacrifice in Chinese religions. The third section attempts a comparison between African and Chinese pictures of sacrifice. While a full-fledged definition of sacrifice must be pursued in another article, I advance the claim that all forms of sacrifice involve, be it at the level of ritual practice itself or at the discursive level, some sort of comparative effort on the part of ritual proponents.

Sacrifice among Igbo-Africans

Igbo-Africans are one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria. Igbo-Africans speak the Igbo language, a group of tonal dialects that belongs to the Kwa group of languages (UDEANI 2007). Numbering over 35 million people, the Igbo tend to concentrate in southeastern Nigeria, which is sometimes referred to as Igboland (ORIJ 2011).

The notion of force, or *ike*, is central for Igbo-Africans. There is a hierarchy of *ike*. Spiritual beings occupy the highest place in this hierarchy, with forces that have agency over human life. The highest spiritual being is *Chukwu*, the creator God. Ancestors are spiritual beings who connect humans to God. Among Igbo spiritual beings, the *Arūsi*, who require sacrifices, are among the most important class. *Chi* connects humans, or *mmadū*, with other forces in the universe while humans are endowed with *obi*, or the life force. The strength or weakness of one's *obi* determines the person's health, well-being, prosperity, and even social status. Ritual practice may influence the *obi*, causing harm or bringing blessings. The Ancestors, the *Arūsi*, and other spiritual entities, may impact humans, both negatively and positively.

Charms and amulets are used and may have a variety of functions; they may protect from evil spirits, attract partners, enhance fighting skills, help with passing examinations, etc. Additionally, the materials used in the preparation of charms must conform to the goals of the charm in question. Since the world is "a forest of symbols", one must utter the correct words in order to activate charms and amulets. Certain materials play an important role in the preparation of charms and amulets. These materials include a variety of trees and plants, including the *Anūnū-Ebe* (a rare tree), the *Akwū Ojukwu* (a species of palm-tree), and the *Orodo* (a type of Lily flower) (IBEABUCHI 2013).

Sacrifices are carried out in order to avert disasters or obtain favors from spirits, deities, and ancestors. According to the Igbo rationale, sacrifice is efficacious because, in reality, *mmadū bụ mmūọ*, which translates as man is a spirit. As importantly, sacrifice is the sole way through which humans may restore their vital force. Those who perform sacrifices must observe certain requirements regarding the time, place, day, week, objects, and materials used during such a ritual. *Chukwu*, the supreme being, accepts sacrifices in the form of "a white chicken, eggs, yams, an eagle's feather and a long pole (*ofolo ngwo*)" (METUH 1991, 52). Depending on how it is performed, a sacrifice may not only reconstitute vital energies but also harm or even annihilate vital forces. Sacrifices are the means through which humans achieve control over spiritual forces which would otherwise have total control over humans.

There is a "hierarchy of forces" and, therefore, existing beings do not display the same level of strength. However, "because man is the only being that makes this enquiry about other beings, this ontological privilege makes him have an edge over every other being" (IBEABUCHI 2013, 298). Humans are weaker than other spiritual beings, however, humans are endowed with

with an ontological advantage, which is the ability to ask questions about the nature of existence. As a result, the Igbo-African designed a sacrificial system through which humans are able to control the activities of the spirits, where “Man compels spirit to comply” (IBEABUCHI 2013, 298).

Sacrifice as the Central Aspect of Chinese Religiosity

Traditionally, the Chinese had no word comparable to the Western concept of religion. The Chinese word *zongjiao* is a neologism imported from the Japanese language (cf. *shūkyō*) during the nineteenth-century (GOOSSAERT and PALMER 2011, 50). The term *sanjiao* refers to the three elite religions that enjoyed imperial patronage throughout Chinese imperial history (221 BCE–1911), i.e., Confucianism (*rujiao*), Buddhism (*fojiao*), and Daoism (*daojiao*). The term *sanjiao*, however, does not concern the religious experience of Chinese society as a whole. The same may be said of the term *zongjiao*. In its very structure, the term *zongjiao* encompasses the characters for ancestral lineage (*zong*) and teaching (*jiao*). It misrepresents Chinese religiosity as ancestor worship, which is in reality only one aspect of the Chinese religious experience. As John Lagerwey summarizes it, especially from the Song dynasty (960–1279) onwards, in China “lineage society emerged and continued to function within the context of a god-and temple-based popular religion defined in territorial terms” (LAGERWEY 2019, 31). This “god-and temple-based popular religion” constitutes the core of the Chinese religious experience. Again, Lagerwey is of great help:

It [i.e., Chinese religion] is the religion established by the Chinese people having blood sacrifices as its core [aspect]; the main representatives of the gods are not the Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, nor the Confucian scholars, but the spirit-mediums – the *wu*. (2013, 459)

The spirit-medium (*wu*) is thus named because he or she experiences spiritual possession, which Edward Davis defines as a “trance of identification in which the persona of the divinity is substituted for, and does not coexist with, that of the subject” (2001, 2). The word *wu* appears early, for example, in relation to the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE). It can variously be understood as a type of sacrifice, a toponym, the name of a god, and spirit-mediums, or shamans. During the Shang and Zhou (1046 BCE–256 BCE) dynasties, which correspond to the pre-imperial period of Chinese history, the *wu* were part of the ruling class. During the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han dynasties (202 BCE–220), the status of the *wu* begins to experience decline. After the Han dynasty and during the whole imperial period, the *wu* no longer held any position in government, and were despised by elite Confucian scholars (LIN 2009). Despite this loss of social prestige, spirit-mediums were undeniably among the most actively sought after ritual

specialists of late imperial China. From the Song dynasty onwards, for example, there is ample evidence that spirit-mediums worked in cooperation with Daoist ritual masters, Tantric (Buddhist) exorcists, and even Confucian literati (DAVIS 2001). The importance of spirit-mediums is proportional to the central role of blood sacrifices in Chinese local religion.

Sacrifices have been an ubiquitous aspect of Chinese religion since pre-imperial times. Beginning in the Shang dynasty, the state practiced sacrifice extensively (ENO 1996). The very word for blessings (*fu*) stems from the sacrificial system of the Zhou dynasty, in which the distribution of sacrificial meat (*zuo*) is variously referred to as the distribution of beneficial meat (*zhishan*) of fortune (*zhifu*) (LEVI 2009). Sacrifices played an important role in the legitimation of the imperial system during the Qin and Han dynasties, for in blood sacrifices the rulers found a model through which to claim a direct connection with the Zhou dynasty (PUETT 2001). Blood sacrifice continued to perform an extremely important role in state cults throughout the whole imperial period (GOOSSAERT and PALMER 2011).

While sacrifices to Heaven and the imperial ancestors were a state monopoly, sacrifices to local gods and personal ancestors were practiced – and continue to be practiced – everywhere in the Chinese realm. During the whole imperial period, state cults were unapologetically supportive of blood sacrifices. The relationship between Daoism, Buddhism, and blood sacrifice, on the other hand, is more complex. Some forms of Buddhism, especially esoteric Buddhism, are not necessarily against blood sacrifices (SHEN 2011). While the rejection of blood sacrifices was a key aspect of early Daoism (KLEEMAN 2016), there is ample evidence that the religion incorporated blood sacrifices and the worship of local gods into its ritual framework from the Song dynasty onwards. As argued by Terry Kleeman, “state and popular cults not only both practiced blood sacrifice, but they contested for power in relation to it” (1994, 186). Indeed, sacrifice is so important to the Chinese religious tradition that both Buddhism and Daoism had to accommodate it in their shared temples, which more often than not belonged to the people and their local gods.

Some scholars see the rejection of sacrifices as a definitional aspect of Daoism (RAZ 2012). And yet, this begs the question of what to do about Daoist deities who consume blood offerings? It also begs the question: if Daoism rejects sacrifice, why do Daoist priests resort to the ancient sacrificial system so as to better describe what their rituals are about? Other scholars, describe the Jiao – the central ritual program of the Daoist religion – as a sacrifice. The word Jiao itself predates Daoism and actually does mean sacrifice (ANDERSEN 2008, 539). Schipper (1934–2021) has been criticized for his description of the Daoist Jiao as a sacrifice involving not animal victuals, but talismans and paper. Schipper’s critics maintain that his description of the Jiao as a sacrifice is incorrect because the act of burning

petitions and other paper ephemera was not a constituent element of the Jiao ritual itself (LÜ 2011, 29). I find it particularly difficult to accept that Schipper, who was a Daoist priest, would have been wrong about this aspect of the Jiao, at least as he observed it during his fieldwork. Is the Daoist Jiao a sacrificial system or not? If it is not, why is the religion's major liturgical program named Jiao, or sacrifice? Franciscus Verellen has offered the most nuanced solution to the impasse to date:

Breaking with the practice of sacrifice, Heavenly Master Daoism retained the language of sacrifice, transforming the nature of the offerings, formerly intended to provide sustenance, into contractual pledges that conferred on the supplicant rights over the spirit world. This was the cornerstone of the Heavenly Master dispensation. Daoism was, to be sure, not alone among world religions to have made sacrificial reform its foundation. Christ's teaching of non-expiatory forgiveness broke with the ancient imperative of shedding blood for atonement, *To give his life as a ransom for many* was interpreted as the sacrifice to end sacrifice (2019, 49).

Verellen subtly captures what is at stake in the sacrificial revolution performed by early Daoists, which involved "transforming the nature of the offerings". This nuanced approach to ritual may be of great aid for a polythetic definition of sacrifice.

Sacrifice in Comparative Perspective

An effective manner through which scholars may explore the polythetic nature of sacrifice is by asking: How are sacrifices performed or described? Michael Puett offers important remarks about the role of sacrifices in pre-imperial China:

And, in fact, Keightley's argument concerning the "making of ancestors" points precisely to this transformative notion of sacrifice rather than to the bureaucratic *do ut des* framework within which both he and Poo Mu-chou attempt to interpret Shang sacrificial action. The Shang sacrificers were not assuming that human and divine powers were continuous or that the giving of a gift would result in benefits from the gods. They were rather transforming spirits into figures who would operate within a humanly defined hierarchy. In other words, sacrifice did not rest upon the "belief" that correct ritual procedures would result in favors. Rather, it rested on the attempt to create a system in which this would be the case (2002, 52).

For Puett, the goal of these early sacrifices was to create hierarchy. Humans used rituals in an attempt at transforming the powerful deceased into ancestors and controlling the malicious spirits behind natural phenomena. The highest god of the Shang pantheon, Di, is not interested in sacrifices. The Shang ritual system, nevertheless, is an attempt at placing Di in the highest place of the ritual hierarchy. What is interesting about Puett's argument is the claim that hierarchy was not taken as an assumption, but as the goal of ritual practice. It is not that the ritual sacrificers were concerned with maintaining an existing harmony of forces. They were trying to create it. This insight seemingly also applies to late imperial China. The Thunder Gods, originally the vindictive souls of those who died a violent and premature death, seems to be a case in point. The Shang ritual system seems to be about relying on sacrifice in order to create ancestors. Likewise, the confluence of Daoist rituals and popular religion has much to say about the role of sacrifices in the making of spiritual entities. Consider Mark Meulenbeld's remarks about a Daoist Thunder God named Deng Bowen:

Some climb the ladder of success to an impressive status, such as Deng Bowen, who heads the Thunder Division that is deified in Canonization. This god originates in southern Henan as a meat-eating god with the rank of general, has been given the title of marshal with his own sacred precincts on Mt. Wudang by the late twelfth century, and ends up as a Celestial Lord (Tianjun) from the thirteenth century onward. He leads the troops of the Thunder Division on exorcist tours through the empire and ultimately figures as a protagonist in other late Ming novels besides Canonization. Like Yin Jiao and Li Nezha, he wears a red apron that leaves most of his body uncovered. (2015, 103)

In this passage, Meulenbeld refers to a section in the Daoist Rites United in Principle (*Daofa huiyuan*), which I translate below:

The Thunder Division has a great deity of scorching fire, whose surname is Deng and name Bowen. In the past, he followed the Yellow Thearch to war and defeated Chi You, being invested as the General of Henan. Once the great god saw that the Yellow Thearch assumed the celestial [throne], he abandoned rank and entered Mount Wudang so as to cultivate himself for one hundred years, [after which] he was able to ascend and descend according to [the flow of] qi. He also saw that the people of the world did not practice loyalty and filiality; [they] murder and deceive; the strong bully the weak, being unrestrained by kings and their assistants. He then vowed day and night that he wished to become a divine Thunder[-God], so as to execute these wicked perverted people on behalf of Heaven. He thought about this incessantly, so that his enraged energies penetrated

the heavens. Suddenly, on one day he achieved transformation, [displaying] a phoenix beak, silver teeth, red hair, and a blue body. His left hand holds a Thunder *Bâton*. His right hand holds a Thunder Club. He is 100 *zhang* tall. Both armpits give birth to wings, which once spread can project a shadow over 100 *li*. His two eyes are able to emit two fire-like rays of light, which can illuminate 100 *li*. His hands and feet are like dragon claws. He can fly and wander through the Supreme Void; he devours sprites and spirits, beheading demonic dragons. Obeying the Thearch on High, he was invested as the Great Deity of Judicial Command, being in charge of the Thunder Gods. His Thunder[-Soldiers] ascend to the Fire Bell Residence, which is at the Southern Palace, during the wu hour of the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. On this day, you may draw his Form in the oratory; deploying five cups of sheep blood, rooster blood, and goose blood, five sheep heads, seasonal fruits, and pure wine, you may present offerings to the Great Deity for one day and night. Once the god descends, you may command him to immediately produce clouds and rain; or to immediately create clear weather; or to stop the winds and destroy demons; or to stop epidemics and remove pestilences. He is able to devour plague gods. When sacrificing to him, you must write two talismans of the scorching flame, which will be deposited upon the altar table. On the next day, you may collect them. You will be able to heal all plagues and perverse diseases. The marvelous [secret] is orally transmitted. (DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan*, 56.15b)

The *Daofa huiyuan* is a ritual manual that was compiled during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). It was included in the Daoist Canon of 1445. In reality, this liturgical compendium is a selection of ritual texts from several local traditions, all of which are associated with the so-called Thunder Rites (*leifa*). This form of Daoist ritual combines inner alchemy (*neidan*), exorcism, and mediumship. The passage above is part of the *Grand Rites of the Jade Prefecture of the Upper Clarity* (*Shangqing yufu dafa*), which is a Shenxiao manual (SCHIPPER 2004, 1107). As argued by Meulenbeld, *leifa* is “is instrumental for building the local communities that form late imperial society” (2015, 2).

This claim is fundamental for understanding Deng Bowen’s story. Indeed, outsiders to Daoist Studies must bear in mind that stories such as the one translated above offer an idealized picture of a grim, not to say tragic, sociological reality. In the story, Deng Bowen is said to have become a god by his own choice: “He then vowed day and night that he wished to become a divine Thunder[-God]”. In reality, this could hardly be the case. If anything, Deng Bowen must have been an ordinary person who died a violent death and, becoming a vengeful ghost (*ligui*), could not receive worship as an ancestor.

In order to placate this type of ghost, Daoists developed Thunder Rituals, which is all about incorporating vengeful and yet powerful – and, therefore, useful – ghosts and demons into the ritual framework of their temple-centric society, since these ghosts could find no place within the traditional lineage. This partially explains why Deng Bowen is said to have lived during the time of the legendary Yellow Thearch. Although Deng Bowen is but a lost ghost, he is represented in the story as a national hero. This narrative has the function of appeasing this powerful and otherwise harmful spirit. Thunder Rituals are thus about compelling spirits to comply. This aspect of the ritual system allows some comparisons with the Igbo sacrifice. Ibeabuchi offers several remarks about what Igbo sacrifices do. The author resorts to the metaphor of the spider’s web to explain the rationale informing sacrifices. Sacrifices are efficacious because all beings are interconnected. Sacrifices are functional. Ibeabuchi lists several of their intended goals or functions, which I compare with the functions of the Thunder Rituals:

The Igbo sacrifice and its functions, according to Ibeabuchi	Thunder Rituals, according to <i>Daofa huiyuan</i> , 56
Obtain favors	No
Avert dangers	Yes
Expiation	Yes
Ward off molestation from unknown spirits	Yes
Petition	Yes
Thanksgiving	Yes
Restoration of vital force	Yes

Some of the categories mentioned by Ibeabuchi, including “expiation”, “petition”, and “thanksgiving” may be incorporated into profitable comparative studies of Chinese and African rituals. Suffice to note here, however, that Ibeabuchi’s observation that “time, place, day, week are specific for certain kinds of sacrifice”(2013, 295) also applies to the record above. According to the text, “the wu hour of the fifth day of the fifth lunar month” is the best time to sacrifice (*ji*) to Deng Bowen. The god demands certain offerings, which are very specific to his cult. The text recommends “five cups of sheep blood, rooster blood, and goose blood, five sheep heads, seasonal fruits, and pure wine”. While it is true that Chinese ghosts and demons were fond of blood and meat, the Daoist deployment of blood sacrifices may be better approached as a return to ancient rites.

The *Daofa huiyuan*, which records the passage about Deng Bowen, entails a comparative perspective on sacrifice. The evidence in the *Daofa huiyuan* demonstrates that Thunder Ritual specialists saw themselves as an extension of the state cult at the local level. For the Daoist ritual master, Thunder Rituals aim at controlling or even destroying the disruptive works of spirit-mediums, or *wu* (BOLTZ 1993). On the one hand, related texts explicitly refer to the ritual classics of the state cult. On the other, the same texts consistently portray *wu* in a negative light. What is more, the *Daofa huiyuan* shows that its redactors were nevertheless conscious about the fragility of their status as representatives of the state cult at the local level.

The *Esoteric Purpose of the Jade Down Retreat (Yuchen dengzhai neizhi)*, for example, argues that:

There may be those who polemicize about the fact that [we] cry to Heaven and serve the Thearch as gentlemen and commoners, which would resemble illicit cults; those who are learned men would doubt this [assumption], which I say is not [true]. (DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan*, 14.1a)

The status of the Daoist as a representative of the state cult at the local level was not necessarily taken for granted by those who indeed did represent the state cult as Confucian sacrificers and officials. Commonly, the latter despised Daoist priests. In order to defend the legitimacy of Daoist ritual practice vis-à-vis imperial peers, the author of the passage in question quotes from the *Mengzi*, identified simply as “the book” (*shu*):

Although a man may be wicked, yet if he [practice the retreat] and bathe, he may sacrifice to the Thearch on High (DZ 1220 *Daofa huiyuan*, 14.1a)

The reference in this passage is not inconsequential. It equates Daoist rituals, Thunder Rituals in particular, with the state cult and its sacrifices. The Daoist sacrifice is not simply about appeasing local gods. Ultimately, it is about creating hierarchy, which is why the authors of the *Daofa huiyuan* claim that Thunder Ritual is comparable with sacrificial service to Di, or the Thearch on High, an impersonal deity who does not need any sacrifices and, therefore, is suitable for occupying the highest place in the ritual hierarchy. In a sense, the single most significant resemblance between Igbo and Chinese forms of sacrifice is that in both cases sacrifice is perceived as a means through which to achieve control over spiritual powers, instead of succumbing to their strength.

Conclusion

Does the transformation of the “nature of the offerings” cancel the sacrificial nature of a ritual system? The problem of whether blood offerings must count as a definitional aspect or not is also a matter of how we conceptualize sacrifice. If we approach it as a monothetic class, then the Daoist Jiao is not necessarily a sacrificial system, for it lacks the element of animal and blood offerings. But if we approach sacrifice as a polythetic class, it is possible to conclude that the Jiao does indeed share some key properties with other sacrificial systems.

For example, Daoists in northern Taiwan offer cooked rice to the Three Pure Ones (*Sanqing*) when they perform the Noon Offering (*wugong*). According to a monothetic definition, this particular offering does not define the Noon Offering as a sacrifice. However, why should vegetarian offerings not count as sacrificial items?

In reality, the act of presenting cooked rice to the Three Pure Ones is an extremely complex procedure, which entails a sacrificial rationale. It involves a series of esoteric actions whose contents are too complex to be described here in detail. Suffice to notice that the act of offering cooked rice demands an extremely precise performance on the part of the Daoist priest. This performance includes several actions, including (1) the manner in which the priest holds the rice bowl in his hands; (2) the secret characters to be mentally written over the cooked rice; (3) the precise moment or timing of the ritual; (4) the exact procedure that defines the act of holding the bowl as the act of presenting the cooked rice as an offering to the Three Pure Ones; (5) the procedures for offering the rice to spirit-soldiers (*yinbing*) outside the temple, which also involves certain invocations and hand-gestures. The status of the cooked rice as a sacrificial offering also entails comparative issues. According to my informant, the Daoist procedure for preparing and offering cooked rice shares some similarities with the Buddhist procedure as it is practiced in Taiwan. A whole article could be written about cooked rice as a form of sacrificial offering that does not involve a single drop of blood.

The same applies to the Igbo evidence. Although the supreme Igbo god accepts meat offerings, scholars should not rule out the possibility that vegetal substances also play an important role in the Igbo notion of sacrifice. Substances used in the preparation of charms, including the Anụnụ-Ebe, the Akwụ Ojukwu, and the Orodo, may well contain a sacrificial function.

If anything, a polythetic approach to sacrifices may considerably deepen our understanding of how rituals operate and what is at stake in the act of sacrificing. This approach, however, demands great humility on the part of scholars. In reality, a polythetic definition of ritual must be sought for in the field. A merely bookish understanding of sacrifice will not suffice.

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