



Review Article

The Disposability of Ritual Animals: Raising the Animal Rights Question around Yoruba Rituals

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Abstract: The use of non-human animals as a category of sacrificial items in Yoruba rituals raises a fundamental question of whether animals' rights discourse and advocacy have had some restricting influence on how non-human animals are rather treated as ritual disposables in Yoruba rituals. While the sacrifice of non-human animals is upheld in Yoruba culture as a part of the moral construct of the Yoruba society the act raises an ethical question as to whether or not there is any moral consideration for the interest of the non-human animals sacrificed to ensure cosmic stability. This paper raises the question of selecting non-human animals for the purpose of securing the universe inhabited by non-human animals and humans in view of a perceived silence regarding this question in Yoruba ritual scholarship. The paper contends that the socio-moral framework of the Yoruba culture is not such that is averse to the consideration of the interest of non-human animals. Hence, on the strength of the basic contention of the stage theory of moral development as explained by Judith Boss (1999) this paper will assert that there is need to reconsider the use of non-human animals in Yoruba rituals by aspiring to a higher level of moral development which could enhance the protection of the interest of non-human animals.

Keywords: rituals, animal sacrifice, Yoruba, non-human animals, cosmic stability, animal rights

Introduction: Are Yoruba rituals within the reach of the influence of the animal rights discourse? Are they captured at all in the scope of scholarly investigations on human and non-human animal relations, especially

regarding abuse of animals' rights and the likelihood of violation of the rights of animals before actual occurrences of abuse of the rights of animals? Given the high rates of animal sacrifice in the numerous rituals spread

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across the various sub-cultural formations that constitute Yoruba culture¹, Yoruba rituals ought to be an area of concern for the enrichment of animals' rights scholarship and advocacy. Regrettably, there seems to be a lack of interest in the animals' rights dimension to the study of this cultural and artistic heritage of the Yoruba in Africana scholarship, whereas the seriousness with which the matter of animals' rights is being centred in non-Africana scholarship, especially Western scholarship, ought to have been replicated in the aspects of Africana scholarship that are concerned with Yoruba rituals². This is because of a major ethical issue of consideration for the interest of non-human animals that Yoruba rituals raise which will be broached in this discussion. This paper will recognise Yoruba culture as one with ethical principles which can serve as a basis for a valid application of ethical theories in articulating a discourse of consideration for the interest of non-human animals within Yoruba ritual contexts (Verbal Communication). Hence, samples of Yoruba ethical principles couched in axioms will be highlighted in creating a background favourable to applying theories of ethics to the discourse of animals' rights within Yoruba ritual contexts. Such principles may be summarised as (1) sameness of feeling of pain and pleasure (as contained in the Yoruba axiom *Isèniyàn nì s'éranko*, (2) self-experimentation with pain (as contained in the Yoruba axiom *Kí èníyàn tó fi ikà se ọmọ èranko kí ó kókó fi se ara rè*), and (3) replaceability or substitutability of animals as a ritual item (as contained in the Yoruba axiom *Bí a kò bá_rí àdán a ó sì fi òòbè s'èbò*) (Verbal Communication). To this end, the stage theory of moral development will serve as the basis upon which we shall submit in favour of consideration for the interest of non-human animals regardless of the importance attached to ritual in Yoruba culture, more so that latitude for making such a claim exists within the culture.

Methodology: The research method is qualitative. Data will be gathered from three rituals of the Ife people of Nigeria, namely, *Ítápá*, *Qlöjó* and *Òrisàjùgbè*. The theoretical context will draw upon the two dimensions to ethical relativism (ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism), universalist moral theories,

and stage theory of moral development as enunciated by Judith A. Boss. This is with a view to formulate a template of appraisal of the ethical basis of indigenous Yoruba cultural practices with primary focus on Yoruba rituals using three rituals of Ile-Ife – the acclaimed spiritual capital of the Yoruba.

Cultural Context and Methodological Orientation:

Year in year out, here and there across the geographical territories where the Yoruba are predominantly found in Nigeria, non-human animals constitute a major constituent of rituals performed by the Yoruba people. *Ebo*, *ètùtè*, and *orò* are words commonly used by the Yoruba to refer to ritual, rite, and sacrificial acts that are concerned with metaphysical powers (Verbal Communication). The rituals of the Yoruba serve spiritual purposes, and can also be formalised acts of atonement. Many times, a Yoruba ritual is not deemed complete until non-human animals are involved. Non-human animals used as ritual items are generally considered vehicles or means for inter-realm communication between humanity and divinity, between the terrestrial and the extra-terrestrial, between the physical world of humans and the metaphysical world of supernatural entities. Hence, non-human animals involved in a Yoruba ritual end up being killed to facilitate inter-realm transactions between humans and their superhuman counterparts.

The Yoruba cosmology is understood as constituted of three realms of existence, one of which the humans inhabit—the terrestrial plane. The other two realms are the unborns' and the dead's.³ All of the realms are believed to operate interdependently for there to be cosmic stability. Any disruption in the operational scheme of any of the three realms will cause cosmic disharmony. For the Yoruba, cosmic harmony is key if all of the lives that the universe sustains will be sustained. Hence, constant interactions between the three cosmic constituents are needed. At the human end of the cosmic system—the earth on which humans exist—humans are to carry out certain functions to enhance their interaction with the cosmic forces. It is for this crucial purpose that non-human animals are used as communication agents. This point is very clear

in the lines of an invocation for the spiritual rejuvenation of the Ọ̀nì, the spiritual head of the Yoruba and the chief custodian of the traditions of Ife—the acclaimed origin place of the Yoruba: *Eku á jísè; ejá a á jísè* (Rats will deliver your message; fishes will deliver your message)⁴. The context in which the invocation is rendered is ritual.⁵ Obviously, the rats, the fishes, and any other animals used for sacrificial purpose to aid the inter-realm communication between humanity and divinity are no less than special emissaries without which the important act of inter-realm communication might not be efficacious.

The context we categorize as socio-moral in which we shall discuss Yoruba rituals as an ethical subject could be understood from certain enunciations of theories of ethics and Judith Boss⁶ shall be our reference. Specifically, we shall attempt to know the Yoruba idea of a moral community; and to this end, we shall be guided by the subscription to the contention that ethical relativism in its two forms – ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism – is inadequate for making ‘real-life moral decisions and as guide for what we ought to do’; and that ‘[u]niversalist moral theories’, as Boss contends, ‘offer an alternative to ethical relativism’ because of its claim that ‘morality is so universal and objective’ which make it independent of ‘personal or cultural opinions’. Hence, our submission shall be informed by the ‘stage theory of moral development’ as enunciated by Judith Boss. The hallmark of the theory is the encouragement of moral development towards the attainment of a stage of reasoning that assures ‘justice for all’.⁷ Our concern is with the ethical bases of the Yoruba ritual traditions on which the prioritizing and essentialising of the killing of animals and/or their use as ritual disposables are based. Our aim is to ground our discussion of animals’ rights issues in Yoruba rituals in ‘moral theory and good moral reasoning’ not only so that we can be ‘less vulnerable to persuasive, but logically incorrect, thinking’, to allude to Boss⁸ but to open up new perspectives to the discourse of Yoruba rituals. On the whole, three rituals of Ile-Ife, namely *Ìtápá*, *Olójó* and *Òriṣàjùgbé* will be the subject of our critical discussion. To enhance a clear understanding of the rituals,

information will be drawn from interviews conducted with the principal custodians of the selected rituals and selected members of the ritual congregations directly observed between the years 2012 and 2023.

Cross-cultural Purview: The traditional Yoruba has not been known to have ever subscribed to animals’ right advocacy, especially in the sense in which such rights advocacy is being articulated and prosecuted in contemporary times with societies of the West taking the lead and setting the standards.⁹ It is yet unknown to the present writers that an intellectually informed traditional mode(s) of advocacy for societies grounded in the kind of moral justice that provides for the rights of non-human animals existed among the Yoruba; or that it has always been in existence but outside the lenses of scholarship as we have it today. Whatever the case may be, animal rights advocacy in contemporary times cannot be easily compared to any that may have characterised the past of the Yoruba or locked up beneath the social and cultural frames of the Yoruba in contemporary times. Of course, animal rights activism started a long time ago in the Western world. It’s often traced to the ancient Greek’s Orphic and Pythagorean religious traditions.¹⁰ While the kind of activism in the West may not have been part of the African past or the present, the cherished traditions of the Yoruba do reveal instances of fair consideration for both human and non-human animals as key components of life, in fact as important partakers of the cosmic affairs. In fact, sometimes the Yoruba hold the belief and express it in a manner as to take both humans and non-humans as comparable units of the universal whole, at least as the universe is understood and often interpreted by them. Indeed, they may never have engaged in any form of activism for the protection of the interest of non-human animals as has been the case in Western societies and lately in other parts of the world, Africa inclusive, yet there is enough evidence within their customs and traditions of a high level of concern for the wellbeing of both human and non-human creatures. The following traditional axioms of the Yoruba attest this fact: *Isèniyàn nì s’eranko* (As human feels so non-humans do);

Kí èniyàn tó fi ikà se ọmo ẹranko kí ó kókó fi se ara rè (Before a human inflicts injury on a non-human animal such a person should first feel the pain such an ill-treatment will cause) (Verbal Communication). What the instances being highlighted are meant to do is to draw attention to aspects of the body of the traditional knowledge of the Yoruba that favour the kind of moral justice which animals' rights discourse and animals' rights advocacy can tap into to enhance their cross-cultural awareness and relevance.

African Rituals as Textual Field: African rituals becomes more or less an open 'textual field'¹¹ when the view of Africanist scholars that African rituals are a form of drama is accepted. This view borrows insights heavily from the Western notion of drama as an artistic enterprise. Hence, as an open textual field, it allows for deployment of diverse theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. For instance, myth-ritual theory and symbolic interactionism are some of the theories that can be gleaned in various scholarly efforts towards making meaning of African rituals and broadening the scope of understanding of the rituals as an art form—making the discourse a humanities one. On the other hand, symbolic anthropology and symbolic sociology are some of the theoretical applications identifiable in the discourse of Yoruba rituals. Symbolic anthropology is about identifying cultural symbols of a society and using the symbols to enhance understand of the society.¹² Similar in a sense to symbolic anthropology, symbolic sociology of which symbolic interactionism is a good example emphasises the use of language to create symbols and meanings for the enhancement of communication among humans.¹³ These theories have served as effective tools of analyses from sociology and anthropology, and have lent insights to other allied disciplines of the social sciences, for instance folklore studies.

Notable Africanist scholars such as Wole Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba, B.M. Ibitokun, J.P. Clark and Ola Rotimi, among others¹⁴ who have studied some rituals of the Yoruba particularly from the perspective of Western drama, using dramatic qualities inherent in ritual to justify their categorisation of African

rituals as a form of drama, have left out the question of the significance of the non-human animal element in their highlighting of the artistic or dramatic qualities of the rituals. And of course the intentionality behind their efforts and the rigour with which they undertook the assignment testify to the hope that discussing African rituals the way they did might be sustained. That the bold visibility of the non-human animals in the rituals and what for the animal rights' defenders could have rather appeared as 'sordid' treatments of non-human animals seem not to have provoked ethical questions in Africanist thinkers on African rituals. Might this be an indication of how marginalised ethical issues such as animals' rights are in African ritual studies? Perhaps, the kind of debates the Africanist thinkers placed premium on has less bearing on such an ethical matter or perhaps their ethical bearings have not been countenanced by scholars of African ritual. Be that as it may, our focus is on how the ethical question of the rights of animals used as sacrificial objects in the rituals may be validly raised.

Ethical and Theoretical Correspondence: Indeed, it is worth noting that much of the pioneering work on rituals in Africa were done by anthropologists and sociologists from the Western societies,¹⁵ particularly during the colonial era in Africa. The end results therefrom have expectedly not been those of the discipline of philosophy. Philosophical theories such as ethical subjectivism, cultural relativism, utilitarianism, and the stage theory of moral development, among others will lend insights into the present discussion. It is noteworthy that correspondence exists between the listed theoretical perspectives and certain ethical principles of the Yoruba culture. The ethical subjectivist position that 'individual people create their own morality'¹⁶ corresponds to a Yoruba ethical principle of individual preference often axiomatically expressed thus: *Èyí wù míń kò wù ó níí jé kí ọmo iyá méji jéun nínú àwo ọtọọtò* (What appeals to one may not appeal to another is the reason two individuals born of the same mother may choose to eat in separate plates). A parallel of this axiomatic principle is *Èkò élékò ni ègbà élégbà* (That which one rejects is what another accepts). Similarly, the cultural

relativist position which 'defines morality in ethnocentric terms' corresponds to the Yoruba ethical principle which prescribes the recognition of social groups according to the peculiarities that set each apart. In Yoruba parlance, *Idálùú ni iṣélú* (the way a community was founded determines how it operates). However, for the utilitarian moral thinker, privileging the 'the greatest good' is the ultimate. '[T]he greatest good' is 'the sum of the happiness of the whole community of *sentient beings* – that is, those beings who are capable of feeling pleasure and pain.'¹⁷ Again, this corresponds to a Yoruba ethic of evaluation between an individual and their community. As the Yoruba do say, *Igi kan kií dá iga bó se* (no single tree makes up a whole forest). The stage theory of moral development explains humans as entities which aspire to higher levels of moral development as they get dissatisfied with their present state of moral reasoning.¹⁸ And of course the stage theory of moral development equally corresponds to another ethical principle of the Yoruba: *Bí òní se rí kó ni òla maa rí ní mü kí Babaláwo d'ífá ọrọrún* (That today will offer something different from that of tomorrow is the reason a seer would constantly make divine consultation) (Verbal Communication).

The foregoing theories of moral reasoning and their correspondences in what may be understood as the corpus of Yoruba ethical principles reveal that the cultural background of the rituals of the Yoruba is not extraneous to philosophical angles and ethical considerations.

Centering the Fate of Non-Human Animals

Ìtápá Ritual: In the long process of the *Ìtápá* ritual spanning over a month two spectacles will be placed in focus: the *Ipiwò* and the *Òsójòsò* rites. During the *Ipiwò*, a she-goat is sacrificed in the grove at *Ìdítá*.¹⁹ It is tethered to a spot within the *Ìdítá* groove. It is later beheaded after some invocations. Our second example from the *Ìtápá* performance is the *Òsójòsò* rite – which features the carcasses of the rams that had been offered to *Òsójòsò*, who is mythically established as a divinity that shares close affinity with *Òbàtálá* – the first divinity to be assigned the duty of creating the world by the god-head, *Olódùmarè*. The carcasses are hung at the spot marked out for

Òsójòsò where they serve as a memory code for supplications so far made to *Òsójòsò*. The third is the Ogun spot by the entrance of the *Òbàtálá* temple at *Igbó-Ìtápá* area in *Ile-Ife*. Fresh and/or decomposing heads of dogs are usually sighted at the Ogun spot reminding of the various sacrifices made at the spot.

Olójó Ritual: During the *Olójó* ritual, the one-time act of beheading a dog tied to the stakes is a most spectacular moment of the ritual. As the carcass of the sacrificed dog is hung to the stakes, the key ritual actors such as the monarch (the *Òoni*), and the chief priest of the divinity called *Ògún* (*Osògún*) and other key partakers dance with glee round the carcass of the dog hung to the stakes.

Òrìṣàjùgbè: During *Òrìṣàjùgbè* the killing of a dog at the spot marked out for Ogun is a major spectacle. The head of the dog is smashed as an act of sacrifice to the divinity. Afterwards, it is prised open and laid on the ground to allow its entrails get exposed heavenwards.

Drawing Upon Regan and Singer: We shall raise a central ethical question at this point: Why are non-human animals treated as disposables as can be seen in the foregoing? Aren't all animals equal? And can't a case be made for the animals so treated as disposable materials in the interest of humans? When we argue, for instance, like Tom Regan to the effect that animals are entities with rights whose utilitarian position is for equal consideration of interest of all creatures,²⁰ the point being made is that non-human animals deserve a better treatment in contexts such as those of Yoruba rituals. Singer's concern for 'equal consideration of interests' for all sentient beings does not presuppose that all beings are alike or have the same capabilities, but rather that the interests of all sentient beings should be weighed without bias. In a representative example from moral philosophy on animals rights – Regan's deontological approach that lays emphasis on 'the right view' of all beings – we see a coincidence with Regan's popular view on the animal rights' dimension to moral ethics. We take both Regan's and Singer's²¹ views as corresponding to what we here refer to as Yoruba Animal Ethic of Equal Consideration boldly inscribed in one of the

Yoruba's beliefs couched in an axiom: *Bó ẹ se ní ẹ se ọmọ èniyàn níí ẹ se ọmọ èranko* (As humans feel so non-human animals do) (Verbal Communication). The three ethical considerations in the three Yoruba axioms cited in the foregoing intersect at a point of favourable ethical concern for animal right discourse. We shall subsequently situate our case for animals within central mythical materials beliefs upon which Ife ritual traditions and, by implication the Yoruba, are sustained. We shall subsequently use the myth of creation which basically underscores a part of the worldview of the Ife and the Yoruba in general which lends credence to the case we intend to make.

Ife-Yoruba Myth of Creation: A popular myth of the Yoruba has it that when Olódùmarè, the god-head, was going to create the world of humans, He first sent Obàtálá (human entity), a five-toed chicken (non-human animal), a chameleon (non-human animal), and materials of creation such as sand, gourd, etc. (material objects). When the first attempt by Obàtálá ended in a stalemate, Odùduwà (human) was sent to complete the assignment. It was the second attempt that resulted in the creation of the world (Verbal Communication). From the viewpoint of the Yoruba indigenous hermeneutics,²² the foregoing myth of creation is a symbolism through which the Yoruba explains the intertwined fate of all animals (human and non-human) right from creation. In fact, numerically, the non-human animals constitute a bigger part of the creation process than humans going by the ratio 1:2 of the creation items. To put it more clearly, though Obàtálá and Odùduwà constitute the human representatives in the creation myth, they are not as constant a pair of representatives as the hen and the chameleon are regarding the non-human animals' representation. The hen and the chameleon were both present at the first creation attempt which Obàtálá could not complete and in the successful continuation undertaken by Odùduwà. The key fact here is that this myth—a foundation element in Yoruba culture—does not marginalize non-human animals. In fact, many Yoruba oral accounts which continue to play significant roles in their social reconstructions and formulations in theoretical and practical terms feature non-human animals as equal to

humans and even, at times, as superior creatures.

Conclusion: The belief that there is equality of feelings for all animals (human and non-human) encapsulated in *Bó ẹ se ní ẹ se ọmọ èniyàn níí ẹ se ọmọ èranko* attests to the fact that deep thought inheres in Yoruba culture and belief. We might ask, given this intellectual sophistication, whether there is a Yoruba non-human animal ethics that may be referenced amidst the debates and contentions in favour of the rights of non-human animals. Perhaps none exists. And perhaps that explains why the practice of animal sacrifice persists, and in fact, are probably on the increase. In Yoruba ritual festivals such as *Olójó*, *Ìtápá*, *Óriṣàjùgbè*, *Óbameri*, *Ókè'bàdàn*, *Óbàtálá*, *Èkimògún*, *Íná*, and *Òrósùn*, among numerous others, several animals are killed and, often, their bodies are badly mutilated as part of the processes of the rituals. All these happen in manners that might ordinarily be described as gruesome and would appear to animals' rights defenders as a serious animals' rights violation. Thinking against the background of such maxims as grounded in Yoruba ethical considerations for the interest of non-human animals as the ones presently cited, how defensible are the various rites of animal sacrifice involved in numerous Yoruba rituals? The cultural defence for the killing of non-human animals in the rituals is that they are sacrificed in the interest of the greater good of every organism on the terrestrial plane – humans and non-human animals inclusive. No doubt, this is a utilitarian contention. But it is such that should provoke an interrogation as to what the idea of the 'greater good' means and how it is to be clearly conceived, and logically explained? One way to answer this question is to recognize the fine axioms of the Yoruba culture, examples of which have been cited as general statements of moral interest rather than philosophical bases of logical argument either for or against the matter of ethical consideration for non-human animals within the Yoruba ritual contexts. And as such the axioms cannot on their own be a sufficient philosophical basis for arguing for any ethical consideration for non-human animals either within the Yoruba culture in general or Yoruba ritual context in particular. Hence, since the

Yoruba encourage constant improvement in their societies and life in general, the stage theory of moral development is apt for our present observation that the interest of non-human animals ought to be part of the scholarly agenda for knowledge production on Yoruba rituals. After all, the Yoruba do not foreclose the possibility of adopting a new mode or process of ritual observation. Their popular axiom clarifies this: *Bí a kò bá_rí àdán a ó si fi òòbè s'èbò* (If bats are not available, colugos could serve the ritual purpose) (Verbal Communication). Of course, this principle of ritual observance does not imply that the interest of non-human animals may be guaranteed if one species of nonhuman animals is prescribed as a substitute for another as is the case in the axiomatic cultural dictate. What the cultural provision for a place of substitute implies in a broader cultural sense vis-à-vis the Yoruba is that modification to culture and cultural practices is allowed. The fact that rituals in general are malleable, transformable and never a cultural practice in a state of stasis, in fact, attest this. The case we are making is that Yoruba ritual practices in which non-human animals are killed and reduced to an agency, more or less disposables ritual items in physical and metaphysical interactions with a principal benefit for humans even while the universe is believed to stand to also benefit ought to be modified in view of the increasing awareness that all sentient beings ought to have their interests well protected. Such a modification can help to re-orientate disciplines, especially literary studies and drama, which seem to have discountenanced the question of animals' rights and consideration for the interest of non-human animals in their hosting of discourses on Yoruba rituals.

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