A Socio-Ethical Appraisal of Ritual Killings in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The spate of killing of innocent souls for ritual purposes is alarming with little or no effort by concerned government agencies to fight the human hunters. One would have expected such pseudoscience acts to be ancient stories or myths by the increase in Christian activities and modern civilisation. But ritual killings to appease the gods or goddess appear to be on an alarming rate. These devilish acts are carried out in a 21st century, when other nations of the world are experimenting and advancing in technology. This paper is an attempt to sensitize the society about the seriousness of this evil and to proffer solution to the alarming increase of ritual killings in Nigeria. The paper identifies the nature and purposes of ritual killings and as well presents a socio-ethical appraisal of ritual killings. It condemns the act and calls upon government and various organizations to fight against this inhuman practice.

Keywords: Nigeria, Killing, Ritual, Morality and Life

INTRODUCTION
Ritual killing is a common phenomenon in Nigerian daily life. It has become a regular event when hundreds of Nigerians lost their lives to ritual killers or what Leo Igwe (2004) called, “Head Hunters.” The ritual killers go about in search of human parts – heads, breasts, tongues, and sex organs – as demanded by witch doctors, juju priests, traditional medicine men or women and/or occultists who require such for their dubious sacrifices or for the preparation of assorted magical portions (Igwe, 2004).

In daily newspapers and magazines, many more Nigerians than ever before are declared missing, just as the incidence of ritual killings attains worrisome dimensions. Yet the authorities appear helpless (Aiyetan, 2003). Why ritual killings? Is it morally justifiable to kill fellow human being for ritual? Are the killers not murderers who deserve to be executed? What is the purpose of this evil? Why it is that ritual killing is in the increase in Nigeria today? These and many more questions this paper attempts to answer from Christian point of view.

NATURE OF RITUAL KILLING
There are three major characteristics of ritual killing in Nigeria such as traditional, occult, and contemporary ritual killings. We will examine each of them critically.

Traditional Ritual Killings: This is the killing of human being during traditional rituals. Ritual killing was done in the primitive religious communities in Nigeria long before the advent of Christianity in Africa. In African traditional practices, a human being was considered the most acceptable offering to the gods or deities. In most Nigerian traditional belief, the gods of war, took pleasure in human sacrifice as a source of power to protect or enable the people attain victory over their enemy. Thus, human rituals serve like armour, to protect and strengthen the people (Parrinder, 2004).
In some part of the country in those days, slaves or war captives were used for sacrifices to appease the gods of the land for protection from trouble and sickness (Awolalu, 2001). This kind of human ritual may still be in practice secretly today. This may be in form of ancestor rituals, because most traditional religions believe that ancestor rituals help to heal the ancestors themselves and the practitioners’ connection with them. Ancestors are believed to be the living dead, those who reside in the spirit world through the loss of their physical bodies (Some, 2008). However, the societies who still engage in this kind of barbaric act or ritual hardly disclose the substances used for such ritual which means the ritualists know that such practice is evil. It may also take the form of human rituals for burial of a king or an installation of a new king which is also done in disguise in a typical traditional certain.

**Occult Ritual Killings:** Human sacrifices or ritual killings are a common phenomenon for occult members of various groups. The purpose according to Brown, as taught to members, is to ‘purify’ them so that they can receive Satan’s ‘blessing.’ Anyone who drinks the victim’s blood or eats the flesh gains new demons and therefore greatly increased in power (Brown, 2006). It is also shocking to know that some acclaimed high and mighty Nigerians indulge in this barbaric act. “For instance, some politicians and government officials have been accused by arrested suspects and herbalists who allege that they use human beings for rituals in order to sustain their influence as well as remain in positions of power. Investigations revealed that cases of ritual killings and disappearance of persons are usually high whenever elections are around the corner” (Nwafor, 2017).

There was a report of ‘Badoo Boys, a cult, who had been unleashing an orgy of killings, during which they used heavy stones to crush the skulls of their victims. Their modus operandi included storming victims’ residences while they are asleep. It is suspected that they usually hypnotize their victims, as none of them had ever been conscious of their presence. They would, thereafter, smash heads of their victims with a grinding stone and after which they use a handkerchief to clean the blood and brain before leaving the scene. During Police interrogation, one of the suspects confirmed that each handkerchief stained with blood was sold for N500, 000. He further revealed that they were mere errand boys for rich politicians. But in their case, the blood and semen stained handkerchief were used to prepare spiritual defence for well to do Nigerians’ (Nwafor, 2017).

**Contemporary Ritual Killings:** In the contemporary Nigeria, ritual killing has taken new dimension. Tell magazines describe the scene as the “Reign of the Ritualists” (Aiyetan, 2003). Many diverse means are used to kidnap people with evil intentions; especially for rituals. Many of those kidnapped for such purposes are long gone but there are a lucky few who actually live to tell the story of their encountered with the ritualists. Some of the kidnappers caught with their victims some time dead or half-dead also testified of their dubious acts (Aiyetan, 2003). There are all sorts of stories of various techniques of kidnapping; some people disappeared on picking or touching some items set as trap by ritualists or kidnappers.

It seems obvious in Nigeria that ritual killers are more prevalent at certain seasons in the year – like the weeks leading to Christmas and during some yearly pilgrimages. It is generally believed that people engage in sacrifice of human beings to get money to spend at such festive periods. There are some known cases of people who killed their wives, husbands, mothers or even their children for money making rituals (Aiyetan, 2003). In Nigeria today, humans’ parts have become essential commodities in the market. For instance, at Agbado Market in Lagos, the police caught a man who was a specialist in selling human parts.

Yahoo plus rituals is the latest on board which is an advanced development to that of normal Yahoo – Yahoo crime. It is important to note that, these Yahoo plus boys do not need to defraud or fleece anyone in order to have money. In most cases, they just need to have sex with girls in order to take their destiny and make them look useless or died suddenly thereafter. Yahoo ritualists look for ladies’ underwear for ritual. For the fear of Yahoo Boys, people in some parts of the country no longer hang their clothes on ropes outside in order not to fall victim of Yahoo ritualists (Ritualists, 2018).

Nigerians surely can do anything for money. Many are discarding the long, arduous hard work road, to cut corners by way of money-making rituals. The crazy desire cuts across all geographical boundaries and
social strata and the extremes Nigerians can go in their bid to satiate their appetite for cheap wealth and varieties of life are unprecedented. As a result, the sanctity of human life and blood is sacrificed on the altar of unbridled money-yielding desires (Owoeye, 2000). Nigerians are running scared as cases of ritual murders, especially for money-making, increase. Why these primitive practices in this jet age of modernisation?

PURPOSE OF RITUAL KILLINGS
Ritual killing is backward practices in a civilise society such as our nation. Upon the level development in Nigeria why is it that some people still engage in such bloody, brutal, barbaric and inhuman acts in this modern life? There may be several reasons but only four will be identified here such as: Nigeria being hyper-religious, hyper-superstitious, hyper-poverty and hyper-power conscious society.

Hyper-Religious Society: Nigeria is a deeply multi-religious society and also a fertile land for any type of religious practice. Most Nigerians, irrespective of status, still believe in the existence of supernatural beings and that these transcendent entities can be influenced through ritual acts and sacrifices. Rituals are integral parts of the traditional religious practice and observance. Igwe rightly observed that “Nigerians engage in ritual acts to appease the gods and seek supernatural favours to ward off misfortune. . . . The root of ritual killing in Nigeria will be found in religion, theism, supernaturalism and occultism” (Igwe, 2004).

Nigerian quest for transcendence is the proliferation of religious cults among various religions – ATR, Islam, Christianity and Others. Aspirants from these religions are not left out in the scenario of ritual killing. Alongside the resurgence of traditional religion, and the fascination of Nigerians with Eastern mysticism, has come the emergence of new religions, which may not be void of ritual killing. Stott rightly notes that “a groping has begun for new forms of spiritual experience and in that search for God; it is all too easy to blunder into the arms of Satan instead” (Stott, 2006). Indeed, many Nigerians have blundered into satanic manipulations that demand human life and have found it difficult to escape.

Hyper-Superstitious Society: We are in a society where most beliefs are still misinformed by irrational, dogmatic, mythological and magical conceptions. Beliefs in ghost, juju, charms and witchcraft are prevalent and widespread. Many Nigerians believe that magical potions prepared with human heads, breasts, tongues, eyes or sex organs can enhance one’s political and financial fortunes. They believe that juju; charms and amulets can protect individuals against business failures, sickness, diseases, accidents and attacks by spirits. Thus, performing rituals with human being is conceived as an act of spiritual fortification and advancement (Igwe, 2004).

The most striking is the modernisation of these beliefs with the rise of the New Age movement, which has encroached, into the nation. “It is a bizarre assortment of diverse beliefs, religion and science, physics and metaphysics, ancient pantheism and evolutionary optimism, astrology, spiritism, reincarnation, ecology and alternative medicine” (Stott, 2006). Those who have already ‘made it in life’ discovered that materialism does not satisfy the human spirit and that in consequence people are looking for another, a transcendent reality. Thus, they seek it everywhere – Eastern religions, through sexual rituals, through music and the other arts, through a drug induced higher consciousness, through modern cults, New Age speculation, dangerous experiments with the occult and the fantasies of science fiction (Stott, 2006). Most of these involved ritual killing for transcendence.

Hyper-Poverty Society: Most Nigerians are involved in ritual killing for money-making purposes. Poverty striking or quest for materialism makes many Nigerians to believe that a special kind of ritual, performed with human blood or body parts can bring money or wealth. Hence the beliefs in “ritual wealth” or “blood money” remain strong among many people and features prominently in the nation’s media and movies (Igwe, 2004). The issue of poverty, however, in Nigeria is paradoxical. In the midst of abject poverty, some Nigerians are living in affluence. Nevertheless, some of these affluence Nigerians have no visible means of income to show for their wealth. Thus, many unprivileged Nigerian youths, try by all means to get rich especially through “ritual wealth” or “blood money” or “yahoo plus” which is the latest on board.
Hyper-Power Conscious Society: Nigerians, especially some politicians in their desperate quest for power, are engaging in ritual killings when elections approach. The Week newspaper reported cases which some politicians were involved in ritual killings. “The politician lusting for power is introduced to a witch doctor by an upwardly mobile yuppie that patronizes the man for money-making rituals. For an agreed fee, the witch doctor agrees to perform the ritual, but the snag is that the politician must produce between three to ten human heads, breasts or genitals to make the ritual efficacious. Thereafter, death merchants are recruited to procure these vital parts, for a fee” (Ekong, 2002).

This is the type of story we read in our daily news concerning some politicians in Nigeria. For instance, the killer shrines of Igbo land, we read that the gory rituals, in the evil forests where human rituals take place abound, are sustained by important personalities (Elesho, 2004). One may be forced to ask, is there any moral justification for ritual killings in the society?

SOCIO-ETHICAL APPRAISAL OF RITUAL KILLING

The socio-ethical consequences of ritual killing are grief to the society. It has caused acute pain and sorrow to many and has brought great distress to families and relations of the victims. Ritual killing is anti-social and should be fought against to put an end to this inhuman act. A society that has no respect for human life is a dangerous place to live. Human beings are not animals to be slaughtered at will. Animals are meant for sacrifices if need be. Human life is sacred and should be treated as such. Thus, it is morally wrong to kill fellow human being for ritual.

When bloodshed and violence filled the earth, God destroyed it with a flood (Gen. 6:11) and then instituted human government with the authority of capital punishment. God stated the reason for this explicitly, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:6). Human life is connected to God, very important and should be treated with great respect. For this reason it is even wrong to say rude things to another human being, talk less of killing a fellow human being for ritual (Geisler, 1995). Ritual killing for whatever reason is deeply a denial of the sovereignty of God and the value and sanctity of human life made in his image and our appraisal will fall under three subheadings in these directions.

The Sovereignty of God over Human Life: Nigerians must recognize primarily the principle of God’s sovereignty over human life. God created every living thing and human beings in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:21, 27). God controls both life and death. He gives life and he takes it away (Job 1:21). From dust we come, and to dust we return (Gen. 3:19). He kills and makes alive (Deut. 32:39). In other words, the Lord gives blessings and he allows suffering. Our relationship with him is not based on his gifts or his blessings but his character and his love for us (Blackaby, 2006). We are not our own but his. God made us and we belong to him. Therefore, human beings have no right to destroy human life for whatever reason (Geisler, 1995). We can learn a lot about the way God wants us to treat our human life by considering the way we have been made. Human beings are uniquely made in the image and likeness of God. This sets us apart from all other creatures that were made “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:21, 24-25). Therefore no one has the right to take another person’s life for ritual even God does not demand human sacrifice. Nigerians need to be educated that human life belongs to God and whoever touches life, touches the image of God.

The Dignity and Value of Human Life: Ritual killing is a challenge to human value and dignity, and from a biblical perspective, human life does not depend on what we can do nor have the potential to do. Being human gives us value and dignity and entitles us to protection and life because to be human is to be created in the image of God. The dignity and value of human life is at the heart of biblical bioethics because humans are made in God’s image and are the crown of his creation. We represent and resemble God that is more reason murder or ritual killing is such a heinous crime, for it is killing God in effigy. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:6). It is even wrong to curse human being because of the dignity of “been made in the similitude of God” (James 3:9). This dignity and value of human life includes the body, which should be cared for (Eph. 5:29) and even buried with respect, anticipating its final resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Human
beings should be accorded that respect and honour and should not be slaughtered like animals for sacrifice or ritual (Colson, 2004; Geisler, 1995).

Human beings are not for rituals but are creatures in the image of God. Human beings are made in God’s image, the basis on which we treat humanity equally with value and dignity. The biblical creation story shows that God brought humanity into this world by his creative word and like other creations around, we constantly depend on his will, purpose and upholding presence (Gen. 1: 26-27). God uniquely made us in his image and likeness and this sets humanity apart from all other creatures that were made “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1: 21, 24, 25). If being a person is what qualifies treatment of individuals with equal dignity to others, then all human beings have this ‘right’, for we are all persons made in the image of God. We are to treat human beings with respect for the whole of their lives, regardless of their characteristics. Human respect does not give us value and dignity; rather, it is because we have value and dignity that we deserve respect. The reality of sin and the fall of humanity does not change this fact, or reduced the value and dignity of humanity made in the imago dei. We retain the image of God at various stages of human life, even in our fallenness (Gen. 9:6). Therefore human life cannot be exchange for money or wealth or for power and prestigious position.

**The Uniqueness and Sanctity of Human Life:** The ritual killings pose the sharpest form of moral question, what does it mean to be human. In ritualists’ actions the uniqueness of human nature and sanctity of life are at stake. We need to understand that humans are distinct from all other species; at every stage of human life and in every condition of dependency, they are intrinsically valuable and deserving full moral respect. No human has the right to terminate the life of another fellow human. Jeremiah reflects on the dependence of the entire human race on God’s sustenance: “A man’s life is not his own; it is not man to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). Ritual killing for whatever reason is a violation of human right and sanctity of life. Human life is a sacred gift of God, as a being created in his image (cf. Acts 17:25; Gen. 1:26-27). Everyone has a duty to conserve and respect human life and to accept responsibility for the life of his or her fellow human. God’s sovereignty over human life must not be usurped. Human life is sacred in the society because it is precious to God (Psalm 116:15), and because God took human nature at the incarnation (John 1:1, 14), thus demonstrating the value he places upon it (Vere, 2015).

The sanctity of human life should be maintained. Unlike animals, human beings are rational moral beings (Col.3:10; Jude 10). Humans resemble God and are morally responsible to him (Gen. 2:16-17). We can be holy as God is holy (Lev. 11:44) and be exorted to moral perfection, just as the “heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Because of the sacredness of human life, God has forbidden killing of fellow human being for whoever does that indirectly attacked God (Geisler, 1995).

**CONCLUSION**

Ritual killing in Nigeria is a serious issue of life and death, a violation of human right and the sanctity of human life and a denial of the sovereignty of God over human life as a bearer of his image. This paper has discussed the nature, purposes of ritual killings in Nigeria. It has condemned the act as a sin against God and humanity. The socio-ethical consequences of ritual killings are too grief for the society and therefore those involved should be brought to book. There should be no sacred cows in terms of punishment for the ritualists. There is an urgent need for a national and an international campaign to end this inhuman practice. The government and various organisations should identify ritual killing as a harmful tradition in its programs and campaigns should be carried out to expose the ignorance, superstition and rationale underlie the belief and practice of ritual killing in Nigeria. The church should teach and promote the concepts of the sovereignty of God over human life, the dignity and value of human life, and the uniqueness and sanctity of human life in her various programmes within and outside the church.

**REFERENCES**