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Offerings as Religious, Symbolic, and Cultural Practice

القرابين بوصفها ممارسة دينية، رمزية وثقافية

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Abstract:

This research explores the phenomenon of offerings as a religious, symbolic, and cultural practice, adopting an anthropological approach that seeks to deconstruct this rite across a range of human religions and traditions. Offerings are not limited to their devotional or ritualistic dimension; rather, they extend beyond this to become acts imbued with symbolic meanings and possessing a socio-cultural function that contributes to the construction of the relationship between humans and the sacred, as well as fostering cohesion within the community. At the intersection of religious, symbolic, and cultural functions lie questions concerning the nature of the offering as a human practice deeply rooted in history and extending across cultures and religions. What is meant by an offering? How have its connotations evolved? Does its meaning differ from a purely religious perspective compared to its examination from an anthropological or cultural standpoint? How do major theories interpret this rite? To what extent do offering practices in traditional African societies reflect profound conceptions of the cosmic order, communal equilibrium, or spiritual authority? Furthermore, how have the forms of offerings diversified among people? Have they consistently carried a unified meaning as a means of communicating with the sacred, or have they been associated with the reproduction of cultural identity and the cohesion of social structures? Do offering rituals still retain their symbolic value in contemporary societies, or have they diminished in influence due to religious and cultural transformations? These questions form the backdrop of this research.

Keywords: Offerings – Religion – Symbolism – Culture

الملخص :

يتناول هذا البحث مسألة القرابين بوصفها ممارسة دينية، رمزية وثقافية، انطلاقا من مقاربة انثروبولوجية تسعى إلى تفكيك هذا الطقس في عدد من الديانات والتقاليد البشرية. فالقرابين لا تقتصر على بعدها التعبدي أو الطقسي، بل تتجاوز ذلك لتغدو فعلا محملا بالدلالات الرمزية، ووظيفة اجتماعية وثقافية تساهم في بناء العلاقة بين الانسان والمقدس، كما تسهم في إعادة انتاج التماسك داخل الجماعة. من خلال دراسة نماذج من الديانات الابراهيمية، يتبين أن القربان قد ظل حاضرا كوسيلة للتكفير عن الذنوب، أو كرمز للتقوى والتقرب إلى الله، سواء في الذبائح الحيوانية في اليهودية، او في تجسيد القربان في المسيحية من خلال فكرة الفداء، أو في شعيرة الأضحى في الإسلام ذات الجذور الإبراهيمية. وفي مقابل ذلك تكشف الطقوس القربانية في الديانات الوثنية والأنظمة الدينية التقليدية عن استخدامات رمزية شديدة التنوع، كما في طقوس الشعوب القديمة كالأزتيك، او في ممارسات بعض المجتمعات الافريقية، حيث يتجاوز القربان حدود الطقس ليصبح أداة لحفظ النظام الكوني أو لإعادة التوازن بين الانسان والطبيعة. وبين الوظيفة الدينية والرمزية والثقافية، تتقاطع الأسئلة حول طبيعة القربان كممارسة إنسانية غارقة في التاريخ وممتدة عبر الثقافات والديانات. ما المقصود بالقربان؟ وكيف تشكلت دلالاته عبر الزمن؟ وهل يختلف معناه حين ننظر إليه من زاوية دينية خاصلة مقارنة بمقاربته من منظور أنثروبولوجي أو ثقافي؟ وكيف تفسر النظريات الكبرى هذا الطقس؟ وإلى أي حد تعكس الممارسات القربانية في المجتمعات الافريقية التقليدية، تصورات عميقة عن النظام الكوني، او توازن الجماعة أو السلطة الروحية؟ ثم كيف تنوعت اشكال القرابين بين الشعوب؟ وهل حملت دائما دلالة موحدة كوسيلة للتواصل مع المقدس، ام أنها ارتبطت بإعادة إنتاج الهوية الثقافية وتماسك البنية الاجتماعية؟ وهل ما تزال طقوس القرابين تحتفظ بقيمتها الرمزية في المجتمعات المعاصرة أم انها فقد أثرها بفعل التحولات الدينية والثقافية؟ تلك الأسئلة تشكل خلفية هذا البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القرابين- الدين- الرمزية- الثقافة.

1. INTRODUCTION

2Offerings as Religious, Symbolic, and Cultural Practice

1. Offerings: Definition and Variations in Spiritual Practices

Offerings stand as one of the oldest and most profound religious and symbolic practices in the history of human societies, having been examined by numerous thinkers and researchers from diverse perspectives. On a general level, an offering can be defined as that which is presented to a supernatural or sacred power (god, spirits, ancestors...) within a religious rite for propitiation, appeasement, gratitude, or expiation. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim posited that the offering is a symbolic expression of the bond between the community and the sacred, serving a social function of reinforcing solidarity within the group, rather than merely an individual relationship with the deity [1]

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss, on the other hand, included the offering within the system of "the gift," considering it a form of symbolic reciprocal giving between humans and the sacred realm, subject to ethical and social laws rather than purely material utilitarian exchange ("The Gift and the Obligation to Reciprocate").[2]For his part, Mircea Eliade viewed the offering as a mechanism that reintroduces humans into "sacred time" [3], considering it a moment of consecration that reconnects humans with the absolute, activates the sacred dimension of existence, and renews the world, maintaining its balance [4].Conversely, René Girard, in his theory of "Violence and the Sacred," proposed that the offering, particularly animal sacrifice, acts as a symbolic instrument for diverting the internal violence of the community towards a chosen victim, thereby allowing for the restoration of balance and tranquility within society. Thus, the diverse definitions illustrate the richness and complexity of the concept, intertwining symbolic, social, and religious dimensions [5]

Regarding the types of offerings, it can be stated that blood offerings are among the oldest forms of rituals, requiring the presence of blood as an essential element for approaching spiritual or divine powers. In many primitive religions, there was a prevailing belief that blood carried immense spiritual energy that facilitated a form of communication between humans and the unseen world, with this blood possibly originating from the slaughter of

[1] Houssam Abdel Ghaffar Abdel Hafeez El-Anani, Émile Durkheim and His Anthropological Thought, The Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Volume 11, Issue 03, Damietta University, Egypt., 2022,p. 142.
[2] Khalil Al-Saadani, n.d. The Gift by Marcel Mauss, Link: https://www.aranthropos.com/ [no date], (Accessed on 05/03/2025)
[3] Gharbi Rabiaa, , Sacred Time and Profane Time in Mircea Eliade, Al-Nassiriya Journal for Social and Historical Studies, Volume 13, Special Issue September, Algeria, 2022, p. 231
[4] Mircea Eliade, Aspects of Myth, translated by Nihad Khayyata, Hindawi Foundation. 2017, pp. 37-42
[5] Zouhir El-Khwaidi, n.d., The Anthropology of the Sacred and the Mimetic Theory of Violence in René Girard, Link: https://www.aranthropos.com [no date] (Accessed on 25/02/2025).

animals or, in some cases, from human blood. Examples of this include what was known in the Aztec civilization of Central America, where human sacrifices through the killing of prisoners or defeated warriors were part of religious rites aimed at presenting blood to the gods, especially to the god of the sun and war, Huitzilopochtli, as it was believed that this blood was necessary to regenerate cosmic energy and ensure the continued appearance of the sun. Some traditional African tribes, such as the Yoruba in West Africa, also practiced similar rituals in which animals were sacrificed as offerings to deities in request for rain, fertility, or healing. In contrast, burnt offerings emerged as another type of presentation ritual, where the materials offered were completely or partially burned, with the belief that the rising ash or smoke reached the heavens and was accepted by the deity, as in Hinduism, where offerings such as flowers, aromatic materials, and foods like rice are presented on altars during worship, in addition to the cremation of bodies in funeral rites as a symbolic sacrifice that transports the soul to the afterlife. In ancient Canaanite religions, the burning of offerings was considered common, with cattle, sheep, and even children sometimes offered to deities such as Baal and Moloch as a means of appeasement. Human sacrifices, on the other hand, were characterized by the presentation of humans themselves to the gods, based on the belief that human blood carried a superior spiritual power that allowed for influence over the fate of the community, especially in times of disaster, famine, or war. This practice was prominently embodied in the Aztec civilization in Mexico, where human sacrifices were periodically offered in religious rites aimed at appeasing the gods and ensuring the continuation of life, especially for the sun god. Some traditional African societies, such as the Akan and Bambara tribes in West Africa, also knew religious rituals that sometimes required the sacrifice of chosen individuals representing special offerings presented during times of war or crisis, reflecting the deep symbolic and spiritual dimension of such rituals in the structure of traditional societies [6]

2. Offerings in the Anthropological Context

In anthropology, the offering is considered a symbolic rite that reflects the depth of the relationship between humans and the sacred, serving as a means of restoring balance between the human world and the unseen realms, whether it concerns requests for blessings, expiation, or appeasement of higher powers. Anthropological studies reveal that the offering takes on multiple forms depending on the culture. In ancient Central American societies such as the Maya and Aztecs, the presentation of human sacrifices was the pinnacle of

[6] Zeinab Abdel-Tawab Riad Khamis, Human Sacrifice Offerings in Some Primitive Societies in Africa, Al-Ibar Journal for Historical and Archaeological Studies, Volume 01, Issue 01, Algeria, 2018, pp. 70-71

devotional rites, viewed as a means of ensuring the regularity of the cosmos and pleasing the gods. In traditional African societies, the presentation of animal offerings and the pouring of libations on the ground remain present rituals on occasions of planting, requests for rain, or the invocation of ancestral spirits. As for Asian cultures, offerings vary between incense, foods, and candles in front of temples on numerous religious occasions.

Many anthropologists have addressed the concept of the offering within profound analytical frameworks. Marcel Mauss considered the offering to fall within the system of "the gift," a form of symbolic reciprocal giving between humans and the sacred world governed by ethical and social rules. Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzed the offering as a symbolic structure akin to myth, understood through mental binary oppositions such as life/death and purity/impurity, making the offering an expression of a deeper intellectual order in human societies. Victor Turner, on the other hand, saw the offering as an important element within the ritual process that accompanies social transformations, where the rite contributes to the reshaping of the symbolic order and the consolidation of community structures. From a different perspective, René Girard presented a conception that focuses on the offering as a mechanism for discharging social violence by directing it towards a "scapegoat" that ensures the stability of the community.

The Moroccan researcher Hassan Hama offers a semiotic-symbolic reading of the offering, considering it a complex cultural sign that expresses the structure of religious thought and is linked to the reproduction of meaning within the community. In a study of Maghrebi rituals, he emphasizes that the offering is not only a ritual act with a religious function but also a symbolic system built on the duality of giving and sacrifice, renewed through festive rituals that recreate the balance between the sacred and the profane. Hama argues that the offering re-symbolizes the relationship between the individual and society and embodies, through its rituals, a kind of "symbolic purification" that paves the way for a transition towards a new state of healing, marriage, etc.[7]

These diverse approaches highlight that offerings are not merely inherited religious practices but rather symbolic and cultural systems carrying profound meanings, serving as a mirror reflecting human conceptions of the sacred, existence, social order, and authority.

3. Offerings in the Religious Context

In monotheistic religions, the offering holds a central position as a means of expressing profound faith, drawing closer to the Divine Being, and embodying submission and obedience. Religious

[7] Abdel Rahim Boudlal, A Reading of the Book: The Ritual of Offering in Positivist and Abrahamic Religions by the Researcher Al-Hassan Hanna, 19/07/2023, Link: https://www.awaser.net/2023/07/19 (Accessed on 01/03/2025).

texts indicate that the offering is not merely an external ritualistic manifestation but a complex symbolic act carrying spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions. This concept is evident in Islam through the story of Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael (peace be upon them), which is considered one of the most prominent narratives establishing the idea of the offering in its deep spiritual sense. In this account, the father presents his son as an offering to God in the highest degree of surrender to His command, whereupon the sacrifice is replaced by a great ram, as stated in the Quran: "And when they had both submitted [to Allah], and he laid him down upon his forehead, We called to him, 'O Abraham, You have fulfilled the vision.' Indeed, thus do We reward the good-doers"[8].This foundational event does not merely represent the ritual itself but a spiritual test that transcends the temporal moment to become a symbolic model practiced annually in the ritual of Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice), reminding believers of the deeper meaning of sacrifice, not for its own sake, but for what it symbolizes in terms of sincerity, detachment, and reliance on God.

The offering also appears in Islam in the story of the two sons of Adam (peace be upon him), where the verse highlights the concept of the offering as a test of intention, truthfulness, and sincerity: "When they both offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them but was not accepted from the other..."[9]. It is understood from this verse that the criterion for the acceptance of the offering is not its form or material value but piety, which is confirmed by another verse clear in its implication: "Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you"[10].

These verses establish a refined religious conception of the offering, not merely as a devotional act but as a symbolic practice embodying the deep spiritual relationship between the servant and his Lord, expressing submission, sincere intention, and purification from selfishness. Based on this, the value of the offering is not measured by what is presented but by the intentions and meanings it encompasses. Furthermore, this ritual has social dimensions that transcend the individual; for instance, the sacrifices contribute to the redistribution of wealth and the reinforcement of values of solidarity and mutual support among members of society, as seen in the distribution of the sacrificial meat to the poor and needy, making the offering a religious act with a social and ethical dimension in one.

In this sense, the offering in the religious perspective combines the ritualistic and the spiritual, the symbolic and piety, the individual and the communal, making it one of the most semantically rich religious acts, granting it the potential for multiple interpretations across

[8] Quran, Surah As-Saffat, verses 103-105.
[9] Quran, Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 27
[10] Quran, Surah Al-Hajj, verse 37

devotional, anthropological, and semiotic dimensions.

4. Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Offering Rituals

The ritual of the offering is considered one of the most prominent religious practices that has extended across various cultures and religions throughout history. Religious anthropology includes it within symbolic rituals that reflect the relationship between humans and the sacred, revealing the social and spiritual mechanisms that govern this relationship. Within this framework, theoretical approaches to interpreting the offering ritual constitute a fundamental tool for understanding the dimensions and diversity of its interpretations in anthropological and religious thought, especially given the multiplicity of approaches that have sought to encompass the essence of this phenomenon from social, psychological, or symbolic perspectives.

In his engagement with the topic of offerings, the researcher Hassan Hama focused on the most prominent theories explaining them and relied on the interpretations of Émile Durkheim and René Girard. Émile Durkheim emphasized the social dimension of rituals, particularly those involving sacrifice or the presentation of offerings, considering that these practices transcend the individual dimension to take on a collective character that consecrates identity and belonging. According to Durkheim, the offering represents a symbolic moment in which collective values are manifested and the social order is reproduced. He argues that the collective performance of rituals reinforces cohesion among individuals and provides them with a sense of belonging to a shared entity based on unified beliefs. In his book "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life"[11], he asserts that rituals constitute a means of shaping collective consciousness and that the offering not only expresses the relationship with the sacred but also symbolizes the assimilation between the sacred and the profane, thus making the sacrifice a means of symbolic communication with the forces that govern social life. Conversely, René Girard offered a different interpretation through his theory of symbolic violence, considering that the offering is not merely a religious act but a social mechanism aimed at containing internal violence and restoring balance to the community. The tensions arising from jealousy, competition, or internal conflicts in early societies found release through the presentation of a symbolic victim, viewed as a scapegoat that absorbs collective anger, thereby leading to the pacification of the community and the restoration of its cohesion. In his book "Violence and the Sacred"[12], he illustrates that the

[11] Émile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: The Totemic System in Australia, translated by Randa Ba'ath, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar, 2019, p. 258

[12] René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, translated by Samira Rasha, The Arab Organization for Translation, Lebanon, 2009,

process of presenting the offering reorganizes the social order and mitigates the intensity of explosive violence through its ritual killing, achieving temporary peace and readjusting relationships within the community.[13]

In this sense, the offering constitutes a means of replacing chaotic violence with organized violence that ensures stability and establishes a symbolic structure that regulates the human relationship with the sacred and rearranges their relationships with others. By combining the social perspective of Durkheim and the psycho-symbolic perspective of Girard, a more comprehensive understanding of offering rituals can be reached, considering them a complex structure in which religious, social, and cultural dimensions intertwine, extending beyond the ritual itself to encompass the symbolic structure of society.

5. Human Offerings in Traditional African Societies

Human offerings are among the ritualistic practices that were prevalent in some traditional African societies, where they were considered a means of communicating with sacred powers or an expression of loyalty and obedience to deities or gods. Researcher Zeinab Abdel-Tawab addressed this topic in numerous works, exploring the dimensions of this practice and its symbolic, social, and religious meanings within African societies.

Researcher Zeinab Abdel-Tawab indicates that human offerings often occurred during major crises such as wars or famines, or on occasions of the installation of kings or powerful figures. Symbolic violence is manifested in presenting a human being as an offering to the deity or natural forces as a means of seeking forgiveness or achieving social equilibrium. The human victim was chosen according to specific criteria related to kindness, luck, or the ability to influence the spirit world, as it was believed that human blood had a stronger effect in ensuring the response of the gods.

Among the African societies that practiced these rituals, the researcher mentions the Akan and Bambara tribes in West Africa, in addition to cannibalistic tribes that practiced human offerings as part of their traditional rites. In the Akan tribe, residing in areas of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, human victims were presented within special rituals aimed at seeking protection from the gods and appeasing spirits believed to inhabit nature. Sometimes, the victim was chosen from the lower strata of society or enemies captured in wars. In contrast, human offering rituals in the Bambara tribe in Mali, Senegal, and Cameroon took place during special occasions such as the coronation of leaders or during natural

[13] Abdel Rahim Boudlal, A Reading of the Book: The Ritual of Offering in Positivist and Abrahamic Religions by the Researcher Al-Hassan Hanna, 19/07/2023, Link: https://www.awaser.net/2023/07/19 (Accessed on 01/03/2025).

disasters, based on their deep-rooted beliefs that human blood was key to safety and abundance in society. As for the cannibalistic tribes belonging to some groups in New Guinea and parts of West Africa, human offering was considered part of war and revenge rituals. In some cases, human offerings were presented to assert dominance over enemies and re-establish social order, as it was believed that the spirit offered in the offering would grant the community strength and the ability to overcome enemies in battles.

From the perspective of researcher Zeinab Abdel-Tawab, these rituals cannot be understood in isolation from the symbolic structure underlying them. She argues that human offering is not merely a devotional act but an indicator of profound social transformations related to power, hegemony, and social status. Furthermore, human offering, in their belief, helps to maintain human order, based on the idea that in West Africa, members of ruling families or chosen individuals are presented as human offerings to protect society from spiritual corruption or to ward off evil spirits. Despite the decline of human offering in many modern African societies, the symbolism behind these practices remains present in contemporary religious and ethnic rituals. Zeinab Abdel-Tawab's study indicates that offering rituals have transformed into symbolic acts that do not involve human violence but still retain their social and spiritual effects within African cultural and ethnic contexts at multiple symbolic, social, and ritualistic levels[14]

6. Religious Offerings Between Symbolism and Cultural Identity

Based on the preceding discussion, we can conclude that religious offerings are among the deepest and oldest practices associated with the traditions of peoples and societies throughout history. The offering, with its rituals and connotations, is one of the most prominent of these practices in many cultures, especially in Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Although the offering may be considered a religious act in its essence, it transcends devotional practice to become a complex symbol closely related to cultural and religious identity, significantly influencing social relations within society.

Anthropology views religious offerings as an expression of the human relationship with higher powers, whether divine or supernatural (in their belief). This relationship varies according to cultures, where the offering is not seen merely as a religious ritual but as an embodiment of the individual's relationship with the community and shared identity. In societies that adhere to Abrahamic religions, the offering is considered a means of drawing closer to God and an expression of commitment to religious laws and loyalty to God, while

[14] Zeinab Abdel-Tawab Riad Khamis, Human Sacrifice Offerings in Some Primitive Societies in Africa, Al-Ibar Journal for Historical and Archaeological Studies, Volume 01, Issue 01, Algeria, 2018, pp. 75-80.

simultaneously representing a crucial element in strengthening social bonds and reinforcing collective belonging.

Offering rituals that transcend individual worship to take on a deep social dimension, serving as a collective event that reflects the spirit of solidarity and social cohesion. In many societies, the presentation of the offering is accompanied by the distribution of its meat to the poor and needy, contributing to the reinforcement of the concept of social responsibility and concern for others. Consequently, the offering becomes an embodiment of the principles of cooperation and giving, reflecting cultural values that elevate the importance of collective action.

Moreover, the offering contributes to defining the cultural identity of society through its diverse rituals, which include the selection of the offering, methods of slaughter (where applicable), and distribution of meat. These ritualistic characteristics contribute to shaping cultural differences between societies and reinforce their religious distinctiveness. Thus, the offering becomes a symbol of cultural uniqueness and religious distinction.

On the other hand, the offering can be considered a mirror of social and economic changes in society. In the past, the offering was part of the agricultural and pastoral economic system, primarily presented from livestock or sheep. With the emergence of modern social classes and varying income levels, offering practices have changed in contemporary societies, affecting how it is performed and their social status. Many have come to rely on purchasing the offering from markets or through social media without a direct connection to raising livestock, and institutions have emerged to handle slaughter and distribution on behalf of people. The act of the offering has also transformed into a commercial service or organized charitable work, and some have replaced the physical offering with donating its monetary value to charities. Despite these economic and cultural changes, the offering, especially in Abrahamic religions, remains an important symbol that emphasizes the unity of society and its religious values, serving as a tool for expressing cultural and religious identity that continues to face contemporary challenges such as globalization and the intermingling of cultures. Through this practice, members of society remain connected to their religious and cultural history.

The offering, therefore, is a blend of symbolism and rituals that take shape within societies and carry meanings that extend beyond the boundaries of individual worship to include social and economic dimensions, making it a comprehensive cultural phenomenon that requires in-depth study through diverse anthropological lenses.

Conclusion

Offerings constitute one of the oldest religious rituals practiced by humankind due to their profound

symbolism in expressing piety, obedience, and the pursuit of closeness to higher powers. Research has shown that this practice transcends the boundaries of religious ritual to perform highly significant social and cultural functions, most notably enhancing collective belonging and regulating relationships within society. Despite the diversity of forms of offerings and the varying meanings across religions and cultures, it remains a symbolic act that unites the spiritual and social dimensions, embodying humanity's continuous quest for reconciliation with the self and others, and achieving balance between the material and the sacred realms.

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