THE PROBLEM OF GOD AND SACRIFICE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

BY

JUSTIN S. UKPONG

(Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria)

Modern attempts to explain why in African (particularly West African) traditional religion sacrifice is not offered to God often use one of two models of God’s relationship with man. The first which appeared as early as the 1920s and in more recent times received the patronage of that great scholar of the History of Religions, Mircea Eliade, is the Deus otiosus theory. According to this theory, Africans are said to conceive God as retiring into heaven after creation, leaving the running of the world in the hands of the lesser gods. He is thus not involved in the day to day affairs of man and so is not given sacrifice often. The second which, to borrow Monday Noah’s terminology, we shall call the mediumistic theory¹ became popular in the 1950s through the research on the Nuer by another great scholar of religion, E. E. Evans-Pritchard. According to this theory, the gods and ancestors who receive frequent sacrifices are intermediaries between God and man so that any sacrifice offered to them is offered ultimately to God. These beings are therefore the medium for sending sacrifices to God.

It is our intention in this article to point to certain inadequacies of both theories and to propose an alternative explanation based on an understanding of sacrifice derived from the sacrificial system of the Ibibio which we have studied.² We shall show that while the first theory exhibits a basic weakness in failing to recognize God’s active involvement in daily human affairs—an important element in the religious thought of most African peoples—the second falters in reducing the gods and ancestors (who are well known among most African peoples as free and responsible beings) to mere mediums or channels who may not be entitled to receive veneration from man as of right. We shall point out that these weaknesses are methodological, arising from an uncritical application of a Judaeo-Christian thought system to understand an African religious fact.
THE DEUS OTIOSUS THEORY

*Deus otiosus. Deus remotus, Deus incognitus, Deus incertus* and *Deus absconditus* are all too familiar epithets that have been used by some scholars in describing the Supreme Being in African traditional religion to indicate the idea of his nonactive involvement in the affairs of the world and hence the basis of infrequent sacrifice to him. It is important to note that the question is not that of worshipping God in general, or offering him sacrifice at all, but rather that of not sacrificing frequently to him.

According to Raphaele Pettazzoni who proposed this theory in 1922:

*Otiositas* itself belongs to the essential nature of creative beings, and is in a way the complement of their creative activity. The world once made, and the cosmos established, the creator's work is as good as done. Any more intervention on his part would not only be superfluous, but possibly dangerous, since any change in the cosmos might let it fall back into chaos.

Thus, for Pettazzoni, the ‘idleness’ of the creative Supreme Being, which is the basis for his not being worshipped frequently, arises not so much from his character as Supreme Being as from his character as creator.

Pettazzoni’s explanation has the merit of focusing on the creative function of God, and provides insight for distinguishing God’s creative activity from his administrative activity. However, his conclusion to the *otiositas* of God is not admissible. He is in fact led to this conclusion by the traditional Western concept of creation according to which the work of creation ended with the pronouncement of the Biblical *fiat* and the fashioning of man as recorded in the Book of Genesis. What God had next to do was to conserve the world and provide for it. Thus three divine functions are distinguished in traditional Western theology—creation, conservation and providence, providence being often regarded as part of conservation. By creation God brought things into being, by conservation he keeps them in being and gives them the capacity to thrive according to their species and individuality, and by providence he procures what is necessary for their existence and cares for them.

For most African peoples however, the situation is slightly different. Two divine functions - creation and governance - are distinguished. While God involves the gods and the ancestors in all aspects of governing the world, he does not however so involve
them in creation (though according to some African peoples like the Yoruba, he may give a particular creative function to a particular god). And in African thought generally, creation connotes a lot more than the traditional Western concept would permit. In general, creation in African thought implies that God having initiated the work of creation continues to bring new beings into existence and to keep them alive. Thus divine creative power continues to be active in the universe. Hence among Africans generally (as among most pre-literate peoples) human procreation for example, is not understood as the result exclusively of the mating of a man and a woman, but rather as the result of a combined activity of a transcendent creating God and human agents. This does not mean denying the procreative function of sexuality. Rather it means that in the procreative process, there is a metaphysical explanation which must be sought not in man but in God. It means, in other words, that God is still active creating even where human beings are involved in pro-creating. This is different from the Westerner’s understanding of the process of procreation. Thomas Crump puts the point rather clearly:

Our (Western) knowledge of sex may be summed up in two principles:
1. A single act of coitus, at the right stage in the woman’s fertility cycle, is all that is necessary for procreation.
2. The child born as a result of such an act will inherit physical characteristics from both parents. Neither of these two principles is generally accepted in primitive society.

Attention must be drawn to the fact that we are here concerned not with the scientific correctness or wrongness of the African’s view of creation and procreation but rather with the fact that his view is different from the Westerner’s. And the difference lies in that the African’s view of creation when properly understood and interpreted is much more dynamic and present than the traditional Westerner’s. This aspect of African people’s thought, which is also common among most preliterate peoples, does not seem to have been properly grasped by some early anthropologists.

Africans generally believe in the presence of God’s creative power in all beings including trees and even stones. This was wrongly interpreted by some early anthropologists to mean animism. Later researchers were able to put a better interpretation on it. Among such later researchers is Placide Tempels who reached a philosophical formulation of this fact in his theory of ‘vital force’
which is the bed-rock of much of African philosophy today. Creation is, therefore for the African, a continuous activity on God’s part. Through it God makes his power and presence felt in the world. From this it becomes immediately evident that the Deus otiosus theory is most inadequate for explaining God's nature as creator in the context of African religious thought.

The Deus otiosus theory reached its peak of popularity around the middle of this century with the researches of Mircea Eliade. The Eliadean analysis is based on the ‘Sky god’ concept—the belief that God is too distant or too good to need any worship properly so called. According to Eliade, Africans and most ‘primitive’ peoples identify the Supreme Being as the sky god. They acknowledge his autonomy, his majesty and primacy. But man easily forgets him as “the hardships of life drive him to look more towards earth rather than towards heaven, and ... he only discovers heaven’s importance when he is threatened with death from that direction”. Being thus in the sky (a symbol of passivity and transcendence) the Supreme Being is in cult substituted for by other religious forms—the divinities and ancestors who are more dynamic, active and easily accessible. Thus man gradually moves away from the Supreme Being, substituting the lesser gods for him and “every substitution marks a victory for the dynamic, dramatic forms, so rich in mythical meaning, over the Supreme Being of the sky who is exalted but passive and remote”. Eliade acknowledges that these peoples do worship God occasionally and that the scant worship given to God “indicates purely and simply that the mass of religious practice is given over to other religious forms; in no case does it indicate that such sky gods are the abstract creations of primitive man (or simply of his ‘priests’), or that he has not had, or been able to have, any real religious relationship with them”.8

This analysis is most significant for bringing out certain important and basic facts about the Supreme Being in African thought and it represents an advance on the Pettazzonian analysis. The facts presented here are that the Supreme Being is not a figment of the imagination, that he is not an abstraction, but a person capable of maintaining a personal relationship with man and actually maintaining such a relationship, and that he is worshipped, though not frequently. From this analysis then, one basic aspect of God’s personality (in African thought) stands out clearly—that he is distant yet near to man.
Eliade's interpretation of these facts however leaves much to be desired. To picture the situation which Eliade does, as that in which the more dynamic lesser gods are gradually substituted for God in worship, is, as Professor Idowu well puts it, to present

a scene in which Deity and divinities are involved in a coup d'etat whereby Deity is the loser, but is somehow allowed a consolation status of being approached or addressed on rare occasions if he behaves himself and keeps away and does not seek by his all-power to disrupt the machinery of the universe which is firmly in the hands of the divinities.9

The Eliadean interpretation does not seem to know or take seriously the fact that Africans generally look on the lesser divinities as creatures of God appointed by Him to administer certain affairs in the world—a situation which puts God in absolute control, and therefore negates any idea of 'substitution' and 'victory' on the part of the lesser gods. That God is distant is undeniable, but that he was pushed away by the lesser gods is unacceptable. Neither is the fact of God's distance (transcendence) the basis of the scant worship given to him for if it were so, to be logical, he would not be worshipped at all, since he would be too transcendent for man's reach. Here we find in Eliade's explanation an obvious overemphasis on God's transcendence over and above his nearness (immanence) which is clearly expressed in God's personal relationship with man and in the presence of his continued creative activity on earth.

Eliade also posits God's goodness as an alternative basis for the scant worship given to him:

He (the sky god) is too distant or too good to need worship properly so called, and they (African peoples) invoke him only in cases of extreme need ... "Why should we sacrifice to him?" said a native. "We do not need to fear him, for he does not do us any harm, as do the spirits of our dead (owakuru)" ... He is so good and so kind that men have no need to fear him.10

We do not question the authenticity of the above statement in quotation. What we question, however, is how such a statement is to be understood and interpreted. The impression given is that this is an answer to a question that could be put thus: "Why do you not sacrifice to God often?" On its face value, the informant's answer would mean that God is good and therefore does not need frequent sacrifice. A close look, however, reveals that this sort of response is typical of West African informants, and is in fact not a direct answer to the question: "Why do you not sacrifice to God often?", even though that may have been the question asked. We venture to
suggestion that even an arch-medicine man in West Africa would not answer that question directly and exactly. He would in the first place be surprised that the question was asked at all. The closest he would go to giving a direct answer would be to say: "Because we are following the custom of our forefathers". The reason is that answering the question directly means giving an explanation that involves a prior critical reflection on what the people regard as the nature and function of sacrifice. To be able to say why sacrifice is not offered to God often involves being able to say why it is offered the gods and ancestors often, and why it might be offered to God often—in other words, why the question of sparse sacrifice to God arises at all. All this involves a critical reflection on and a theoretical explanation of the nature and function of sacrifice in African religious thought. And such an explanation is generally not a common commodity in the traditional culture. Cultures provide structures and systems, they do not provide theoretical explanations. These have to be got through reflection. We venture also to say that such a question would not be asked from within the traditional culture itself. People within the traditional culture accept the status quo, especially in matters concerning religious practice, and do not ask why things are not otherwise, for such matters are too sacred to be challenged. Thus, faced with a question the answer to which requires a critical reflection on a religious custom, generally the West African in the traditional culture mentally reformulates that question in terms of a particular concrete situation and answers it from that vantage point. What this means is that the statement we quoted earlier is not an exact answer to the question: "Why do you not sacrifice to God often?" even if this was the question actually asked. Rather it is an answer to a reformulated version of that question. Even at this level one may not, for quite a different reason, always expect a direct and exact answer. For it is again typical of traditional West Africans that when asked particularly questions concerned with matters of traditional worship they are likely to give one of three types of answer: (1) a direct answer to the question if the person is sufficiently knowledgeable, and understands and trusts the enquirer. (2) an answer to a question not asked but which the informant thinks is actually what is wanted or needed by the enquirer if he (the respondent) is knowledgeable. (3) an evasive answer if the informant is not knowledgeable or does not trust the enquirer. (I have tested these points a few times during field work
among my people and their neighbours). It is therefore always necessary, in the light of this explanation, to look at the structure of the response to get its meaning. In other words, the meaning of the response depends not so much on the question asked as on the structure of the response itself.\footnote{11} Thus judging from its structure, the response under consideration merely repeats the information available within the system: that (frequent) sacrifice is not offered to God, that people do not need to fear God, that God does not do people harm, and that the spirits of the dead can harm people. To try to understand this as a logical reasoning for not sacrificing to God often is rather hazardous, not because the informant is incapable of making a logical statement, but rather because that is not what he is out to do. He is here not trying to formulate a syllogism, for in this particular case doing so requires much more than what his culture permits. He thus mentally settles on giving particular concrete information.

On the whole the Eliadean analysis, as already stated, brings out some basic facts about God’s relationship with man. Its weakness however lies in not being able to discover the balance between divine transcendence and divine immanence in African religious thought. And one could only expect this from a scholar who knows African religious thought inside out.

James O’Connell carries the Eliadean analysis further with adjustments. Instead of stressing “the exclusively abstract character of the sky God” which he says Eliade has done, he stresses rather the all-purity and all-powerfulness of the high God. This, according to him, made people uneasy about Him and resulted in the withdrawal of the high God. Against Eliade, he holds that the sky God was not pushed away by the lesser gods but withdrew of Himself. He also acknowledges that the sky God is not completely withdrawn as He can be approached in extreme necessity and is regarded as the author of morality, and that the gods are only expressions of His power.\footnote{12}

By attributing the withdrawal of God to God Himself, O’Connell’s analysis avoids the Eliadean mistake of putting the world under the control of the lesser gods. However, the process of the withdrawal as presented, gives the impression that too much has been concluded from a particular fact. God’s withdrawal does not seem to follow logically from people’s uneasiness about his all-purity. Rather it would have been more logical to say that people
withdrew from God's presence because they felt uneasy about his all-purity. But such a logical conclusion would negate the Deus otiosus thesis which the author sought to propose, and so he had to use the illogical one. The point being made here is that O'Connell's conclusion does not fit his premise. And like Eliade, he does not integrate into his solution the fact of God's nearness to the people which he has observed.

The fact that God is seen to be all-holy and all-powerful and yet not completely withdrawn, which O'Connell's research makes clear, should indicate a need to re-examine the whole question of the withdrawn God and should point the way to another direction of research. Thus this theory, though still being maintained by a few has been largely replaced today by the 'Mediumistic theory'.

**The Mediumistic Theory**

The propounders of the mediumistic theory hold that even though Africans do not offer sacrifice directly to God or do so only occasionally, all the sacrifices offered to the lesser gods, the spirits and the ancestors are offered ultimately to God. These beings are therefore intermediaries between God and man—through them man sacrifices to God.

The early beginnings of this theory seem to be found in the studies of the Kasena of Ghana made by two Catholic missionary priests early in the century, Frs. Oscar Morin and Charles Gagnon. In his study, Fr. Morin in 1909 observed that the Kasena sacrificed frequently and that these sacrifices were not addressed to God but to the ancestors. He however noted that the ancestors were regarded as the friends of God and could intercede with God for the living, and so were requested to carry people's prayers to God. Fr. Gagnon's study which was carried out much later (1945) revealed that the Kasena did sacrifice to God directly as well as use the ancestors as mediums between God and man. Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones writing about the Ibo and Ibibio speaking peoples of Nigeria in 1950 advanced the same theory. For these peoples, according to these authors, the gods are intermediaries between God and man, and God is the ultimate recipient of sacrifices made to the gods. With Evans-Pritchard's study of Nuer religion published in 1956, this theory became highly popularized. According to Evans-Pritchard, whenever the Nuer
prayed or sacrificed to the lesser spirits, they prayed or sacrificed to God through them. They might refer to God as being in the sky, moon or sun, but these are purely 'elliptical statements' by which they mean that these elements are mediums, manifestations or signs of divine activity. They are not therefore identified with God neither are they used metaphorically. The lesser spirits on the other hand are to be regarded as hypostases, representations or refractions of God. When praying to any of these spirits, the Nuer are actually addressing God in a particular spiritual figure or manifestation. The Nuer do speak to God directly but they also do speak to him in the figure of a particular spirit depending on 'whichever mode is most appropriate in the circumstances'.

This line of explanation has since been adopted by many scholars with and without modification. Thus according to K. A. Busia, for the Ashanti of Ghana, "A god is but a mouth-piece of the Supreme Being ... a servant acting as intermediary between creator and creature". E. B. Idowu and B. G. Der carry this explanation further by establishing a basis for this theory in the people's culture. They argue that the indirect approach to God was determined by the people's norms of social etiquette and had nothing to do with God being inactive in the world. For among the Yoruba about whom Idowu writes and among the Kasena about whom Der writes, norms of social etiquette provide that as a sign of respect kings, elders and chiefs are not normally approached by members of the younger generation directly with request for favours, but only indirectly through elders in the community. This pattern of thinking was then transferred into the religious context so that God, who is regarded by many African peoples as a king, is not approached directly with sacrifice but rather through intermediaries. Monday E. Noah writing of the Efik and the Ibibio of Nigeria refers to the gods of these peoples as "mediums through which ... (to) reach the Supreme Being", and the religion of these people as 'mediumistic religion'. Newell Booth adds a psychological perspective to this theory with his psychological explanation of the nature and function of the gods. Based on Paul Tillich's theory of God-man relationship, Booth argues that the gods are projections of human needs of God. They are in a sense 'man-made' and represent the attempt to make God concrete and available to man. For, according to him, 'God cannot be thought of apart from specific manifestations, functions or symbols; neither can he be identified with these' for he
transcends them. This means that any sacrifice offered to the gods are offered to God.

The mediumistic theory is indeed plausible and has attracted many African scholars but few seem to see the vital problems it presents. In its psychological model proposed by Booth, the gods are a mere fiction of the human mind and therefore have no real existence. This goes sharply contrary to the people’s belief that these gods are real beings, creatures of God and really alive and active in the universe. Thus while the theory is a lofty attempt at explaining man’s preoccupation to concretize to himself transcendent divine action, it does not however reflect the experience and aspirations of African peoples for whom these gods have external existence and relevance outside the human mind.

Within the sociological model of this theory (that is, the other explanations) which recognizes the reality of these gods, the question is: either these gods are recognized as free beings capable of initiating actions and carrying them through, and responsible for such actions and therefore meriting praise or blame, or they are mere instruments or channels without free will and responsibility. To say that the gods are both free beings and instruments does not make sense. An analogy from a human situation may make this clear. The minister of education in a nation serving under the president of that nation is a free and responsible person. He can initiate actions and accept praise or blame for such actions. Yet he was assigned that post by the president and serves under the president. The slave of the president, however, (if he has any) functions altogether differently. His freedom and responsibility are very limited and he can be ‘used’ as an ‘instrument’ by the master. His situation cannot therefore be compared with that of the minister, neither can he rightly be said to function both as a slave and as a minister. In the same way the gods cannot be thought of as functioning both as free responsible agents and as instruments. To reduce them to mere instruments poignantly contradicts the conceptions of many African peoples about the nature and function of these gods. For the Yoruba of West Africa, for example, conceive Orisâ-nlá, one of the gods of Yoruba pantheon, as having helped God in the work of creation, not as having been used by God as an instrument in creation. The Igbo of Nigeria see Ala the earth goddess as one that gives fertility to both man and the soil. According to Victor C. Uchendu, “without her, life would be impossible for the Igbo who attach much sentiment to the land”.
The Akan of Ghana, according to Busia, seek the gods "to grant health, or children, or prosperity in business, or protection from misfortune and from witches". According to the Ibibio of Nigeria, each god has a particular sphere of human life and affairs of which he is in charge. And in the words of Professor Idowu, "the divinities are ministers, each with his own definite portfolio in the Deity's monarchical government. Each is in his own sphere an administrative head of a department". All these go to show that these gods are not mere instruments but free and responsible beings, indeed masters within their limited spheres and have a wide range of powers. They must therefore be seen as being responsible for their actions, meriting praise or blame, and capable of demanding, accepting or rejecting sacrifices without necessarily having to refer to God. It only becomes valid to talk of them as intermediaries when they are specifically requested to intercede before God on behalf of man. Yet they are creatures dependent on God for their existence just as any other creature.

The point being made here is, granting that these beings are or can be intermediaries between God and man, are they free and responsible intermediaries just as any human intermediaries between men are or are they mere passive instruments? If they are free and responsible (and most of the authors seem to admit they are) then they deserve to be thanked when they perform well and to be blamed when they perform badly (just as any human intermediary receives praise for a job well done and blame for one badly done). And sacrifice to them is one way of thanking them. This means that the gods ought to be considered not purely as a means to an end but as, at the same time, an end in themselves in some limited sense.

Among the Igbo as also among the Ibibio, the mediumistic theory is not borne out by any aspect of their sacrificial system. For neither the sacrificial structure nor the sacrificial rituals and prayers imply that every sacrifice is intended ultimately for God. And this can be said of most West African peoples for what we notice is that sacrifices are always addressed to specific spiritual beings and sometimes the gods and ancestors are explicitly requested to carry sacrifice to God and to intercede before God on behalf of man. If such intermediary function were always implied in every sacrifice to the gods, it would of course be unnecessary to make it explicit sometimes.
If sacrifices be ultimately offered to God, what of those sacrifices that are offered to evil spirits? Among the Ibibio for example, such sacrifices are always contemptuous and are intended to ward off these spirits. Things offered in such sacrifices are generally not fit for human consumption and there is generally no sacrificial meal. To say that such sacrifices are ultimately intended for God is simply repugnant to the spirit of these people who would not want to offer a contemptuous sacrifice to God. It must be accepted then that these sacrifices are meant for these spirits. And if evil spirits can demand and have sacrifices for themselves, good spirits must likewise be thought to be capable of demanding and having sacrifices themselves.

Again among most West African peoples God is regarded as supremely good and cannot be thought of as author of evil. Among these peoples calamities like epidemic or famine are attributed to the gods, and sacrifices are offered to these gods to placate them. To say that such sacrifices are ultimately intended for God would mean saying that God is the cause of the epidemic or famine, and this is repugnant to these peoples’ conception of God.

It must therefore be admitted that sacrifices offered to the gods and the ancestors are meant for them and not for God except when that is so specified.

Alternative Explanation

We are thus faced with the antinomy of, on the one hand, a Supreme God who is given sacrifice less frequently, and on the other created gods and ancestors who are given sacrifice more frequently. Students of the phenomenology of religion know that antinomies are the stock in trade of religions. It is therefore not strange to find it in this form or in any form at all in African traditional religion. But the crucial question here as is bound to be in any other situation is: within what frame of reference do we search for an answer? What are the basic assumptions taken and what is the method used in trying to give an explanation? Emefie Ikenga Metuh rightly states that a Judaeo-Christian background is a ‘perplexing factor’ for any scholar who undertakes the study of African traditional religion.31 And unfortunately most scholars who study African traditional religion are of that background. This creates a problem in that certain situations in African traditional
religion which are quite normal within the context of that religion, when viewed in the light of our Judaeo-Christian background become perplexing, and we tend to ask questions and seek answers not in the context of African frame of reference but rather in the context of Judaeo-Christian frame of reference. This is where one sees the sense in Okot p'Bitek's critique referring to African deities being used "as mercenaries in foreign battles".32

One important aspect in any theoretical reflection is method. And one significant aspect about method is its relation with the object studied. A method states Paul Tillich, is not an "indifferent net" in which reality is caught, but the method is an element of the reality itself.33 This means in effect that to be appropriate the method for explaining African religious phenomena must incorporate the frame of reference of African culture within which such phenomena are intelligible.34 Our point of departure in a question like this must therefore always be a critical examination of the basic assumptions used in our explanation or reflection. African religious situations must be reflected upon within the African cultural context. In other words, an understanding of any African religious fact must always be sought first of all within the context of African world view and thought system. It is only after this that it is legitimate to attempt to relate such facts to Judaeo-Christian thought and practice.

It is indeed natural and spontaneous in the light of our Judaeo-Christian background to posit as the valid premise in relation to our topic that since God is supreme, sacrifice should be offered to him alone or at least it should be offered more frequently to him than to other spiritual beings. In this light it becomes quite difficult to reconcile the idea of sparse sacrifice to the Supreme God with that of frequent sacrifice to the lesser spiritual beings. The Deus otiosus theory sought to explain this by eliminating God's active influence on earth, while the mediumistic theory sought to explain it by reducing the lesser spiritual beings to mere instruments. Both theories, as we have seen, go contrary to African conceptions. They arise as attempt to fit African traditional religious practice into the framework of a Judaeo-Christian model.

To understand why few sacrifices are offered to God by some African peoples, we must first of all enquire into what sacrifice means for them and then see how this meaning affects their relationship with God. We shall here base our argument on the sacrificial system of the Ibibio35 which in many respects is similar to that
of other West African peoples. Sacrifice, and for that matter any ritual, is for the Ibibio primarily, though not exclusively, a means of establishing contact with the invisible world, and when offered to God it means an entry into the divine presence. Here we see that the understanding of the nature and function of sacrifice in Ibibio traditional religion differs from what it is in Judaeo-Christian religion. In the latter, sacrifice is the highest form of worship and so must be given to God alone. In Ibibio mentality however (and this holds good for many other West African peoples), cultic actions are not categorized in vertical terms of the higher and the lower but in qualitative terms of the more potent and the less potent. Thus sacrifice is conceived as a cultic action that is most potent in establishing communication with the spiritual beings. It is not therefore reserved for God alone but can be offered to all and any spiritual being when contact with such beings is required. Thus the Ibibio see no contradiction in offering sacrifice to God as well as to the gods and the ancestors.

It is necessary to understand the above premise in order to be able to grasp why the Ibibio and perhaps many other West African peoples do not sacrifice to God frequently. Next, we must have recourse to the people’s social norms and practices in search of an appropriate analogy. For the Ibibio and those West African peoples who regard God as a king/chief, Idowu and Der have actually pointed the way to this by referring to the etiquette governing the relationship between the king and his subjects in African society whereby the ordinary subject may not treat the king with familiarity. This demands that the king may not be approached by the ordinary citizen except through an intermediary, that is in the company of an elder; it also demands that the king may not be approached or seen often by the ordinary citizen. The line of explanation chosen by Idowu and Der is the former. We propose however that the latter is a more appropriate analogy.

For an appropriate analogy, it is necessary that there be a ‘correlation’ of correspondence between the two realities. In this light, the analogy of approaching the king through an intermediary is seen to be inappropriate, because whereas in social life the king is never approached directly, in the religious context sacrifice is sometimes offered directly to God, as the authors who propose this line of explanation do themselves testify. Thus in addition to the reasons already given for rejecting the mediumistic theory, the par-
The Problem of God and Sacrifice

201

ticular aspect of social etiquette on which it is based is here seen to be inadequate as well.

The other aspect of African social etiquette (on which we base our explanation) is that the king should not be approached or seen often. Among the Ibibio and many other West African peoples the king/chief appears in public only occasionally and even so is among the Yoruba, often veiled.38 But generally it is for these peoples a mark of respect that the king/chief is not approached often by ordinary citizens. And indeed they do not need to go to him often. Yet this must not be interpreted as a lack of concern on the part of the king/chief for the welfare of his citizens nor as a lack of interest on the part of the people for their king/chief. For, the king/chief actually consults with his counsellors daily on the welfare of his subjects, and is kept well informed by the different lineage heads of what goes on in the kingdom. The people, too, show a lively interest in carrying out his orders. This for us is a more appropriate analogy for explaining why most West Africans do not sacrifice to God often. Sacrifice, as we have seen, means for the Ibibio entering into the divine presence. Prayers alone are considered as not sufficiently potent to bring man into the divine presence. For, as the Ibibio say, between God and man there is a ritual fence. In communicating with God through prayer, it is as if one were speaking to God over the fence. In communicating with God through sacrifice however, the ritual fence is removed and one enters into the presence of God, and to do that often is simply not acceptable.

Conclusion

We have tried to show in the above that as models for explaining the scant sacrificial worship given to God by some African peoples, the Deus otiosus theory and the mediumistic theory fall short of reflecting the reality of the situation at least among some West African peoples. We have also pointed to the analogy of Ibibio etiquette governing relationship between the king and his subjects as the direction where an appropriate explanation is to be sought. Unlike Idowu and Der, who locate the explanation in the aspect of such etiquette demanding that the king be approached through an intermediary, we locate it rather in the aspect demanding that the king be not approached often. This leads us to the conclusion that within the framework of Ibibio and many other West African religious thought
and practice, it is perfectly in order that God is not given sacrifice frequently, and that it is indeed out of respect and decorum rather than anything else that this is so.

NOTES

4. The word ‘traditional’ is used here advisedly, for there is today the more viable Western theory of continuous creation.
15. We acknowledge our indebtedness here to B. G. Der. See his article: ‘God and sacrifice in the traditional religion of the Kasena and Dagaba of Northern Ghana’, JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA, 11(3) 1980, 172-187.
20. Idowu, Olo'dumáre, 140-147; Der, ‘God and sacrifice’, 175.
23. Karin Barber confirms this from her research among the Yoruba: “The Yoruba conviction that the Orisa need human attention in no way questions the existence of spiritual beings as a category’. See her article, ‘How man makes God in West Africa: Yoruba attitude towards the Orisa’, Africa 51(3) 1981, 741.
35. Idowu, *Olódumáré*, 141.
36. For an account of Ibibio sacrifice which forms the background of this section, see Ukpong, ‘Sacrificial worship in Ibibio traditional religion’ (note 3).