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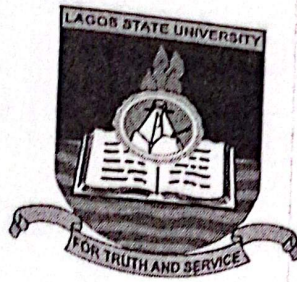


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2. The front page should include the FULL names of the author[s], affiliations and contact (address, phone, and email).
3. The referencing style to be used is 6th edition of APA or Turabian.
4. Submission should be made in electronic format to: relps@lasu.edu.ng
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6. The full paper, of block paragraphing feature, should not be more than 15 pages long, including the references.

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An Appraisal of Women's Role in Sacrifice in Yoruba Religion

Adeyeye, Agnes Omotayo, PhD & Abolaji, Rebecca
Omowumi

Abstract

The Yoruba understanding of gender is complex and broad and also influences the participation of women in sacrificial practices. Many researchers indicate asymmetry connected with the gender, which also refers to the religious sphere. The non-literate peoples consider life to be the fundamental value and that is the reason why their cultural and religious traditions put emphasis on women biological functions and see procreation as her main vocation and task. A woman performs the role of a native doctor and healer among many African people, since the basic medical care takes place within family. In Africa, older women after menopause perform priestly duties to a smaller degree. Researchers of the African people emphasize that spirit possession takes place more frequently in the case of women than men which they consider a reaction to the inferior status of women in the social, political and religious life. Both men and women are diviners among many African people. Among some people of Eastern and Southern Africa women control the Earth fertility and they are renowned rain-makers. Women belong to secret societies in some African people. Both men and women can be sorcerers and witches, although among many African people it is more often older women who are accused of witchcraft which is explained by social and economic inequality and the desire for power.

Keywords: Yoruba, religion, sacrifice, appraisal, women's roles

Introduction

Goddesses were worshipped, priestesses led sacrifices and feminine wisdom was respected in ancient spiritual traditions perhaps it's time we reclaim that sacred equity.

THE ABOVE QUOTE NOT ONLY CAPTURES ATTENTION, BUT ALSO DEPICTS AN UNDENIABLE illustration about women's roles and participation in sacrifice and other facets of Yoruba religion and community at large. The Yoruba of Nigeria occupy a large area. They are found in the South-western part of Nigeria, and in some parts of Dahomey (Republic of Benin) and Togoland. Their influence has even spread beyond the lower Niger northwards into Nupeland. But predominantly, the Yoruba belong to Ogun, Oyo Ondo, Ekiti, Osun and Lagos States of Nigeria with a substantial portion of the population of the Kogi and Kwara States are also Yoruba (Awolalu & Dopamu 2000, Nothing at present can be said with certainty about their population since it was a long time ago we had a dependable figure. All that we know is that they are many, and they are regarded as one of the most advanced communities in West Africa, especially in religion, agriculture, commerce, education, art, intelligence, government and warfare. These great people have a long history, and they trace their ancestral home to Ile-Ife where they believed that the act of creation began. They all claim to have had a common ancestor.

tor, Oduduwa. They speak the same language, though there are dialectal variations among the dialectal groups can be named the Egba, Ekiti, Ibadan, Ife, Ijebu, Ijesa, Ilaje, Ondo, Owo and Oyo. However, their language is rich in proverbs, folklore, and pithy sayings. The more one understands these, the more they lead one into richness of reality that has, throughout the ages, served as the basis of Yoruba beliefs and practices. I was intrigued with the Yoruba cosmology because it portrays a rich mythology of creation rooted in the pantheon of gods and their Supreme Being, Olodumare, rather than justifying the name Olodumare, I would say the name is left as it is called because He is the unique king or chief who holds the name in authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth, and He is at the same time permanent, unchanging and reliable. No one living or dead is called that and this shows the unique superlative worth of His supremacy.

One of the most significant practices within this religious framework is sacrifice known in the Yoruba language as *ebo*. Sacrifice is the act of offering the life of an animal or person, or some objects, to the divine Power or powers. It forms an essential part of every religious ceremony, and it is fundamental to worship. Sacrifice is primarily a means of contact or communion between the divine and man. It serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship. It is also valued as the most effective means employed by man to influence the divinity to be interested in human affairs. To the Yoruba people, what is the most valuable offering is the life of that which is offered. And this they find in the life of animal or man and since the life of an animal or man is symbolized by blood, Yoruba African people regard blood offering as the most precious offer they can give in homage of the supernatural to reverence the exaltedness of the spiritual powers.

The foregoing explains the phenomenon of human sacrifice in the past. This is a practice found in every race and culture throughout the world. It has been practiced by every nation at one time or the other and the motive is one. That is, in order to satisfy the Divine, the best must be given. Also, in times of special need, when there is drought, epidemics, war, flood, and calamity people considered it expedient that a man should die to save the ambassadors of the nation who should take special messages to the other world. Nowadays, the sacrificial animal serves as a surrogate for man, and still represents the supreme act of total giving. Worshippers seek to elicit a reciprocal response from the gods, ancestors, or spirits. This act of giving is deeply symbolic, representing a gesture of faith, gratitude, or penitence. It is based on a principle of reciprocity; the belief that result in blessings, protection, or assistance in return. In this way, Yoruba understanding of sacrifice extends beyond mere ritual to encompass a profound expression of their theological beliefs.

The study is divided into four subheadings: introduction, the Yoruba conception of gender, the content and content of sacrifice in Yoruba religion and the role of women in sacrifice. The paper concludes with a question which demands attention: "How do women experience and roles in sacrifice shape their spirituality and religion in recent days?"

The role of women in sacrifice within the Yoruba religion is a diverse topic that

ants a close exploration. It analyzes the works of Ezeanya, Oyeronke, Awolalu and Dopamu, and Ilesanmi emphasizing the role of women in sacrifice in Yoruba religion. Ezeanya asserts that women are born into an environment that is thoroughly soaked in religion, and for this reason they must be recognized in all aspects of religion and spirituality. Oyeronke in her work revision and enlargement of her Ph.D. thesis at the University of Ilorin discusses women in the Yoruba religious sphere and argues that women are a society is made up of men and women, boys and girls, rulers and their subjects and every member of the community has a role to play in the social, political, economic and religious life of the community. (1976, 108). She argues that it must be pointed out right from the beginning that the social pattern affects the religious pattern and women are not to be excluded from these.

Furthermore, Awolalu & Dopamu in their views on sacrifice and the participation of women in Yoruba spirituality is a way of acknowledging the roles of women in sacrifice and the effectiveness of the roles played by them. Women play an important role in preparing and participating in sacrificial rituals, often serving as priestesses, ritual specialists and custodians of cultural knowledge. (2000, 290).

Ilesanmi beautifully remarks that women are the spice of religion. There are areas of human life which only women can fulfill. They do not only bear life, they cherish and sacrifice their life for the coming of another life. (1996, 5). His argument is concentrated on the fact women are more sentimental than men folk and they commit themselves unreservedly to all the demands of liturgy (a public form of worship). By supporting Ezeanya's view on women being soaked in religion, Oyeronke's valuable insight on women in Yoruba religious sphere, Awolalu & Dopamu, and Ilesanmi's broad diversity underscores the importance of women in preparation of sacrifices.

Yoruba Conceptualization of Gender

A society is made up of men and women, boys and girls, rulers and their subjects and every member of the community has a role to play in the social, political, economic, and religious life of the community. It must be pointed out right from the beginning that the social pattern affects the religious pattern.

Most West African societies are patrilineal. To all outward appearances, it seems as if this world is predominantly male. The social, the economic, the political and the religious status of women is viewed with indifference and at times with contempt. Traditions seem to emphasize the fact that women are to play subordinate roles; they are to be seen and not heard. Traditionally, in every home, the man is the head he owns not only the house but also all that is contained therein, including the women. In other words, women constitute part of man's wealth as he deems fit. In practice, among some ethnic groups, women were not allowed to eat at the same time as their husbands and they could not eat with their husbands. In great respect, they would kneel down when they addressed their husbands or when they served them food or drink. When we remember that religion has to do with the Holy and that women every month have to be regarded and treated as impure in consequence of menstruation, we can understand why in Africa most of the shrines are presided over by male worship functionaries, whilst women are discriminated against, and can only play subsidiary roles.

Among the Yoruba, it is widely held view that women gossip a great deal and could

not keep things that are secret. As a result of this, they are usually kept indoors and precluded from rituals which require secrecy. On such occasions, only men come and participate in ritual ceremonies. Among the festivals from which they are, by custom, precluded could be mentioned Oro, Egungun, Agemo, Eluku, and Aribеji. It is generally believed for example, that if a woman sees Oro, she will surely die or be killed. Hence the Yoruba saying "Bi obinrin ba foju kan Oro, Oro a gbe e" [if a woman sees Oro, she will seize or devour her].⁵

Ironically, observation reveals that women are usually more in number than men in almost all religious congregations as they are many, they are also pious and zealous. But in derisive manner, men say the women are sentimental and superstitious. This assessment of women by men may not be fair. Like her male counterpart, the African Yoruba woman is born into an environment that is thoroughly soaked in religion. She finds herself exposed to the same religious influences as, if not more than, the man.⁶ She has to relate to the Supreme Being, the Divinities and Spirits, the ancestral spirits and the mysterious powers believed to be very active in the African World. "She realizes," says Ezeanya:

that she has a real part to play in order to obtain all that she needs for her life and those related to her. She cannot afford to be a mere passive member of a society in which the day-to-day life in an individual, male or female, is taken into account by the powers above man; a society in which one has to constantly come to terms with the tutelary spirits in order to live a successful and peaceful life, a society in which even the unidentifiable spirits have a part to play in a person's life.⁷

Yoruba society assigned various roles and tasks to individuals based on their gender but these roles were not absolute. Women, for instance, played significant roles in trade, politics, and spirituality, and could delay positions of authority in these areas. The Yoruba concept of "Aje" and "Oriki" showcases the importance of women's roles and their significance to the society.⁸ Aje refers to the spiritual and mysterious powers associated with women, while Oriki celebrates the success and attributes of individuals, including women. Yoruba mythology is filled with stories of forceful female deities, such as Oya, Osun, and Yemoja, who represent various elements of femininity and female power. These myths demonstrate the importance of women's roles in shaping the world and human destiny. For instance, the myth of Osun, the goddess of love and fertility, emphasizes the importance of women's roles in securing the fertility of the land and the continuation of human life. Similarly, the myth of Oya, the goddess of storms and change, showcases the power and capacity of women in shaping the forces of nature.

The Yoruba conceptualization of gender is seen in their art and symbols. Yoruba art often portrays male and female personalities in supportive roles, emphasizes the mutual reliance of the sexes. The use of symbols such as the Aje which represents female power and the Opon Ifa, which represents the wisdom and knowledge of the divine, further stresses the importance of gender in Yoruba culture. In contemporary society, the Yoruba conceptualization of gender has notable implications for our understanding of gender versatility and diversity.

Furthermore, it offers meaningful insights into the importance of context and culture in shaping our understanding of gender. It emphasizes the need to move beyond opposite ideas of gender and to identify the complexities and nuances of human ex-

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perience. By accepting this complexity, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and empathetic society, where individuals are recognized and respected who they are, regardless of their gender.

In conclusion, the Yoruba conceptualization of gender is a broad and complex topic that offers valuable understanding into the culture and society of the Yoruba people. By exploring the different facets of Yoruba gender concepts we can also gain meaningful understanding of the importance of gender adaptability, accessibility, and fairness. As we move forward in our understanding of gender, it is crucial that we recognize the significance of cultural context and the importance of valuing and revering the efforts of all individuals, regardless of their sex.

The Yoruba people's understanding of gender is not limited to the physical realm but also includes the spiritual and mystical aspects of human experience. In Yoruba cosmology, the spiritual realm is inhabited by pantheon of gods and goddesses, each with their own unique characteristics and attributes. These deities are often portrayed as having both male and female facets, showcasing the symbiosis of the sexes in Yoruba thought. The Yoruba's spiritual practices such as Ifa divination and Egungun masquerade also reflect their understanding of gender. Ifa divination for instance, involves the use of sacred texts and rituals to communicate with the divine and gain deep insight into human affairs. In Ifa divination, the roles of male and female are often blurred with both men and women playing important roles in the divination process. Also, Egungun masquerade a spiritual practice that honors the ancestors, showcase the importance of women's roles in maintaining traditions whereby the ancestral house is secure by a woman called "iya agan."

The Contents and Context of Sacrifice in Yoruba Religion

Different things can be offered to a divinity, depending on his taste and the occasion of the sacrifice. Among other things, sheep, goat, cow, fowl, pigeon, egg, yam, rice porridge and other food items can be offered as sacrifice. But as each divinity has his taste, each also has his food taboo. Extremities and entrails of animal victims are usually exposed in a bowl before the shrine. They can also be placed on the ground in front of the temple or shrine. At times, they are laid on the emblems of the divinity. Sacrifices may be exposed at cross roads or at the market place, they may be buried, they may also be shared as communion or as a sign of friendship in which case the sharers regard themselves as having communion with their god. It is believed that primarily, all sacrifices belong entirely to the divinities. That is why certain sacrifices cannot be shared among worshippers. Also, the way certain sacrifices are treated depends on the prescriptions of the oracle.⁹

The context of sacrifice in Yoruba religion is deeply rooted in the Yoruba worldview, which is based on a complex cosmology that includes a multitude of gods and goddesses, ancestors and other supernatural beings. Yoruba people believe that the universe is governed by a delicate balance of forces and that human beings must play their part in maintaining the balance through their actions and offerings. In Yoruba religion, sacrifices are typically offered to specific gods or ancestors each of whom has their own distinct personality, power, and domain. For example, sacrifices may be offered to Olodumare, the Supreme Deity, to seek forgiveness and protection.

The contents of sacrifice in Yoruba religion are widely depending on the specific god or ancestor being honored as well as the occasion and purpose of the sacrifice. Sacrifices may include animal offering, such as goats, sheep, or bulls, food offering such as, fruits, vegetables, grains and other offerings such as, clothes, beads and money. In addition to these material offerings, sacrifices in Yoruba religion also involve ritual performances, such as prayers, songs, and dances. These performances serve to invoke the presence and power of the gods and ancestors and to express the devotion and gratitude of the worshippers. When offerings are made to the gods and ancestors, they are always accompanied by prayers and invocations that are believed to activate the power of the offerings and to ensure efficacy.

The Yoruba people believe that sacrifice has the power to restore balance and harmony in the universe, averting crises that might arise from disobedient and hostile forces that shape man's destiny. Sacrifices are regularly offered to specific deities each with their own uniqueness and attributes and are believed to possess distinct powers and capacity to influence human affairs. The role of the priest or diviner is important in the context of sacrifice in Yoruba religion.

These spiritual leaders serve as intermediaries between the human and divine realms, giving instruction on the proper performance of sacrifice. Through their knowledge and ideas, priests and priestesses ensure that sacrifices are made in a way that is appealing to the gods and effective in acquiring the desired results.

In Yoruba society, sacrifice is not limited to specific rituals or festivals but it is an integral part of daily life. Many Yoruba people believe that sacrifice is crucial for maintaining a good relationship with the divine and also to ensure the well being of an individual and communities as a whole. The practice of sacrifice in Yoruba religion has also been influenced by Islam and Christianity. Many Yoruba people have incorporated structures of these religions into their practices which result into a distinct blend of spiritual traditions. In spite of these influences, the core principles of sacrifice in Yoruba religion remain undiluted and unchanged, reflecting the enduring significance of this practice in Yoruba culture. We can summarize this section by saying that the whole gamut of human motives in worship is seen in the simple basic idea of a gift in sacrifice. On the part of the giver, the offering of the gift may be accompanied by a feeling of total self-surrender or by confident intercession and on the part of the recipient which is the divinity, the sacrifice is taken as a means of restoring the balance of relationship between him and man. The divinity, by accepting the gift will permit the renewal of contacts and fellowship in order that all will be well with man.

The Role of Women in Sacrifice

The truth of the matter is that there are moments in a woman's life when necessity dictates to her to be "more religious" than her husband and this is so because she tends to carry more of the domestic problems than her male counterpart. For example, she carries pregnancy for nine months and she is hedged round with innumerable taboos. She knows the problem she encounters before, during and after child birth and the different crises she faces from the teething period of her baby to adolescence. At a time when the present medical facilities were not available, she would depend upon consulting

the diviners and medicine men, offering the prescribed sacrifices, taking the prescribed herbs and doing all that was necessary to be done to relate well to the ancestral spirits.

Women are seen as wives of divinities. They play an essential role in maintaining social harmony and growth. John Onaiyekan pointed out that as a rule, the Yoruba religion of the Owe people is an affair completely controlled by the adult male section of the community. But he went on to show significant exception to the general rules as he discussed the phenomenon of Ofofi whom he described as "women who are initiated into an esoteric and deeply religious society, involving periodic and authentic spirit possession. They are considered the 'Wives of Ebora' and unlike other women (Onaiyekan 1983, 34). Another good example of women espoused to divinities is among the Urhobo of Delta State, Nigeria. There is a divinity called Urhienu which has very strong regulations and taboos about sexual relations for his devotees. "The devotees called *eya* or *amebo* do not, as a rule, have husbands. Their rightful husband is the god of Urhienu and they pay him all that a woman owes as a duty to her human spouse. It is the common belief of the female devotees...that the god keeps them company at night as husband does to his wife"¹²

Women used their skillful arts and craft in making some instrument used in making sacrifices. In our local markets, it is women who are knowledgeable in the making of calabash and traditional pots used in making rituals and sacrifices and they often pass down this knowledge and skills to their daughters and other young women in their communities. It is of a good interest to note that women's roles in Yoruba society are not limited to the domestic sphere but also extend to the public sector as well.¹³ They often hold positions of authority and power in their communities and play an important role in decision making and critical thinking.

Some remarkable women serve as traditional diviners and healers during sacrifice. In many Yoruba land, some remarkable women are divinely gifted with special gift of healing. They alleviate psychological disturbances and utilize a combination of divination and healing to bring assurance to the disturbed and restoration of health to the sick. They consult oracles, prescribe sacrifices to be offered and give herbs to be used. In recent days, women are known for their sound knowledge in the use of herbs, handle children's ailment and women's medical needs in the areas of gynecology and obstetrics. In Iwo, Osun State, there is Madam Sinatu Iya-Abiye Agbomola Sewedayepo (Nig) Ltd, (Dopamu & Awolalu 2000, 279). She is a specialist in African medicine and she claims to have medicines for stroke, hypertension, diabetes, tuberculosis, dysentery, pile, pregnancy problems and many others.

Women play a crucial role as the preparers of food and drinks used during sacrifice. There is a sacrifice among the Sefwi ethnic group in Ghana called Alue Festival. All the active participants are young ladies and women. The festival lasts eight days. The wedding of the shrine at the outskirts of the town is usually done by women and they also go to the farms to bring enough foodstuffs to feed the family and visitors during the festival because nobody should go to the farm in first two days of the festival, (Awolalu 2000, 292). It is an occasion when women and girl show their natural beauty. As a part of the celebration, they have to be nude - they only wear beads to cover their waist and with some pieces of cloth (asia) they cover the genital area. In their nudity, they parade the streets of the village, singing Alue songs, most of which are profane. They dance round

the town three times at the end of which they put loose dresses. If one wants to have a look at the beautiful naked figure of a girl, one has to request it by saying "Bo me truu" that is "Prepare me soup!" On hearing this, the girl or young lady whisks off her clothes or raises her cloth. When one adds, "to nu ngyee!" that is "Put salt in it!"¹⁴ the girl turns the other side. When food is prepared and taken to the main ancestral shrine, all barren women and young ladies are blessed by the officiant at the ancestral shrine. Part of the food is given to the supplicant as prayer is said for the blessing of children.

Women serve as medium in time of sacrifices. They experience spirit possession and in this way they link human beings with the spirit world. They act as mouth pieces for the deities that possess them. In Isarun near Akure, Ondo State, the tutelary god, Olua, is believed to have a spouse (Aya Olua) through whom Olua manifests himself (Awolalu & Dopamu 2000, 292). The medium is a priestess who is possessed during Annual Yam festival and who "would bring messages from the divinity to the entire community or to individuals within and outside the community. When possessed, the priestess would speak as if she is the divinity himself and has to be addressed in masculine pronouns.

Women's participations in singing and dancing during sacrifice. At Ilawe Ekiti, the devotees of Orinlase are all women – the priestesses, the chanters, the singers, the instrumentalists and the dancers. The priestesses are usually dressed in immaculately white blouse (*buba*) and wrappers (*iro*). They wear plaited hair to which is an attached brass combs (*ooya ide*) and the red feathers of the parrot's tail (*ikooode*). During the rituals dance, chanting and singing, some of the devotees are possessed by the spirit of Orinlase and deliver message to the people.¹⁵ At any religious ceremonies where they are not excluded, women outshine their male counterparts in singing and dancing. This is appositely Ilesanmi when he asserts:

Women are the spice of religion. They are more sentimental than men folk, committing themselves unreservedly to all the demands of liturgy, especially where there is no prohibition for their taking any role in the religious drama. They put up their best in dress, in body decoration, in recitation, chanting and singing, in choreography, twisting their bodies in a warm boneless fashion to raise their spirits high to the level of the divine....¹⁶

Women as deified ancestors in the making sacrifice. Ayelala is one of the deified ancestors in Yoruba land. She was originally a slave woman brought from Ekitiland to Kises in Okitipupa Division of Ondo State, and offered as a substitutionary sacrifice to bring about peace between Ilaje and Ijaw who were at war with each other.¹⁷ The Ilaje and Ijaw went into war with each other because Keko a commoner in Ilaje land cohabited with Chief Temetan's wife and fled to Ijaw land to avoid justice (Awolalu & Dopamu 2000, 90). The usual punishment for a commoner who cohabited with the wife of an important chief was death. Keko knew this, hence he fled. Because the Ijaw people did not want to give up Keko to the Ilaje to be killed, war broke out between them. Later men of goodwill stepped into the matter, and a compromise was reached namely, that if Keko was not to die, a substitute must be got. The Ijaw agreed to look round for a substitute and eventually they got the slave woman who was offered as a substitutionary sacrifice. Ayelala was not the real name, but she came to be given the name in consequence of her dereliction when she was about to die for the sin she had not committed.

ted.¹⁸ In Ilaje dialect Ayelala means "the world is great or incomprehensible" (Awolalu & Dopamu 2000, 92).

Details of how she came to be defied cannot be given but suffice it to say that before she died, she had agreed to see that fair play prevails among the Ijaw and the Ilaje and that wickedness in any shape or form will be punished. Tradition says that soon after Ayelala's death, certain people who acted contrary to the laid down norms of the society fell victims to Ayelala. Such victims swelled in limbs and abdomen and had terrible agony which led to their making confession of sins committed. Thus Ijaw and Ilaje people came to revere Ayelala and to set up shrine for her at Orita Ayelala where she was sacrificed. Other shrines soon sprang up in different places in Okitipupa Division and beyond. She is now almost always thought of as an anti-wickedness goddess and guardian of social morality. She is known and referred to as the "Queen of Justice" and ready reckoner who passes judgment when the evil doer has forgotten.¹⁹ In this story, it is of interest to note the different roles played by a woman, she was used as an item of sacrifice and now turned to demander of what should be used in sacrifice of which sacrifice are made to her (Awolalu & Dopamu 2000, 91-92).

Conclusion

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of the recognition of women's roles in Yoruba cosmology. The role of women in sacrifice is a significant aspect of Yoruba religious practices and beliefs. In Yoruba culture, women play important part in different dimension of sacrificial rituals, from preparation to execution and their involvement is crucial for the success of these sacrifices.²⁰ The substantial of women's roles in sacrifice is rooted in Yoruba cosmology giving recognition and importance to the female and the showcasing their role in maintaining peace and balance in the world. The importance of women's roles in sacrifice extends beyond their practical involvement. Women's participation in these rituals is also symbolic of their spiritual power and authority, highlights their capacity to communicate with the divine and influence the forces of nature. Their role is also seen in the reverence accorded to female spiritual leaders and priestesses in Yoruba land.²¹ These women are known and respected for their wisdom and ability to interact with the divine and are often sought for counsel. Their expertise in sacrifice and other spiritual practices is highly valued and honored and they perform an important role in keeping the spiritual well being of individual and their communities.²²

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