1 Introduction

The word sacrifice is still used in most parts of the world to denote, for example, sacrifice on behalf of family and children (Schreurs 2001), but the practice of the ritual killing and burning of a human or animal has all but disappeared in most countries of the world. However, there are also parts of the world in which sacrifice, as the ritual killing and burning of an animal, is still a core part of the culture and of the liturgical praxis of churches (Mbaya 2019). This is the case in certain African Independent Churches (AIC) in South Africa. This chapter will focus on one such church: the Corinthian Church of South Africa (CCSA) and will begin with a description of the actual ritual killing and burning of animals as sacrifice. The chapter will then present theories on sacrifice – from both Western and African perspectives – to attempt an interpretation of this event.

Both authors of this chapter attended the sacrifice in question as participatory observers. They also conducted several interviews and focus group discussions regarding this particular sacrifice and other smaller sacrifices conducted in this church with members and leaders of the CCSA. During one workshop hosted by the authors of this chapter, they presented a description of this sacrifice to an academic audience comprised of scholars from both Africa and Europe. Whilst listening to the description and looking at the photographs of a heifer being killed and afterwards burnt to ashes, one of the participants who was from a Western European secular context exclaimed: “But this is against the Enlightenment!”

The aim of this contribution is to not only describe and better understand sacrifice and violence embedded in ritual action, but also foster at least some transcultural appreciation for this practice in line with the core values of the Handbook.

2 The ‘Pilgrimage’ to Umlazi

Every year on the last Saturday of October, thousands of members of the CCSA, from almost every corner of the country, converge at Unit 2 of Umlazi Township close to Durban in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They participate in the annual pilgrimage to attend the ritual burning of the sacrifice, which in IsiZulu is called Isitshisa, a marked day on the calendar. The pilgrims arrive in buses, taxis (minibuses), cars; and nearly all are dressed in golden-like attire; with slings hanging over their shoulders. The colours make them conspicuous in the late afternoon, and sunset of the October sky. Most of the men wear turbans and are bearded, some carry sticks.
Umlazi Unit 2 is similar to other Black South African townships. Most people who live in this township are materially poor: they do menial jobs in Durban city, and in some suburbs in the city. Umlazi is mostly comprised of shacks, with some middle-income houses scattered here and there. It is here that the main Church of the Corinthians is situated.

As one enters the church, an area of about 200 metres in length and 80 metres in width, there is a festive feeling in the air: people sing and dance endlessly, others beat drums and play trumpet-like instruments and hornses (imibhobho). Many members are dripping in sweat in the heat of spring in this sub-tropical part of the country. Others are seated or stand chatting around the church building.

Amidst all the loud singing and dancing in the building, it is almost impossible to conduct a conversation and understand one another. The singing and the talking, the chatter, and the sound of the imibhobho is deafening. The smell of meat cooking and roasting on the open fire behind the church building fills the air. This smell blends with the pungent smell of incense for which a shrub (impepho) is used.

Umlazi, the headquarters of the CCSA, seems to mean to the Corinthians what ‘Mecca’ might mean to Muslim people, or what ‘Jerusalem’ might mean to Jewish and Christian people. However, in the South African context, and to some extent, to the Corinthians, Umlazi has become similar to what Moria outside Polokwane is to the members of the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC), under Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane that is visited annually at Easter by millions of ZCC members (Müller 2011).

A question which naturally comes to mind is: what attracts all these people to this place? What motivates them to congregate here every year? And why particularly do they come to Umlazi? We obtained answers to these questions by means of interviews and focus group discussions.

To the Corinthians, this space is special; it is here where the church founder, Johannes Richmond, established his ministry, and the spirit of the founder is believed to reside in this Church (Wepener 2019). It is also a place where the founder’s widow, Bestina Richmond, who was the archbishop at the time of our visits, was performing her duties and was thus present during the Isitshisa.

This rectangular Church building, situated at the northern end of the ground, nearly a hundred meters in length, and thirty meters in breath is the centre of the gathering; the very centre of ritual worship and service. It is like a shrine, symbolising the presence and authority of the late archbishop, as his staff is kept there. On this occasion the church is fully packed, with almost no space to move as soon as you step through the door.

It is important to note, that the church grounds surrounding the building are also a relevant ritual space during the performance of Isitshisa. Behind the building, at the eastern end of the church, a group of mostly women cook mutton in three-legged pots on an open fire. There are others, washing pots and plates, and men slaughtering sheep. The smoke blows all around the church building, and some of it finds its way into the church – since the windows are open.
Around 6pm, the worshippers sing and dance in circles. The church officials seem to sit according to hierarchy at the one end of the building – with the wife of the founder and current archbishop elevated above them. Then come the bishops and other dignitaries including the secretaries (oonobhala).

Inside the Church, different rituals take place at the same time. Jean Richmond, the daughter of the founder and the principal secretary, stands at the centre of the church. A long line of ladies and girls sing and dance as they carry food items, such as oranges, packets of rice, beans, potatoes, on their heads – making their way to the secretary, where after they put it down, the secretary records the items in the book. These items are presented to poor people in Umlazi the following day.

While these food presentations take place, the ordination of the clergy attracts particular attention. The rite entails the smearing of goat’s blood in the hands of the ordinands, and the stewards. The founder’s staff, and then the Bible, is placed for a while on the head of each ordinand, while some words are spoken. This rite goes on for many hours.

At about 11.30 pm, a brown heifer is led inside the church through the West door by four men and is taken to the centre of the building. There it is blessed by a senior bishop. Immediately after that, in a procession, the heifer is led slowly and solemnly outside through the Western door of the Church. As this happens, the singing and blowing of the hornets increases. The atmosphere is electric. Outside the church, a fire burns on a large altar built of stones.

Around midnight, the heifer’s throat is slit, and the animal is placed on a large fire on the altar. As this happens, the singing gets louder and louder. A red cloth is suspended over the fire while the heifer burns. The large amount of smoke and the smell of burning flesh fills the whole area. The heifer remains on the altar burning into ashes, as people continue to sing and pray. This ritual killing and burning is the Isitshisa, the burning of the heifer, the climax of the worship service.

Subsequently, the ashes from Isitshisa after the service are shared amongst the priests of the various local congregations for later usage. The Isitshisa is however not the only sacrifice done in the CCSA. According to one priest during an interview:

> There are also times we go to the mountains and there we make a fire and burn a chicken or sheep or small lamb as an offering. It is our culture as Corinthian Church people. If you remember the offering that Abraham and Isaac did on the mountain – we follow that culture. The reason for that is that we sometimes have visions that lead us to go and perform that ritual at the mountain. (See also Mbaya 2019; Wepener and ter Haar 2014; Wepener and Meyer 2012)

The Isitshisa concludes at midday on the Sunday with a communal meal. During this meal, blind people from Umlazi are brought to the church where they share in a meal with the Corinthians and are presented with gifts. This meal, and gifts, just like the sacrifice of the heifer, were instituted by Johannes Richmond.

During the rest of the liturgical year until the next Isitshisa the ashes are used by priests to conduct a variety of rituals. Most of these rituals are, according to the lead-
ers and members, aimed at healing and cleansing, especially with regards to rituals pertaining to death.

This case study described a sacrifice in an AIC in current day South Africa in which members perform an annual slaughtering and burning of a heifer as well as numerous smaller animal sacrifices over the course of the year. In what follows, we present theories pertaining to sacrifice and violence. However, first a word about the authors of this chapter on whose participatory observation this description is based.

3 The Authors

As authors, we had various degrees of closeness to the service that we observed. Firstly, and importantly, the authors are both, amongst other things, ordained ministers in their respective church traditions (Anglican and Dutch Reformed). Right from the outset, the leaders of the CCSA made it clear that they would only allow us to conduct the research in their congregations, to participate, observe, and conduct interviews and focus groups, if we had been ordained with the laying on of hands. Had we not been, we would probably have not been allowed to carry out this research at all.

In the first meeting with the leader of the CCSA and the congregation in Phepheni, they expected the project leader (Wepener) to stand up and pray aloud before they gave their final approval (Wepener and Barnard 2010). Thus, in spite of the fact that the authors are in very different ecclesial and liturgical traditions to that of the CCSA, permission was sought from the leaders of the CCSA to do the research. We reassured them that the researchers would approach the data in a theological and fairly open-minded way and with transcultural sensitivity for a repertoire of liturgical practices which they knew would possibly be fairly new to us.

There are similarities and differences between the authors of this chapter. Both are ordained and academics. The first author is Malawian/South African, and an Anglican priest. He is specialised in Church History and Missiology. The second author is a white South African. He is a Dutch Reformed minister and is specialised in Practical Theology and specifically Liturgical- and Ritual Studies. Our various ways of looking at Isitshisa helped us to focus on different aspects and afterwards compare notes in order to provide a thicker description. In what follows, we will particularly focus on the ritual killing and burning of the heifer and the other ‘smaller’ sacrifices by members over the course of the year.

4 Sacrifice

Etymologically ‘sacrifice’ comes from the Latin sacrificium (sacred action) or sacer facere (to make holy). It is important to distinguish it from ‘offer’, which is derived
from operari (to serve God through works) (Bell 1997, 112; Drexler 2006, 1658). There is however some overlap in the meaning of sacrifice and offering. Catherine Bell (1997, 112) explains that certain theories make a distinction between sacrifice and offering, arguing that in sacrifice the object sacrificed is sanctified.

Foci of these theories of sacrifice vary: from sacrifice as gift/exchange, as divining, as connecting, as meal, as communicative act, and as purifying (Bell 1997, 111–114; Mbiti 2008, 59; Schreurs 2001, 220). In the light of the *Isitshisa* as a case study, René Girard’s theory on sacrifice and violence, as well as theories of sacrifice by scholars of African religion and philosophy will be discussed. As South Africans, we understand violence in a broad sense, such as the violence of colonialism, the violence of apartheid, deliberate physical violence that includes acts such as murder and death as a form of violence within an African cosmology. Sacrifice, as ritual act is itself a form of violence. René Girard ([1972] 2018, 34) states: “Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred” and Girard’s theory specifically makes a connection between violence in society and the violence of ritual sacrifice.

4.1 René Girard on Sacrifice and Violence

In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard (2018) writes that societies are inherently violent. This violence can build up over time so that it overflows in a community like a dam overflowing its walls, ending in catastrophe. In sacrifice, the society then deflects upon a victim the violence that would have otherwise spread among its members (Girard 1996, 241). However, sacrifice can serve to stop the rising tide and channel the violence (Girard 1996, 245). The inherent violence in society is thus redirected in the act of sacrificing. A victim outside the confines of the society is chosen, and serves to repress the inherent strife, jealousy, in-fighting, thus “protect[ing] the entire community form its own violence” (Girard 2018, 8, 105). The aim of the sacrifice is to stop the potential gulf of violence and to establish harmony in society as well as to strengthen social fibres (Girard 2018, 9, 106).

Violence, in this case, ritual violence in the form of sacrifice, is thus utilised to stop violence in society. Sacrifice as violent ritual in other words substitutes the real thing and “Thus the circle closes” (Mack 1987, 9; see also Schreurs 2001, 221). “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating” (Girard 1996, 252). Violence from his perspective can also be contaminating, and thus sacrifice also plays a role in this regard as he sees death as “nothing more than the worst form of violence that can befall men” (Girard 1996, 255). Sacrifice can thus also serve to curb the contagion, which can include death.

A concept in Girard’s (2018: chapter 4; Girard 1986) scholarship that should also be included here, is scapegoating. Scapegoating is the act of ‘sacrificing’ one victim instead of many. This identification has an impact on the bonding of the group who now feels more united than before. “The alien threat displaces everything else; internal quarrels are forgotten. A new unity and comradeship prevails” (Girard 1987, 90).
He writes how the scapegoating phenomenon thus has a real impact on the society, specifically on social cohesion, as the death of the scapegoat is followed by “a new mood of harmony and peace” (Girard 1987, 91). He suggests the importance of seeing how a scapegoat has power, because even though the person might have been (for example, in Medieval Europe) burnt on a pyre, people would have believed the person to possess powers that could be utilised for good or bad means (Girard 1987, 94). Here one can think of the utilisation of the ashes of the Isitshisa in many rituals of the CCSA and the social and spiritual capital and spiritual power that is generated through participation in the performance of Isitshisa (Mbaya 2019; Wepener and ter Haar 2014).

Of particular significance for us is Girard’s discussion of sacrifice in cultures where the ancestors or living dead play a significant role and where they are seen as “founders, guardians and, if need be, disruptors of the cultural order” (Girard 2018, 290). Isitshisa is performed within an African spiritual ontology in which the living dead play an important role influencing the livings’ daily lives for good or for evil. When the ancestors are unhappy with the living, they, in the words of Girard (2018, 290) “incarnate violence”; however, they do not want to destroy the community, and are “willing once more to accept the homage of their descendants; they cease to haunt the living and withdraw to their usual retreats.” It is in this regard that ritual observances which include sacrifices play an important role. According to Girard (2018, 290–291) death is the ultimate violence and funereal rites play a large role here. Girard (2018, 291) states that death contains the germ of life. The death of the heifer and other animals and the ritual use of their ashes contain the germ of life in the CCSA as it is used in cleansing and healing rituals. These insights gained from Girard’s theory on sacrifice and violence are helpful to come to an interpretation of the sacrifices performed in the CCSA.

4.2 Sacrifice in African Thought

The phenomenon of sacrifice is highly complex, and Girard’s theory should be read alongside other insights, and for our purposes, alongside insights from scholars of African religion. Isitshisa clearly fits within an African ontology. In this regard, and like the discussion by Girard, Zahan (2000, 10–14) confirms the importance of the so-called cult of the ancestors for understanding ritual sacrifices across the African continent. Sacrifices play a role in appeasing the ancestors who can for various reasons become upset with the living. However, libations precede bloody sacrifices, as the libations are used to start a trade with the ancestors, whereas the sacrifice forms the high point “in their quest and their wat, engaging the living, in a radical fashion, and the dead in their obligation to reply favourably” (Zahan 2000, 12). He also emphasises the importance of blood in the sacrifice as a symbol of life.

The African cosmology within which sacrifices such as Isitshisa should be appreciated, consists of the world of the Spirit and the spirits which form part of the lives
of humans. In Africa, the spirit world is not seen as a metaphor for reality, but as an integral part of reality (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 51). According to Jacob Olupona (2011, xvii) the divine realm interpenetrates daily experiences of humans in such a way that religion, culture, and society are very closely interrelated. It is within this spiritual ontology which consists of an intricate and delicate network of relationships between the worlds of humans and those of the spirits, that sacrifice in Africa should be understood. This also becomes clear in the work of John Mbiti.

According to John Mbiti (2008, 58) sacrifice is in Sub-Saharan Africa one of the most common acts of worship, with number of examples. He makes the distinction between sacrifice in which animal life is destroyed, and offerings in which food or items are presented. For Mbiti both (just) slaughtering as well as slaughtering and burning in African custom will thus come under this definition of sacrifice. He (Mbiti 2008, 59; 1999) explains that the ontological balance or equilibrium that should exist between God, humans, the deceased ancestors, and the cosmos, is sometimes disrupted. According to Mbiti (2008, 59), sacrifice serves to assist in re-establishing the desired equilibrium within this spiritual ontology as misfortune is the result of such an imbalance.

Chinaka Nwachukwu’s (2018, 141–157) thoughts are closely related to the work of Mbiti. Nwachukwu (2018, 143, 153) states for example: “The visible and the invisible coexist in a constant cycle of harmonization made possible through prayers, sacrifices, and appeasements” and that “survival in the world of the living depends on meaningful access to the resources of the supernatural world.” There are many kinds of sacrifice, such as expiation, petition, thanksgiving to ward off evil, and they are practised at various occasions, such as at life passages, with the new yam celebration, or after disasters, but all are aimed at influencing God through the deities and spirits as messengers of God (Nwachukwu 2018, 144–145). Elochokwu Uzukwu (1983, 277–278) points to the fact that sacrifice is often part of reconciliation rituals in Africa which links to Zahan. What is also meaningful in Nwachukwu’s (2018, 156) contribution is his observation that “the time has come when the West must allow Africans to present our experiences of God and his revelation within our own history and culture” and suggestions on how sacrifice can be integrated in a meaningful way in Christian liturgy in Africa. This chapter would like to align with the values expressed by Nwachukwu and hope that this exploration of the Isitshisa can assist in fostering a transcultural and transreligious appreciation of these religious practices.

In the light of the South African case study as well as these theories, we will now endeavour to do an interpretation of the Isitshisa.

5 Interpretation

In light of Girard’s theory, the sacrifice of the heifer in the Isitshisa is aimed at stopping the spread of death as a form of violence. Isitshisa as sacrifice should thus be
understood as an act of violence aimed against the spread of the violence of death within the CCSA and amongst its members. The case study also showed how afterwards, the ashes are used ritually to assist in preventing the spreading of the contagion (see also Douglas 2008) of death; it is clear that the ashes from this sacrifice are believed to possess certain powers. CCSA members who attend a funeral are cleansed afterwards by means of a ritual washing in which ashes are mixed with water. Girard’s insights are helpful to see how this sacrifice assists in curbing certain forms of violence, here specifically the threat of the violence of death.

Apart from curbing the spread of violence, the sacrifice, and specifically the use of a scapegoat (the heifer), assists in fostering group cohesion, or in the words of Girard, to foster the social fabric of the group. In a large-scale research project regarding the role of religious rituals in social capital formation in an AIC (Wepener et al. 2019) it became clear that the liturgical rituals of the CCSA fosters mostly bonding capital as a subset of social capital amongst its members. The core ritual, which is almost the epicentre of the ritual activities of the CCSA, is the Isitshisa. This sacrifice thus supports bonding capital among members of the CCSA and a heightened kind of bonding is established in the group when the scapegoat is removed from their midst and sacrificed. It is important here to recognise the scapegoat mechanism and surrogate victim at work in the ritual sacrifice by means of the heifer and how it fosters bonding during the service in Umlazi. On the other hand, it is also significant that members and leaders, after attending Isitshisa, take the ashes back to their congregations for ritual usage, the spiritual capital they have accumulated during the service with CCSA back home, and share with those who did not attend the Isitshisa (Wepener and Ter Haar, 2014).

The Isitshisa should also be understood and appreciated in light of the work of scholars of African religion, within a spiritual ontology aimed at serving equilibrium. There are many forces (violence?) that continuously disrupt equilibrium, and sacrifices (and libations) that play a vital role in restoring this equilibrium. However, in Africa, not only should an equilibrium be maintained between the living, but also between the living and the living dead (Wepener 2021).

In many African traditional religions, blood is symbolically very significant. “[It] symbolises and expresses life”, so Magesa asserts (1997, 110). Magesa goes on to note that “Blood has a very high concentration of the power of life, so much so that it is often identified with life itself.” Precisely because of its high symbolic value, it plays a critical role in ritual sacrifices. Blood functions in initiation rites as a symbol of bonding envisaged to occur between the initiate, the land, and the community. Mbiti (1991, 75) puts it like this: “The blood which is shed during the physical operation binds the person to the land and consequently to departed members of his society. It is said that the individual is alive, and that he or she now wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he or she has been born as a child.”

Magesa furthermore asserts that, “[c]onsequent are the many taboos surrounding blood as well as the function of sharing blood in cementing blood-pacts or blood-friendships, and in assuring transitions through the critical stages if life” (Ma-
gesa 1997, 162). Similarly, the symbolic significance of blood in bonding relates to cementing personal relationships. Mbiti (1969, 212) states that, “Formal oaths are used as another method of establishing and maintaining good human relationships. They are oaths which people mystically make together, the best known being the one which creates what is rather loosely referred to as ‘blood-brotherhood’” (Mbiti 1969, 212). Mbiti highlights the significance of the oath as follows, “This oath places great moral and mystical obligations upon the parties concerned; and any breach of the covenant is dreaded and feared upon to bring misfortunes [...] death, suffering, if broken” (Mbiti 1969, 212). However, perhaps the widest use of blood as a symbol denoting the essence of life relates to animal sacrifice.

Thus, Mbiti (1991, 63) asserts that, “The practice of presenting sacrifice and offering to a deity or spirits is found almost all over Africa. It is a critical dimension of African tradition and cultures”. He goes on to elaborate saying “By this practice material and physical items are offered to god and other spiritual beings. This act marks the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet and shows man’s intention to project himself into the invisible world” (Mbiti 1991, 63). However, Magesa highlights the significance of blood in the efficacy of sacrifice offering to the Supreme Being, ancestors, or spirits. He notes that, “Sacrifices and offerings gain value because of what the items represent. The one offering identifies self with the offering by touching it before it is dedicated and offered. In this respect, the offerer becomes the sacrificial victim” (Magesa 1997, 203).

The significance of the offering lies in the offerer identifying themself with the sacrificed victim. In other words, the blood, (life) of the sacrifice seems to represent the life of the one sacrificing. As Magesa (1997, 203) states, “It is the offerer who gives him- or herself in propitiation or expiation, and in this way asks to be reintegrated properly into the order of the universe”. Magesa underscores the most pragmatic rationale behind sacrifices in Africa which affirm the claims made by the African scholars above. He states, “The fundamental meaning of sacrifices and offerings lies in their efficacy to restore wholeness. If wrongdoing causes a dangerous separation of the various elements of the universe, sacrifices and offerings aims to re-establish unity and restore balance. [...] [s]acrifices and offerings have their goal ‘to give the cosmos dynamic continuity.’” (Magesa 1997, 203)

6 Conclusion

Sacrifice as an act of ritual violence in the context of the CCSA involves violence directed at the violence of death and in service of the ideals of peace and equilibrium. In addition, the restoration of equilibrium is a kind of healing, as its aim is the restoration of relationships, with and between the living and the living dead. This restoration can also be called reconnection, as the sacrifice assists participants to be reconnected with those around them in renewed and restored relationships, but also and importantly their relationship with the spirits of the ancestors. These rela-
relationships form within an African worldview a delicate web of connections (Wepener 2021). Sacrifices play an important role in maintaining relationships in this web and also, when they get disrupted by the violence of death, to restore these relationships.

Bibliography


