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Reasons for Female Child Sacrifice: A Historical, Mythological, and Religious Investigation

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of female child sacrifice as represented in mythology, ancient African and Arabian societies, and sacred texts. Anchored by the myth of Iphigenia—immortalized in a mosaic unearthed in Perge, Antalya—the research traces how war, religion, and patriarchal control converge to justify and ritualize the killing of young girls. By examining archaeological, scriptural, and mythological data, this paper argues that the sacrifice of girls often functioned as both a political-religious tool and a mechanism of social control. It also questions the historical normalization of war and why girls, in particular, became its sacrificial symbols.

Keywords: sacrifice, girl child sacrifice, Iphigenia, primitive religions, pre-Islamic Arabia, African societies

Introduction

In the early 21st century, a mosaic depicting the sacrifice of Iphigenia was uncovered in the ancient city of Perge in Antalya, Turkey. The image recalls a haunting moment in Greek mythology: Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, is offered as a sacrifice to appease the goddess Artemis so that the Greek fleet can sail to Troy. The act is at once one of obedience and submission to divine will, yet also a gruesome example of gendered violence. It raises a fundamental question: Why are girls so often sacrificed in the name of gods or nations?

This paper examines how and why young girls became victims of sacrifice in ancient narratives and societies—particularly in Greek mythology, pre-Islamic Arabian culture, and African tribal traditions. Drawing on archaeological findings, religious texts, and comparative mythology, it investigates whether such acts were ever considered "normal" and how female child sacrifice was interpreted as either sacred or profane. In the Greek case of Iphigenia, she was chosen not because of personal sin but because of her gender and symbolic value, to ensure military success, because her death was politically necessary. This example reflects how girls can be transformed into ritual instruments for national and religious purposes. Iphigenia is one of the most powerful and tragic narratives in Greek mythology, especially when viewed through the lens of gender, sacrifice, and the politics of war. Her story is not just about a girl offered to the Gods but the significant story of how societies use children's bodies as divine or national demands.

A 1,800-year-old mosaic, which showed the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra during the Trojan War in Greek mythology, was found at excavation works in the ancient city of Perge in Antalya. Archaeologists discovered the mosaic while digging at a shop located on Perge's West Street, finding it in the basement of the building. The mosaic depicts the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis. According to the myth, Iphigenia's father killed a deer sacred to the goddess. The goddess reacted to the offense by causing the winds necessary for the fleet set to leave for Troy to stop. Agamemnon, with an entire army waiting for him to sacrifice his daughter, decided to carry out the deed, but just as Iphigenia was about to be sacrificed, the goddess sent a deer, which was sacrificed in her place. Thus, the winds started blowing, the fleet sailed to Troy, and Iphigenia became a nun in the temple of Artemis.

Symbolic Layers of the Iphigenia Myth

1. The Cost of War is Innocence

Iphigenia's death is not due to her sin, but to the collective sin of her father and his society. She becomes the price for military ambition, showing how patriarchal societies often make women and children bear the consequences of male-driven violence.

"The winds do not blow unless a girl dies."—*Euripides, Iphigenia at Aulis*

These lines depict the cruelty of the treaty. For the two warring communities, a girl's life was considered a blessing from nature. Also, Agamemnon's decision shows his patriarchal power. Even his wife, Clytemnestra, is excluded from the decision. This incident demonstrates both how daughters are objectified by being used as offerings in political-religious relations and how mothers have no right to make decisions about their children.

2. The Sacred Feminine and Divine Appeasement

Artemis, a female god, invites a female sacrifice—for a symbolic exchange between sacred feminine powers. Iphigenia, in the other versions, is transformed into a priestess or saved at the last moment. Thus, Iphigenia expresses the value of a sacred figure who transcends death. In Euripides' Iphigenia in Tauris, she reappears as a priestess, not a corpse. This represents ritual rebirth or transformation, aligning with ancient themes of initiation and transition.

3. Innocent Sacrifice, Political Justification

The sacrifice of Iphigenia serves as a political pretext to unite the Greeks and legitimize the war against Troy. A girl is killed not for her worthlessness, but for her worth. In the modern interpretation, Iphigenia is a prototype of the sacrificed girl, not unlike those found in other traditions: girls buried alive in pre-Islamic Arabia, virgins offered to river Gods in Africa, and girls like the daughters of Jephthah in the Hebrew Bible. In each case, the girl child becomes a ritual object, a tool for a society's fears, guilt, or ambitions.

The Iphigenia mosaic in Perge (Antalya, Turkey), unearthed in the early 2000s, is not only an artistic artifact but also a sociopolitical symbol. The mosaic evokes how the sacrifice of girls has always marked the boundaries between war and peace, human and divine, power and powerlessness. Iphigenia reminds us that the logic of sacrifice is not always divine; it is often deeply human and deeply flawed. Her story asks us: What kind of world demands the death of its daughters to move forward? Is war ever justified if its cost is the life of a child? Who gets to decide which lives are expendable for a "greater good"? Across many ancient and traditional societies, female sacrifice appears in myths, religious rituals, and even in historical records, but not all cultures practiced it, and not all sacrifices involved females. What is universal, however, is the symbolic use of sacrifice as a way to appease divine powers, mark transitions, or maintain social order. In many cultures, the female body, particularly that of a girl or virgin, becomes the ritual object due to its symbolic associations. The frequent appearance of girls in sacrificial stories comes from cultural meanings attached to femininity:

Table 1. Symbol-Reason Table

Symbol	Reason
Purity/innocence	Girls are often seen as untouched, spiritually clean—"worthy" of divine contact.
Fertility	Their potential for childbirth links them with life, land, and cycles—making their death symbolically potent.
Obedience/passivity	In patriarchal societies, girls are more easily objectified and controlled.
Property	Girls, especially daughters, were considered family or tribal property, which could be "offered" without their consent.

Numerous cultures reflect this pattern:

Ancient Greece: Iphigenia is sacrificed by Agamemnon to appease Artemis and ensure military success (Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*; Hughes, 1991). *Iphigenia*, sacrificed for favorable winds (Euripides).

Hittite and Mesopotamian Myths: Female figures, such as Ishtar's descent, symbolize cosmic balance through suffering or self-offering.

Hebrew Bible: Jephthah's daughter is sacrificed as a result of a vow to God (Judges 11:30–40), interpreted as a tragic symbol of loyalty and obedience (Graves & Patai, 2009). Jephthah's Daughter is sacrificed due to a rash vow (Judges 11).

Pre-Islamic Arabia: Daughters were buried alive due to tribal shame or economic pressures, a practice condemned in the Qur'an (Qur'an 81:8–9; Mernissi, 1991). Female infanticide (*wa'd*) linked to honor, later condemned by the Qur'an (Takwir 81:8–9).

West African traditions: Girls were offered to river gods during droughts or as fertility rites (Mbiti, 1991; Law, 2004). Virgins were offered to river gods (e.g., the Niger Delta) in exchange for rain or protection.

Aztec civilization: Female children were sacrificed to deities like Xochiquetzal for agricultural blessings (Carrasco, 1999). Girl priestesses offered to gods such as Tlaloc or Xochiquetzal, often linked to agricultural fertility.

Japan and Southeast Asia: Folklore includes tales of maiden offerings to sea gods (Kelsey, 2007). In some versions, maidens were placed in boats and sent to sea to appease sea gods.

Many cultures also sacrificed boys, especially firstborn sons, war captives, or children of nobility. The Torah, for example, commands the redemption of firstborn sons (Exodus 13:2, 13:15), suggesting that male sacrifice was also considered in some theological frameworks.

In mythology, female sacrifice is common because it conveys powerful symbolic messages, purity, transition, and cosmic balance. In historical practice, female child sacrifice was rarer, often ritualized, and deeply tied to religious or political systems. Not all societies practiced human sacrifice, and many that did quickly replaced it with animal or symbolic offerings. While the idea of female sacrifice appears in many cultures, it is not a universal religious practice, but a recurring symbolic pattern in how societies understand sacrifice. Ultimately, female sacrifice reflects how patriarchal systems have historically used and controlled female bodies to manage religious, social, or political tension.

The practice of human sacrifice is not universal, but it is cross-culturally widespread and symbolically significant. Across various civilizations, from the Mediterranean to sub-Saharan Africa and Mesoamerica, female figures appear frequently as sacrificial victims in myths and, more rarely, in historical rituals. These patterns reflect cultural attitudes toward purity, fertility, obedience, and gendered power structures, rather than a universal religious norm. In patriarchal societies, female children were often considered ritually valuable due to symbolic associations: Purity and innocence: Girls were viewed as untainted, making them appropriate intermediaries between humans and the divine (Suter, 2008). Fertility: Their potential for motherhood connected them to the land and agricultural cycles (Conrad, 1984). Passivity and obedience: In many traditions, daughters were more easily controlled or "offered" by male figures (Gager, 1983). Liminal status: As beings "not yet women," girl children were positioned at transitional thresholds, making them symbolically potent (Leach, 1976). These meanings were projected onto female victims in myth and ritual, justifying their role in sacrificial narratives. It is essential to differentiate between mythological representation and historical ritual. In many cases, female sacrifice exists primarily in myth, as a symbolic narrative rather than a regular religious practice. Actual historical rituals involving female children were rare, often occurring in contexts of extreme social crisis or elite ceremonial rites (Burkert, 1985).

While male children and sons were also sacrificed in certain traditions, e.g., firstborn sons in Mesopotamia, or captives in the Aztec world, the frequency and emotional framing of female victims in myth points to their ritualized objectification (Assmann, 2001).

Sacrifice in Abrahamic Religions: Meaning and Evolution

The concept of sacrifice has ancient roots in almost all religious traditions. It functioned as a means of communication with the divine, a ritual of atonement, or a tool for ensuring divine favor in warfare or harvest.

In the Torah, for instance, sacrifice is depicted as a form of worship:

"Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain and called his relatives to eat a meal" (Genesis 31:54).

In the Book of Exodus, animal sacrifices are used as protection against divine plagues (Exodus 8:25). These examples suggest an evolving practice where offerings could escalate to human sacrifices, especially during moments of societal crisis.

In many traditions, the child, especially the firstborn, held symbolic value of purity, potential, and inheritance of the family line. When Isaac is nearly sacrificed by Abraham (Genesis 22:1–18), it is both a test of faith and a theological metaphor for obedience and trust in divine providence.

As Graves and Patai (2009, pp. 249–256) note in *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, such stories encode deeper societal anxieties about inheritance, lineage, and divine favor. Importantly, while Isaac is spared, female children in other myths are not.

In societies where lineage and inheritance pass through the male line, girls were often seen as less economically or socially valuable. Their symbolic power, however, could be immense in times of religious or military crisis. Sacrificing a girl may have been interpreted as a greater offering, due to:

- Perception of girls as innocent and pure
- Perception of fertility as the real and symbolic cause of the continuity of life.
- Believing that girls have a transcendental power between the earthly and divine realms.

Pre-Islamic Arab Society and the Quran

In pre-Islamic Arabia, daughters were sometimes buried alive a practice known as *wa'd.* Reasons for this situation may include economic hardship, tribal honor rules, the perception that girls are a source of shame, or the perception of girls as divine beings, such as goddesses and angels. The Qur'an directly condemns this practice: *"And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed"* (Takwir 81:8–9). Other verses reflect the shame and grief associated with the birth of daughters (Nahl 58–59, Zuhruf 17). The Qur'an reframes the child not as a burden but as an innocent life endowed with dignity.

This religious revolution reframed sacrifice, not as a divine demand but as a human injustice. The act of sacrificing a girl child sits at a paradoxical intersection of the sacred and the profane: sacred because the victim is viewed as worthy of divine communication, also profane because the act is intrinsically violent, often justified by social dysfunction or superstition. These paradoxes are visible in the Iphigenia myth: she is both a holy offering and a tragic victim of patriarchal power and war. In many ancient cultures, this duality served to justify the act while masking its violence with ritual.

The phenomenon of female child sacrifice reveals how deeply intertwined religious belief, gender norms, and social crises can become. The sacrifice of girls, whether to gods, rivers, or military success, was rarely about the girls themselves. Rather, they became symbols manipulated by patriarchal systems to resolve existential threats or assert power.

Islamic teachings, widespread in West and East Africa, forbade the killing of children, emphasizing mercy and divine justice (Qur'an 6:151). According to the Quran, women and men are created from the same element. Pre-Islamic Arab practices regarding girls are being

criticized, and the creation of Adam's wife in the Book of Genesis is being revised (Akinci 2021). Christian missionaries outlawed such sacrifice practices, replacing them with baptisms, naming rituals, or communion ceremonies.

African Traditional Religions themselves evolved, substituting animal offerings, dance, or spirit possession in place of human blood. The topic of child sacrifice in African societies is complex and often misunderstood. It is important to approach it with cultural sensitivity, historical accuracy, and a critical distinction between myth, ritual, and actual practice. It is necessary to examine evaluations of child sacrifice practices in Africa.

Anthropological bias played a role: 19th-century European colonizers exaggerated or misrepresented these practices to justify colonialism, portraying African societies as "savage" or "barbaric." Most African religions and cultures did not support or allow the killing of children.

Girls in particular were less protected by inheritance or lineage laws in patriarchal societies and associated with earth, fertility, or rebirth making them symbolically powerful. In African societies, anthropological records show that during times of drought or war, virgins or young girls were offered to river gods or spirits to appease nature (Mbiti, 1991). In this ritual, the girl was not only a sacrifice; she was also considered a sacred medium.

In ancient African worldviews, religion, politics, and society were not separate. A sacrifice was:

- As a political statement: Showing the king's or priest's power
- As a spiritual action: Believed to maintain cosmic order
- As a social tool: Reinforcing hierarchy and obedience

In many cases, child sacrifices functioned as ritualized violence, used by elites to control society or cope with trauma. African traditional religions gradually evolved: many replaced human sacrifice with animal sacrifice, symbolic offerings, or initiation rites. Islam and Christianity, once introduced, strongly condemned any form of child sacrifice. Qur'anic teachings oppose the practice, and many African societies embraced this shift.

While child sacrifice was practiced in some African societies, it was never universal and was often deeply misunderstood. It was motivated by a mix of cosmic beliefs, patriarchal structures, and sociopolitical pressures. Children—especially girls—became the tragic bearers of adult fears, divine appeasement, and social instability. This history is best studied not as a condemnation of African culture but as a window into how humans across all civilizations have tried—sometimes in dark and destructive ways—to control the unknown.

Historical Cases of Child Sacrifice in African Societies

a) Dahomey Kingdom (present-day Benin): The Kingdom of Dahomey, active between the 17th and 19th centuries, practiced human sacrifice, especially during major festivals like the Annual Customs (*Xwetanu*). As reported by the French explorer Jean-Baptiste Labat and corroborated by later historians such as Robin Law: "The shedding of blood was considered a necessary gift to the royal ancestors and gods to secure fertility, protection, and stability."—(Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port*, 2004)

Although adult war captives were the primary victims, children were occasionally sacrificed in particularly grave situations—such as the death of a monarch or impending war. Their youth and innocence were believed to give the offering greater spiritual power.

b) Buganda Kingdom (Uganda): Historical accounts from 19th-century missionaries, such as Rev. Alexander Mackay and John Roscoe, describe ritual killings ordered by King Mwanga II, including young attendants at court. While these killings were more political than strictly sacrificial, some were framed as religious appeasement to ancestral spirits or divinities (Roscoe, *The Baganda*, 1911).

c) Igbo (Nigeria), Twin Sacrifice and Infant Offerings: In pre-colonial Igbo society, the birth of twins was sometimes considered unnatural or a bad omen. One or both infants were sometimes abandoned or killed, especially in rural areas. This practice, described in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and studied in the ethnographies of J.S. Harris and P.A. Talbot, was later condemned and abolished by missionaries and colonial authorities.

"It was not mere cruelty, but part of a deeply spiritual logic in which the community feared contamination by spirits" (Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. II, 1926).

These actions were tied to beliefs in "ogbanje" (spirit children) who were believed to repeatedly die and be reborn to torment families. Children were viewed as liminal beings not yet fully socialized, closer to the spirit world. In many African cosmologies, this gave them symbolic power: Purity and Innocence: Made them suitable mediators with the gods. Fertility Symbols: Girls, especially virgins, were associated with land, rain, and renewal. Subordinate Social Position: Made girls more vulnerable, less protected by inheritance systems in patriarchal structures.These factors made girl children both powerful and expendable within ritual frameworks.

In African traditional religion, rituals were deeply political. Sacrificing a child, especially a royal or virgin girl, was often a demonstration of ultimate devotion or divine negotiation. However, these acts also reinforced elite power: Kings, chiefs, or priests decided who was "worthy" of sacrifice. And sacrifices were public spectacles that instilled fear and obedience. Also they reinforced gender roles: girls as sacrificial, boys as warriors or inheritors.

While such practices did exist, European colonial narratives often exaggerated or misrepresented them to justify moral superiority and colonization. Writers like Sir Harry Johnston and Samuel Crowther portrayed Africans as "primitive" and "bloodthirsty," often without context or nuance. Modern anthropologists like John Mbiti and Ifi Amadiume have corrected these distortions:

"Most African societies do not permit human sacrifice... It is a mistake to generalize isolated rituals into a continent-wide norm." (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 1991, p. 94)

With the spread of Islam and Christianity, child sacrifice was rapidly condemned and replaced with symbolic offerings. Child sacrifice in African societies must be understood within its cultural, religious, and political context. While it did occur in some pre-modern communities, especially in royal or priestly contexts, it was never universal and often tied to crisis theology, gender norms, and cosmological beliefs. The frequent targeting of girls reflects deep associations between femininity, fertility, purity, and submission.

Conclusion

Studying this history allows us not to judge but to understand how violence was ritualized and justified, and how human societies have used children, particularly girls, as tragic symbols in the search for order, power, and divine favor. Child sacrifice in African societies, while not widespread or common, has been documented in specific historical and cultural contexts. This phenomenon, often shrouded in myth, oral tradition, and colonial distortion, was typically associated with moments of crisis, transition, or religious obligation. The gendered nature of these sacrifices reflects broader themes of purity, submission, and symbolic value in traditional cosmologies. When it happened, child sacrifice usually had symbolic motivations:

Purity: Children, especially girls, were seen as pure and uncorrupted—making them "worthy" to communicate with gods or spirits.

Appeasement: A child was offered to restore cosmic or social balance, especially after plagues, floods, or military defeat.

Fertility and agriculture: In some cases, children were sacrificed to river gods or fertility deities to ensure rain, crops, or livestock.

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