

THE VIEWS OF THE IBIBIO ON LIBATION

Aniekan Etim Nana

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa*

Abstract

The Ibibio people look at Libation as a means of reaching to the ancestors through invocation, incantation, and supplications to the divinities. They can also express their views through sacrifice, chants, rites and rituals. Performance of Libation has not been elaborately studied, relevant as it is in revealing the cultural values of the Ibibio people. This work, therefore, assesses the performance property and world view of Ibibio people in their libation performance. Ibibio libation performances are ritualistic, but some are more intense in contents and props. Performances from rural areas are more esoteric than those from the urban settings, spatial and temporal settings of the performances vary according to contest, while appeasement to deities is very sacrosanct. This work adopts a historical approach in analyzing the views of Ibibio on libation. That the Ibibio use schnapps for the appeasement of the divinities underscores Ibibio understanding of schnapps as a foreign drink. Similarly, coronation performances are performed at designated spiritual arenas, while routine worship, welcome, naming or puberty rites are performed at homes with performers dressed in traditional attires. The select texts exhibit repetition and metaphor as devices used in exploring narrative properties such as plea, confidence and affirmation. Libation performances in Ibibio society while utilizing symbolic drinks. Objects and props reflect the mores of the people. Thus, they reveal a communion with the divinities and ancestors manifested in theatrical aesthetic that portrays the cultural values and view of the Ibibio on Libation.

Keywords: Ibibio, Libation.

Introduction

The practice of Libation rituals is a quintessential aspect of Ibibio culture and spirituality. It is a mark of piety and devotion to the gods and ancestors in an attempt to define a meaningful moment of communion, to honour our ancestors, and to begin a new form of consciousness as required by customs and traditions. Libation expresses the relationship between the Supreme Being and the ancestors on the one hand, and the ancestors and man on the other. In his view, Opukwaa (2005:60), asserted that libation as a form of ritual transcends both spiritual and material words. He further argues that the practice of libation

has a significant impact on setting forth people's understanding of hospitality, tokens of fellowship, family living, death, continuity, and contest. This claim is in connection with Nehusi's (2013:3) description of libation in Africa as "a ritual of heritage". Libation reflects the African experience of life across time and places and necessitates cultural transmission from one generation to another. Libation is propitiatory custom found everywhere in the African continent, which involves the pouring of alcohol or other drinks as offerings to the ancestors or divinities. It is believed that the role of liquid is central in the ritual of libation: the ultimate significance is the restoration and maintenance of the cosmic order, given the assumption that for all the Ibibio's, libation is a path of the divine cosmic order, that is the correct relations among people, other beings and things in the entire cosmos.

Opukuwaa (2005) remarks that rituals keep the door open to the spirit world in order to receive clear guidance, direction, and messages that enable man to live peaceful, prosperous and healthy life. He argues further that ritual helps to transform man's mind, body and spirit from certain negative beliefs and attitudes. Religious rituals enable individuals to relate to the sacred, reinforce a group's social bond, as well as relieve tension. It is also an important way in which events are celebrated, and crises such as deaths are made less socially disruptive and more tolerable for human consciousness. This means that libation can provide some psychological relief or emotional outlet than can reinforce social stability among community members. Kilson (1969) opines that libation is a sacrificial act that can elucidate certain ideas about the ordering of the universe and the meaning of sacrifice. Ritual is, in this sense, a medium for the expression of cultural ideals and models and, in turn, serves to orient other forms of behaviour. Rituals enable people to modify their social order while simultaneously reinforcing certain categories of it.

In the view of Patton (2009:31), "the act of pouring or drinking a liquid is one of the oldest, most ubiquitous and least understood forms of religions action in the world". Kofi (2010) argues that ancestors who are in the ancestral realm are divinely entrusted with man's spiritual development, and have divine directives to guide and protect man. He likens the act of pouring libation to making a mobile phone call. The way the phone alerts its owner with a ring tone is synonymous to awakening the ancestors when libation is poured.

Rites and Rituals: The Matrix of Ibibio Religious Life

Rituals refer to the strict, ordered or traditional method of performing or conducting the acts of worship or a solemn ceremony which must not be faulted or altered. Rituals and rites are similar as they both deal with liturgy. They are media of invitation of the

ancestors and deities to the affairs of the people through invocation. They constitute important lines between the past and present and both constitute core ingredients in libation performance in Ibibio. Rituals (Libation) are found in all aspects of Ibibio life, ranging from traditional occupations like Utop Ikod (hunting), sea-faring, bricklaying (masonry) and carpentry. Rituals are also performed for some traditional rites like ekpurikpu uboon, mboppo, udad ekpo, ekuho ekpo, ukpad ekpo, as well as the general initiation into ekpo, ekpe, ndaam, inam, idion and ekoon societies.

Even the Ibibio worship of their deities is ritualistic in that every priest/priestess of a deity must as a matter of inevitability offer periodic sacrifice to his/her deities through libation. Such sacrifices are normally carried out on a specific day of the Ibibio eight-day week. The Ibibio calendar week comprises Obo, edem-obo, fiogaran, edittaha, edet, edem edetaha, fiogotok and edere-obe. Fiogaran and fiogetok are big market days on which traders come from far and near to buy and sell at the designated market locations. Other markets take their turns in the other six days of the week.

These days do have their significance for social activities like sacrificing worship of the deities and libation. In traditional Ibibio society, fiogaran and fiogetok are days for female cleansing rites while edetaha and obo were set aside for rites of passages into priesthood and chieftaincy. From birth to death, many rituals accompany the Ibibio at certain stages of life. For instance, at birth, the family together on the eight day for usio anyin (a naming ceremony) and thanksgiving to (amasa), the god of fertility and naming. In the case of the female child, the day begins with circumcision of the forsaken whereby the blood spills unto mother earth as a symbol of unification and a form of identity. At puberty the girl child has to contend with puberty rites, mboppo (maiden seclusion), while the male gets initiated into a traditional society, like ekpo among others, (Etuk, 2002:34). In ekuho mboppo, series of rites are performed such as clitoridectomy (otherwise known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and cicatrization. Mboppo marks the preparation of a maiden for marriage after intention has been declared and accepted.

Other rituals found in Ibibio land occur during the institution and consecration of her several traditional cult groups and shrines like uban ekpo (formal initiation into ekpo cult), iso ndem okpono (a shrine for a deceased name sake), iso idio (a shrine for idio spirit), iso abasi ekon (a shrine made for the divinity of war), ntum ntum (pantheon) children's spirit otherwise known as okpo nka, which involved regulated sacrificing and rituals duly accompanied with elaborate libation performances. All these and more are believed to have regulatory impact on the people's well-being and hence are observed accordingly.

Libation: Its Origin and Concept in Ibibio

Libation in its narrow sense comes from the Latin word *libara*, meaning, “to pour us an offering” (Derbedrossian, 2010:4), or from the Greek word *laibein*, meaning “to pour” (Effiong-Fuller 1987:8). It was the English that discovered that the Scandinavian custom of drink was not just to everyone present but to all of one’s friends, even to those who are absent as well. It originated from ancient Greece and has continued “to modern day America through most religions and just about all part of the world” (Derbedrossian, 2010:4) Paul Dickson (2008:22) says that “if there was a Golden Age for toasting, it came during the period from approximately 1880 to 1920”. The act of toasting became more fashionable and adaptable to the occasion. Over time, the simple act of toasting became embellished and intertwined with other customs. (It would not be until the seventeenth century that the act was actually referred to as a toast).

In ancient Roman religion, libation was an act of worship in form of liquid pouring which may involve unmixed wine and performed oil. Both emperors and divinities were the receivers of libation, just like it was performed rite at funeral rites. In the Andes region of South America, it is common to see the use of beverage poured as a performance to *panchamama* the mother earth. It is a common ritual called “*challa*”, performed quite often, especially before meals. In contemporary America, there is the tradition of pouring malt liquor to the ground before drinking; it is called “*tipping*” which is most often accompanied by songs and parody. Libation is a concept that cuts across all cultures. It has been extensively researched into in many cultures, although it nevertheless remains a means to which the living communicates with the dead. Libation is a part of African life, just like the communion of the saint is part of the church liturgy. In the same way that the Africans believe that the ancestors are alive and around us in the invisible realm, some Christians believe that the dead saints are alive in the spiritual realm. This belief accounts for the performance of the “*litany of the saints*” where different saints are invoked through prayers. Onwurah (1994: 37) corroborates that: with the advent of Christianity today, it (libation) has become a common practice to begin any formal ceremony with a Christian prayer followed by the pouring of libation. The former meets the Christian aspiration while the latter responds to the yearnings of the traditionally oriented people of Ibibio.

In West African tradition, libation is performed to awaken the ancestors and directly communicate with them to give thanks and ask for blessings and guidance in the same way the orthodox Christians communicate with God in worship, prayers and thanksgiving. Mvunabandi (2008:6) avows that libations, which he calls drink sacrifices, “are made in order to secure the benefaction of the deity out of actual need, to give thanks to it (sacrifices of thanksgiving, first fruits, thanksgiving festivals after festivals),

to increase the fertility of the field through the use of sacrificial blood, and other matters”.

In Ibibio however, the local gin, ufofob was and still is the preferred drink for libation of awakening while other kinds of drinks (palm-wine, gin, and schnapps) and items (oil, salt, water and pepper) are used for regular performances. Whenever a priest is confronted with the need to consult the water spirit, the schnapps must accompany the props to be used because schnapps arrived in Ibibio culture through the sea, whereas in the consultation of other deities and spirits, any gin or ufofop is sufficient for the performance.

Libation in Ibibio is the call on ancestors to be part of an event. Since Africans generally nurture the belief in life after death – reincarnation, this belief is prefixed on the notion of the ancestors as the link of the living to divinities. The ancestors, Udo (1983:258) avers, “consisted chiefly of the forefathers and grandmothers ... not every ancestor was honoured and worshipped, but only good ones who were noted for their good life, bravery, sane judgment and philanthropy”. Similarly, Idowu (1973:187) intones that only good people become ancestors after receiving the well-done judgment of the deity or of the cult of the ancestors”. To the Ibibio therefore, one qualifies to be relied upon as an intermediary if one lived a good and upright life while in the secular world. In the same vein, orthodox Christians believe that the saints are those who kept the faith till the end and as such they are involved through prayers and revered at baptism and ordination services.

In order to contact the ancestors for their very important role as links to the deities becomes eminent, the African society “consist of basically two worlds – the spirit world and the human world the spirit world no less real if less evident and visible and removed from the human environment”. Okon (2012:4) on the other hand asserts that the Ibibio believe in “the multiplicity of the existential planes of the society – the plane of the living, the plane of the dead and that of unborn, spirit and the deities.

The essence of libation is succinctly expressed in its spiritual and religious importance for Africans. This is why Opoku (1978:9) indicates that the pouring of libation to the African ancestors reaffirms that the community in Africa is not only made up of the living, but also of the dead and the reality of this notion is given concrete expression in libation and other sacrifices to the dead whose participation, involvement and blessing are sought, as continuing members of the community. Onwurah (1994:40) confirms these by adding that “libation symbolically opens the way to the presence of the divine powers by providing an avenue through which prayers are directed ultimately to God”. This belief is further enhanced by the discernment that the African understands that “the margin

separating his physical world from his spiritual realm is very thin, and he is repeatedly criss-crossing that margin” the natural world and spiritual which is accessed only through libation Etuk (2002:51). This margin, “criss-crossing” reinforces the Ibibio belief in the intertwining of these two worlds – the visible and the invisible.

Libation is one of the categories of religious poetry in Ibibio, it connotes a sacrifice which is a means of communication of the visible with the invisible beings believed to be living among us. It permeates all facets of Ibibio cultural life, from birth, through puberty and maturity to death. In this sense, Etuk (2002:39) enthuses that libation “is most commonly a drink offering made to the deities and spirits as part of an invocationary prayer (which involves) calling on the deities, divinities and the ancestors by name; (at the same time) inviting these spirits to attend, drink and bless the occasion or prosper the undertaking” Ekong (2009:48) confirms that libation is “a ritual of pouring of drinks to the spirit of the departed ancestors and divinities of the land”. It is true that the traditional religious practices of the African are anthropocentric in the sense that all the religious practices invariably point to one objective, namely, human life and its preservation. Prayers and sacrifices offer to the gods and the ancestors all have one end in view, namely, the welfare of man (Nana, 2019:319). The concept of libation entails a set of “flexible narrative spaces designed to accommodate a range of desires” which are manifest in each performance (Agawu, 2007:3). Libation, to the African, is the “basic instrument for the appeasement, invitation and worship of the African deities”. Brempong (2000: 39) considers libation as a traditional religious ritual among the Africans. He adds that:

Libation is the pouring of wine or any alcoholic drink on the ground and reciting a prayer to God, mother earth, the deities and the ancestor... Libation is designed to engage the supernatural beings in the lives of human beings. At the same time, it demonstrates human belief in the power and the presence of God, the deities and the ancestral spirits.

Brempong’s assertions distinctly corroborate the views of this researcher that, the power of the spoken words of prayers is the defining factor in the actualization of the concept of libation performance in Africa, not the “pouring” alone as many tend to define. He considers the words of prayer which are uttered during the pouring of libation as “the verbal ceremony of invoking the Supernatural powers”, while confirming that “the two acts, the pouring of the drink and the reciting of a prayer occur simultaneously in every libation performance (Brempong, 2005:54).

Des Wilson (1987: 93) calls libation an extra-mundane communication. It is “the mode of communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or Supreme Being (that is) usually done through incantation, spiritual chants, rituals, prayers, sacrifice, invocation, séance or trance”. Although Ekong (2001:47) says that “it is not just anybody who may

perform sacrifice, ritual to ndem or ibok,” libation among Ibibio is gender friendly. It can be poured by a woman to a male ancestor and vice versa, especially in female-related problems but these occasions are few. It is equally not a taboo for libation to be poured by the youth, although this is usually in a more informal setting such as the meeting of friends after a long while. Ibibio society is highly religious and monotheistic in the sense that the Ibibio believe in the existence of only one Almighty God-Abasi Ibom. In Ibibio parlance, Abasi Ibom denotes a “God so large and mighty that he cannot be housed” (Udo, 1983: 249), therefore Abasi Ibom or Abasi Enyong simply means the Almighty, everlasting God who dwells in the sky. He is not only the God of Ibibio by this understanding, but the God of the entire universe that He created.

Clarification of Libation

Cleansing of the Land

Most of the socio-cultural activities of our traditional societies are sometimes carried to the extreme by some overzealous initiatives. This implies that at the end of that cultural activity, the chief custodian owes a duty to cleanse the land from any form of abuse and excesses perpetrated by the members during the period so as to avert incurring the wrath of the deities on the people. For example, the conducts of ekpo, ekoon and other such cult groups are usually exhibited beyond the boundary that tradition demands by either overzealousness or envisaged hatred for someone. The Ibibio also carry out cleansing for such convicted offences like adultery, rape, seduction and incest (Esema, 2002:19-20). Similarly, the beginning and ending of a season call for cleansing. At these times, libation, whereby the deities are “fed”, becomes necessary.

Gathering of the Clans

The Ibibio society, as an essentially traditional one, depends so much on discussion for the day to day running of the society. This entails regular consultations among the representatives of the families and the elders of the land where issues pertaining to the land are solemnly discussed. Since libation involved the invitation of the divinities for participation, the presiding elder of the gathering or the Okuidem of that society will initiate the performance of libation at such meetings.

Funerals of Important Personalities

The burial of a chief or a prominent member of the respective cults in Ibibio land cannot be performed without elaborate libation. Each society has its peculiar prerequisite pattern for the disposal of their dead members, just as they have for initiation into it. A chief is usually buried with so much fanfare that sometimes includes a live person or fresh human heads placed as his footstool. Of course, those heads and humans are not just placed there silently. The incantation that accompanies their “burials” is in itself a libation in addition

to the drinks that would be poured in the process. Equally, the announcement of the death of the chief requires much more than just giving of information; other traditional rituals that follow his demise also call for libation as this strict pattern must be followed in order to avert danger in the society.

Consulting the Oracle in the Face of Perceived Disaster

As an orally inclined society, the Ibibio consult different oracles at regulated intervals or when the need arises, to locate the source of a situation and possibly seek a solution to it. This instance too lends itself naturally to the pouring of libation since the divinities are only brought to the mainstream through libation (Eberefiak, 2009:46). Similarly, in consulting an abia dion (idion priest) in a religious reflection or in an enquiry into life's affliction, libation becomes inevitable. Abia idion, Ekong (2001: 46) enthuses, plays an important role in the lives of the Ibibio people in that he is consulted before any major decision is taken.

Individual or Clan Afflicted with Calamity

As a non-literate society, some of life's events –like sickness – are still attributed to affliction from the divinities for some assumed guilt of omission or commission. Even at this time of globalization, so many people cannot shake off their traditional beliefs on certain matters; they still indulge in the consultation of the relevant abia idion in the face of any serious affliction. Some cases of famine or drought are still blamed on some gods/goddesses as punitive measures. This, after the necessary consultation with the priest of the presumed deity (s), must be attended with libation performance.

Rites of Passage

So many rites attend the life of a traditional Ibibio person. Some placate the deities at the birth of the child and at certain marked stages of growth up to the point of death. (The latter depends on the type of cultural religious group that the person assumes at adulthood). Others begin at the stages of age grade, through puberty, marriage, to adulthood where the person(s) is/are believed to have acquired a sense of maturity. Since each of these stages border on an assumed fidelity of that individual to the tenets or his/her society, Libation becomes inevitable at each stage. Instances include the unfailing performance of uwa idion adiaha owo (rites of passage for a first daughter's marriage), that the Ibibio uphold initiation rites into cults, among others.

Rites at the Gravesite

It is observed that at every gravesite in Ibibio land, the family of the deceased members must pay "homage" to the diggers before the corpse can be accepted into the grave. It constitutes a set of rituals that all traditionally prescribed items are offered as well as money before the diggers are pacified to declare the grave "habitable" for the corpse.

Since the idea is hung on a set belief that is ritualistic, this paper classifies this as libation too as incantations are made thereof.

A Woman with Menstrual Cycle

A woman who is menstruating is regarded as abomination to the regular order of tradition. Should such a woman pass through the village shrine or a confined sacred area, she is believed to have desecrated the place. Offiong (1991:62), while writing on witchcraft, sorcery and social order and the role of the ancestors and ancestral spirits among the Ibibio, enthuses that whenever there is disorder in society, the deities have to be appeased or neutralized in order to maintain social and cosmic equilibrium. The chief priest must be informed so that he may perform some rites to restore the piece of the land, wherefore libation is inevitable.

Childlessness

This is another important instance in which libation becomes inevitable. Africans value procreation; a childless marriage is no marriage at all. Therefore, at the slightest indication of delay in procreation, the family (if the man of the house delays) must seek solution to the cause of such delay. This of course involves the consultation of amasa- the goddess of fertility who invariably is a water spirit—and libation is the only link through which this goddess is reached.

Initiation into Ekpo, Ekpe and other Cults of the Land

During initiation into the different socio-cultural societies in Ibibio land such as ekpo, ekpe, ekoon, idong, ibok, inam, among others, libation is an important aspect of the exercise. It borders on the invocation of long-gone ancestors to guide the new initiates during their fraternity with the cults. This invocation performance is considered necessary to activate the spirits of the divinity in certain natural phenomena. Through libation, divine realities become represented in physical reality.

Periodic Sacrificing to the Deities

There are usually periodic sacrifices that each priest/priestess must offer to their deities. These normally happen at the onset of a season, the end of one, the coming out of a new moon, annual worship period for a particular spirit, among others. These two cannot be performed without libation.

Harvesting, Planting and Fishing

As an agrarian society noted for its dependency on land and its produce, the Ibibio offer periodic sacrifice just before the clearing of the farm for planting” to the deities of fertility, asking for peace upon the land during planting season, pleading for fruitful yields of their crops at harvesting period (Etuk, 2002: 19). According to our source, the ritual of Ukoo edo must be performed before any ‘akpene’ (fallow land) is cleared for the planting

season. The fishing community does the same elaborate ritual with libation at the beginning of the fishing season (Etuk 2002:34). Libation is also performed to thank the deities for abundant yield during the season of harvest as a mark of reverence to them. This also serves to pacify them for the coming season, a gesture of well-established relationship.

Conclusion

This work on the views of the Ibibio on libation is very interesting. The paper indicates that libation among the Ibibio shows their recognition of the powers of unseen forces who rule the earth. Moreover, it indicates that the Ibibio people give due respect and credence to these unseen forces. Libation performance is thus an act of worship and reverence to these forces. They further embody human attempt to maintain a balance of peace and unity between humanity and these forces. The libation performance of the Ibibio shows in many different ways the cultural values of the Ibibio people and reflects the people's earnest belief and reliance on the divinities for onward transmission of their needs to the Supreme Being, God, rather than the erstwhile erroneous Euro-Christian conception of fetishism. The libation performances of Ibibio, by the potency to promote and check the social status, demonstrate the moral worldview of the Ibibio traditional society. In this paper, we have also elucidated that although ignorant minds refer to the call to the ancestors to intervene in human affairs as fetish, the unprecedented idea behind the call is the fear of God whom the traditional society sees as awesome and too big to be approached directly, hence, they are unable to find a living person qualified enough to approach Him.

References

- Agawu, K (2007). Communal ethos in Africa performance; ritual, narrative and music among the Northern Ewe. *Tran Revisita Transcultural de musica Julio numero 001*. Societed ethomusicologia. Barcelona, Espana.
- Brempong, O. (2000). Libation in highlife Songs. *Research Review New series 16.1*
- Derbedrossian, V. (2010). Libation: getting soil liquored culture, Issue 7. Posted on 20-04-2010. Retrieved on 5-07-2022 from [www. Novareinna.com/festive/kwanzaa.html](http://www.Novareinna.com/festive/kwanzaa.html).
- Dickson, P. (2008). A brief history of raised glasses. Posted on 20-09-2010. Retrieved on 4 -07-2022 from [ttp://toasts book.com/history.shtml](http://toastsbook.com/history.shtml).
- Eberefiak, E. (2005). Commentary. The Ibibio millennium converge. News commentary broadcast on Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation (AKBC), Uyo, on 11-05-2005
- Eberefiak, N (2005). *The guest for spiritual transformation: An introduction to tradition Akwa Ibom people of Nigeria*. Uyo: MICOMP

- Effiong-Fuller (1987). Traditional libation in Cross River State. A Paper presented at the university of Cross River State Cultural Week, June 9th-13th, 1989.
- Ekong E. E. (2009) Nwed mme usem ikot Ibibio ye Iko mbakara. *Ibibio English English Ibibio bilingual dictionary*. Uyo: Dove.
- Ekong, E. E. (2001). *Sociology of the Ibibio: A study of social organization and change*.
- Esema, J. D. (2002) *Culture and traditions of Akwa Ibom people of Nigeria*. Uyo: Micomp
- Etuk, U. (2002). *Religion and cultural identity*. Ibadan: Hope.
- Idowu, B. E. (1973). *African traditional religion: A Definition*. Ibadan: Fountain publishers.
- Kilson, M. (1969). Libation in Ga ritual. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 2 (2).
- Kofi, T (2020) Race and history forum. Repairing the African spirit. <http://www.raceandhistory.com/cgi-bin/forum/webs-configsPl?md=read; Id=2324-> Accessed on 04-07-2022
- Nana, A. E. (2019). The influence of Religion on culture in African society. In *Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Study, Vol 6, No 2*.
- Nehusi, K (2013) A ritual of heritage in Africa life Africa Holocasust. <http://www.africanholocause.net/news-ah/libation.html>.
"http://www.africanholocause.net/news%20-ah/libation.html. Accessed on 4-7-2022"
- Offiong, D. A. (1991). *Witchcraft sorcery, magic and social order among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Lagos: fourth Dimension
- Okon, F (2012). *Ibibio oral performance: a study of "uto" poetry: an ethnolinguistic and literary analysis*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAMBERT.
- Okpoku, A. K. (1978). *West African traditional religion*. Ibadan: International private Limited.
- Onwurah, E (1994). The socio-religious dimension of libation in Ibibio Culture. *Severthan*, No19.
- Opukuwaa, N (2005). *The quest for spiritual transformation: An introduction to traditional Akam religion, practices*. Bloomington : Universe.
- Patton, K. (2009) *Religion of the Gods: ritual, Paradox and reflexivity*. Oxford. Oxford University press.
- Udo, E. A (1993). *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana- Feb.