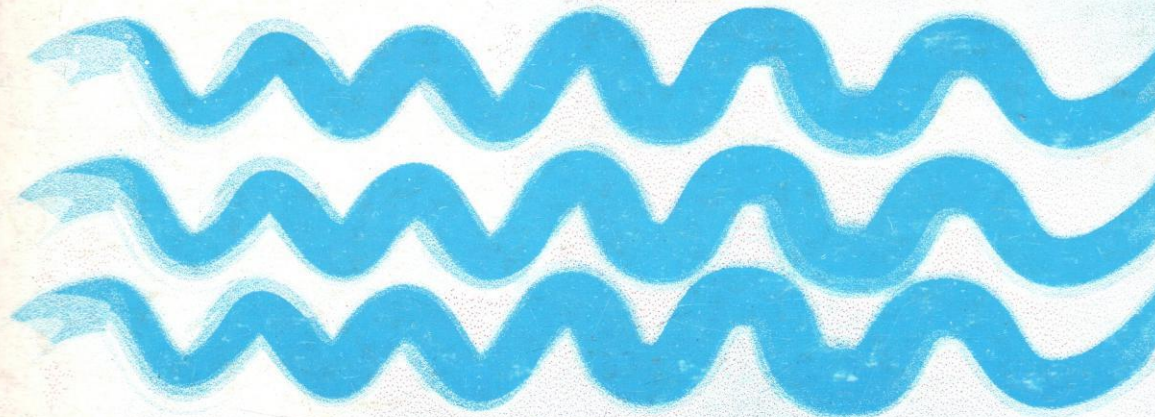




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THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELEVANCE OF LIBATION IN IBIBIO CULTURE

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Introduction

The act of pouring libation to the gods and ancestors is prevalent in many traditional societies in the World. Among the Ibibio people of Nigeria, it is an indispensable practice in their formal or informal traditional religious and social life. Libation pouring has always been of great interest to social scientists especially anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of religious studies. It is in the same curious interest that this paper has undertaken to do study of the socio-religious relevance and significance of this practice.

The traditional religion of the Ibibio people has neither founder nor sacred scriptures. It evolved slowly as the people responded to the situations of their lives and reflected upon their experiences of the forces in the universe. The traditional Ibibio believes in the Supreme Being [Abasi Ibom] who created all things including the lesser deities who are his ministers. The believe in life after death has led to the veneration of the ancestors who are believed to be the custodian of morality. The Ibibio adherents of the traditional religion view the world as having two aspects, namely the visible which is the domain of ordinary human experience and the invisible, the domain of gods and the spirits who can however move about freely within the visible and invisible domain. Human life according to their conception passes through these two domain in the cycle of death and reincarnation. Since religion seems to permeate every facet of life everything in the universe is interpreted religiously. The principal objects of veneration in Ibibio traditional religion are the gods, the clan deities and the ancestors. For the people, these entities are ever abiding with close practical involvement in the everyday affairs of the family or clan. Man therefore must recognize them and remain in constant awareness of their powers to protect and reward or to reject punishment. Thus the Ibibio people like other Africans according to Parrinder are incurably religious.³

What is Libation?

The origin of the word 'libation' is not certain. It appears to be of Latin origin *Libare* that means to take a portion or to taste. It is also possible that the word could be of Greek origin *Leibein* meaning to pour. Most likely, the word libation may even be of mixed Latin and Greek development. Effiong Fuller suggested that the name seems to have been introduced into the English Language at about the 14th century

AD, its oldest recorded usage being in the form *Libacibus*. Since then, the word has developed in form through *lybacion* to *libation*, the form in which it has been used till present time.⁴ The word libation has been variously employed, the text ranging from philosophical to mundane, particularly in the western world. Usually, the meaning of the word varies within context. Alcoholic drinks are sometimes termed libation.⁵

Libation in other cultures
 It might be interesting to note that the pouring of libation to gods and ancestors is not peculiar to African and the Ibibio culture alone. Woods writing on libation in the encyclopaedia Americana reports:

In Greek memorial ceremonies for the dead, libation was a common form of public or private sacrifices to the gods. In the homes, a little wine was poured on the ground at mealtime to propitiate the household gods.⁶

The ancient Greeks believed in the "after-life" and concrete expression of this was through libation. They believed that the ancestors need this wine to quench their thirst in the spiritual realm.

Southgate asserts that "the custom of pouring libation prevailed in the houses of the Romans who at their meals made an offering to *Lares* in the fire which burned upon the hearth. The libation they poured was thus a kind of pagan grace before meal".⁷ Libation was commonly poured to communicate with the departed ancestors.

Costelloe, a celebrated writer and thinker opines that a single act of pouring libation could be an expression of religious belief in the gods and ancestors or social and cultural act that has no religious significance. According to him:

Libation is a sacrificial offering made to the god or the dead by the pouring out wholly or in part of some liquid such as wine, milk, honey, oil or mixture of these. A libation could be of private or public character.

It could be employed alone or in conjunction with or the sacrifices, it could be used to solemnize an oath to seal a treaty or simply as an offering at a beginning of a meal. In the early church the taking of wine during *refrigerium* at the shrine of a martyr was substituted for the earlier libations poured out at family tombs. During the fourth century, the practice was proscribed in some places such as Milan because of the abuses that arose from it.⁸

Costelloe seems to suggest that the pouring of libation in the Roman culture did not always have a religious overtone. But, in the Jewish and African culture, libation always convey a religious significance. David the king and great ancestor of the Jews poured libation to Yahweh; this is recorded in the 2nd book of Samuel:

Oh, David sighed, if someone would fetch me drink of water from the well that stands by the gate at Bethlehem! At this the three champions, forcing their way through the Philistine camp, drew water from the well that stands by the gate of Bethlehem, and bringing it away presented it

to David. But, he would drink none of it and poured it out as a libation to Yahweh.⁹

On the side of the Africans, Opoku explains that libation, which is a rite performed in connection with the ancestors, is a religious act but not necessarily an expression of worship which implies that pouring of libation has nothing to do with ancestor worship. For the Africans, their community is not only made up of the living but also the dead and the reality of this notion is given concrete expression in libation and their sacrifices to the dead, whose participation and involvement and blessing are sought as continuing member of the community. The Africans simply believe that the ancestors continue to live the same kind of life they led when they were on earth and they require food and drink to sustain them even in their spiritual existence¹⁰. Again, the Africans believe that there is a close relationship between god and the ancestors, therefore libation, which is a specialized method of communicating with the ancestors, provides an avenue through which prayers are directed to the ancestors and ultimately to God.

Mbiti, a celebrated African scholar and writer views libation as an act that keeps Africans in contact with the living-dead. In his words, "libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect, the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact¹¹. Mbiti further sees the food and libation given to the living-dead as paradoxical act of hospitality and welcome, and yet of informing the living-dead to move away. However, libation is a religious act because no libation rite is brought to an end without a prayer to the gods and ancestors.

Awolalu and Dopamu assert that the significance of libation lies in the belief that since liquid softens the ground, it symbolically opens the way to the presence of the divine power or powers. Whether this is true or not, we do not know but a point of interest in their assertion is that the act of pouring libation among the Africans has a religious overtone and implication since libation is poured to the spirits¹². Lastly, it is the belief in the ancestral spirit, which makes Africans pour libation. For instance, in his book *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, Rev. Edmund Ilogu, making a case for this rites pointedly said: "Our recommendation therefore is that all Ibo Christians as well as non-Christians, acknowledge this link with our matrilineal ancestors in the pouring of libation and in the giving of the pieces of kolanut"¹³.

In summation, the Africans pour libation for purely religious motives. It would therefore be wrong for those of other cultures and religions to condemn the practice of libation which essentially deal with the holy and sacred. People who profess a different faith should appreciate the religious overtone express in the pouring of libation among the Africans.

Libation in Ibibio Culture

Who can pour libation in Ibibio culture

In ordinary circumstances, anybody, male or female alike can perform libation provided he or she is sufficiently knowledgeable in the procedure. For instance, an

individual can perform libation before he takes his drink or food. He can perform this libation on behalf of himself, another individual or a group of people. But in any formal gathering in Ibibioland, it is usually the lot of the oldest man in the group or the chief to pour libation on behalf of the people and during worship or any ritual the priest usually performs the act¹⁴. According to E.O Effiong-Fuller:

The person selected to perform libation would depend on the sophistication or degree of the occasion. In family functions, the most senior or eldest person is selected; the reasoning perhaps being that such a person would be most knowledgeable from years of experience. Alternatively, the most senior male person may be selected for reasons of senility the eldest chief could not perform the libation, he may appoint a competent person even though younger to do it. When a Chief performs libation, it is customary for him to be attended or assisted by a subject¹⁵.

Two or more persons cannot however perform libation simultaneously. In formal gatherings the material needed for libation include drink and cup. Esen writes "the drink must be alcoholic preferably the homemade gin brewed from choicest wine¹⁶. These days, the imported or western brand gin e.g. schnapps are also used. But palm wine is most frequently used in the pouring of libation in Ibibio culture; non-alcoholic drinks are unacceptable¹⁷. According to Esen, "the large element of water in such drinks is a disqualification since it makes the drinks "heavy" and therefore unworthy of spiritual entities.

There are three main parts in the pouring of libation in Ibibio culture especially in formal gathering. These include the invocation, the Supreme Being, the clan deities and the ancestors are called upon to grant that the occasion proceeds successfully. Then the liquor is poured for them to "drink". Next comes the supplication stage. The request made would depend on the occasion- marriage, enthronement of a chief, laying foundation for a new building etc. In other words, supplication is made to suit the occasion in question. After the supplication, a quantity of the liquor is again poured for invisible beings to "drinks". The concluding rite in the process of pouring libation is well explained by Esen:

Remembering that good and evil tend to exist together in the same environment, the libator now passes the cup from his right hand into the left, and sprinkles a drop or two from it unto the ground and calls on any evil or negative forces that might be present to take a sip and depart so the positive influence might not be obstructed¹⁸.

As part of the concluding rites, the cup is then returned to the right hand and the libator makes a final prayer to the gods and ancestors and pours all the remaining content of the cup on the ground. The audience may arise at this juncture and join their voices together in affirmation of the prayer. Informally, libation can be poured to the gods and ancestors during a meal or sit-out talks in prayer of petition, protection

and help against the forces of evil or simply to let the departed partake in the meals of the living in order to show brotherhood that continues even after death.

The socio-religious significance of libation in Ibibio culture.

An analysis of the act of pouring libation and the content of the libation rites in Ibibio culture shows that libation is a communicative agent. As an act transmitting information or a didactic procedure, the Ibibio people use libation procedure as a means of transmitting to the younger generation their basic world view, customs and traditions. For example, when at a libation pouring ceremony the priest or the elder calls on 'Abasi Ibor' [the limitless God of heaven and earth], the rite communicates to or teaches those present that God is Lord of all creation. When in the next section of the rite, the divinities and the ancestors are called upon; it reveals the basic belief that the Ibibio world is unitary world of both material and spiritual, that is of both divine and human. The pouring of wine and sharing of belief is communalism between the dead and the living and between man and man. In essence, libation is a means of communication between the divine and the humans and among the humans. Apart from that it remains a means of transmitting basic belief of the people from one generation to another. This serves as a communicative purpose.

Libation as communication involves a giving or exchanging of information signals or message by words and gestures. When for example, the Ibibio people perform the libation rite, the belief is that permission has been secured from God, the divinities and ancestors before engaging in any significant public gathering or engaging in any project or activity such as building a house, naming or marriage ceremony etc. Though these spiritual entities or beings are not physically seen, Obong Udo Umoren in an interview said that "the people believe that the moment the libation rite is performed, automatic permission is granted by the gods to proceed with the issue at hand"¹⁹. Whether this is true or not, it is not our primary concern, the important thing is that this is the belief of the people. Thus through libation, humans are able to communicate with non-humans. Another important aspect is the fact that pouring libation signals the consecration of a moment and of the occasion.

Libation rite in Ibibio culture expresses the closeness and the sympathetic relationship that exist between the supreme being and his creatures, between the supreme beings and the divinities, between divinities and humans and between ancestors and the living. Libation in Ibibio culture brings men into communion with God and thereby preparing them psychologically to communicate with each other. The act of pouring libation is also a psychological device of renewing contact between the living and the dead in the physical and spiritual world respectively. Libation presupposes and describes the fact that God communicates with his creation in deed and sign. The pouring of libation proclaims and communicates faith in God, in the divinities and in the ancestors. Libation, then is artistic action which is performed by a set of cultural conventions and which functions as communicative art.

In Ibibio culture, part of the liquor used in libation to gods and ancestors is not just

thrown away; it is usually shared among those present at the ceremony. This indicates meal participation not just among humans but with the divine also. Before libation is poured, the cup is held up with both hands and raised up to heaven inviting the gods and the ancestors to share in the drinks. This is done with the belief that if the divine beings share in the drink they will in turn protect the supplicants from harm. The meal participation with one another through libation brings solidarity among the people present during such exercise, helping them to select brotherhood. This portrays love and unity among the people. Furthermore, libation is characteristically marked by realistic depiction of the community or family situation. In this way too, they provide relief by understanding the truth that an individual member of the community or the family, is not suffering in solitude. The problems and joys are shared by all in the process of libation which essentially a meal sharing. Thus in both form and content, libation is communal instrument which brings love, joy and understanding among the people of Ibibio.

Shorter asserts that prayer is the common phenomenon of religion. Prayer is the sign of religion wherever it is alive. This means that prayer is religion in action. Through prayer, the faith, life, work and ruling motive of the religious believer are expressed. Prayer is therefore a living communion of the religious man with God. In most religious traditions of the world, various forms of prayers are discernable viz.: prayers of petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise etc. In Ibibio culture, the act of pouring libation is indeed a form of prayer. The various forms of prayer listed above is made manifest in the libation rites of the Ibibio people. Before an Ibibio pours libation he makes petitions to the Supreme Being, thanking him for his past bounteous blessing, pressing him for his omniscience. He also makes intercession on his behalf or on the behalf of others, asking the blessings of the spiritual beings on their endeavors or activities of the community at large. In the ceremonial act of pouring libation. The mind is fixed upon the Supreme Being and on what he is able to do for men. The attributes and acts of kindness of God are recalled and enumerated. In the prayers of libation, God emerges as the clearest and most concrete spiritual reality. God is approached first and foremost as father and creator. There is a feeling of confidence towards God as with a father. Through libation, the Ibibio people have access to God; appeal to him freely and look up to him for protection and succor. When in Libation the Ibibio people pray to the ancestors, he is not necessarily worshipping them. They believe that there is a closer relationship between God and the ancestors who in turn can obtain good things for them. The singular act of pouring libation is a symbol of fellowship as well as a token of respect and remembrance of the departed soul. Through libation the ancestors are recognized as the guardian of morality and as beings that are interested in the ultimate well being, continuity and progress of their families.

Conclusion

Libation is characteristically marked by realistic depiction of the community or family situations. In this way too, it provides a relief by understanding the truth that an individual member of the community or the family is often remembered even after death. The people used libation to articulate many of their deepest and most enduring feelings. As valuable as cultural consciousness, it is to the libation text that one must refer to comprehend our fore-fathers world view, for it is in the text that the present generation can find a medium which resembles in many ways the cosmology of their ancestors. Invocation during libation shows that the people consider the gods to be very close to them, ready to respond to their needs. The most persistent image the Ibibio libation-text portrays is that of cultural people. Certain aspects of our culture confronts us with evidence which indicates that however seriously the imported religion may have tried to diminish the central communality that had bound all Ibibio together, it has never been able to destroy it totally or leave it psychologically defenseless. But for the most, when our people look at the cosmos, they see man, nature and God as a unity distinct but inseparable aspect of a sacred whole. The notion of sacredness gets at the essence of the texts and through them at the essence of the people's world-view. Libation according to Ibibio people is a powerful spiritual operation, which when properly utilized, could be of immense benefit to mankind.

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