

Libation Performance in Africa: Fetish or Fortress?

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Abstract

Libation as an aspect of African Orature, is a ritualistic performance that involves invocation, praise, incantation, prayers and supplication offered to a “Higher being”. It implies the reverence and call on the ancestors, deities/goddesses and the deities in the African pantheon. It is a communion with and a means of communication with the gods/goddesses in the African culture. In Ibibio libation performance for instance, both the performer and the audience engage in a dialogical relationship which, according to Isidore Okpewho reflects the harmonious interactive relationship that both share. This study examines some components of libation performance properties to ascertain the relevance of libation performances as either fetish or as a fortress to the society (societies) that practice (s) them. The study applies Richard Schechner’s performance theories in analyzing some select performances from both the urban and the rural areas of Akwa Ibom State as its case study. These performances, though collected in the target language (Ibibio), were transcribed and translated into English, for ease of understanding by wider audience. The study discovers that performances from the rural areas bore more esoteric features than those from the urban settings. The study reveals that the sole aim of libation performances is a means of communion with the gods and ancestors, which manifest in theatrical aesthetics that portrays libation performances as a fortress to the performer.

Key words: Ibibio Libation, Reverence, Fortress, Performance, Significations

Date of Submission: 06-07-2021

Date of Acceptance: 19-07-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

Libation, an aspect of African Orature (oral life), is a facet of religious worship in Africa. It involves invocation, chants, praise, prayers and supplication, to the ancestors and deities of the land who are believed to channel these to the Almighty. It entails an appeal to God, the deities and the ancestors through the invocation of these supernatural beings to protect human beings from their enemies. Polycarp Onwurah calls it “a mark of veneration for the ‘living-dead’ whose participation is sought as continuing members of the clan” (39). 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 amongst us. It permeates all facets of Ibibio cultural life, from birth through puberty and maturity to death. In this sense, Udo Etuk 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, [and at the same time] inviting these spirits to attend, drink and bless the occasion or prosper the undertaking” (39). Ekong Ekong confirms that libation is “a ritual of pouring of drinks to the spirit of the departed ancestors and divinities of the land” (48). During libation, the drinks “poured” are actually efforts to feed the deities.¹

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, 3). Libation to the African is the “basic instrument for the appeasement, invitation and worship of the African deities/goddesses”². Etebom Effiong Eberefiak, while discussing on the importance of libation, adds that libation is the call on the ancestors and deities of the land to intercede and intervene in the affairs at hand. Owusu Brempong 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 ancestors 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” (39).

In Ibibio, libation is foregrounded in performance which involves both the performer and the audience in a dialogical relationship. Items such as hot drinks, palm wine, water, salt, palm-oil, *ukpok*, *iko*, *nnak eniin*, *nnak enaā*, *ekere*, glass, etc., are usually used for the performance of libation among the Ibibio.

Libation in its narrow sense comes from the Latin word *libare*, meaning, “to pour as an offering” (DerBedrossian, par. 4), or from the Greek word *leibein*, meaning “to pour” (Effiong-Fuller, 8). It is a concept that cuts across all cultures. In ancient Roman religion, libation was an act of worship in form of liquid pouring which may involve unmixed wine and perfumed oil. In the Andes region of South America, it is called *challa*, where beverages are poured as a performance to *Pachamama* - the mother earth - and performed quite often, especially before meals. Contemporary America has this tradition of pouring malt liquor to the ground before drinking; it is called “tipping”, and is often accompanied by songs and parody. In Asia, Burmese Buddhists perform a kind of libation called *yay zet cha* - water libation, where water is poured from a vessel of water into a vase, drop by drop.

Even in ancient Hebraic tradition, libation was an aspect of Judaism. Jacob, the son of Isaac, sets up a pillar of stone in the place where he has spoken with God, and “poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it” (Gen 35: 14). Prophet Isaiah uses libation as a metaphor to describe the manner of death of the Suffering Servant when he says He will “pour out his life unto death” (Isa 53: 12). In the Jewish tradition, libation is regarded “as a worthy sacrifice to Yahweh” (Onwurah, 39).

In African pantheon, its performance is not limited to the Ibibio society alone, it exists in other cultures. The Igbo call it “*igor ofor*” (Obasi, 6). In Pretoria, South Africa, Shadrack Mvunabandi calls it “drink sacrifices” (3). In the Yoruba tradition, libation is performed in form of *oriki* – praise – and it is usually accompanied with chants, prayers and sacrifice (*ebọ*) in form of offering to the deities and ancestors³, the Yoruba therefore call it *ebọ*, while the Ibibio call it “*uduok ukod*”.

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In African traditions, 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 that orthodox Christians communicate with God in worship, prayers and thanksgiving. For this reason libation becomes the bulwark that unites the African society. Mvunabandi avows that libations “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 after festivals), to increase the fertility of the field through the use of sacrificial blood and other matter” (3-4).

While comparing the reasons for conducting blood sacrifices among the Xhosa, Zulu and Tsonga communities of South Africa and Christian religion, Mvunabandi posits that blood sacrifice serves as a medium of communication between the performer (s) and the super power in the metaphysical realm. He states that in Christian religion, the sacrifices from Judaic culture served to link man to the spiritual, a kind of restoration of a broken order. He further asserts that both instances serve as means of acquiring material and spiritual benefits to the performers. His assertion corroborates the Ibibio worldview that the world is a combination of the visible and the invisible, stressing that both worlds intertwine through constant communion by way of libation. It is thus the ancient fortress relied upon for the proper functioning of the African cosmos.

In an interaction with a Roman Catholic priest, the source infers that libation is a part of African life, just like the communion of the saints is an integral part of Catholic liturgy. He avers that, in the same way the Africans believe that the ancestors are alive and around us in the invisible realm, the Catholics believe too 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. This is a regular event in the soteriological order of Catholicism⁴. Similarly, Onwurah 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 later responds to the yearnings of the traditionally oriented people of Ibibio (37).

In Ghana and Nigeria, schnapps is the preferred alcohol for libation (DerBedrossian, par. 6). In the Yoruba culture, libation occurs mostly during offerings, which are usually made of “foodstuffs, palm-oil, snails, clothes, in addition to animal and human blood” as sacrifice to the invisible powers (Mvunabandi, 137). These sacrifices are believed to make up for atonement, appeasement, thanksgiving and worship of the supernatural that in return showers the practitioners with blessings and favour. Again, it is considered a dependable stronghold. In Ibibio however, the local gin, *ufọfọb* was the preferred drink for libation, while other kinds of drinks (palm-wine, gin and schnapps) and items (oil, salt, water and pepper) are used for regular performances.

Libation in Ibibio is the call on ancestors to be a part of an event, since Africans generally nurture the belief in life after death – reincarnation – the link of the living to divinities. The ancestors, EdetUdo avers, “consisted chiefly of the forefathers and grandmothers... not every ancestor was honoured and worshipped, but only good one. Bolaji Idowu intones that “only good people become ancestors after they have received the well done judgment of deity or of the court of the ancestors” (187).

In order to contact these ancestors for their very important role as links to the deities, libation becomes eminent. Helen Chukwuma observes that the African society “consists 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” (72). Friday Okon on the other hand asserts that the Ibibio believe in “the multiplicity of the existential planes of the society – the planes of the living, the dead, the unborn, the spirits and the deities” (4).

The essence of libation is succinctly expressed in its spiritual and religious importance to the Africans. This is why Kofi Opoku 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 (9).

Onwurah confirms this 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”(40). This belief is further enhanced by the discernment that Africans understand that “the margin separating his physical world from his spiritual realm is very thin, and he is repeatedly criss-crossing that margin” (which reinforces the African’s belief in the intertwining of these two worlds – the visible and the invisible): the natural world and the spirit world which is accessed only through libation (Etuk, 51).

Since events and issues change and adapt themselves to various demands of the dynamics of the larger world, libation as a fortress for the African man to the gods, has also embraced this dynamism in the ways it is performed. This corroborates Idowu’s opinion that religion in its pristine form is no longer in existence, what we have today are modernized contemporary worship forms, which does not erode the original purpose of libation performance.

The concept of libation has been extensively researched into in many cultures, although it is sometimes directly linked with sacrifice in some cultures, it nevertheless remains a means to which the living communicates with the dead (Mvunabandi, 2008; Anonaba, 2012).

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 actualisation of the concept of libation performance in Africa, not the “pouring” alone as many tend to define and classify as fetish. He considers the words of prayers 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, 54).

In the same vein, he adds that “since the libation ritual is basically religious, [it is the] individuals who are articulate in the Twi language and culture [that] perform elaborate libation because they possess the necessary understanding of the Akan belief system” (40). His views validate the assertion that one needs to be cultured in the nuances of the societal religious import, to be a good performer of libation practices.

Ibibio society of Nigeria 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, 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. It is this concept of His Supreme Being that the Ibibio man reveres and maintains this spatial relationship to man through ancestral worship, whereby libation becomes the only way to gain access to him.

II. CONCLUSION

Libation is an aspect of African religious life. It implies the reverence and call on the ancestors, deities/goddesses and the deities in the African pantheon. It is a communion with and a means of communication with the gods/goddesses in the African culture. It implies the way by which Africans nurture their relationship with understanding of who God is to them. In Ibibio libation performance for instance, both the performer and the audience engage in a dialogical relationship, which facilitates easy and harmonious interactions.

In today’s modern world, it is realized that events and issues change and adapt themselves to various demands of the dynamics of the larger world, libation as a means of communication to the gods, (fortress for the African man) has also embraced this dynamism in the ways it is performed. Libation in African culture underscores the Africans’ belief in and nurture of the concept of reincarnation— life after death, which links the living to divinities. This belief further enhances the discernment that Africans understand that “the margin separating his physical world from his spiritual realm, which he repeatedly criss-crosses, is very thin. Africans believe in the intertwining of these two worlds – the visible and the invisible): the natural world and the spirit world which they accessed only through libation. This reliance therefore sums up the conviction that libation is a fortress to the Africans, not fetish as was erroneously concluded by the biased ignorant foreigners who charted the part of African literature.

Thank you for listening

Notes

1. In an interaction with the clan Head of Oku, Etebom (Dr.) Effiong Eberefiak.
2. In an interaction with the clan Head of Oku, Etebom (Dr.) Effiong Eberefiak.
3. In an interaction with Prof. P. A. Ogundeji, Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan.
4. In an interaction with Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Emeka Nwosuh, Dean of Studies, Dominican Institute, Samonda, Bodija, Oyo State.

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Rebecca Okon Usoro, Ph.D. "Libation Performance in Africa: Fetish or Fortress?." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(07), 2021, pp. 26-29.