



The Significant Roles of Libations as a Symbol of Harmony amongst Indigenous People of Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

Libation remains one of the most enduring symbols of cultural harmony among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State. Despite the influences of modernisation, religion and globalisation, the practice continues to express the people's commitment to unity, truth and respect for ancestral values. This paper examines the significant roles of libation as it serves as a spiritual link between the living and the dead, promotes reconciliation and social order and ensures that community decisions are anchored on peace and moral responsibility. Libation is the ritual act of pouring liquid to honour ancestors and deities, reflecting the people's worldview of unity, respect and spiritual continuity. It also examines the vital role of libation in sustaining social cohesion, promoting peace, and reinforcing communal relationships across various ethnic groups, including the Ibibio, Annang, and Oron. This study highlights that libation is traditionally performed by elders, family heads, chiefs and priests who serve as custodians of culture and moral authority. Through its performance during meetings, festivals and conflict resolution, libation symbolises reconciliation, ancestral guidance and collective responsibility. The paper seeks to examine further the changing patterns of libation practices in different communities in Akwa Ibom State, noting a gradual shift from purely religious to symbolic cultural

expression, influenced by modernisation and Christianity. The aim of the study is to highlight the significant role of libation that remains a potent medium for invoking ancestral blessings, expressing communal solidarity, and maintaining peace among community members. The paper adopted the empirical method of contacting texts and relevant journals for information. The study concludes that the continued practice and adaptation of libation affirm its enduring relevance as a cultural mechanism for promoting harmony, moral order, and social unity among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: Libation, Harmony, Indigenous People, Akwa Ibom State, Cultural, Ancestral Veneration, Peace.

Introduction

Libation, the ritual act of pouring out liquid offerings such as palm wine, water, or local gin to the ancestors and divinities, holds deep cultural and spiritual significance among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State. It is an age-long practice that reflects the people's worldview, emphasising peace, unity, respect, and social harmony.

Among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State in Southern Nigeria, libation occupies a central place in traditional religious and cultural life. It is a sacred ritual that involves the symbolic pouring of liquid, often local gin, on the ground or on ancestral shrines as an offering to the ancestors, deities, and spiritual forces (Adesanya, 2025).

This act is performed to express reverence, seek blessings, promote peace, and maintain harmony. This act is performed to express reverence, seek blessings, promote peace, and maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world. The practice of libation among the Akwa Ibom State, particularly the Ibibio, Annang, and Oron ethnic groups, reflects a worldview deeply rooted in communal living, ancestral veneration, and the belief in the interconnection of all beings (Agbo, 2018).

Libation is not merely a religious exercise but a social instrument that fosters unity, reconciliation, and respect within families and communities. It is often performed at family gatherings, festivals, traditional marriages, coronations and conflict resolution meetings, serving as a solemn reminder of shared heritage and collective responsibility. Thus, the significance of libation extends beyond spirituality; it embodies the values of

harmony, social order, and mutual respect that define the indigenous identity of Akwa Ibom people. Through libation, the people reaffirm their bond with their ancestors, express gratitude for divine protection, and make blessings for peace, fertility, and progress in the community (Okeke, 2023).

Qualified people to perform libations in Akwa Ibom State

In Akwa Ibom communities, the performance of libation is a sacred cultural and spiritual act that requires both social and religious authority. It is not performed casually by just anyone, rather. It is carried out by individuals who are recognised and respected within the community for their spiritual maturity, age, and traditional knowledge. The following undermentioned categories of people are generally considered qualified to perform libations in Akwa Ibom State communities.

i. Elders of the family (Ndito Ete or Nditor Eka)

The most common and respected performers of libations are community elders or family heads. They are considered the custodians of tradition and the link between the living and the ancestors. The age, experience, and wisdom grant them the moral and spiritual authority to invoke ancestral blessings (Effiong, 2024).

ii. Family Heads (Ekpuk Head)

In many Akwa Ibom State families, the head of the family or lineage (known as Obong Ekpuk) is responsible for performing libations during family gatherings, marriages, burials, and festivals; this is because he represents the family before the ancestors and the community.

iii. Traditional priests and priestesses (Akan, Mbiam or Ndito Ndem)

In shrine and religious ceremonies traditional priests or priestesses perform libations to the deities (Ndem) and spirits. They are believed to have the spiritual insight and purity necessary to communicate effectively with the supernatural world.

iv. Village or community chiefs

When libation is performed at the community level, such as during festivals, coronations or peace ceremonies, the village head (obong isong) or community chief presides over the ritual. This symbolises unity and collective representation of the people before the ancestors. Clan Heads and Paramount Rulers

At higher traditional levels, libation is performed by recognised custodians of cultural heritage, such as clan heads (Obong Ikpaisong) or paramount rulers (Hai Afe Annang,

Okuku, Nsom, etc.). Their role ensures that ancestral blessings cover the entire clan or kingdom (Nana, 2024).

v. Designated spiritual interpreters

In some communities, certain individuals are specifically chosen for their spiritual sensitivity or ancestral calling to act as intermediaries during rituals. These people may not necessarily hold titles but are respected for their spiritual gifts.

In Akwa Ibom State, libation is performed by individuals who hold spiritual authority, social responsibility, and moral integrity. Whether they are elders, priests, or traditional rulers, these individuals act as the mouthpiece of the community, maintaining harmony between the living and the spiritual realm through prayers, blessings, and invocations.

The changing patterns of libations in different communities in Akwa Ibom State.

Different communities in Akwa Ibom State have adapted libation practices to align with contemporary beliefs and lifestyles. For example,

In Uyo and Etinan, libation has become largely cultural rather than religious, with soft drinks and water replacing traditional substances such as gin, *okoko*, or palm wine.

In Ikot Ekpene and Abak, libation is primarily performed to inaugurate cultural festivals, emphasising communal unity rather than spiritual invocation.

Oron, where libation was once associated with sea deities, it now functions as a public cultural performance during beach festivals (Usoro, 2013).

In Eket and Ibeno, both the ritual materials and symbolic meanings have evolved, with the use of non-alcoholic drinks and a renewed focus on themes of peace and prosperity. However, libation has since shifted from a sacred religious ritual to a symbolic cultural expression of harmony and shared identity (Akpan, 2023).

In Akwa Ibom State, the advent of Christianity emerged as a complex phenomenon, encompassing Western cultural and political influences, scientific worldviews, technological innovations often framed as miracles, formal education, and new approaches to mastering nature. Over time, Christianity has significantly shaped and transformed indigenous cultural and religious practices.

One notable indigenous rite that has been adversely affected is libation, a central element of traditional religious observances. The impact of Christian practices is particularly evident in indigenous burial ceremonies for titled chiefs, which have largely

been replaced by Christian religious rites. In many cases, Christians refused to provide the customary goats, hens, and native drinks required to seek spiritual permission for grave digging and burial. Additionally, practices previously prohibited, such as allowing women to accompany the corpse to the graveside and witness the burial, were introduced.

In contemporary society, many responsible and traditionally eligible members of the community now decline invitations to pour libation, citing religious convictions as their primary reason (Anikan, 2023).

In some instances, members of certain Christian denominations refuse to touch any remnants of drinks used for libation, even though they are not abstainers. Some individuals may even leave a gathering once it is announced that libation will be poured. This attitude illustrates the extent to which Christianity has altered the institution of libation in Akwa Ibom State.

Today, it is common to observe that when someone is invited to pour libation during minor ceremonies, the person simply raises a cup of palm wine, recites a brief Christian prayer, and concludes the ritual without the traditional invocation. This abrupt detachment from the land to which all Akwa Ibom people are culturally bound results in individuals being cut off from collective moral values and indigenous communal solidarity (Esien, 2014).

With modernisation, the *ukpok*, the indigenous drinking cup traditionally used for libation, has largely been relegated to rural settings, while drinking glasses have become common in urban areas for libation rituals (Ekaette, 2023). On many occasions, when an elderly man is appointed to pour libation, he is handed a drinking glass filled with schnapps, gin, or whisky. This practice reflects the strong influence of European culture on Akwa Ibom traditions and is particularly prevalent among urban dwellers living away from their ancestral homes.

The way libation is performed in urban areas is often adulterated. Urban Akwa Ibom people tend to disregard traditional protocols such as wearing indigenous attire or using the *ukpok*, believing that an ordinary glass can serve the same purpose. Consequently, they no longer feel bound by the customary rules governing libation. This contrast highlights a clear distinction in expertise: rural performers are more likely to observe the ritual meticulously, preserving all essential elements, whereas urban practitioners frequently omit important aspects of the practice (Mayer, 2011).

In village settings, children typically gather in large numbers to witness libation ceremonies, thereby learning the traditions firsthand. However, in modern adaptations of libation, English expressions are increasingly used, often overlooking the belief that the gods of the land trace their origins to specific deities. The religious orientation of the people remains evident in daily life, particularly through continuous prayer and invocation, all aimed at seeking the assistance and involvement of the gods and ancestors in human affairs through libation.

Very early in the morning, the eldest man, or father of the family, pours libations, calling on “Abasi Enyong”, the supreme God who lives in the sky, and inviting him to drink wine or gin and eat kola. Then he goes on to ask for peace, protection, and guidance in the day's activities for himself and the rest of his family. When a member of his family is sick, he does the same. This shows the importance of libation in the land. There is constant divination and seeking of the will of the ancestors and deities. Doubtful matters are resolved by divination, through the help of libation. There is, therefore, a semblance of a theocratic social organisation among the Akwa Ibom people (Ekong, 2001).

The significance of libation to the spiritual harmony of Akwa Ibom people is mostly seen when sacrifices are presented as prayers of thanks and during periods of addressing petitions to a deity or the ancestors: In this practice, libation is a legal instrument for validating the decisions of the family lineage, village, or clan, settling disputes, and ensuring peace and harmony. It expresses the will of the community, including the dead ancestors and the gods, and serves as a means of warding off the power of wicked spirits. It is used to protect oneself against danger, such as the possibility of epidemic (Kaly, 2010).

Indeed, libation in Akwa Ibom is a means of establishing unity and continuity. Every major and mysterious happening, misfortune, famine, disaster, death, and sickness is under the control of the gods through libation. The gods protect and give peace to whatever is entrusted to their care (Umoawan, 2015).

On the other hand, libation can serve negative purposes. Every successful traditional man, chief, or titleholder must be equipped with special powers to pour libation. To the Akwa Ibom people, libation has become the image of a self-assured god, confident in the knowledge of its strength, and the people become conscious of their obligations to it (Owudoke, 2021).

The gods and ancestors constitute a means of altering peace in the community. They usually listen to the people's cry and yearning. Libation places man in a strong centre

position in the theoretic universe of the Akwa Ibom people's conception. To maintain that place of peace and spiritual harmony in the community, man must make libation, which makes the individual perceive the values of the environment and the various components in a bid to make different meaning out of what is visible. That perception is derived from the answers to the prayers expressed in the libation

The customs, culture, music, and drama show a true spiritual harmony derived from the gods. The people's collective expression indicates in an indirect way the people's philosophy of life and their collective view of the people. Libation becomes a symbol of peace in which the gods, the ancestors, and man himself interact peacefully within approved bounds, influencing and complementing each other for the good of all. Libation and harmony among the Akwa Ibom people go together (Okafor, 2018).

Thus, the community is ever kept conscious under the rule and vigilance of the gods and ancestors. Man must recognise and remain in constant awareness of their powers to protect and reward. A lack of this knowledge always results in punishment. (Akpan, 2023).

Conclusion

Libation among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State is a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual practice that serves as a powerful symbol of harmony, unity, and moral order. It functions as a bridge between the living and the ancestors, ensuring that communal life is guided by principles of respect, truthfulness, and reconciliation. The ritual reinforces social cohesion by fostering collective responsibility, promoting peace during conflicts, and legitimising decisions made in indigenous meetings.

Historical and contemporary analyses reveal that, despite changes brought about by modernisation, urbanisation, and the spread of Christianity, libation has been adopted while retaining its symbolic significance. Across different communities, Ibibio, Annang, and Oron, libation continues to play a critical role in promoting communal identity, cultural continuity, and harmonious relationships among community members.

Its performance by elders, family heads, priests and chiefs reflects both spiritual authority and social responsibility, underscoring its enduring relevance in contemporary society. Ultimately, libation exemplifies how traditional practices can contribute to social harmony, moral governance, and cultural preservation in modern times.

Recommendations

Libation pouring among Akwa Ibom people is an exercise that most people in the community look forward to with enthusiasm. They are often keen to learn from the few surviving elders about the intricacies of libation pouring. Through this process, they gain wisdom from the insightful sayings typically shared during the ritual of libation.

Based on the study of libation as a symbol of harmony, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Cultural Education and Preservation: Indigenous communities and educational institutions should incorporate teachings on libation practices into cultural and heritage programmes to ensure younger generations understand their significance.
- ii. Integration with modern governance: Community leaders and policymakers should recognise the role of libation in promoting peace and use it as a complementary mechanism in local conflict resolution and dispute settlement.
- iii. Documentation and Research: scholars, cultural organisations, and local governments should document libation practices comprehensively to preserve the ritual as part of the state's intangible cultural heritage.
- iv. Promotion of Intergenerational Transmission: Elders should actively mentor youths in the proper performance of libation to ensure continuity of cultural values and communal ethics.
- v. Cultural Adaptation with Religious Sensitivity: While maintaining its symbolic importance, libation practices can be adopted in ways that respect modern religious beliefs, using non-alcoholic substitutes or simplified rituals without compromising cultural meaning.
- vi. Public Awareness Campaigns: Cultural festivals, media, and community events should highlight the importance of libation as a tool for unity and harmony as social cohesion.
- vii. By implementing these recommendations, the practice of libation can continue to serve as a vibrant cultural instrument that fosters harmony, peace, and collective identity among the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State.

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