

## THE CULT OF ANCESTORS: A FOCAL POINT OF PRAYER IN IBIBIO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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### Abstract

*The cult of ancestors as a focal point of prayer in Ibibio traditional society is very apt and timely. The Ibibio generally do not believe that death is the absolute end of life, rather they believe that death is the termination of the physical life and the beginning of another life in the spirit world, which the death keeps interceding for the living kinsmen. The Ibibio society believe that the ancestors are the mediators between man and the supreme Beings. The Ibibio ancestors interact between the visible and the invisible world of man and the invisible world of the ancestors. However, the ancestors who are believed to be still around the living, keeping watch over their relatives, forms a focal point of prayer for the Ibibio traditional society. This paper adopts a historical method in looking at the position of the Ibibio ancestors and their relationship with the living. It is observed that no function is carried out in the traditional setting without prayer, calling the ancestors through incantation, pouring of food and sacrifice or libation to them to share in the joy of the people and for the betterment of their life. This paper has for reaching recommendations made, based on the findings of their work so as to remove the dilemma of fetish and controversies generated by the practice of worship of the people.*

**Keywords: Cult, Ancestor, Prayer Focal Point, Ibibio Traditional Society.**

### Introduction

The Ibibio world of the spirit is very nimbly populated with spiritual beings; the spirits and the living death (Mbiti, 1960). The Ibibio cosmology clearly believed in the Supreme Being who is believed to be the owner and the creator of the entire universe and everything within, is believed to be the handwork of the Supreme Being. The Ibibio also projects other spiritual forces that are said to have powers often time for specific reasons. The Ibibio held tenaciously to the ancestors as a living-dead that stands as an intermediary. Some scholars of African Traditional Religion classified the belief system of the Africans into four ways; The Supreme God, the sky God, the mother god, the mother earth and other divinities (Parinder 1961. Mbiti1975), echoed that" every African people recognized God according to some cosmologies. However, there are beside Him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of which all associated with him". Ezeanya (1972), in Ezenweke (2004), discover that it is generally observed that when Africans pray, they invoke the Supreme Being (God), (Abasi)spirits, and Sky god. Each is believed to be powerful and capable of protecting man."

Idowu (1973), critically asserts that West Africa is the home of many divinities. Basden (1966), had earlier avowed that "scattered here and there throughout the African society, in most of our local areas, are local deities alleged to possess supernatural powers." According to Metuh

(1981), he reiterated that “the belief in many duties and the ancestral cults has been observed and has overshadowed the worship of God.”

It may sound to illogically that till date, there seem to be no concurrence opinion among scholars of African traditional religion on some theological issues relating to the nature of African Traditional religion. Some of these theological questions centered on whether the adherents of African traditional religion pray and if they do, who are their recipients of these prayers (Ekwunife, 2007). These and Many other theological questions such as the place of the cult of the ancestors in African prayers seem not to have received a general acceptable answer among scholars of African traditional religion.

Ibibio societies generally believe that after death, the departed ones enter into a spiritual state of existence, for the Ibibio there is a destination between deity, divinities and ancestors. While the deity and the divinities are distinctly out and out of the supersensible world the ancestors are related to the living persons in a way that cannot be claimed for either the deity or the divinities. The ancestors though they are dead are still regarded as leads and parts of families or communities to which they belonged while they were human beings. It is generally believed that what happened in consequence of death was only that family life of this earth has been extended to the supersensible world. The ancestors are departed spirits who stand in peculiarly close relation to the tribe or the family. It is accepted that the life of the family is derived from the ancestors because he is taken to be still in a sense one with it, his favor or disfavor has a sharply focused relation to the family and is more urgently to be sought or avoided. This paper adopts a historical analysis of the cult of ancestors in Ibibio; a focal point for prayer.

### **Nature of Prayer**

Prayer in traditional Ibibio society could be private or public, individual as well as communitarian. Arinze (1970), pointed out:

**“individual prayers is not the normal thing except in the form of ejaculations to God, the spirits and the ancestors”.**

He equally sees public prayer besides that traditional morning prayer as “almost invariably bound up with sacrifice” (Arinze, 1970). In essence, prayer in Ibibio traditional religious consciousness is a reality or a necessity to believed as much as to be communicated or verbalized. It is a socially meaningful symbolic act of communication bearing directly upon persons perceived as somehow supporting, maintaining and equally controlling the order of existence of the one praying. It is usually performed with the purpose of getting results from or in the interaction of communication.

Mbiti who felt it as unnecessary to be dragged into the complex question of the origin of prayer maintained that;

**The original circumstance in which early men found himself and for which he had to solicit help from someone other than his fellow human beings forms the basis and origin of prayer (Mbeti, 1975).**

Prayer in Ibibio Traditional Religion falls into the category of “primary prayer” on the ground that spontaneous prayer is closer to the real feeling and actual religious experience of the worshipper. In Ibibio Traditional Religion, prayer is very comprehensive and they scan a vast range of people’s experience. The context of these prayers, no doubt, bear the colouring of traditional man’s cosmology, his idea about the relationship with spiritual being in life and worship and his life situation.

### **The Addressees**

The Addressees of prayer of Traditional Religion are numerous. Most of the prayers are addressed directly and specifically to the “SUPREME BEING” who is the prime addressee. But generally prayers are addressed to the spiritual realities of which people are very much aware of. These realities include;

- a. **Abasi:** At least 90% of traditional prayers are addressed to “Abasi” who is the clearest and even the most concrete spiritual reality in traditional Ibibio Concept. The picture of God as it emerges from prayers shows him to be personal, loving, kind, approachable, giver and preserver of life. Whenever people pray to God they believe that they have reached their last resort in times of need.
- b. **The Spirits and Divinities:** These are always regarded as the second category of spiritual realities which emerge in prayers. In Ibibio, it is held that some of the spirits and divinities were created by Abasi while others are the departed persons and the rest are personification of natural objects. Often people address them in prayers keeping their help in times of need
- c. **The Ancestors:** Prayer being regarded as a communication between man and whatever spiritual realities he chooses to address make it clear that the ancestors are prayed to for there is always communication between man and his ancestors. Man usually seeks help from his ancestors through prayers.

### **Time of Prayer**

Prayer in traditional Ibibio is born in time of individuals need, that it becomes a regular practice in order to anticipate needs that are repeated after. One can then say that prayers are offered at any time as occasions demand. Prayers are mostly said in the morning before going out for work, for many people do not leave their homes without offering an appropriate prayer to the gods. It is a known fact that no ceremonies in Ibibio context begin without prayers.

### **Position When Praying**

Ibibio people assume different positions when praying. Some societies stand, few prostrate before the addressees while some others sit. It is therefore, true that there is no specific acceptable position while praying. The position in most cases is determined by the social relationship of the group concerned. Majority of people usually squat while praying.

### **Composition of Ibibio Prayer**

In Ibibio land, prayers are composed of:

1. **Invocation:** This is a call to the objects of worship to listen to the petition. In invocation the object of worship is mentioned by its personal name which in most cases must be honorific. Praise names, attributes and proverbs are used as part of the invocation to honour the addressees.

2. **Petition:** This is the most important aspect of prayer. It is an expression of the will of man who asks favour from dependable beings for himself and his well wishers. During this part of prayer, the worshipper invokes the blessing of the deity on all those who wish well but pronounces curses on his enemies.

### **The Cult of Ancestors in Ibibio**

In the ancestorship institution, the belief is strong even in the great religions that the ancestors of a given race are alive elsewhere. The question therefore is, who are the ancestors? They are the deceased relations who once lives in this earth and passed onto the other side life. In the faith of the traditional Ibibio, the ancestors are so real that they do not complain of their interference in their personal or family affairs or complain of punishment in the case dereliction of filial duties on the part of their offspring (Iwuagwu, 2002). In the above citation, Iwuagwu gives a clear picture of the personality and position of the ancestors and the ancestral institution in the African World view. He situates the fact of the inseparable interpersonal relationship between the dead (ancestors) and the members of the family who are still alive Iwe (2001), asserts that ancestors, though dead are regarded as members of their families, kindred, clans, or then communities. They are both spiritual members and elders of the kindred which they had belong while alive”.

Ancestors are also regarded as living-dead (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). Therefore, Dopamu states further that the ancestors are regarded as spirit in the sense that they are no longer visible. However, they are not spirits in the senses that they are like divinities or gods. Ibibio distinguishes between ancestors divinities and gods. Deity and divinities and distinctly out and out of the super-sensible world, while ancestors are related to the living community. In other, words, the ancestors are regarded as leads and members of their earthly families. Ancestors are therefore, present among their earthly families. In Ibibio though systems, the living and the dead together from the one community whose members are mutually interdependent upon each other. This relationship is with a view of maintaining the ontological harmony which nature needed to operate fully and freely for the benefit of the social order. on this wise, the ancestors, who provide the spiritual link for the harmony are not “aliens to their communities but are conceived as members of the living families, possessing the same emotions as the living members of the community (Dopamu, 1979). So in the Ibibio world-view, human life and relationship is not only considered from the material realm but also (and most importantly) from the spiritual realms.

It is due to the spiritio-ontological conception of the world that made the Ibibio become quite attached to the ancestral institution. Another important reason for this inseparable attachment is the eschatological dimension of Ibibio religion and philosophy. The Ibibio have a great religion and are of the from conviction that, death is not the total annihilation of the self, but a transition from one state of life to the other or a portal to the wider world beyond. Hence one’s relations include the living, the dead and those yet unborn. The belief in ancestors helps the Ibibio to sustain the super-structure of the socio-political, cultural and economic lives of the community and to maintain a coherent philosophy of reality in Ibibio ontology. The ancestral institution besides, offering Ibibio people the philosophical bases for the explication of the perennial questions of human existence, also provides the bridge and concrete link between the spiritual and physical realms of existence. Ancestors also guide the moral order of the community. (Iwe, 2001), puts it this way; ancestors supply strong sanctions for public

normality. They are the guardians of the ethics and traditional morality. They therefore, demand a high sense of respect for the traditional laws and customs. Ancestors veneration is certainly comparable to the Christian cult of saints in so far as it is an expression of moral ideals of the society. The ancestors are the custodians and guardian of the family affairs, tradition, ethics and activities. Offences in these matters are ultimately an offence against the ancestors who in that capacity act as the invisible police of the families and communities (Mbiti, 1985). Ancestors with the divinities are seen as those that set the boundaries of morality and consequently enforce them.

Consequently, Dopamu (1979), maintains that for the orderly maintenance of the world, the divinities and ancestors laid down norms and set patterns of codes of conducts. They know that morality sustains the well being of the human society and that society must be devoid of oppression, deprivation, materialism and suffering. Certain things which are morally disapproved by the deity, such as cheating, extortion, over –profiteering, and exploitation, must not be committed, since the actions or conducts of any member of the family for good or for evil affects all. The ancestors have become the bacon and protector of public morality through their painstaking effort to maintain a life of chastity, honesty and probity white on their mortal existence. Therefore, they have become standard on morality and social justice for their progenitors. This is contrary to Nana’s assertion that ancestors demand that the living must live as they had lived. Therefore, the exemplary lives of the ancestors serve as standard of social ethics and morality. Notably, the idea of being ejected in the cult of the ancestors in the life after taunts the average traditional Ibibio man and such ideas acts as a deterrent and constraints towards the tendency of oppression, embezzlement, cheat, and dupe, abuses of public office and trust, marginalization of the powerless and overall morality. The fact that the ancestors guide the living members of their family to observe and maintain the moral prescription of the community has been highlighted on Awolalu and Dopamu thus; it is believed that just as the living parents have power to punish disobedience in the youth or dereliction of filial, so ancestors can bring disaster upon the whole family, thus murder, sorcery, witchcraft, stealing, adultery, bearing of false witness, taking false oaths, hatred, incest and other evils are condemned and punished by the ancestors.

The ancestors act as check and balance on the moral life of the community. They reward the morally upright person here on earth with success, happiness, good health and place them in the ranks of the ancestors in the life after. This is the definition of success and wealth in Ibibio traditional ontology. This stance makes more meaning in the popular adage in Ibibio society, “Etiyinyinofonakanuwakinyene” inyeneasaghekekeetusung ono emem” they mean of good name is better or preferred to material acquisition” and “wealth acquired by hones means brings peace” respectively. This means that morality is the basis of Ibibio cosmology.

These good idea and moral virtues of the Ibibio society have been set aside by the material inclination of the contemporary world brought about by globalization and its agents. They result is that Ibibio have lost their personality, authentic self, uniqueness, identity and respect for the sacred, and their contributions to other human races. Consequently, our world has become entirely a material one rather than a humanistic one as the creator made it from the beginning. The ancestors, or the living dead, are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth died “good” and natural death, that is at ripe old age, and received the acknowledge funerary rites. They could be men or women. But more over

often than not, male ancestors are prominent since patrilineage is the dominant system of family and social integration in most traditional African societies. Anyanwu, (1999), opines that “for matrilineal groups like the Ashanti of Ghana and the Ndembu of Zambia, both male and female ancestors are duly acknowledged; with the completion of prescribed funeral rites, a deceased person is believed to transform into an ancestors” Ancestors perform many roles, these roles may be summarised as follows:

- (a) Unifying families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding and inspiring.
- (b) Protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, even in war.
- (c) Mediating between people and the Divinity.
- (d) Enforcing discipline - in case of the breakdown social values
- (e) Facilitating holistic healing (Mbiti, 1975).

Efforts are directed to ensure unity with the community and with the ancestors since one actually exists if the bond of relationship is not broken, Mbiti. (1990)

### **The Focal Point Recipients of Prayer in Ibibio Tradition Societies**

Who do Ibibio address their prayers to? The background that forms this theological question may be summed up in line with Ekwunife (2007), “that the pendulum seems to be oscillating between three positions; overt denials, middle-way positions and affirmative positions”. Ekwunife (2007) went further to elaborate thus;

The overt denial scholars with an assumed evolutionary Theory of the 28<sup>th</sup> and the mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries could not countenance religious thoughts and practices being associated with African traditional religious mentality.

Thus, in view the lofty abstract nature of God cannot be attained in any way by the untutored Africans....the middle-way positions is based on the theory of the remote God or lazy God or inactive God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the African multiple deities, or divinities, ancestors, spirits, spiritual powers and men... the affirmative positions are held by scholars who affirmed with concert proof that traditional Africans relate and commune with God as the adherent of other world religion do.

The overt denial position was originated in the words of Emil Lud Wig a white missionary, who Ezenweke (2004), noted to have ignorantly described the Africans in these words: How can these untutored Africans conceive God? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.

The trust of this paper lies much on the much on the middle-way position. Thus, who is the focal recipient of Ibibio traditional prayer? Is God a remote God or Lazy God or inactive God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the African ancestors and their spirits? What is the place of ancestors in Ibibio traditional prayers? We shall handle this by first of all, identifying the utmost concern of an Ibibio and then move to whom they address their prayers to. The utmost concern of many Ibibio communities is co-existence with and the strengthening of vital force or vital relationship in the world and universe. Hence, the

emphasis is on fecundity and life, and the identification between beings and power or vital force. Nyamiti (2006), substantiate and amplifies that;

**The carving for power, safety, protection and life is the driving force in the African religion. This craving originates not so much from logical reflection, but from a feeling of incapacity and an obstinate desire to overcome it many individual needs are believed to be satisfied by dynamism and spiritism. Amulets and talisman are vehicles of vital energy. This ethic is based on the belief that every act and custom which strikes at the vital force or at the growth and hierarchy of man is bad. What is ontologically and morally and juridical just is that which maintains and increases the vital energy. This vital force is usually increased and protected by being in union with ones ancestors.**

One of the most important aspect of Ibibio religion is the reverence of the ancestors. They are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped. The ancestors are the dead forbears' of the family. However, death does not necessarily confer ancestorship on a person. To be considered an ancestor, they must have lived on exemplary life, and have done much to enhance the prestige of the family, clan, or tribe. It is believed that the ancestors are spiritual beings with the power to bring good fortune to the living, or if dissatisfied, show their displeasure by causing ill fortune, sickness etc... prayers and scarifies are most often offered to them to solicit their blessings and avert their curses (Rutledge, 1997).

Among the spirits, God is the highest. He is the ultimate controller of natural forces and human destiny. He dwells far away in the sky, or in some important places such as mountains. He is often approached through intermediaries such as the ancestors... an ancestor is believed to enjoy a sacred super-human status with special magico-religious prayer that can be beneficial or even harmful to his earthly kin. Such super-human condition is expressed in various ways. Thus, for instance, both bodily and spiritual qualities are ascribed to the ancestor: invisibility or visibility in human but unusual form, capacity to enter into the posses human individuals or brute animals, capacity to consume food or drinks, special nearness to the supreme Being, capacity to exist anywhere-although the ancestors are believed to have localities of preference (e.g shrines, particular trees or bushes, grave yards, etc)... they are said to manifest their anger by sending to their descendant bodily or spiritual calamities. Their anger is usually appeased through prayer and ritual offerings or oblations... An ancestor is, therefore, expected to be faithful to his earthly kin, who expect from him a favorable response or reward for their prayers and ritual donations to him. When recourse to the ancestors fails to procure the desired effects, the living normally turn to the supreme being as a last resort (Njamiti, 2006).

Mbiti (1990), illustrated that;

**The living dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lives until recently,' and they speak the language of the spirit and God... they are spirits' with African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living –dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men.**

**They are still part of their human families and people have personal memories of them.**

The informants of this study most of whom are supposedly Christians have varied opinions regarding the focal recipient of African traditional prayers. While some are inclined to the cult of the ancestors, many seem to reject it. It is surprising that a well known educated politician vehemently in line with other respondents attested to the role of ancestors in their achievements. From the above, one may conclude without serious contradictions that the cult of ancestors seems to be closer to the affairs of their living relations and so. Ibibios seem to call them or resort to them more frequently in their prayers. This may have informed the opinion of the middle-way positions of a remote God or lazy God or inactive God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the Ibibio multiple deities, or divinities, ancestors, spirits, spiritual powers and men. The observed situation may be understood in other ways rather than on the ground that is remote or lazy. The fact that children usually gather around their mother is insufficient to perceive a father as a lazy or remote father. However, one fact that is obvious is the frequent prayers to the ancestors.

**Conclusion**

Ibibio traditional society is a society that believes in the existence of the physical and spiritual world. The physical world is the domain of man while the spiritual world is inhabited by the supreme Being, the divinities and ancestors and spirits. Ibibio generally believes that the spiritual world controls the physical world. Hence they always resort to spiritual forces for solution in times of trouble or favour. In order to explore these spiritual forces, Ibibios always channels their petitions or prayers through the ancestors. This is because they believe that the ancestors are still living with them and are watching over them. Moreover, since fathers have the duty to care and protect his children as well as providing for their needs, Ibibio believe that at death, the father continues those responsibilities as an ancestor to the living.

At times, the ancestral spirits are presented with ambivalent features. They can be benevolent to their earthly kins, but they can also intervene at will to harm them. That is why they are also feared. When they are forgotten or neglected by their descendants they are said to manifest their anger by sending to their descendant bodily or spiritual calamities. Their anger is usually appeased through prayer and ritual offering of libation. This is an indication of the belief that ancestors are entitled to regular sacred communication with their earthly relatives. Indeed, the living on earth experts special benefits from their ancestors. For example protection from sickness, death or other misfortunes and the acquisition of various benefits such as long life, great wealth or many children. An ancestor is therefore expected to be faithful to his earthly kins, who expect from him a favorable response or reward for their prayer and ritual donations to him. When recourse to the ancestors with facts to procure the desired effect, the living normally turn to the Supreme Being as a last resort.

The ancestors on their part are said to desire frequent or regular contact with their earthly relatives, and are even believed to visit them through dreams and mediums. In fact, the living and their ancestors form a totality in which solidarity is prayer and rituals in which human and cosmic solidarity is engaged. That is why the cult of ancestors form a focal point for prayer in Ibibio traditional society.



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