
LIBATION AND ITS SYMBOLISM

J. A. ASARE-TETTEY
COLLEGE OF ART, UST, KUMASI, GHANA

ABSTRACT

Libation, a common Ghanaian ritual, is fraught with numerous symbols, some of which the majority of Ghanaians are unaware of and therefore cannot appreciate as being Ghanaian. This verbal art is here presented from the perspective of the different ethnic contexts, in terms of the symbolisms, practices and interpretations that go with them, our understanding of which will foster a better awareness of one of the popular Ghanaian cultural practices which help to unify the people as a nation with identical cultural practices.

KEYWORDS: *Libation, Symbolism, Culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Libation, a form of supplication, is carried out simultaneously with the pouring of liquor in small quantities as invocation is recited, while the audience by listening partake in the ritual. Rev. Asante Antwi in his book 'Faith in Life Situations' defined libation as a cultic act in which participants - priests, an auxiliary priest or an elder and those present and absent address themselves to supernatural being through the utterances of prayers accompanied by the pouring of food or liquor/drink on the earth as offering'. Through this ritual, a communication channel is established to link the people and God, ancestors, gods and goddesses (The spirits or The spiritual overlords). The supplicants (the living) petition the spiritual overlords to grant their wishes or intercede on their behalf, depending on the nature of the petition.

This form of ritual compares with the presentation of drinks to a monarch in the anticipation of a favour. Aside of creating a communication link with the spiritual overlords, the supplicants strengthen the bond of friendship that links them with the spirits, culminating in an intimate acquaintanceship. The warmth of this friendship is almost always implicit in the language of libation which is direct, personal, intimate and frank; similar to the part of one participant in a dialogue between two associates who share

each other's concerns.

Viewed from another perspective, libation is seen as a one way banter in which only the living participate. The other party - the spiritual overlords remain inactive and latent due to their invisibility and status as spirits. The adherents of this ritual have the conviction that the spiritual overlords as well as the living are equally active partners in the ritual and that the participation of the spiritual overlords may be felt only by those who are spiritually in tune. Therefore, libation is an activity in which officiants or actors and believing participants play their parts actively and with conviction and sincerity.

Every libation is directed to a particular spirit personally or to specific spirits. During each libation process, the circumstances of the issue calling for libation is frankly presented to the spiritual overlords, who the living acknowledge to be capable of dealing with their problems and therefore aware of everything leading to the need for libation. It follows that any action of deceit, dishonesty and faithlessness on the part of the petitioners during such contacts is tantamount to deceit and gross disrespect for one's benefactors and therefore promptly provoke their cold shoulder, sanction and anger. In these circumstances, libation advocates believe the spiritual overlords to be omnipotent, just and friendly spirits who must be accorded the respect and approached cautiously in order to gross the maximum benefits to be gained through libation.

Libation methodology differs from among many ethnic groups in the country. These differences which are to be observed in the performance of this ritual stem from the symbolisms the different ethnic groups seek to portray which are firmly based on their beliefs and philosophies. These symbolisms reveal an in-depth philosophy of life. Among some Ewes of the Central Volta Regions, for example, a person officiating in libation in connection with a happy occasion faces the rising sun and where the sun is not visible he faces the east to tap from the "living" rising sun the penetrating good influences that make for happiness and progressive life in the society. Among the Ashantis, the libation celebrant may face any direction in performing the ritual. His only concern is to forestall the possibility of his own shadow being cast on the spot of libation which is regarded as evil and which must be avoided by all means.



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The circumvention of this rule may force him to face the sun or the east, thus his intentions of doing so are different from that of the Central Volta Region Ewe.

Despite these divergent approaches to the same goal, there are common areas in the libation process that constitute it into a national practice, the identification and assimilation of which will provide the desired appreciation from the citizens. It is also necessary for us as Ghanaians to identify and understand all the various symbolism for the sake of mutual understanding of each ethnic group's viewpoint on libation issues and therefore appreciating the culture of libation among many ethnic groups in the country.

Approach To Libation

Occasions for libation during gatherings are generally two, namely happy and sad moments (including moments of crisis). These two occasions require two distinct approaches in the matter of the liquor used among ethnic groups. To explain this further, generally "good" drinks are the libation liquor provided on happy occasions and "bad" drinks are those presented for libation during sad moments and at other times when there is crisis.

Although these two occasions are common to people of the different ethnic groups in Ghana, some other groups do not label their drinks for libation as such. While the Ashantis, the Kasena Nankanis and many other ethnic groups do not draw any line of distinction between the sombre and joyous aspects of life during libation, others like the Nkonyas and the people of Peki Traditional Area do as mentioned earlier.

To further emphasise the significance of "bad" drinks to connote that which is evil, sinister, the left hand is employed in the disposal of some of the reserved liquor for final libation rites known as "epuo" among Akans, "aha zome" among the Ewes and "Sekuri" among the Kasena Nankanis. For "good" drinks the right hand is used.

Strong liquor is preferred to other drinks for libation. Nonetheless, non-alcoholic drinks, even ordinary water is occasionally used for lack of requisite liquor or for its propriety in particular circumstances. Ordinary water when used for libation suggests that the envisaged spirits are either teetotalers or that the spirits require calming down from anger against some offending individuals as the Ewes think. At other times, strong liquor is used as a tonic to excite the spirits against those the society thinks need to be punished. It is often bluntly spelled out in the libation oration that the drinks should rouse the spirits into action against the offenders. This is also practised by most Akan groups including Fantes, the Walas of Upper West and many other ethnic groups.

Libation officiants are chosen from personages such as linguists, chiefs, and clan heads and the elderly in society during official gathering such as performances in the chiefs house, family gathering and state durbars and selection is considered a privilege reserved almost always

for these selected few.

The selection is based on a number of conditions such as one's position in the society, age and knowledge of traditional usages. Therefore in choosing someone to perform this rite, the position of the linguist over-rides that of any other person and his presence automatically precludes any other choice. At a meeting of ordinary clansmen, excluding the chief and his linguist, the clan head qualifies to perform the libation ritual. At other gatherings when it becomes incumbent upon the group to entreat someone to make a libation, age and knowledge of cultural traditions become the yardstick for the choice. Irrespective of the basis of choice of a libation officiant, family affiliations, the beneficiary of the drinks and other issues can influence who the libation celebrant should be. At other occasions, out of official circles, anybody can perform the rite irrespective of the above considerations.

Among most ethnic groups, to commence libation proceedings, the chosen official together with his assistant bare their chests of clothing and remove their sandals. The assistant then clasps the liquor bottle with both hands, spurts out some of the liquor onto the ground before filling the libation glass or calabash held by the officiant. Some ethnic groups such as the Anlos fill the receptacle without pouring any drops of the liquor on the ground first. The shouts of "agoo, agoo" that follow the pouring, signal for the commencement of the ritual and perfect silence predominates.

Almost always and among most ethnic groups including the Frafras and Kasena Nankanis of Upper East Region God is invoked first as the supreme Deity, Lord of Creation and Sustainer of Life who is above all things; then follow the ancestors and gods depending on the importance the people attach to the spiritual overlord concerned.

In invoking the ancestors, the most recent dead is mentioned first and charged with the responsibility of transmitting the libation message across to the other ancestors of earlier generations. This may not be true of all the ethnic groups.

While the libation progresses, the welfare of the state, social justice which advocates punishment for the wicked and freedom for the vanquished, the blessing of the society with children and riches are greatly stressed. In the course of the libation, the speaker's words are punctuated with words and exclamations of approval and encouragement by those gathered, sometimes throwing in a word to stress what one particularly wishes to happen. This is so with almost all ethnic groups in Ghana such as the Gas, Gonjas, Dagombas, and Brongs.

At hearing the final word of the narration or prayer, the official is warmly congratulated and served with the first glass or calabash of the liquor, the rest of which is shared among those assembled in order of precedence - perhaps chiefs first followed by the chief's elders and advisers, then the elderly in society and the rest of the

people as may be directed. In some societies the chief may not be served with the drink in public. His share of the liquor may be reserved for him.

As a gesture of esteem or favour, the chief or an elder may invite one of the gathering to share his drink. Out of courtesy, the invited person must lower his cloth to waist level and remove one or both his sandals, squat and with both hands receive the drink. It is important to take sips intermittently and look up to your benefactor for further encouragement. The chief or elder on his part will bid the recipient to take more of the drink or it should be politely returned with gratitude. It is not courteous to refuse such an offer.

Among some Ewe communities especially the Anlos, before handing over a drink to a chief, the server must taste it to find out if the liquor is wholesome and that it is not poisoned. It is equally important to compensate the provider of the libation liquor with a glass or calabash of the drink immediately after the celebrant has been served.

Tradition also demands that a little of any liquor being served be reserved. This reserved drink referred to as "aha gome" in Ewe, or "epuo" in Akan or "Sekuri" in Kasena Nankani is declared to the gathering to announce the conclusion of the ceremony. This may be used by the libation official in concluding or sometimes he asks that it be drunk by some chosen person. After the concluding rite or drinking of the "epuo", the end of the ceremony is announced and the donor of the drink thanked by the assembly.

Individuals after consuming their drinks served them, dispose of the little left in their glass or the "epuo" too. For some, the patterns formed as a result of the coming into contact of the liquid with the ground provides a sign of augury calling for interpretation or explanation of what the pattern means in the light of the purpose of the libation.

DISCUSSION

A number of symbols associated with libation have been mentioned in passing without going into details. The first of these is the rising sun often substituted with the east, the source of the rising sun. This rising sun is synonymous with birth, regeneration and vitality. Among the Nkonyas and some Ewes of the Middle Volta Region, the waxing sun or the east is believed to radiate forces through its rays which regenerate, invigorate and impregnate other forces giving birth to positive influences that finally create chains of reactions similar to the auspicious event which provided occasion for the libation. Therefore, after the libation following the birth, of a baby, more births follow in reaction to the libation, it is believed.

Directly opposite to the desirable things of life, symbolised in the libation by the rising sun are the undesirable and adverse events, that mar the pleasantness of life, which

through libation we seek to control and metamorphose into pleasant events for the enjoyment and continuity of our societies. The west or the setting sun which is symbolic of death and decay requiring transformation through purification or change, just as the setting sun "dies" daily and comes up the next morning and is transformed into bright sunlight emitting power. So through the process of "death" and "resurrection" as symbolised in the setting and rising sun the undesirable things and events of life are transformed into desirable and pleasurable events through the ritual of libation. Death, for example, being an undesirable event of life is compensated for by births; illness brings health and mishap generates events of joy.

To further help expedite this circle of metamorphosis through libation, the "epuo" or "aha gome" is disposed of among the Nkonyas and some Ewes in the middle of the Volta Region with the right hand for the "good" drinks and the left for the "bad" drinks especially in funeral libations. The reasons are not far fetched. According to Rev. Akwasi Sarpong, the Ghanaian associates uncleanness and decay with the left hand and uses the left often when unclean jobs must be undertaken. Using the left to dispose of the "epuo" therefore shows in clear terms the peoples abhorrence and unwillingness to promote the continuity of those undesirable events.

Contrary to the above, events of joy must be encouraged and multiplied by using the right hand that symbolises that which is good and continuity. Some individuals, conscious of this and anxious to achieve more in life throw the "epuo" towards their body after taking a "good" drink so that the positive forces would affect them too.

As to why after opening any drink meant for libation some amount is generously poured onto the ground, it is that, everything we have or live on comes from the earth "Asase Yaa" and that whether we live or die, we depend on the earth and this is done as a gesture of gratefulness.

The number three is very significant in libation and Ghanaian cosmological beliefs. To begin libation among most Akans, Guans, Ewes and some other ethnic groups, God is three times invoked before any other spirit. Some ethnic groups after the "epuo" tap the earth three times with the calabash or glass before placing it on the ground.

Invoking God three times strikes a chord in His nature - Sky, Earth and the Underworld - of which the Akans think God consists. Sky, Earth and the Underworld - which is portrayed in the "Nyame dua" - the three pronged stick alter of God is a testimony of this.

The "Onyamedua" tree (Alstonia boonei) served as a symbol of their dependence on God. The tree either grew in palaces, shrines and houses, or a stump of it with a forked branch was placed at the entrances to these palaces. A pot containing rain water (Nyankonsu) was placed on the tree or stump, and periodically the water was used to bless the inmates of the house and any other person who needed to be blessed." writes Kofi Asare Opoku.

Hard liquor, ordinary water and a mixture of corn and flour and water are among the different types of drink used in libation. Different ethnic groups use the drink most common to them. Those in the north mostly use their local drink, "Pito" and in Southern Ghana palm wine. All the drinks have significance in their use. Water which is not an intoxicant and does not stir anyone into action is used in libation when tranquillity is the main aim of the libation. Where the deities to be consulted are considered to be teetotalers and when libation needs to be quickly performed and hard liquor cannot be immediately procured water is the alternative. Palm wine, has been used among most ethnic groups in southern Ghana where the liquor is common. Besides these, any liquor used during libation is for the purpose of paying homage to the spiritual overlords.

The mixture of corn flour and water used by some Ewes especially the Anlos for libation on certain occasions is considered as food-drink which would fortify the ancestors.

Immediately after each libation, the celebrant, the contact person between the two parties - the spirits and the living - is served with some of the drink. It is a way of saying "thank you" to the official for the work done. The drink having been used for libation has been blessed by the spirits and as a result has become a "sacramental" meal which must be shared by all. The celebrant being the contact man must take his share first.

The lowering of one's cloth to the waist level and removal of one's sandals before libation is a sign of respect which is normally accorded chiefs. Among the Dagombas and some ethnic groups in Northern Ghana, one goes down on all fours when approaching a chief. It is this same attitude of respect that is extended to the spirits.

After having gone through the libation and served the drinks down to the dregs, the impending end of the function is announced by the showing of the dregs ("epuo") of the liquid to the gathering. This simple act empowers those who did not benefit from the liquor served to raise a query and also finally put all into the right frame of mind for the concluding part of the supplication. When finally the green light is given, what is left of the drink is poured out into the cup or calabash for the final prayers.

After the final prayer that conclude the libation, individuals look closely at the patterns of their "epuo" and interpret them. In most cases the interpretations are based on events that gave rise to the libation, linking them with the

community, family or individuals whose "epuo" is being interpreted. If the pattern interpreted was like a hand with fingers outstretched, it meant that the man whose "epuo" was being interpreted has his hand (control) over the topic of the libation or the clan, community or the family; that he has successfully eliminated or overcome that problem. Another design which was also interpreted looked like a tree with many branches. Its meaning was the growth of the family or the ethnic group spreading far and wide.

CONCLUSION

It is only after a grasp and an appreciation of the process, imagery and meanings of the symbolisms as contained in libation that one will be in a position to fully understand this verbal art, its spiritual significance and the drama that accompanies the words of the libation. This awareness will place the rich ethnic philosophies of our people at the disposal of the young to ponder over. It is after this comprehension that we can claim to be part of the culture of libation which we witness almost everyday whether as individuals or as groups. Whichever way we look at it, we cannot isolate ourselves completely from society and therefore from some of its cultural practices like libation. We can be sure to be one day confronted with it whether we are prepared for it or not.

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