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LIBATION IS PERFORMED, NOT "POURED"

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Abstract

Libation, as an ancient cultural and spiritual ritual, has been a universal practice amongst most cultures and civilisations across the globe since time immemorial. It is generally characterised by offering wine, food portions or other specified liquids with the intention of invoking and soliciting assistance from spirit beings. Similarly, in the Ghanaian context, libation is a form of prayer or ritual that follows a standard procedure. Unfortunately, many authors, in their definition, have sidelined the main purpose of libatory ritual, which is the verbal utterances to merely the drink/food offering; thereby eschewing the verbal recitals, which is the emphasis. This is a great misrepresentation of this cultural heritage and sacred ritual. It further undermines the essence of the protocols involved in the procedure. This ethnographic study brings clarity to the appropriate terminology for defining libation to suit the socio-cultural Ghanaian context. It underscores that libation is not merely the arbitrary pouring of liquid/food offering to spirit beings, but a scripted, directed and guided art and tradition which is meticulously performed.

Keywords: libation, ritual, performance, prayer

1. Introduction

Libation is a universal spiritual act in all indigenous Ghanaian cultures, especially within Traditional Religion and African Spirituality (Kwakye, 2022; Essel, 2014), as well as some cultures across the globe (Agyarko, 2005). Libation is the most ancient mode of prayer and has a long tradition in human history (Ayim, 2024; Agyarko, 2005). As part of the libation prayer, liquid offerings such as wine, honey, water, blood, oil, amongst others, or food portions as

offered to the spirit beings (Ayim-Aboagye, 1996; Tamakloe, 2016; Kwakye, 2022). Kwakye (2022) educates that the drink serves as a conduit that connects the one performing the task to the spirit beings. He further clarifies that a prayer with a drink offering draws one closer to the spirits than a prayer without a drink offering. This implies that the drink offering serves as a catalyst or a booster, but not the prayer itself. Inversely, a prayer can be made without a drink/food offering. However, libatory prayer is highly recommended because the drink offering further marks or initiates an act of reciprocal relationship between the living and the spirits (Goshadze, 2022); since the drink/food offering is offered with the intention of invoking the spirits and requesting their assistance or favour in return (Ayim-Aboagye, 1996). It also strengthens the bond of friendship between the living and the spirits (Asare-Tettey, 2016).

1. Literature Review

Libation is a ritual (Asare-Tettey, 2016) which involves the pouring of liquor or other specified liquids or food as part of the practice (Adjaye, 2001; Amoah, 1998 and Antubam, 1963 as cited in Tamakloe, 2016; Adelabu, 2020). It has, however, been observed that many authors (including Ayim-Aboagye, 1996; Kwakye, 2022; Essel, 2014) have erroneously used the phrase 'pouring libation' in reference to libatory prayers or ritual. This description of libation as just the 'pouring of liquids/food' does not holistically describe the ritual. It creates the impression that the libation is liquid/food, hence 'pour libation' meaning 'pour liquid/food', which is not the case. Pouring of liquid or food portions alone is not libation. Libation encompasses the whole set of activities (Asare-Tettey, 2016), where the offering is just a part of the whole process. Therefore, such a description limits the ritual/prayers to just the drink/food offering aspect, thereby ignoring the other salient components, especially the verbal utterances and their procedural format. Another example is the definition of libation as "the act of pouring a liquid as a sacrifice (to a deity)" by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2025), and "an amount of alcoholic drink poured out or drunk in honour of a god or a dead relation" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). However, in the context of the indigenous Ghanaian cultures, describing libation as merely the 'pouring of wine or other liquids' is a great misrepresentation and misinformation of the ritual. It does not efficiently define the practice, but further undermines the essence of the verbal utterances during libation. Meanwhile, the verbal utterances (prayer) are the main task, while the pouring of liquids/food accompanies the words. Since libation is a "sacred serious ceremony" (Adelabu, 2020), its authenticity by way of description should not be undermined, but rather preserved and socialised in its originality.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is backed by the theory of contextual relativism, which opines that social and ethical practices differ among cultures (Jarvie, 1995; Steefel, 1961). Therefore, understanding a phenomenon, statement, or activity first requires understanding the socio-cultural background of where it was derived, rather than applying a universal standard (Nickerson, 2023; Hollinger, 2008). Contextually, libation in the indigenous Ghanaian communities should be regarded and described within the subjective context of the Ghanaians. Though libation is practised in ancient Greek, Egyptian, Asian, Latin American civilisations, as well as Israelite, Australian, Babylonian, and Assyrian religions (Agyarko, 2005), a generic or universal definition does not properly define this ancient practice and ritual in the Ghanaian context.

2. Methodology

Paradigm refers to a common assumption or a set of shared beliefs that defines the world around us (Turin et al., 2024; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In the study, the Interpretivist constructivist paradigm was adopted. This paradigm educates that knowledge is socially constructed, and hence knowledge and reality can best be understood and described in the social context of the people involved (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Turin et al., 2024). Implicitly, in as much as libation is a common cultural practice globally, libation in the traditional Ghanaian context should be understood, defined or described from the perspective of the Ghanaian culture. This study is an ethnographic research under the qualitative approach also employed tools such as photographs and direct participant observation from fieldwork as primary data sources. Per the requisite of ethnographic design, the researcher was part of the everyday activities of the participants in their natural setting for five years, from which data was gathered through interactions and participant observation (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, direct participant observation requires the researcher to be present and as an active participant in the activities of the population under study (Kumar, 2011; Cohen et al., 2007). In that effect, the 'emic' approach (Astalin, 2013) was used in interpreting data and in descriptive narratives. These were also supported through a library search from secondary sources. Even though the study did not narrow its scope to a particular Ghanaian ethnic group, traditional Ghanaian leaders within Akan communities like Mfantseman municipality and Cape Coast Metropolis were emphasised during the ethnographic fieldwork.

3. Discussion of Findings

3.1 Libation as a Performance

A performance in literary terminology refers to an act or process of executing a task or an action (Ghalem et al., 2016). Idowu and Adeseke (2020) categorise performing arts as a subset of performance, explaining that performing arts are a performance characterised by scripted or unscripted body actions displayed before an audience. They reiterate that in the performing arts, the human (artist/performer)'s body and presence are used as a medium for expressing the content of the theme. This justifies what Adom (2014) asserts that verbal arts, which are performances that ride on words and body actions or gestures, are an aspect of performing art. Bauman (2011) supports with further clarity that verbal art is a mode of communication or language use. Verbal arts, being a form of oral communication (Bauman, 2011; Kapchan, 2023), include incantations, recitations, folktales, drama, poetry, proverbs, and riddles (Adom, 2014). It is with the above assertions that both Asare-Tettey (2016) and Essel (2014) describe libation as a 'verbal art' and 'art' respectively. This is because libation is a combination of a set of activities that follow a laid-down pattern (Asare-Tettey, 2016; Kwakye, 2022; Tamakloe, 2016), which makes it a scripted performance. It also inculcates other art disciplines such as incantations and traditional formats of recitations, both being verbal arts, hand(body) gestures or actions being a performance, and fashion (dressing style) like the performer lowering his cloth or performing bare-footed; in some Ghanaian cultures (Adjaye, 2001).

4.2 Incantation and Recitations

Incantations, also known as enchantments, are words or ritual utterances spoken to charm or cast a spell (Duru, 2016; Nweke, 2023). An incantation is used during ritual in the form of a hymn or prayer to invoke or praise a supernatural entity (Duru, 2016). In libatory prayers or rituals, incantations and recitals are made. These verbal utterances follow a laid-down format;

the Supreme Being is acknowledged first, followed by notable Abosom of the community, and then some prominent Ancestors (Tamakloe, 2016). Tamakloe (2016), in citing Adams (2010), Engmann (1961) and Dakubu (1981), categorises the stages of the verbal utterances under: introduction, invocations, narration of purpose, supplications and conclusion. Agyarko (2005) adds that after the supplication, a curse is pronounced on entities who might counter the purpose or request of the prayer, before the prayer concludes. This part is when the left hand is sometimes used. Agyarko (2005) further emphasises that, though the officiant/performer is granted an unlimited scope of creativity in his diction, the sequence of the prayer remains rigid and definite. Hence, various Ghanaian communities follow this same format of acknowledgement, regardless of the event or language. Based on observation from field work, the libation also employs the act of cantor and chorus (call and response) approach, where people present respond to certain pronouncements. Examples are the sound "jwej" by the Akans and "Yaa o" by the Gas.

4.3 It is Scripted and Directed

There are specified events or moments where libation is performed. These include during rites of passage, when one is about to embark on a journey or trade, festivals/durbar or traditional gatherings, during enstoolments and distoolments, times of trouble or appreciation (Adelabu, 2020; Essel, 2014; Tamakloe, 2016). That notwithstanding, not everyone is privileged to perform libation at any of the aforementioned moments. People designated to play such a role are mostly spiritual leaders, traditional priests, linguists, family/clan heads and elders of a community (Asare-Tettey, 2016; Kwakye, 2022; Tamakloe, 2016). The person officiating libation is assisted by at least one person. That person(s) stands immediately behind the one doing the prayers to respond and urge the performer in the process (Ayim, 2024).

Antubam (1963), as cited in Tamakloe (2016), stresses that libatory prayers are not done at night in most Ghanaian communities. Ayim (2024) clarifies that night libatory prayers can be done but only on special occasions, like a secret burial of a ruler. This affirms the stand that libation is not just an act of pouring liquid/food, nor is it an arbitrary form of utterance, but follows a traditional procedural template or regulation. Also, not all liquids can be used for libatory prayers. Liquids such as wine, honey, water, blood, oil, or other beverages are the few specified liquids permissible for libation (Ayim-Aboagye, 1996; Tamakloe, 2016). Therefore, combustible liquids or fuels like petrol, kerosene, bitumen and the like are not used for libation ritual. Only blood and edible or consumable liquids are used for libation in the traditional Ghanaian context.

4.4 Code of dressing (Costuming) and Props

As observed, a performer of libation who has his cloth draped around his shoulder often removes it from the shoulder and lowers it to the region of his torso (Figure 1). The lowering of one's cloth is a traditional gesture of reverence and submission to a higher authority or force (Akuffo & Adjerkor, 2020; Asamoah, 2025).



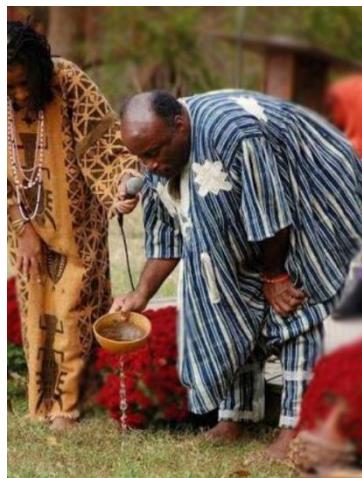
Figure 1: (a) A Ga-Adangbe and (b) Akan traditional leader performing libation with their clothes lowered.

(Image Courtesy: GBC Ghana Online; Modern Ghana)

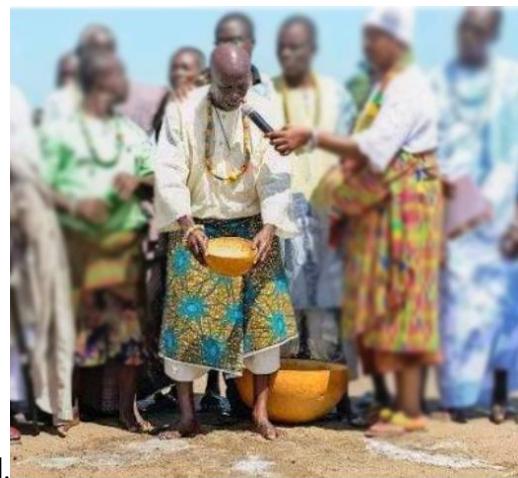
As a sign of respect, and to honour the sacred nature of the presence of the spirit being, it is significant for the performer to remove the footwear in most cases (Amartey, 2022) during libation (Figure 2a and b). This removal of footwear is a traditional protocol expected of one when appearing before or when greeting a chief or higher authority (Adjei, 2015; Fosu, 2020). Also, for libatory ritual, objects like calabash, bottle(s) of schnapp, and a glass or cup of liquid in contemporary times, are procured and used to hold and pour the offering during libation (Tamakloe, 2016) as shown in Figure 2.



(a and b) An Akan traditional leaders performing libation barefooted
 (Image Courtesy: Fieldwork, 2025; Graphic Online)



c.



d.

(c and d) Ewe traditional leaders performing libation with calabash and barefooted
(Image Courtesy: EweArchives)



e.

(e) A Ga traditional leader performing libation barefooted
(Image Courtesy: Ghana and Africa in Stills)

Figure 2 (a-e): Various traditional leaders performing libation

4.6 Body Actions

As earlier established, a performance or performing art deals with body actions or gestures. In the case of libation, the performer makes certain body actions or hand gestures, too. The performer first raises the offering (drink/food) to his/her mouth to verify its true content (Figure 3a), and then looks up to the skies with the offering raised (Figure 3b), as an introductory action during libation; affirming the claim of Ayim (2024).



Figure 3 (a and b): An Asafohen performing the initial stages of libation
 (Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

Per the traditional ethics and protocols of most African cultures, handshake, giving and receiving an item and other social activities are expected to be done with the right hand (Wójtowicz, 2021). Similarly, among the Akan, Ewe and the Kasena Nankana of Ghana, the right hand is predominantly used during libation (Asare-Tettey, 2016). However, in cases where the right hand is preoccupied, a plea must accompany the use of the left hand in such situations (Agyekum, 2008). This is evident in Figure 4 (a-c).





d.

Figure 4: Various traditional leaders performing a libationary prayer; all using the right hand

(Image Courtesy: Fieldwork, 2025)

In most African cultures, with Ghana inclusive, there is a left-hand taboo which prohibits the use of the left hand in interacting with people (Wójtowicz, 2021). However, the left hand can be swiftly used to pour the offering when pronouncing curses. This is a way of averting calamities and to condemn negativity during libations (Asare-Tettey, 2016), as demonstrated in Figure 5 (a and b).



Figure 5: (a) Performer using the right hand to solicit positive things. (b) Performer (Image Courtesy: Fieldwork, 2025)

using the left hand to avert negativity while pouring the liquor away from the spot. In Akan culture, the officiating minister drinks for and on behalf of the spirits mentioned in the prayers, and people present appreciate the performance of the officiant of the libationary prayer at the end of the prayer (Agyarko, 2005). Per observation, this appreciation comes in the form of a clap offering, gunshot, drumming or in words such as "Mo ne kasa" or "W'ano hwam" among the Akans, which translates as "you've spoken well." Why not "you've poured well"? This is because, in the cultural context, the focus of the libation is the content of the verbal utterances,

and not the pouring aspect. Linguistically, Akan refers to libation as “*apae*” meaning ‘prayers’ (Agyarko, 2005). So ‘*yi apae*’ is a command meaning ‘pray’, and “*nsa guo/nsa gu*” also means ‘wine offering’. The ‘*gu*’ is not synonymous with ‘*hwie/hwoe*’. “*hwie/hwoe*” is just pouring, while “*gu*” in the Akan language is a codification which instructs one to abide by the procedures in ritual drink/wine offering. So for libatory prayer, one will not merely ‘*hwie/hwoe nsa*’ (pour wine) to invoke the spirits, but will “*gu nsa*” (follow an enshrined performative procedure).

4. Conclusions

Libation as a form of prayer includes verbal recitals, hand gestures, coupled with the offering of liquid or food portions. Therefore, saying ‘pour libation’ technically implies that the libation is the liquid or food portion. Meanwhile, libation is not the liquid/solid offering but the entire collective spiritual exercise. On the other hand, a drink or food portion can be poured, but the art of libation cannot be poured. Authors are thereby encouraged to use the phrase ‘perform libation’ instead of ‘pour libation’, and ‘libatory prayers’ instead of ‘pouring of libation’. This is because, in the traditional Ghanaian cultures, libation is a prayer, a prayer is a ritual, and rituals are performed, not ‘poured’.

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