

LIBATION ART IN ART OF GHANA: LINKING THE UNLINKED

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the history of easel painting on libation art in post-independence Ghana in relation to Nkrumah's non-statutory cultural policy of inculcating libation art in national state functions. Through a visual analytic approach of post-colonial paintings on the subject matter by two pioneering contemporary Ghanaian artists, and analysis of musical libation into hiplife, it concludes that libation is a beneficial intangible cultural heritage permitted by Ghana's constitution and international laws and must be reinstated at state functions. It posits that though libation shares peculiar religious characteristic verticality with Christian and Islamic prayers, the nation owes no apology to any religious sect for pouring libation at state functions as it has been the case for over five decades after independence. It recommends that a libation manual must be made to encourage its practice by young ones in order to ensure its preservation for the current and future generations.*

KEYWORDS: Libation, Prayer, Cultural Heritage, Traditional Worship, Religious Tolerance

INTRODUCTION

Libation as a verbal socio-cultural practice has been with Africa's Ghana for centuries. Though the exact origin of the art is unknown, since the people of present day Ghana are multi-ethnic emigrants from different locations (Amoah, 2003; McCaskie, 2009) in and outside the African continent, they might have practiced it before their arrival at their present settlement from about the eighth century (Salm & Falola, 2002; Levtzion, 1980). Long before colonialists invasion in the fourteenth century majority of the ethnic groups in Ghana were practising libation art. It characterizes solidarity traditional festivals, various activities in rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage and death) and merrymaking events. There was no agitation upheaval sacrilege over its performance until foreign religious concepts inimical to its practices emerged through colonialists' invasion. Christianity and Islamism were planted in the land formally obsessed with African Traditional Religious thoughts. The establishment of these foreign religions gradually ignited a seemingly unending debate as to whether or not a Christian should practice it, a phenomenon that has generated ambivalent decision among the populace, even among Ghanaian Christians. In 1957 a number of Christian churches' invitee officials from the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches who were to grace the occasion for the dedication of the government-sponsored Ambassador Hotel (now Movenpick Ambassador Hotel) decided to turn down the invitation over the Accra Municipal Council's plans to pour libation at the dedication ceremony. Three main points were given as reasons for the boycott. To them, it is a disgrace to pour libation at a multinational gathering of a sort with varying people with different religions backgrounds, secondly, libation pouring is addressed to gods, ancestors, and spirits which Christians do not believe, and their presence at such a gather would assent a believe contrary to their Christian faith (Daily Graphic, February 1957). They reconsidered their anchored decision when they were given the chance to perform Christian prayer rites on a day solely set aside for them as part of the ceremony. At this point in time, the

Christians felt partially marginalized and were fighting for space and national prominence at state functions. Nkrumah had then selected a state linguist who poured libation at all state functions.

According to Sarpong (1996) Archbishop William Porter, the then Archbishop of Cape Coast set up a committee headed by the then Rt. Rev. John Kojo Amissah to investigate the pouring of libation in 1958. Part of the committee's findings was in support of the act while part was condemnatory. The cultivation of Christianity brought in its wake a proliferation of unprecedented Christian converts and churches with many adherents who are not in favour of pouring libation at public functions (Botwe-Asamoah, 2005).

Nkrumah Factor in Libation

Some of the country's intellectuals (including Nkrumah) began to protect this longstanding cultural heritage through the arts. Emerging from a firm standpoint that libation is a beneficial traditional religious practice that predate Pharaonic state, (Biko, 2011, March) and besides not animistic as portrayed by theologians, perhaps due to their ill understanding and negativism towards African traditional religious thoughts, "Nkrumah's preachment imparted on the methodological positions, thematic construct and visual cultural sense" (Essel, 2014) of the nation's artists, artistes, writers, dramatists and other academicians who created artworks in savaging the drenched libatory heritage. Many educated Ghanaians with a deep sense of national cultural consciousness began to join in the decolonization process of the indoctrinated Ghanaian mind. Nkrumah and many other Africans who sought "knowledge as an instrument of national emancipation and integrity" (Nkrumah, 1964, p. 4) approached this religious insightful propagandist problem in a unifying manner. As a unifier, Nkrumah was by no means calling for the abolition of the foreign religions but seeking for the co-existence of these religious sects together with African Traditional religious practices. He stressed that the two foreign religious thoughts – Christianity and Islamism "must be accommodated only as experiences of the traditional African society." He tells the African continent that "If we fail to do this our society will be racked by the most malignant schizophrenia." (Nkrumah, 1964, p. 78) It is implied that Africa's conversion to the Christian and Islamic faiths must not lead to a complete turnover of her religious beliefs and practices but strengthen her traditional religious cultural inheritance. For it is pathetic to think that Christianity and Islam are superior to traditional worship since there are disparities in their religious belief systems as in the case of African Traditional Religion (ATR).

Nkrumah introduced the pouring of libation to African ancestors at political rallies (Hagan, 1991) alongside Christian and Moslem prayers. Sherwood (1996) as cited in Botwe-Asamoah (2005, p. 121) points out that at the memorial service for Dr Kwegyir Aggrey in Salisbury, North Carolina in 1943, Nkrumah said sacred prayers and then poured libation to the Gods three times. The then dean of the Lincoln University's Theological Seminary condemned his act as contradictory to Christian teachings since Nkrumah had been licentiate to preach. Nkrumah reportedly replied that "the burden of my life is to live in such a way that I may become a living symbol of all that is best in both Christianity and the beliefs of my people. I am a Christian and will ever remain so, but never a blind Christian." By this he meant to Africanize Christianity by blending positive Afrocentric religious beliefs and practices with Euro-Christian beliefs.

To paint him as an evil incarnate in the eyes of the Ghanaian populace, perhaps due to his belief in African religious practices and a general perception at the time that he was spiritually armoured, rumours spread that he possessed occult powers. The then military regime which overthrew his government sought for a Christian ritualistic cleansing of the Osu castle, which until 2012 was the seat of government. The advent of the military juntas did not necessarily cause a stoppage of libation pouring at state functions. During the commissioning of Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park on July 1, 1992, libation was poured by Okyeame Akuffo, the then state linguist. However the debate over whether or not libation should be abolished in state functions erupted with Ghana's contact with the colonialists through the introduction of Christianity and Islam, continued after Nkrumah and other successive governments but degenerated under President John Evans Atta-Mills in 2009. As a result of his Euro-Christian beliefs, he discontinued the pouring of libation in all state functions, disjoining a nationalized state religious treasure consolidated for more than five decades before he acceded the presidential throne. Many traditional authorities and other heavyweights even in the Christian circles who are in favour of libation as a prayer publicly lambasted this move. This public outcry left the late president Atta-Mills in limbo. At a point in time his demeanour towards libation pouring was highly inconsistent and a display of double standards — he allowed and disallowed in some instances. A member of the opposition Honourable Balado Manu referred to this situation as a political gimmick to win votes from electorates for the then oncoming elections (Ghana MPs, 2010). On the day the fishermen of Elmina bestowed an honouring title 'Ofarnyi Kwegya' (great fisherman) to him, libation was poured as part of the ceremony. Despite his personal religious belief as a Christian he could have allowed libation to be poured at state functions. It would have showcased him as a political leader who has high pedigree for religious tolerance and a protector of state cultural heritage. Besides, it is customary in Ghana for visiting dignitaries including politicians to pay homage to chiefs of a particular protectorate anytime they want to do or say something that may affect the lives of the people under the jurisdiction of that chief. During such visits, libation is poured as custom demands. Most of the pro-libation intellectual commentators see no reason why the then presidential candidate Mills in 2008 sought for libational prayers from these chiefs and turning back after winning power to eliminate it from its non-statutory position in state programmes. Disallowing the act may have serious spiritual repercussions, according to Archbishop Sarpong, for the gods or the ancestors may be angry (Boadu, 2012). It was, therefore, not surprising that two staunch traditionalists in the Greater Accra Region, Nii Kwabena Bonne, who doubles as a member of the Ga Traditional Council and Osu Alata Mantse (Chief), and Nuumo Gbelenfo, Chief Linguist of Osu, have alluded that the early morning rains which disrupted the recent Ghana's 57th Independence Day celebration was a demonstration of the wrath of the gods and the ancestors for barring libations at state functions. However, non-destructive rains are traditionally perceived as a sign of abundance blessings while tormenting rains on the other hand may be interpreted as a ranging wrath from the Supreme Being, the gods and or the ancestors. This common interpretative analysis is owing to the instinctual belief system of the African.

Though libation predated Pharaonic state, ancient Egypt played a great role in its rampant spread. There is a text of Ani that supports the pouring of libation (Biko, 2011, March, p. 60): "Pour libations for your father and mother who rest in the valley of the dead ... Do not forget to do this even when you are away from home ... For as you do for your parents, your children will do for you." Examining the above Ani text, libation is an obligatory command and spiritually rewarding should one say it for loved ones. Added to this, it cements one's loving kindness and goodwill message to the other. In other words one shows his/her loving

compassion by pouring libation for the wellbeing of another person, community or nation. Libation is not a preserve of Africa. Similar practices have been widely recorded in other cultures including the ancient Greeks and the Romans (Alexion 1974 as cited in Brempong, 2000). Sarpong (1996, p.19) adds that in Jewish culture, “libation was not a separate religious rite but only an additional element of sacrificial rites.” The African notion of community is that it consists of both the living and the death. This notion is concretized by libation and other sacrifices to the dead as spiritual participant observers who bring blessings for the continuity of the African community (Antubam, 1968; Opoku,1978).

Nkrumah’s pre-independence and post-independence pronouncements invigorated scholars such as Kofi Awoonor, Ayikwei Armah and many others who contested the attack of a positive traditional spiritual apparatus and decisively anchored in their intellectual creations defending why Ghana should keep her idyllic past cultural epochs (Mar, 2012). For instance Awoonor’s (Senanu & Vincent, 1988, p.209) poetic rendition makes nostalgic reference to the depletion of Ghana’s heritage to the detriment of foreign ones. He writes:

On this dirty patch
a tree once stood
shedding incense on the infant corn:
its boughs stretched across a heavens
brightened by the last fires of a tribe.
They sent surveyors and builders
who cut that tree
planting in its place
A huge senseless cathedral of doom.

Awoonor outwardly registered his protesting sentimentality towards foreign religious intruders who wittily superimposed their religions by using formal education as bait and condemning the artistry of the people as festishistic or idolatrous. Metaphorically, ‘tree’ (in line 2) represents the indigenous belief system that recognizes the existence of God, lesser gods, spirits and ancestral veneration. Many Ghanaians do not overtly profess their faith as traditionalists due to its stigmatization by Christianity and Islamic. Nevertheless, the actual situation on the ground is that many blend their indigenous belief and practices with whatever foreign religious adoptions – whether Christianity or Islamism. Salm and Falola (2002, p.50) throws more light on the situation. They write that: “People may subscribe to Christian beliefs, but in certain situations, such as sickness, mishap, or other ill-fortune, it is common to turn to a traditional diviner or priest in search of a cure.” As a matter of fact, the communalistic living of Africans in terms of nuclear and extended family life, belonging to a clan and the community, makes it difficult in isolating oneself from the observance of these religious rituals including libation.

Libation in Hiplife and Hiplife Music

Libation was introduced into highlife music which emerged in the 1920s (Graham, 1994) and later into hiplife music at the latter part of 1999. Highlife musical composition from ‘All Brothers’ Band and Kwesi Ampofo Adjei are examples. In his introductory lines of his song *Mbusuo nka nia ɔpɛ me sɛyɛɛ* (woe to my haters) Kwesi Ampofo Adjei, one of the outstanding Ghanaian highlife musicians of blessed memory, inculcated libatory prayers giving its national flavour since libation itself became and continues to be a national cultural heritage. In other African countries, Hugh Masekela, a South African musician whose band consisted of some Ghanaian singers sometimes uses libatory Twi (Akan) lyrics in his songs that invokes “the most important supernatural beings, God, the mother earth, the deities, rivers (which are also

considered deities) and the ancestors.” (Brempong, 2000, p.53) One of Ghana’s hiplife artistes Obrafour (the executioner) also gained national popularity with his patriotically mimetic libatory composition with the title track ‘*Kwame Nkrumah*’ in the latter part of 1999, a song that continues to enjoy much airplay in the country. Shortly after the release of this song, he was adjudged the *Best Rapper*, *New Artiste of the Year*, and the *Best Highlife song of the Year* during the 2000 Ghana Music Awards. Thriving on the rhythmic sounds and *Twi* lyrics, the first stanza sequentially calls on God, Heavenly hosts, Mother Earth, Ghanaian ancestors including Kwame Nkrumah in that order. It is followed by an appellative grandeur for Kwame Nkrumah for his nationalistic braveness in attaining independence for Ghana, and concluding with a call on all Ghanaian ancestors with a request for longevity for all Ghanaians. The lyrics goes:

Twerduapon Kwame, nsa...
 osor ne Asaase Yaa, nsa ...
 Nananom nsamanfoɔ, nsa ...
 Yeyi Kwame Nkrumah apaeyee ...

Yebɔ wo din, wo deɛ woyɛ ntin
 Wode wo nyansa and ɛgye Ghana tow ho bɛyɛ ɔhene
 Awim ye din, aborɔfoɔ koma bo brim afiri se wonim
 se w’akokoduro mpo doɔso te se hwin
 Dr Kwame Nkrumah wo nim nyansa te se nsoroma
 Africaman mu nyinaa yegye wo tomu se wonim nwoma
 Bapɔnma, w’ani ate, osabarima, w’ani afiri se aborɔnoma
 W’adom ne w’adaworoma wo ma Ghana anya fahodie
 Wiase amansan nyinaa mo so monye aso na montie ...

... Afei yebegu nsa,
 osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah bra begye nsa
 Nananompanimfoɔ a, mode mokra too ho
 degyee Ghanaman yi ma yen so yetoo nsa
 Afrɛ mo ne Ghana abusua nsamanfoɔ se mo megye nsa
 Mongyina yekyi akyigyinapa, yesere moma doɔ nsa
 Nipa bone a, eka ne nkoa oman Ghana anim beguase dee
 mo mma ne mmo ne ti so,
 oman Ghana nkwa so, omanpanin nkwa so, obrafour me nkwa so ...

It is translated as follows:

God, here is a drink offering ...
 Heavenly hosts, here is a drink offering ...
 Ancestors, here is a drink offering ...
 We pray for Kwame Nkrumah ...

We invoke your name for you are like a vein
 You saved Ghana with your wisdom and became a king
 The sky became silent, the heart of the colonialists skip for
 they know your braveness is as countless as hairs
 Dr Kwame Nkrumah, you are as wise as a star
 Africa boasts of your knowledgeability
 Great son, Wiseman, Great Warrior, your eyes are sharp as that

of a dove
 By your grace and kind courtesy you fought for Ghana's independence
 Behold and listen all you nations ...

... It is time for libation pouring
 osagyefo (saviour) Dr Kwame Nkrumah, here is a drink offering
 Our ancestors, who toiled with your souls for Ghana independence, come for
 drink offering
 We call you and the entire Ghanaian ancestry for drink offering
 Be our pillar, we beseech unitary drink offering
 We invoke tribulations unto anyone who wishes Ghana's downfall.
 Long live Ghana! Long live the President! Long live Obrafour (the musician
 himself)!

Easel Painting in Libation Art

Two of the surviving post-colonial easel paintings that pay tribute to libation are that of Kobina Bucknor (Plate 1) and Ernest Victor Asihene (Plate 2) though both employed different techniques. The former was amongst the exhibits of the 1968 National art contest organized under the auspices of the then Arts Council of Ghana and Mboil Oil Ghana Limited. These paintings were "created as visual representation of established ideas to provide emotional and intellectual framework for the understanding of the life of the societies that produced them." (Fosu, 2008, p.viii) Looking at the works, Prof Ernest Victor Asihene, the then Dean of College of Art identified three main types of artists: the first being the one who works with fresh unsophisticated and unbiased source; the second is the copyist artists who tap his ideas from European source; and last is the artist who imbues his creations with his/her cultural nuances though s/he may borrow from other sources. In my view, both Bucknor and Asihene belong to the third category of artists in that exhibition due to their individualized unique visual metaphoric depictions on the same subject matter. Bucknor's representation exudes a pool of invited ancestral heavyweights in dramatic invocatory arrangements depicted with intercessorial somatic forms of oval shapes and visual rhyming colours. The wide opened mouth in angulated stroke of white colour and the cephalic orientation that faces the heavens immediately ushers the central figure into a sanctimonious conjecture in a way that appears to be observing the formulaic opening addresses that characterize libation pouring — a call on God, Mother Earth, deities and ancestors in that order before proclamation of any supplications. With this painting, Bucknor gives an annotated visual description to the perceived hour of spiritual visitation whenever and wherever libation is poured. He saves viewers' time and energy for imaginative perception about the figural activity yet focus their minds on the varying expressive facial details of the multiplicity of masks that engulfs a centrally placed human figure clothed in a colourful toga-like tapestry. It holds a calabash-like object from which a liquid substance drizzles on the ground and into an opened oral cavity of a mask, a dramatic illusion that tries to justify the popular Akan mythology that the ancestors take turn for drink offering during libation. The bodily praxis of the figure and its toga-like costume depicts male characteristic features. Bucknor soaks the entire composition in melancholic expressions considering the idealized figural facial physiognomy and the use of the reds, browns and black as in Ghana's notion of colours. Embedded in philosophical clouts of polychromatic scheme of varying shapes, the deployment of the dark background heightens the mourning emotional quality of this composition and suggests a funeral occasion. He calls this personalized artistic accents of episodic representations that invariably invite spectatorship to his creations 'sculptural idioms'.

Differing from Bucknor's technical style, Asihene presents an impressionistic realism of a gentle forward bent male adult pouring libation near a water body (plate 2). His figure is partially bare-chested and wrapped in a cloth of which part rests on one arm while the other arm holds a small container from which a liquid substance empties to the ground as in Bucknor's cubic approach. In suggesting the flowing of liquid substance from the container and wetland characteristic features of the environment, he uses concentrated patches of luminous polychrome, an effect that blurs a nearby foot of the human figure. Despite the disproportionate rendition of the feet, the figure is well balance. However, the intentional disproportionate elephantine foot wears a slipper, a suggestibility of derivative spiritual strength during and after the libatory intercourse. The bulky fold of the drapery in the cloth form curvy beam of rays that converges at the upper part of one arm. There is a cultural ritualistic quality as a result of the figure's body posture and the lowered wrapped cloth secured by one hand of the figure. This gesture symbolizes utmost humility in Akan customary etiquette. Usually, if a male speaker is in native sandals he is required to accompany the partial bare-chested cloth wrapping mannerism with a half-way withdrawal of the feet from the sandals before addressing a chief at a durbar or a social gathering. Asihene creates perspectival space at the background in darker tones to suggest bushes. With this style, the central figure assumes emotional and spiritual prominence. A careful look at the nape of the figure is a tilted oval-shaped human head that blends with the skies and creates a partial illusion of, perhaps, a listening spiritual force. The eyebrows are slightly raised and the nose and other facial features rendered amorphous in style. Viewers of Asihene's work (plate 2) derive real aesthetic enjoyment of a mused human figure. Both artists painted with deep spiritual inclinations in spatial and figural distortions. Admittedly, these paintings add to the contemporary concretization of libation art and animate the practice in the minds of viewers.



Plate 1: *Libation*. Kobina Bucknor. 1968.
66 x 33 inches. Arcrylic on board.
Source: Kojo Fosu, 2008.



Plate 2: *Libation*. Ernest Victor Asihene. 1995.
32 x 24 inches. Acrylic on board.
Source: Kojo Fosu, 2008.

Libational Liberation

Africans recognize the presence of the supreme deity (God) and say prayers to him in the form of libation. It is done by pouring a liquid substance (water, palm wine or liquor) on the ground and mostly accompanied by prayerful incantations and appellations. It is not a diabolic performative action in the worldview of the traditionalists as perceived by some Euro-Christian believers. During the pouring of libation, the pourer invokes the ancestors who serve as spiritual interlocutors between the physical and the spiritual world. Anytime it is done the ancestors converged to listen and act as intercessors in the spiritual battle. Ancestors are not worshipped in libation (Sarpong, 1996; Angelfire.com, 2004) as some scholars wrongly portrayed in discussing African religious thought, but, venerated as spiritual entities who have power to reward or punish (Cole, 1989). Ladzagla (1980) as cited in Kemevor and Duku (2013, p.58) in buttressing this argument explains that when “libation is performed the spirits of our ancestors are accorded reverence, but not worshipped”. Libation consists of verbal and non-verbal art and a combination of the two. Among the Akans of Ghana, it is not uncommon to observe people pouring little portion of water or wine on the ground anytime they drink. Obviously, this ethnic cultural mannerism satisfies an aspect of the non-verbal form of Ghanaian libatory life. As a verbal art, it is rendered in systematic appellative diction accompanied by corresponding situational gesticulated expressions (as in Asihene and Bucknor’s paintings) that is believed to bring spiritual nourishments.

Having seen the light in African religion, the then Reverend Father Vincent Kwabena Damuah of the Catholic Church in Ghana resigned to establish Afrikania Mission in 1982. Considering the teaching and worshiping style of Afrikania Mission, it could be described as a rebranding of African religious beliefs and practices organized in Christian liturgical format. The teachings of the church, among other things, stress on libatory prayers, its effective and validity in spiritual matters. Afrikania advocates for a return to traditional religion as the spiritual basis for Africa’s development (Nyame, 2011). Libation as a religious art has no founder but it was handed down. Culturally, it is both individual and communistic prayer. That was the way the ancestors taught Ghanaians how to communicate to God. Damuah acted as a strong advocate for traditional religion and did not form a new religion for before him it was.

The prestigious divinity attachment to libation naturally proscribes children from practicing and the fact that it was and continues to be performed, in most cases, at public places by mainly male adults (family heads, clan head, priests) with superfluous oratory fecundity, has limited its performative popularity among children. If the younger generation are debarred from practice of libation how can they be enculturated with it? How can it become part of them when they are not taught from infancy? Since it was handed down to the present generation, it will continue to chart the same course, so, removing these discouraging barriers will attenuate its perpetual existence from generation to generation. To seal it all, a procedural pragmatic manual and innovative computer apps such as animations and other interactive computer applications centred on libation must be made available for easy assimilation and practice.

Religion is an intimate individual affair and an opportunity that establishes the deepest relationship between an individual and his/her maker. The state has no business with it. Both the Ghana’s 1992 constitution and International Law frown at religious intolerance. Article 21 (1) (c) of the Ghana’s Constitution states that “All persons shall have the right to freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice” and Article 35 (5) under the Directive Principles of State Policy also states, “The State shall actively promote the integration of the peoples of Ghana and prohibit discrimination and prejudice on the grounds of place of origin,

circumstances of birth, ethnic origin, gender or religion, creed or other beliefs". Furthermore, Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees freedom of religion. Article 2 (1) of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. Libation in itself is not a religion but a prayerful aspect of African Traditional Religion. It is one of Ghana's religious cultural heritages. Why then sacrificing Ghana's cultural heritage at the expense of foreign religious thought? Looking at the evidences it is justified to say religious tolerance in most African countries including Ghana, is not observed to the core as enshrined in their respective constitutions and international laws.

CONCLUSIONS

Before the advent of Christianity and Islamism, Ghanaians prayed through libation. The presence of Christianity and Islamism militated against the practice. Their insightful indoctrination against the practice generated a pre-independence and post-independence debate of whether or not a Christian/Muslim should pour libation. Despite several decades of unfavourable teaching about the act, it still remains invincible. Ghana's musicians, writers, painters and poets contributed to the protection of libation. A key factor that informed their artistic creations was that it promoted and established a deeper relationship with their maker. Again, morality as an essential ingredient of religion is central to Christian, Islamic and libatory prayers and there is, therefore, no reasons why libation should be halted at national state functions as Nkrumah instituted. The religious political interference with libation pouring at national state functions in Ghana today must stop. Allowing Christian and Islamic prayers while proscribing libation pouring at national state functions is totally discriminatory and tantamount to religious intolerance, and a depletion of a cherished cultural heritage. The nation owes no apology to any religious sect for demonstrating her libatory cultural heritage at state function. Ghana's past must inform her futuristic religious growth.

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