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Theological and Philosophical Significance of Libation (Traditional Prayer) Among Indigenous Mafi-Ewe People of Ghana

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Abstract: Worship in African traditional religion may be incomplete without pouring libation. The practice is one of the means through which devotees reach the Supreme Being. It is through libation prayer that the people worship God, present their requests and also express their gratitude for their wellbeing. Unfortunately, some people misconstrue the practice as heathen, pagan, primitive and worship of dead people as well as manmade objects. This paper provides the theological and philosophical underpinnings of libation prayer among Mafi-Ewe people in Ghana. Data was generated through unstructured in-depth interviews where respondents provided the needed information for the study. The respondents were selected randomly from Mafi-Ewe communities such as Avakpedome, Dugame, Tsawla and Adidome. The respondents included chief priests, chiefs and community elders. In addition to the interviews, personal observations were made in the communities during traditional festivals, funerals, naming ceremonies and other events that required pouring of libation. It was found out that the people could not disconnect the linkage between the living and their dead relatives. They revered the important place of the ancestors in their lives, therefore, in many gatherings they pour libation to connect their departed kinsmen spiritually. They do so to ask for their blessings for the occasion and success of the activities. The paper concludes that modernity and influx of foreign culture and religions among the people have led to the misconceptions that some people hold against the African traditional religious practices in Mafi-Ewe traditional area.

Keywords: Libation, Prayer, Mafi-Ewe People, Ancestral Spirits, Mawuga, Trowo.

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INTRODUCTION

Over centuries, African traditional institutions have thrived solely on African indigenous religion. African indigenous religion for the African peoples serves as the pivot around which all cultural, economic, political and social activities are revolved. In that vein, they consider religion literally as life and life as religion. This is why it is argued that philosophical and theological ideas about African traditional worldview can be said to have originated with the cultural and social life of African peoples (Faimau & Lesitaokana, 2018). Philosophy and theology exist in the people's belief systems and practices in relation to nature, ecology and creation (Auwah-Nyamekye, 2014). Similarly, the philosophy and theology of African indigenous religion are found in personhood and destiny, morality and destiny, family, community, justice, peace and love and so on. The goal of theological and philosophical issues in African indigenous religion is to give its adherents critical, objective and open-minded attitudes to the principles and basic belief systems that the religion holds.

Significantly, (Mokgobi, 2014) indigenous belief systems are not homogenous in Africa, yet, there are a lot of similarities in the traditional beliefs and practices in most African societies. They believe in God as the Supreme Being, the existence of man, the universe and everything that exists in it. The people

hold beliefs also in life and life after death, the power of deities, the idea of sacrifice, rites of passage and ancestral ties (Asante & Mazama 2009; & Isidienu & Onyekelu, 2021). There are, however, some differences in the belief systems and religious practices since most African religions are tribal or clan-based. This is why scholars such as Mbiti asserts that Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices (Mbiti, 1969).

The people of Mafi-Ewe have their own system of beliefs and practices that are not entirely different from what other tribes and ethnic groups in Ghana hold. These beliefs and practices are not exclusive to Ghana on the continent of Africa (Aderibigbe, 2015). Libation is one of the traditional religious practice that serves as form of worship, yet it appears unappealing to contemporary young people in Mafi-Ewe. It is also considered as an outmoded phenomenon in their contemporary socio-religious worldview. The religious act of pouring libation is frowned upon and considered as evil by some people. This perception is largely due to the misconceptions people hold about African traditional religion in Ghana, especially among young people. Meanwhile, the truth remains that pouring libation is a way of praying to God through the lesser gods by the adherents of the African traditional religion. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to look at the rationale behind pouring

libation and how the practice serves as spiritual exercise to relate with the Supreme Being among the indigenous Mafi-Ewe.

INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS WORLD VIEW OF MAFI-EWE PEOPLE

The Indigenous religious worldview of the people of Mafi-Ewe is made up of material and spiritual beings. They believe that at the highest point of both material and spiritual existence is the Supreme Being. Mafi indigenous people like all Ewes call the Supreme Being ‘Mawu’, or ‘Mawuga’, the creator of all things. Some of the material things, especially those with an extraordinary appearance in nature are regarded as the dwelling places of spiritual beings, especially the lesser gods known as *trowo*. Examples of such material things are huge rocks, trees, hills, streams, and forests, among others.

The earth and heavenly bodies like the Sun, Moon and Stars are believed to influence their socio-economic and religio-cultural activities. For example, the appearance of the Moon and its disappearance tell the people when they can have a good harvest when they go fishing or when they could start cultivating the land. Although they do not worship or consult these heavenly bodies, the position of certain stars is used for marking the start of some economic activities such as major farming seasons and also designing the calendar year. The belief is also held that the position or the shape of the moon affects the weather and rainfall. For them when the moon looks cloudy it is a sign of rain.

Mafi-Ewe people in their religious mindset are mindful of what happens around them. They hold the view that nothing happens by chance. In every situation, it is believed that there must be a cause and effect, and these are attributed to the supernatural or spiritual powers as the causative agents. They believe also in the hierarchy of deities. These are The Supreme Being (Mawuga); Ancestral Spirits (Togbewo or Togbetogbewo); lesser gods (Trorwo); Other Spirits and Powers – such as Dzo (juju), witchcraft (Adze), and so on.

The Supreme Being (Mawuga)

Mafi-Ewe indigenous religious system firmly holds to the existence of the Supreme Being. They refer to or call the Supreme Being as Mawu or Mawuga just like other Ewe-speaking peoples. Religion teaches that the world and everything in it were created by Mawu. Mawu is the source of all powers including the power over life and death. Many attributes of Mawu can be deduced from proverbs and other sayings of the people. The following are some examples.

- *Mawu wor xexeame kple nu sia nu si le eme la* (God created the world and everything in it).

- *Mawu nye nublanui kpor la* (God is merciful).
- *Mawu nye nusetor* (God is all-powerful and almighty).

In spite of these attributes of Mawu, he is not directly worshipped by the Ewes. They worship Mawu through lesser gods, ancestral spirits, and other spiritual beings that they believe are the custodians of the authority of Mawu and his servants. This explains the point that in the indigenous religion of Mafi-Ewe people, Mawu is held in very high esteem for which reason they prefer to relate to him through the ancestral spirits and lesser gods. Mugambi and Kirima put it that God is held very high in the thinking of the African, and this is evident from the study of the praise names and attributes given to him, as well as from a consideration of how his relation to man is conceived (Mugambi & Kirima, 1976).

The Ancestral Spirits

The ancestors, in other words, known as ‘the living dead, are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died naturally at a ripe (old) age and had received befitting funeral rites. Next to the Supreme Being, Mawu, are these ancestral spirits, known as *Togbewo* or *Togbetogbewo* (forefathers). Mafi-Ewe people believed that the spirit of their dead relatives or kinsmen albeit believed to be dwelling in the unseen world are in constant and close linkage with the living. They could protect as well as punish the living for any wrongdoing. The ancestors are, therefore, revered and often, the people conferred with them for guidance and advice. Prayers and sacrifices of food and drink are offered to the ancestral spirits when necessary. This religious practice of Mafi-Ewe is not quite different from that of some Akan communities in Ghana. John Evans subscribes to the fact that among the Akans older people never drink without pouring out a few drops of palm wine on the ground for the spirits of the departed relatives. This is called *okra aduane*, ‘food for the soul’ (Evans & John, 1950).

Social and religious wrongs are ‘tried’ by the *Togbetogbewo* and judgments are given. If a living member of the society did anything wrong and is to be corrected by other living members, it was often the duty of these ancestral members to deal with the wrongdoer, depending on the magnitude of the matter (Olupona, 2014). Quarcoopome writes in buttress of this fact that ‘the ancestors are unseen presidents at family and or tribal meetings and perform the duties of guardians and policemen of public morality (Quarcoopome, 1987). The wrongdoer could be penalized directly, or another member of the society could be made to suffer in order to draw attention to the misdeed and its consequences. The ancestral spirit could be consulted by special priests or media to ascertain the details of their displeasure in certain adjudicates. The living members are then obliged to rectify the situation and avert any misfortune

that they believe the ancestors will inflict on them. Failure to do the will of the *togbewo* will attract very harsh punishment. It is believed that in very serious cases, the guilty person is summoned by death to go to account for his or her behaviour in the home of the dead. Pursuant to the belief in ancestral spirits, Mafi-Ewe people do not only revere their ancestral spirits, they also try to live morally upright so that they do not invite the anger of the ancestors upon themselves. The people hold that the ancestors may allow evil spirits to inflict them with calamities in case they are offended. Kwesi Dickson argues that, to the African, diseases and deaths are caused *ultimately* by spirit powers; the universe is full of spirits which for one reason or the other may act for or against human beings (Kwesi, 1984). It is significant to mention that criminal offenses such as murder, rape, robbery were hardly heard of among people in the past. This does not mean that the people live in an environment where there were no immoral issues. The argument is that people were afraid to go to *Torkor atorlia* hence they would not dare to commit such evil as defilement, rape, murder, robbery and so on. As a result, they hold high their socio-ethical system. On the contrary, some recalcitrant individuals and groups of people often time ignore the consequences of unethical behaviours and still engage in the perpetration of several kinds of immorality. This departure from one time morally sound community to immorality is largely blamed on strangers who joined and settled among the indigenous people of Mafi-Ewe. To some extent, it is suggestive that the people's hospitality might be responsible for the unconscious moral degeneration in Mafi-Ewe society.

It is not only among the indigenous people of Mafi but throughout Eweland in Ghana and other parts of Africa people hold the belief that both the living and the dead are in constant communication with each other such that the past ancestors continue to be the custodians of the right religious beliefs and practices (Ansre, 1997). The living usually communicates with the ancestors through pouring libation, rituals, and other forms of rites. It is believed the ancestors on the other hand communicate with the living through the outbreaks of epidemics, untimely deaths, drought, death of prominent persons in the family or society, lightning and thunder, good harvest, child birth, dreams and many more. The events as they happened are interpreted as such.

The Lesser god(s) (Trowo or Vudu)

Mafi-Ewe people believe that there is a host of lesser gods known as *trowo* in Mafi-Ewe land. *Trowo* are believed to derive their powers from *Mawu*. The *trowo* have different powers and prestige. In Mafi-Ewe, there are many lesser gods for various communities that serve under the main Mafi-Ewe *tro* known as *Avakpe*. The roles of these lesser gods are to assist mankind, especially in times of need, such as drought, an outbreak of epidemics, barrenness and warfare. They

are also consulted for advice, protection and prosperity. These deities could also punish wrongdoers and are also invoked to adjudicate in cases like stealing, lying, dishonesty or infidelity. This reveals that the lesser gods also abhor and punish sins. They also play the role of intermediary between man and the Supreme Being. Mbiti (1975) writes:

It is believed by African people that God gave moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another. Through this moral order, customs and institutions have arisen in all societies, to safeguard the life of the individual and the community in which he is part. Moral order helps men to work out and know among themselves what is good and evil, right and wrong, truthful and false, beautiful and ugly, and what people's rights and duties are.

Sin committed by man is not only against the lesser gods but also the Supreme Being. In many African societies, God is the source of their moral laws. One does not only avoid sin to escape punishment but also to acknowledge the fact that God is supreme and ought to be revered and obeyed. Awolalu (1976) puts it in clearer terms as follows:

'Although sin can be and is punished by either the divinities or ancestors, we must realize that Africans believe that such sins are still regarded as offenses against God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe and its inhabitants, who expects his creatures to maintain a good relationship with one another and with the super-sensible world and on whose behalf the divinities and ancestors punish immoral deeds'.

This background discussion may provide the best ethical tool that can sustain and promote moral growth in Mafi-Ewe communities. It is obvious the people are committed to revere God and other spirit beings including the ancestors. It is worth investigating what has actually changed that this worldview of the people is looked down upon by the younger generation. Some elders in the community attributed the problem to the advent of foreign religions, like Christianity and Islam. Meanwhile, some adherents of these religions sometimes expressed their allegiance and affinity for the indigenous religious beliefs and practices. They undercover consult the lesser gods and diviners to find remedies for their personal spiritual problems. Though in the surface such people appear Christians, yet underneath they own allegiance to the indigenous religious.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

According to Samuel Amponsah prayer is a medium of communication with transcendent realities and to that end, it constitutes a principal medium for the articulation of the cardinal beliefs of a particular

religion (Effah, 2009). Prayer is one of the means of communicating with objects of worship. Prayer is also one of the commonest methods of approaching the Supreme Being in African traditional religion. In indigenous religion of Mafi-Ewe people pouring libation is a religious practice through which the members of the religious faith commune with the deities and their ancestors. Most often the prayers are said through the ritual of pouring libation. Among the Mafi-Ewe, prayer whether as part of private or communal worship, has basically the same characteristics: invocation, petition and conclusion. Usually, the prayer to the Supreme Being is directed through a lot of deities. The leader may be a clan or family elder, chief, linguist or a traditional priest, thus, if the prayer is communal would be required to mention the names of all known ancestors during the invocation. When the leader is unable to acknowledge all the known ancestors and the deities (lesser gods) apology is rendered on behalf of the people. This is done in order to appease any of the deities that may be assumed to be present in the community yet the priest or the elder is not aware. In African traditional religion prayers generally include praise of the Supreme Being, lesser gods, ancestors, and so on. This praise usually takes the form of appellation. The prayer involves thanksgiving, and also declaration of the state of affairs in which the prayers are offered. After this, then the petition follows which is usually requested for material blessings such as good crop yield, good rain, good health, and success in businesses, protection from danger, safety in travelling, preservation of life, peace and prosperity for the community among others. The request also includes blessings for people who wish the worshippers well and curse for those who plan evil against their lives and people who wish them evil too. The concept of 'enemy' is evident among the Mafi-Ewe people. They presume these enemies can only be defeated through the intervention of the spirit beings.

Mafi-Ewe people believe that authority over blessings or curses does not lie in the powers of human beings. Besides, human beings cannot by any means of himself or herself overpower evil spirits. The belief that offenses are usually punished by spirit beings has in itself checked moral degeneration in Mafi-Ewe communities. It is expected that if somebody commits evil acts, automatically the person must be punished by the ancestors. In this vein, moral values are held very high among members of the communities. Members of the community are expected to live and act in such a way as to promote community's well-being and to do otherwise is to deliberately call for wrath of the gods or ancestors. The anger of the spirit may be visited on the offending individual or the entire community. Kwesi Dickson affirms that any act that distracts from the soundness of a society is looked upon with disfavour, and society takes remedial measures to reverse the evil consequences that may be set in motion (Kwesi, 1984). Prayers are therefore directed towards good

neighborliness so that communal living would be enhanced. To maintain this moral harmony in the society children are brought up to recognize the roles they must play in pursuance of the need to strengthen the community ties as they graduate into adulthood. Among the people of Mafi-Ewe the belief is held that ancestors are said to be the reference point for ethical and moral values. They are the custodians for laws and customs. Often, when some immoral acts are committed the people literally say 'our forefathers or ancestors do not do such things'. The choice of the present tense alone is in itself proving the fact that in African societies ancestors are counted as living beings dwelling among members of the society.

The Act of Pouring Libation

The act of pouring libation is one of the oldest and favourite rituals that is practiced in most African societies. There is no specific 'time table' or time frame for pouring libation in any African communities. In Mafi-Ewe society pouring libation can be done at the start, middle or end of an event. Such events may include the beginning of daily activities by the individual, meeting of chiefs and elders, special occasions such as birth of a child, festival, or simply receiving of some special guests into the community. During traditional arbitrations that is usually moderated by chiefs and elders, libation is poured at the end of proceedings to thank the ancestors for granting them the wisdom to resolve issues and make peace.

The elements used for libation is either palm wine or akpeteshie (Akpeteshie is a potent local gin also nicknamed as "homeboy" among some indigenous Ewe people). The palm wine is mostly fetched in calabash while the akpeteshie or gin is served in drinking glass for the libation. The prayer begins by invoking the various gods and ancestors. The number of ancestors to mention in the prayer depends on the significance attached to the occasion. The ancestors mentioned are those that are known to the living. After the invocation, the actual prayer will then begin. The speaker will put the occasion in context by recounting the events that led to the occasion. The speaker will reveal the Ewe philosophy during this part. Lastly, the final blessing asks for wealth, good health, peace among other things. The speaker will be pouring onto the ground the drink from the calabash or drinking glass whilst speaking. Through this means, communion can be achieved with the ancestors in African indigenous religion.

Interacting with some elders at Tsawla, it was noticed that the choice of the drink depends on the occasion and the reason why the libation must be poured. Water is literally used to quench fire and cooling down hot objects. For this reason Ewes and other people in Africa believe that when the living arouses the anger of the ancestors or there is a pending danger they seek the intervention of the ancestral spirits by using water to pour libation, sometimes. The belief is

that water will cool the heart of the offended party. In addition water is also used as substance for reconciliation. This is done usually when elders adjudicate cases between factions; they pour water on the ground to signify peace and an end to any fight or misunderstanding.

Kofi Opoku Asare opines that libation may be offered with food and drink. It is believed that ancestors continue to live the same kind of life they led when they were on earth, therefore, they would require food and drink to sustain themselves in their spiritual state of existence (Asare, 1977). A respondent recounted that sometime they hear strange noise from their kitchens when everyone is at sleep in the night. For them, it is their departed family members who come around to look for food. In many indigenous African societies the ritual of giving food to the ancestors is much observed. Indigenous people of Mafi-Ewe respond to this such that during their annual Hogbetsotso festival *Dzobodzoboe* meal is sprinkled on the ground for the ancestors as a form of expressing appreciation for successes chalked in the year. The sprinkling of the *Dzobodzoboe* is accompanied with prayer for good crop yield, good fishing, health, protection against calamities, and so on. They sprinkle the food because they believe the ancestors just like any human being also need food to gain energy to work effectively among them.

In an attempt to understand how the practice engages the spirit beings, the chief priestess at Avakpedome revealed that *“ideally, once you poured libation you should be talking to the ancestors like you talk to any other living person. You should commune and build the relationship. Over time, you will hear messages in distinct ways. Sometimes several people will hear the message or hear parts of the message”*. This is done through silent meditation.

Often when pouring libation it is required that you craft your own libation prayer. You craft the conversation that explains why you invoke the ancestors on the occasion. The onlookers during the prayer respond to almost every declaration that is made pleasant to the ear as *neva me*.

Who Pours Libation

Respondents submitted that young people especially teenagers do not normally pour libation in the presence of elders. Pouring libation in Mafi-Ewe is done by elderly persons. It can also be done by traditional priests or priestesses. The person performing the libation must possess the spiritual force (power) to engage the ancestors.

Libation is not always pouring of drink. Sometimes the individual perform the libation by spewing the drink from his or her mouth onto the ground. Respondents at Adidome stated that pouring

libation is not only spiritual exercise that is preserve of the male gender. Women who possess the same spiritual qualities like men can also pour libation. However, the woman must be of good moral standing. It is also expected that she must be in good relationship with the ancestors as well as possessing qualities that would qualify her as an ancestor after death. A woman who serves as priestess is qualified like her male counterparts to pour libation in Mafi-Ewe traditional area.

Where to Pour Libation

People do not always have a consecrated shrine or special place to pour libation. African peoples believe that the Supreme Being is omnipresent, therefore, they can call upon him everywhere through the ancestral spirits and the lesser gods. Therefore, in performing libation the drink is poured on the ground in shrines, in front of shrines, onto living plant, at the door step of a building (thus, during building dedication ceremony), public ceremonial grounds among other places. This implies that libation has no prescribe place for it to be carried out.

SIGNIFICANCE OF LIBATION

Pouring libation is very important in African societies. This is because it is the only way the people communicate to the Supreme Being (God). The people offer thanks to God through the lesser gods and the ancestors. During festivals they pour libation to express their gratitude to God for protecting them throughout their farming seasons, fishing and other economic activities. Among Mafi-Ewe people, God is seen as transcendent who is above all other powers and controls the entire universe. They acknowledged God as the reason behind their successes and fortunes who deserve appreciation and reverence for their yields. Sometimes, the libation is poured during family gatherings or festivals to offer the thanksgiving.

Pouring libation is not only means of communicating with the objects of reverence and worship but it is also to keep a good relationship with the departed relatives who are now spirits and are believed to be dwelling among the living. Mafi-Ewe people like many Africans, believe that death is not the end of human life. A person is believed, to continue to exist after death. The continuation of life beyond death is recognized through a very widespread practice of libation pouring to remember the departed. This phenomenon is found throughout Ewe land. The community in Africa is not only made up of the living, but also of the living dead and the reality of this notion is given concrete expression in pouring libation and other sacrifices to the dead whose participation, involvement and blessings are sought, as continuing members of the community (Asare, 1977). What is usually done in remembering the dead is that adult or elderly members of the family or community, and especially heads of families, pour out drinks such as

water, palm wine, alcoholic beverage on the ground for the spirits of the family or the community? Through this ritual exercise children learn about their great grandparents and their contribution to their families and community.

Pouring libation as form of prayer among the people of Mafi-Ewe. It is also meant to seek protection against spirits that they regard as evil. It is believed by Mafi-Ewe people that a person whose dead body is not buried with due and correct customary rites will not be admitted among the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living aimlessly and haunting the existence of other people. This is also the fate of people who die through what they called "unnatural death" like road accidents, during child-birth, bad diseases that are contagious such as HIV/AIDS, elephantiasis, leprosy, and so on. The belief is that these are bad omen, and person will only die through such means as a result of curse. Bolaji Idowu posited that in certain areas in Africa, the possibility is not ruled out that these spirits enter into animals or birds in order to destroy things or molest people (Idowu, 1973).

CONCLUSION

In African societies the idea of regular communal prayer is rare. Shrines and priests are very few, especially in recent time. Individual and family prayers are widely practiced. They believe that God provides refuge and answers to questions of anything that bothers on life. Parrinder postulates that despite God's greatness and distance, he can be appealed to directly, without special formulae or intervening priests or godlings (Parrinder, 1962). The belief in prayers reveals that God is seen as the creator of all things. Like the mightiest of kings He is rarely approached and the intervening gods and ancestors receive much more attention.

The concept of ancestral belief is among other things to emphasize the relationship that exist between ancestors and God on the one hand and between ancestors and their descendants on the other. In perspective, ancestors will and should be regarded not as an illusion but as a reality that can be described as living together with human beings who are alive.

Philosophy in African traditional religion is a systematic study of the attitude of the mind and the beliefs that have emerged over the years in African societies. Indigenous people of Mafi-Ewe hold ideals based on the belief that every act and custom which strikes at vital force or at the growth, prosperity and protection of the human being is bad. Nyamiti echoed that, what is ontologically and morally and juridical just is that which maintains and increases the vital energy, and this vital energy is usually increased and protected by being in union with people's ancestors (Nyamiti, 2006). It is believed that ancestors hold power to bring

good fortune or otherwise to the living. For this reason prayers and sacrifices are most often offered to them to solicit their blessings.

The theological concern for some persons is who is the focal recipient of African traditional prayers? In African traditional religion, its adherents believe in the Supreme Being as the creator and sustainer of the universe and everything in it. They believe the ancestors play intermediary role between their descendants and the Supreme Being, and are close to both. For me African Christian theologians who may argue that African traditional religion has no theological cake to share as far as prayer in African traditional religion is concerned missed the mark. This assertion can be blamed on the advent of other religions such as Christianity and Islam. That notwithstanding, many people have embraced foreign lifestyles at the expense of their traditional religious values in the name of modernity.

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