



## The Ibibio Traditional Religion

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Received: 11.04.2026 | Accepted: 14.05.2026 | Published: 03.06.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.20531204](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20531204)

### Abstract

### Original Research Article

The traditional religion of the Ibibio people of South-Eastern Nigeria is an integral aspect of the African Traditional Religion (ATR), thus, it shares its basic features of the latter which include: the belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in the spirits, belief in ancestors, as well as the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own attendant cult. The cult involves the performance of rituals and ceremonies (or worship) and the existence of religious functionaries. The Ibibio, like other Africans have always been very religious and religion permeates all aspects of their life so fully that there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular and between religious and non-religious. The Ibibio developed their religion before the advent of the Europeans and were satisfied with the worship system and the outcomes. In recent past, the Ibibio religion, and indeed, the African Traditional Religion (ATR) have been denigrated by most Western scholars and commentators. In a bid to justify the erroneous claim that before the advent of the Europeans that Africa was a “Dark Continent” with no civilisation, diverse derogatory epithets were ascribed to African religion such as paganism, fetishism, primitive, savage anti-Christ, etc. The study discovers that despite the deliberate Eurocentric attempts to discredit the indigenous religion as well as some drastic legislation which bar certain traditional practices and regulation of its workings, some Ibibio still adhere to aspects of their traditional religion to this day. The paper adopts a historical narrative methodology.

**Keywords:** Ibibio traditional religion, African Traditional Religion, ancestral worship, religious rituals and ceremonies, historical narrative methodology.

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### Introduction

The Ibibio and her sub-groups such as the Annang and Oron, live in present-day Akwalbom State of Nigeria. Ibibio antiquity in the area has led to speculations. M’Keown (1912) states that of all the Cross River peoples, the Ibibio are “probably the stock native from whom most of the small tribes in the Qua Iboe and Calabar have sprung”. Talbot (1923) posits that by 7000 B.C., firm formations of ethnic

groups in Ibibio area had begun because, according to him, “the Ibibio area with its abundant wild fruits, fish from the rivers and salt which could be obtained from the salt rivers was capable of supporting human population from very early times”.

Available records estimate the population of the Ibibio at about 7 million (Akwalbom State Ministry of Information and Strategy, 2023). Like other African groups, the



Ibibio are very religious. Indeed, they did not learn religion by rote, rather, religion permeated all facets of their lives so fully that it was not easy to possibly always isolate it (Ukpong, 2007).

The importance of religion in any human community is readily acknowledged. Man's need to reach out to a being, higher and mightier when he is under stress appears to be both basic and universal. Historians and Anthropologists opine that from the beginning, man felt this need when mystified by the forces of nature, threatened by ferocious wild beasts and perplexed by death and the hereafter. This, they believed coupled with the fear of the unknown, brought about the genesis of religion. Indeed, the affirmation of transcendental beings is the core of religion. Hardly did any human civilisation grow in early times without giving recognition to religion (Kalu, 1989).

Once upon a time, the only known religion in the whole of Africa was the African Traditional Religion (ATR) (Awolalu, 1989). Put differently, before the advent of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria where the Ibibio situates, there had been indigenous religion upheld by the forebears of the different nationalities that now constitutes country. It is a religion whose founders cannot be traced no matter how far one may attempt to delve into history. It may not be wrong to assert therefore that religion is as old as the first man in Nigeria. It is a religion which emerged from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present generation of Nigerians and which is being practised today in various forms and intensities by some sections of Nigerians, openly or surreptitiously (Awolalu, 1989).

The Ibibio developed and lived by a religion of their own which can stand side by side with any other in terms of organisation, observances, and conception of the sacred and divine. The Ibibio recognised the existence of a Supreme Being who ruled the Universe and directed the affairs of men. Below Him in the hierarchy were several lesser deities with specific powers and well-defined spheres of influence. The traditional religion of the Ibibio has been described by a number of writers who

have studied it from the religious, philosophical or anthropological points of view (Esen, 1982).

Despite the scholarly contributions of Africans on the history and culture (including the Traditional Religion) of many African ethnic groups, the subject matter of the history and culture (including the Traditional Religion) of the Ibibio, is still in its infancy. In other words, the literature on the Traditional Religion of the Ibibio is fairly scanty. This study is a modest addition to the available literature on this robust field of academic field of study.

### Religion: Its Meaning

Religion is the most functional aspect of a people's culture. It is probably the strongest element in the society which exerts the strongest influence upon the thinking and life of the people. In the traditional society, there are no irreligious people; a person does not learn his religion by rote. Rather, it is instilled in his system right from birth (Ukpong, 2007).

Idowu strengthens this position thus:

Religion in its essence is the means by which God and Spirit and man's essential self communicate. It is something resulting from the relationship which God established from the beginning of (human) life between himself and man (Idowu, 1973: 4).

Religion is both individual and social activity. It is a serious social obligation of individuals or communities towards the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interest and destinies. The word "traditional" is attached to the religion of the Ibibio because it originated from the environment and the soil of the area. The word "traditional" serves the purpose of distinguishing other religions such as: Christianity and Islam

that were introduced by foreign missionaries. In contrast, the Traditional Religion of the Ibibio was not brought to the indigenes by any missionary group rather, the people were born into it. It has been handed down from generation to generation, and it is part of their rich heritage (Utin, 1987, Abasiattai, 1991).

According to Utin (1987), the religion of the Ibibio, being part of a vast corpus of what is known as the African Traditional Religion, shares the principal features of the African Traditional Religion, which include, the belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in the spirits, belief in ancestors, as well as the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own attendant cult. The cult involves the performance of rituals and ceremonies (or worship) and the existence of religious personnel or functionaries.

### Belief in the Supreme Being

Osaji (1957) believes that even before the coming of the great religions, all human cultures the world over, recognised the existence of the Supreme Being. Mbiti (1977) also observes in this connection that all African peoples in the pre-Christian era, believed in the existence of the Supreme Being or God. Thus, the concept of a Supreme Being or God loomed large, long and clear among the Ibibio in the pre-Christian era (Ukpong, 2007).

The Ibibio conceive of God as a masculine personality (Akpan, 2018). This concept, according to Mbiti (1977) is known in anthropological literature as anthropomorphism. God is viewed as the creator of all things. He was/is transcendent and immanent. He did not abdicate his responsibility to man but was rather still concerned with the affairs of this world.

The Ibibio designate the Supreme Being as *Abasilbom*, (Infinite or Supreme God), who lives in the sky or heavens; hence, the people identify with *AbasiEnyong*, God of the firmament or universe. *AbasiEnyong* is the creator, *Obot*, and ruler of the universe. He is omnipotent and omnipresent, transcendent, yet immanent. His very name, *Abasilbom*, indicates a vastness in size, power, jurisdiction,

benevolence and the like that is boundless and virtually beyond human comprehension. In Ibibio land, there is a universal use of the name *Abasilbom*, for God by the people (Utin, 1987; Abasiattai, 1991; Ukpong, 2007).

Calamities were/are regarded as being caused by evil spirits or by magic or witchcraft and not by God. But God could be angry and vengeful and could cause deaths, drought, flood, outbreak of locusts and other calamities, when offended. He was/is just, always right, evil followed evil, God established laws and customs and ordained destinies. Procreation, fertility, happiness and well-being are his attributes (Mbiti, 1977).

The supreme status of *AbasiEnyong* (Supreme Being) is underscored in the Ibibio proverb –*odoeti-me amaotototAbasi, atuakisong* (meaning that the instrument for digging the soil first acknowledges God and clears with Him, before striking the earth). The instrument referred to here is a stout pole sharpened at one end, used for boring holes vertically in the earth especially for the purpose of positioning yam stakes for burying refuse. The operation involves holding the *eti-me* with both hands, raising vertically skywards, and bringing it down with force on the chosen spot on the ground, so that the sharpened end spears deep into the soil. The *etim-me* was a standard instrument found in practically every Ibibio home in the past. To the Ibibio, the skyward raising of the *etim-e* was a symbolic art of asking *AbasiEnyong* (Supreme God) for permission to strike at or disfigure his property, the Earth. (Esen, 1982; Akpabio, 1982).

### The Worship of the Supreme God

Traditionally, the Ibibio used to engage in two kinds of worship of God - direct and indirect worship. Though the nature of worship has not been systematised like in the case of Christianity and Islam, the (traditional) worship of the Supreme Being is a family or individual affair (Utin, 1987, Akpan, 2018).

Direct Worship: The Ibibio traditional religion allows for direct worship of God. God is approached by everybody, young and old. Of the

Supreme God, *AbasiIbom*, the people do not make an image or a statute or other resemblance, nor construct any building, housing or temple, for He is too vast for human imagination to comprehend or to be confined or localised within the confines of a dwelling abode. For practical purpose of worship, the object of worship could be represented by a small pot with water, usually placed on a little clay mound beside *okono* or *itomo* saplings planted for that purpose. *IsoAbasi* (face of god) is a place for the offering of sacrifices, usually of white colour, symbolising the purity of the Supreme Being. The sacrifice is usually done on the eighth day, *Etaha*. In the olden days, the *etaha* day was regarded as a sacred day (like the Jewish Sabbath) which no farm work was allowed (Abasiattai, 1991).

In times past, when a person planned to begin any important venture – to engage in business, for example, or when he took a new step in life – such as marriage, he solicited the favour and protection of God by sacrificing a cock directly to Him. During this type of worship, the head of the man wishing to engage in business and the heads of the members of his household were touched with the cock before it was killed. This act signified that those whose heads were touched with the offering would share in the blessings which “god” would bestow.

Utin (1987) states further that another case of direct worship of what the Ibibio conceptualised as the Supreme Being was the *mmem* (safety or peace rite). Through this rite, every mother, acting as the priestess, was supposed to seek the blessings and protection of god

for her children almost every morning before going out to work (comparable to the way Christian parents conduct morning family prayers). *Mmem* was a mixture of some leaf roots with clay and other ingredients pounded together with some water. It was always prepared by a medicine man, for household and used as a protective medicine. Very early in the morning, the mother would dip her hands into the vessel of *mmem*, raised her hands up towards the rising sun and asked God to ward off evil from her house and to guard and protect her children. At

the end of the prayer, she would rob her children’s faces, arms and bodies with the *mmem*.

Udo (1983) states that in cases of extreme hardship and distress such as outbreak of epidemics of small pox or chicken pox, infestation by locusts or prolonged drought, God was sacrificed to directly. In such a case, the object of sacrifice had to be spotlessly clean and immaculately white. They include, white goat, white hen, white ram, etc. On certain occasions, parents of children and heads of households prayed to God directly for the health and well-being of themselves and members of their households. But such direct prayers to God were isolated cases and not widespread.

### Priesthood

As noted by Utin (1987), a priest is an important person in any religion, especially in the Traditional Religion. The art of priesthood arose from man’s confrontation with the supernatural. Through this encounter, man learnt that the Sacred must be approached with the utmost care, and that man must approach the holy that he may live.

Oso maintains about priesthood thus:

The priest came into existence as a mediator between man and God. He is one dedicated to the service of a Deity and therefore the servant of the Deity; therefore he should know the Deity, be able to hear the voice of the Deity and be able to speak with the Deity. He is at the same time, the mouth-piece between the Deity and man. His function includes also the offering of man’s worship to the Deity; he is the keeper of the shrine and the custodian

of the sacred emblems; he looks after the temple and sees that everything is ready for worship; he consecrates new emblems of the shrine and sees that the necessary needs are supplied to the shrine, for example the drinks for libation (Oso, 1978: 187).

In Ibibio society, priests were trained and ordained. They could be male or female. The office of priest could be hereditary or acquired. The chief of a village or clan combined magico-religious duties with his civic duties. He had a ritual status and was ontologically believed to be nearer to God, divinities, ancestors and spirits than other members of the community (Mbiti, 1977; Noah, 1988; Ukpong, 2007).

The Ibibio traditional religion like every other religion has its own liturgy. In traditional religion, the liturgy consists in sacrifice and libation. Sacrifices were made virtually on every ceremonial and non-ceremonial occasion. Sacrifices were made at birth, naming of a child, fattening of a girl for marriage, circumcision, wedding, funeral, planting, harvest, rites of passage, drought, pregnancy and birth of a child, hunting, illness, going on a journey, building a new home, opening a new market and at eating. Before a child ate his/her food, he/she threw a portion outside, saying: *Ete mmi dia do; Eka mmi dia do* (my father eat your share; my mother eat your share). When a person acquired a new chicken for breeding, he removed a feather from its body, burnt it and caused the chicken to smell the burnt feather. Thereafter, he introduced the chicken to every corner of a room where the chicken would be kept saying: *tum diadia tum di duk* (forage well for food and come back safely every day). Finally he poured a cup of water on to the roof of his building and allowed the drops of the water falling down, to bathe the chicken. Thus, the ancient Ibibio had a rudimentary idea of baptism. Indeed, religious worship was a twenty-four hour affair among the Ibibio (Ukpong, 2007).

The items of sacrifice depended on the occasion and on the number and personalities involved. They included: drinks, crayfish, fish, animals such as goats tortoise, sheep, chicken, birds, insects, *ndom*(white clay), *nsei*(yellow and red dye), *ntuenibok*(pink desmodium), cocoyam, yams, cassava and sometimes, human beings (Mbiti, 1977, Ukpong, 2007).

Most sacrifices were accompanied by libation. Libation was sometimes poured without sacrifice. In any gathering, the oldest man in the group poured the libation because he was believed to have been ontologically nearer to God, the divinities, spirits and, ancestors than any other person. In every libation, God was mentioned first, then the earth deity, the clan divinities, minor gods and ancestors. The person offering the libation sought the aid of these spiritual entities for the well-being and prosperity of the living (Udo, 1982).

### Divinities

The Ibibio also believed in the existence of lesser deities (or divinities) and spirits (*ndem*) through whom they used to make supplications to higher being. Other deities included: *abasiisong* (goddess of the earth), believed in times past to be responsible for the fertility of crops, *ekaabasi* (mother god), which was also considered to be responsible for procreation and fertility of women, *ebeabasi* (a defiled husband); and *AbasiEkong* (god of war) (Utin, 1987; Ukpong, 2007; Akpan, 2018).

Mbiti (1977) posits that “divinities are spiritual beings of relatively high status”. Idowu (1983) and Ukpong (2007) state that “the divinities are derivatives from deity”. In other words, they are manifestations of the attributes of the Supreme Being. Their powers and authority are meaningless apart from Him. The divinities are believed to have been brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. Each divinity had a specific function in the ordering of the total life of the community. They were ministers, each with its own definite portfolio in the deity’s monarchical government. Each was in its own sphere, an administrative head of a department.

The divinities were intermediaries between Deity and man especially with reference to their particular functions.

Among the Ibibio, some of the divinities were *AbasiIsong*(Earth Goddess); *ObotUso*(the god in charge of carving, blacksmithing, iron bending, pottery and other forms of technical devices requiring great ingenuity; *AbasiEkong*(the god in charge of the conduct of war); *Idio*(the divinity in charge of farming),etc., (Ukpong, 2007).

As stated above, since divinities were “gods of relatively high status” their influence was not confined only to certain individuals, families, villages or village groups. Rather, their influence and power transcended an entire clan and beyond to the rest of the Ibibio. Each clan divinity was worshipped in an entire clan. Certain days were set aside in the clan for the worship of their divinities. However, the principal Ibibio clan divinities were: *Anantia*(Ibiono); *Etefia*(Ikono); *Awa* (Itam); *Itina*(Iman); *Anyang* (Nsit); *AkpaEdu*(Ndikpo); *Otuk Idem* (Iwawa), *Ukana*(Offot); *Udoe Oku* (Oku); *Udoe*(Ediene), *Adukana* (Ukana), *Obioufre* (*Asang*) (Ukpong, 2023, Akpan, 2018).

The clan deity was a strong unifying force within the clan. All persons from the clan came to identify with the clan’s deity, and whatever their local differences, were, firmly united in their reverence for that local god, in their strict observance of the week day regarded as holy to the clan deity, and their severe abstinence from eating the meat (totem) held sacred to the deity. Every Ibibio clan had its own deity, whose worship entailed special modes of behaviour, prescribed sacrifices, the observance of holy days, and abstinence from meat of some special animals or crops regarded as sacred to such gods.

The veneration of *abasiisong* (land divinity) to a great extent related to the central role that land played in the existence of the Ibibio. In the first place, the people believed that land was the habitat for the living, the ancestors and the unborn, as well as most of the deities. The importance that the people attached to land was founded on the belief that land is a

communal property that must not be permanently alienated by anybody. In fact, until the overwhelming influence of urbanisation, when the pace of social development proved stronger and modified the traditional land tenure, land was a communal property (Udo, 1983).

The Ibibio cosmology posits that it is the *AbasiEnyong* (God of the sky) that creates, but it is *abasiisong* (god of the earth) that sustains. He is that source of all the food, water, shelter, medicinal herbs and all other things that sustain life. He is the sustenance of the living, the final resting place of the dead. For these reasons the earth or the soil itself personified as *abasiisong* was the object of great reverence and source of hope (Esen, 1982).

In recognition of its sustaining power, the Ibibio say that *omuumisiongisiduoho* (meaning that he who holds firmly to the soil does not fail). This proverb expresses very succinctly, the real feeling of the Ibibio about the earth (or soil or land). Whoever is in firm contact with it cannot fall.

The people believed that *ndem* was the intermediary to *Abasilbom*. It was commonly held that *abasiisong*, is the major source of sustenance to the people through the provision of food and other necessities to support the environment. It was in this context that the Ibibio used the term *isong*, (land, in describing the community of people). When the Ibibio poured libation, they ended with the expression, such as *isong*, *isongododukana* (god is the giver of fortune) (Abasiattai,1991; (Akpan, 2017).

*EkaAbasi*(Mother god): *EkaAbasi* (mother god) was believed to be a goddess associated with fertility; hence, the spirit mother who sends children in the spirit world to the planet earth. She was seen as the one responsible for the sickness and misfortune which befall children. The fertility of the land and bountiful harvest were linked with the feelings of *ekaabasi*. Sacrifices had to be offered to appease her and also keep her away from snatching children through death. Some of the groups venerated *ekaabasi*, with a pot and an erected stake at cross-roads, and offer sacrifices of food, goats, yams, etc (Abasiattai, 1991).

*EbeAbasi*(defied husband): *Ebeabasi* (spirit husband) was also dreaded by the Ibibio because it was believed that he had power over children. All female children were believed to be married to this deity in the spirit world before they were born into the physical world. It was on the basis of this belief that sacrifices were offered before young girls were married to pacify the spirit husband.

To Ibibio, benevolent spirits - *etiekpo* protects the living and were also considered to have the capacity to engender the fertility of the soil for increased harvest. When the ancestors were displeased, they send diseases, especially when the people failed to perform some mandatory rituals and festivals. This thinking informed their decision to keep shrines, dedicated to their ancestors called *isoekpo* (the face of ghost), where libation was often poured and food served to the ancestors. The shrines were represented by stakes of some specified trees such - hard wood, driven into the ground inside a room of a house erected specifically for that purpose, and stick out two to four feet high with decorations tied around them. The highest stake, represented *ete-etebom* (great grandfather), the lower represents *etebom*, (grandfather), and the lowest, *ete* (father) (Akpabio, 1982; Abasiattai, 1991; Ukpong, 2007).

According to Abasiattai (1991), the setting up of the shrine was known as *edikongakwa*. In the case of a chief, the stakes were surrounded with a skull. *Ekpo* were regarded as being close to the living, and were generally believed to “see” what was happening in the physical realm. Sometimes, their attention had to be drawn by sacrifices and prayers. In most cases, some people claimed to have seen and interacted with their dead ancestors in the dream state. In fact, *ekponyoho* cult was closely linked with the veneration of the ancestors. In Ibibio land, deceased adult males who were members of secret societies were honoured with *nwomo* (a decorated mini-hut memorial), erected on their graves in which a large number of their personal belongings were placed for their use in the world beyond.

Among the ancient Ibibio, there was a widespread belief that every object in nature, even an inanimate one, had a spirit essence or was inhabited by a spirit or spirits. There was no area of the earth, no object or creature, herb, an implement such as a machete or hoe or a stone, which could not be inhabited by a spirit or spirits. There were spirits of trees, rocks, mountains, valleys, forests, rivers and even spirits of departed ancestors (Akpabio, 1982; Ukpong, 2023).

### Spirit and Ancestors

According to Mbiti (1977), the word “spirit” has a very wide meaning. It could mean soul of man, an angel, a demon, nature spirit or the spirit or soul of a dead person, roaming about in this mundane world. Spirits are said to be innumerable.

The ancient Ibibio called the world of the death, the *obioekpo*. Talbot (1926) states that the spirit world was neither in the sky nor below the earth but side by side with the abode of the living, from which the dead were separated by a fence or with a gate. According to him, in the *ObioEkpo*(spirit world), every soul or inmate occupied the same position or continued to practise the same occupation as here on earth. There were chiefs and elders, ordinary people, messengers, labourers, blacksmiths, craftsmen, palm wine tappers, climbers of oil palm fruits, traditional midwives, musicians, expert singers, drummers and dancers, and so on. There were also medicine men and diviners. Marriages were arranged; weddings were celebrated; children were born.

It has been reasoned that the geography of this world was duplicated in the *ohioekpo*. Every clan, village group or village had its own place in the *obioekpo* and that there were mountains, valleys, rivers, streams, swamps, forests, animals in the *obioekpo*as in this world (Udo, 1983).

According to Idowu (1983), the word “ancestor” represents “one from whom a person descends either by the father or mother, especially one more remote than a grandparent;

a progenitor, as well as one from whom an inheritance is derived". He also opines that only people who lived righteous lives on earth, qualified to be ancestors, whether or not these were the immediate fathers, mothers, grandparents or more remote ancestors of the living. Udo (1983) claims that only grand-fathers and grand-mothers or more remote relations are qualified to be accorded the status of ancestors. He adds that "only the good ones who were noted for their bravery, sane judgement and philanthropy, were accorded the status of ancestors.

Ukpong (2007) observes that among the Ibibio, an ancestor could be the deceased father or mother, grandfather or grandmother or a remote ancestor of the living, provided the deceased person lived righteous and honourable life while here on earth. Ancestors were believed to continue to be members of the families they left behind in this world. They ensured the well-being of members of their families. They gave instructions in dreams, made requests to be given something and could threaten to punish family members for not carrying out particular instructions or not caring sufficiently for them by way of sacrifices and libation. The Ibibio made offerings to their ancestors in the form of food items such as palm wine, goats, fowls, libations of wine or water, and also made daily prayers and invocations.

Ancestor worship is a very important aspect of the Ibibio traditional religion. The Ibibio, like other Africans, believe that when the venerable patriarch of the family dies, he is really not dead, but gone to another world from where he continues to watch over the children and protect them and their interests against harm. It is believed that even after "death" the dead still live among the descendants contributing their patriarchal function of protecting the entire family much in the same way as when they were alive. In return, his descendants invoke their presence generally at all times and especially in times of difficulty, and share their food and drinks with them. If an Ibibio man is about to eat kola, or he is about to drink wine or take snuff, he first throws down a bit or few drops of it on ground and calls on his ancestors to take it before

he himself takes it. This practice of pouring a libation of strong drink to the ancestors derives from this central principle (Esen, 1982). The Ibibio holds the view that the ancestors still hear them if they call, because, as the proverbs puts it, *ekpoakpaenyinikpahautong* (it is the dead man's eyes that die, not his ear).

### Reincarnation

The Ibibio, like other African groups, had the belief in reincarnation. The idea was that when a person died, the ghost, *ekpo*, either moved into the land of ghost, *obioekpo*, supposed to be located beneath the earth, or wandered restlessly around its former earthly abode *asukpakha* or *mfimmfimekpo*. They believed that if one died before his time, he would have to come back to the earthly plane, and that each person had the chance to reincarnate. Those who had just come to this life for the first time were called *akpandieheobot*. Such people were usually naive, innocent, artless and almost un-intelligent. Conversely, those who had come to this life before were intelligent and artful and may be referred to as *akaniowo* (Abasiattai, 1991).

It was held that while awaiting reincarnation, the period of which might vary from a few months to two years, the dead spirit remained as an ancestor guiding and protecting its descendants on the earth, they were also said to be the ones that enhanced the fertility of crops and women. It was on this basis that the descendants were compelled to offer sacrifices to these spirits. For instance, the people generally rarely drank anything until they had offered some of the drink on the ground to the ancestors. They believed that the ancestors could however chastise people with disaster or diseases if they broke some taboo or fail to perform stipulated rituals during sacrifices, neglected other religious duties or failed to preserve the laws and customs (Ekong, 2001).

According to Ekong (2001), when the spirit was re-born, the behaviour and fortune or failures of the individual from birth unto death were believed to be governed by fate, *uyio* or *ekangaemana*. In this respect the individual was

considered to have made some promises or resolutions during his previous life which was not fully realised, or that the person must have done some wrong for which he was being punished. It was believed that fate could be changed through the process of metamorphosis. This involved the consultation of a diviner and offering of sacrifices.

Generally, it was believed that reincarnation occurred within the same family to which the dead previously belonged unless in a situation where the individual considered that he or she was ill-treated in the family during the previous existence.

**Affinity:** It was believed that every person possessed a soul, which was represented by some specific animal. Nearly all powerful animals in the bush were suspected to be were-beasts. A man's soul was considered to inhere in animals, birds, fishes or trees. This soul could be projected during deep sleep, so that the individual could take on the form of his or her animal affinity. It was also held that when the animal was killed, the person who had his soul in it must also die. Various explanations about this were generally advanced. For instance, it was said that when an animal which had a person's soul in it was caught in a trap, the person often told the name of the owner of the trap that had caught him and the location, from then negotiation was carried out to free the person.

To minimise the exposure of the bush soul to harm, each families placed a big pot of water at some corner of the compound for bush souls of all members of the family to drink. In that way, they would not wander about in search of water. Sudden deaths were often attributed to the killing of the bush soul. Animals such as the leopard, python, bush pig, among others, were revered. Some people were said to have tree affinities and popular trees for this included: *Ukana* (African Oil bean tree), *Ukpa* (cam wood), *Ukim* (Silk Cotton tree), *Ofriyo* (Iroko tree), etc., while the affinity in birds included *Ntrukupum* (Eagle), *Inim* (Parrot), etc. In Ibibio, many individuals, families and communities bear common names that reflect their affinity (Abasiattai, 1991).

## The Significance of the Ibibio Traditional Religion

The Ibibio traditional religion held the society together and guaranteed peace, unity, honesty, high moral, ethics and the rule of law in the society as everybody believed in the same system and worked towards the sustenance of the system. It gave every activity a religious connotation or aspect. It developed in the people, an unshaken confidence in God and saved them from the embarrassment of having or maintaining dichotomy or double standards in the religion of the society which evidently influenced other spheres of societal life. It encouraged virtuous living and kept the practice of social vices in proper check as it exposed and punished all offenders adequately and in time (Antia, 2005).

Anita (2005) further states that the Ibibio religion created self-assurance and moderation in the people who seriously maintained a very strong position concerning their confidence in the gods, the protection ability of their ancestors and their conscious obligations to them in view of the dreadful knowledge that the gods did not condone wicked actions.

Esen reasons in the same vein thus:

What emerges seems to be the image of a self-assured people, confident in the knowledge of their strong position vis-à-vis the gods, confident in the protective influence of their ancestors and conscious of their obligations to both. This self-assurance is kept in proper balance by the dreadful knowledge that the gods do not condone the actions of the wicked. These knowledgeable and understandings then became the underpinnings of a

moral society in which order and moderation in all things prevailed...an Ibibio culture in which societal norms were based on the one hand on the acknowledgement of the gods, and on the other on the proper realisation of the power of man to influence the shape of his destiny by his own words and actions. This was not man grovelling and cringing helplessly before the gods, but man exercising the potential of his central position in the universal hierarchy to influence, and sometimes even direct, the actions and responses of the gods (Esen, 1982: 57).

### Christianity and the Ibibio Traditional Religion

The Presbyterian Mission (formerly the United Church of Scotland), made its advent in Ibibio land in 1858. This was followed by the Qua Iboe Mission (United Evangelical Church) in 1887. The advent of these Christian denominations marked the introduction of new way of worship which came to be at variance with the traditional religious practices (Akpan, 2018). The Christian religion began since then to wage a relentless battle against the Ibibio religion, however, the Ibibio religion has been resilient and has not been totally wiped out. In this respect, Ukpong (2007) has pointed out that “Christianity, by its very nature, is a vehicle of Western culture and so, many of its aspects have not been fully embraced by many Ibibio people”. Okoko (1988) maintains that the traditional religion is still in vogue. Christians still resort to the traditional religion for their needs”.

The majority of the Ibibio still believe in the destructive effects of witchcraft and sorcery. Most misfortunes are still being attributed to these malevolent forces. Consequently, the Ibibio still approach the *idiong man* (diviner) to find answers to their problems. They also approach the traditional medicine man or healer for the diagnosis and cure of the so-called non-physiological ailments. The administrator of the *ukang*(ordeal), is still in business. Some Ibibio still sacrifice to the divinities, deities and ancestors secretly. Occasionally, libation is still powered as deemed necessary. However, for obvious reasons, the worship of the divinities, minor gods, spirits and ancestors, has waned.

### Conclusion

Religion is as old as mankind. It has been the normal way of looking at the world and of experiencing life. Therefore, religion is found wherever people live. It is generally accepted that religion permeates the whole of human life and activity from cradle to the grave. There is no known society which does not have something which modern scientists would classify as religion. Thus, every society possesses a conception of a supernatural being or order, or spirit, gods, or of impersonal forces superior to those conceived as governing ordinary events of every day-life. Therefore, the African Traditional Religion has a history “buried” in the past, with reminiscences of prophets and reformers. Even today, such leaders still appear to continue with the past traditions in new ways. Like other African societies, the Ibibio had a rich religious heritage which has helped in the cultural development of Nigeria(Essien, 1994).

This study has attempted to analyse some critical aspects of the traditional religion of the Ibibio people of Southern Nigeria. It explains that the Ibibio were very religious in the pre-Christian era and that religion was a continuous affair. It has also been shown that the Ibibio Traditional Religion had an ethical or moral content.

At present, the overwhelming majority of the Ibibio are Christians, yet some of them, are still adhering to aspects of the Traditional

Religion. This shows that Ibibio have abandoned aspects of their Traditional Religion without fully embracing the tenets of Christianity, consequently, a religious and moral vacuum, have been created. This moral vacuum manifests in crimes of various kinds including murder, stealing, kidnapping, banditry, chicanery, etc. According to Ukpong (2007), whereas there was security, order and predictability in the pre-Christian era, nowadays the opposite is the case. Clearly, the ancient Ibibio had fashioned for themselves a theocratic state in which everything moved by the supreme authority of the gods who acted directly or through the agency of the ancestors, chiefs and elders. It was a system in which the gods, the ancestors and man himself interacted freely within approved bounds influencing and complementing each other for the good of all.

The Ibibio people could not escape the pernicious foreign influences. Like other Africans, they fell victim to European suppression and tasted the bitterness of disorganisation and disorientation that followed the trail of the Union Jack and the Bible, yet aspects of their traditional religion still permeate their landscape.

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