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# SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND ETHNO-COMMUNICATIVENESS OF SELECT LIBATION PERFORMANCES IN ITU, SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

By highlighting the reverence for ancestors and the dependency of man on supernatural powers for his life, development, and well-being, libation performances reinforce ties between living things and ancestors as essential elements of African traditional culture and spirituality. However, due to the Itu people's attitude toward libation performances, the language of elements of libation performances including chants, prayers, invocations, incantation, and appeasement is disappearing. Therefore, the symbolic interaction in libation performance in Itu, South-South, Nigeria was explored in this study. Every item used, gesture made, song or prayer said, every unit of space and time that by tradition stands for something other than itself were analyzed. The study used the focused group interview (FGI), non-participant observation, and the survey method to collect information from 70 informants who were selected from the five (5) clans in the Itu Local Government Area. The EUDICO Linguistic Annotator (ELAN) was used to annotate, transcribe, and document the data while it was being descriptively analyzed. The study, among other things, indicated that ancestors may be addressed verbally or non-verbally over the course of the libation performance among the Itu people of Ibibio. Water,


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eggs, domestic animals, gin, clay, and other things are symbols. This study, among others, offers information on drinking that might supplement already available knowledge. It also aims to highlight the significance of the social values linked with drinking among the populace.

**Keywords**: Libation, Rituals, Itu, Ethnography, Documentation

## INTRODUCTION

Humans have a fundamental need to pass on knowledge of their eras, cultures, and civilizations to subsequent generations, as well as to retain the memory of the significant accomplishments of their life. People have created a variety of methods for passing information from one generation to the next over the years.

Due to linguistic shift, the level of language endangerment is rising. A language's significance increases and decreases in exact proportion to the significance of its speakers. As a result, the smaller group languages have a harder time surviving. It's not impossible, though, that these languages could come back into use. There are numerous languages that have successfully undergone revitalization, and ongoing efforts are being made to save additional endangered languages.

For instance, less than 150 people speak each of the more than 11% of languages spoken worldwide. Additionally, quite a few languages are predicted to become extinct during the next century. Nettle and Romaine (2000: 40) point out that the extinction of languages has an impact on linguists' and anthropological communities' communities as well as the individuals who speak the languages.

Different factors can cause a language to disappear. First of all, a language may deteriorate and eventually disappear if people do not continue to use it in their society and pass it on to the following generation. Second, a language may become irrelevant if a group of its speakers lacks access to favourable circumstances where they can make a living (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 5). In contrast, the desire to protect a group of speakers' native tongue gradually decreases if they do not think that language is a significant part of what makes them special (Singh & Jones, 2005: 84). Since such a language is not passed down from parents to children, its chances of surviving will be drastically decreased. It will eventually deteriorate into a shell of itself. Additionally, a language will be considered to

have achieved its end or to be effectively dead if there is just one remaining speaker, whereas a language for which there are no living speakers is said to be extinct or dead (Crystal, 2000: 20–21). Additionally, all languages that are no longer spoken today and for which there are no written records or documentation can be categorised as extinct (Crystal 2000: 2).

Languages are crucial in identifying people's cultures; as a result, when populations lose their native tongue, a significant portion of their culture also disappears. An example of a practise that depends on language is a large number of practises. For instance, the extinction of language is likely to result in the disappearance of numerous verbal arts, including poetry and traditional music. Unless the language's stories are translated into other languages, even if it was written down, it might lose some of its characteristics (Hoffmann 2009: 21). Any community's collective and individual identities are significantly impacted by language loss. "When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, and a work of art," claims Hale (1998). It is comparable to throwing a bomb on a museum.

In her claim, Ray (2000) asserts that speakers of the Kuuk Thaayorre language, which is used in Pormpuraaw, Cape York, invariably utilise the cardinal directions rather than the words "left" or "right," Kuuk Thaayorre's speaker can always tell where they are, and this usage of directions affects how conscious they are of time. This may suggest that there are different degrees of intellectual profundity in each language. Such lovely vocabulary shouldn't go since they are valuable to the cultures they come from and attractive to outsiders. Therefore, in order to preserve such fascinating terminology and cultural practises, it is crucial to recapture sleeping languages. Languages are crucial for people and the environment because of their complex effects on identity, communication, social integration, education, and development. The beautiful fabric of cultural diversity also disappears as languages disappear. Opportunities, customs, memories, distinctive ways of reasoning and speaking—valuable assets for guaranteeing a brighter future—are also gone. If we wish to at least retain some of the wealth that these languages possess, revitalising endangered languages is a crucial and urgent effort that must be completed quickly or it will soon be lost forever.

This work examines the symbolic interplay in libation performances in Itu, South-South, Nigeria based on this premise. Every item used, gesture made, song or prayer sung,

every unit of space and time that by convention stands for something other than itself (a symbol) were scrutinised.

### *Itu People*

The word 'Itu" is the name of a town as well as, a Local Government Area. This area comprises various ethnic groups with conflicting traditions. Agriculture is the principal occupation of the people. The people of Itu Local Government Area speak the Ibibio language. This is a common characteristic of the people of the different parts of Akwa Ibom State. Itu Local Government Area is made up of five (5) clans namely; Itam, Oku Iboku, Mbiabo, Ayadehe and Itu. There are seventy-eight (78) villages in Itu Local Government Area.

## Literature Review

### Libation

Drinks were characterised by Moore and Myerhoff (1977: 6) as being more uniquely categorised by their formal qualities than by their content features. For instance, the kind of award given at a ceremony or the type of test that new members must pass might not be as significant as the fact that the test or award was successfully completed. The systematic occurrence of particular behaviours, like trials or rewards, in these kinds of events gives the individual occurrences within a given event value, but the fact that the particular conduct adheres to a predetermined pattern characterises the event as ritualistic. This characteristic of libations explains how they can be utilised to spread various messages in a variety of social circumstances and display cross-situational uniformity:

> It is our contention that certain formal properties of that category of events ordinarily called collective libation (or ceremony) all lend themselves singularly well to making ritual a "traditionalizing instrument." . . . Collective ceremony can traditionalize new material as well as perpetuate old traditions. (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977: 7)

The participation, involvement, and blessings of the deceased are desired as live members of the community during the conduct of most ceremonies, such as funerals. The region of pleading for assistance is one in which regular requests for blessings are made. This is evident from the fact that practically every libation concludes with a request for

assistance, support, and direction from the ancestors (Opoku, 1978: 124). Although considered a religious practise, libation is not viewed as an act of worship. The indigenous people honour and value their ancestors by pouring libations in their honour. The public manifestation of the close bond between the living and the deceased is portrayed by the pouring of libations. Additionally, it shows that this link endures beyond death and that this bond cannot be severed by the power of death (Opoku, 1978).

Libation can occasionally be combined with eating and drinking. This is justified by the notion that our forefathers now lead similar lifestyles to those they did while they were still on earth. As a result, the people believe that if they survive, they will need to eat and drink in order to survive. On behalf of the community, communal elders frequently perform libations (Opoku, 1978: 37). Before starting to eat or drink, people can also perform libation by pouring liquids like water or drinks on the ground. This is justified by the notion that one is providing water or drinks for the ancestors since they may be thirsty or in need of a drink.

As presented in Moore and Myerhoff (1977: 6), libation has six major components:

(a) It contains an element of repetition, either of content, form, or occasion.

(b) It is acted out in planned, rather than spontaneous ceremony.

(c) Libation contains behaviour that was out of the ordinary, used ordinary behaviour in special ways, or overtly drew attention away from mundane uses of behaviours.

(d) Libation is highly organized, where even chaotic elements were given prescribed places within the ceremony,

(e) It uses evocative presentation to draw and hold attention, and

(f) It is aimed at collective, never individual, consumption.

The correct degree of analysis for a ritual lies in the hidden, underlying meanings of those activities, even though libations comprise various observable actions. In other words, Smircich (1983) and Wilkins and Ouichi (1983) added that, given that culture is frequently conceptualised as a shared worldview made up of systems of shared and underlying meanings, it is the latent and dormant actions in libation performances that actually evoke the true meaning of what is said and performed.

Water, alcohol, or any other beverage, such as wine, is spilled on the ground during libation pouring in order to invoke the spirits and ask for their assistance. It is a vocal

manner of address to one or more metaempirical creatures with the aim of starting or maintaining contact, according to Platvoet (1982: 201) and Ayim-Aboagye (1996: 165). Those who pour libations appear to be acknowledging that they are being led and controlled by forces that are much more "powerful" and "wiser" than they are. By engaging in this activity, participants are acknowledging that neither their personal nor collective fates are in their own control. God and the ghosts of the departed are responsible (Owusu-Mensa, 1990).

**Theoretical Approach**

This study is rooted in Goddard's (2006) ethnopragmatics as well as Austins's (1962) Speech Act Theory. The development of cultural and contextual meanings in language interpretation that are locally relevant is explained by the ethnopragmatic paradigm. Since the fundamental descriptive criteria have been predetermined without consideration of any particular local culture, the theory of ethnopragmatics is forced to impose a "first-hand" perspective on the description of the speech practises of each given local culture. It defines a perspective on language use that places culture at the centre of the explanation while also paving the path for connections to be made between language and other cultural phenomena.

Understanding speech practises in terms that are understandable to the persons involved is the essence of ethnopragmatics. It focuses on native values, attitudes, and beliefs as well as social classifications, feelings, and other things. For instance, *éwá* (dog) can be understood to imply "an animal, a wanderer, and the act of promiscuity" in Ibibio. The Malay ideas of maruah, or "personal dignity," and malu, or "shame, or sense of propriety," can also be seen from this perspective in Malaysia (Goddard, 2002). An ethnopragmatic comprehension of the ways of speaking in their various cultures requires an awareness of the Japanese notions of wa ('harmony') and omoiyari ('empathy'), as well as the Yankunytjatjara idea of kunta ('shame,' 'a sense of being out of place') (Goddard, 2002). Cultural key words are an apt name for such ideas. As they serve as the framework for indigenous cultural psychology. The cultural psychology concept that people in different cultures speak differently because they think, feel, and relate to others differently is congruent with ethnopragmatics. This demonstrates how cultural values are 'hidden' meanings that underlie speech systems.

The main focus of speech act theory is on the linguistic tasks carried out by human utterances. Austin asserts that when we speak, among other things, we carry out a variety of behaviours such as stating, directing, accusing, counselling, and informing. The locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act are the three different categories under which speech acts are categorised. The communicative act of pronouncing a sentence is known as the locutionary act. This entails making references to specific things, persons, or phenomena in the outside world and commenting on them. The locutionary act is the act of expressing anything literally, whether it be in writing or speech. The action that is carried out through utterance is known as an illocutionary act. It is outlined by societal norms. In essence, it refers to what is deduced from a sentence. Illocutionary actions include making assertions, accusations, warnings, disclosures, and requests. The perlocutionary act describes how an utterance affects the hearer or hearers. Although it might not always be the case, the impact is sometimes deliberate. Communication is not a unilateral process, hence it is crucial to acknowledge the perlocutionary act, claims Searle (1969). Among the perlocutionary acts are those that amuse, persuade, please, and frighten.

In order to illustrate how information flows and to characterise the style of speech in terms of acting, miming, agreeing, reporting, proclaiming, persuading, and ordering, this study uses the Speech Act Theory.

## METHODS

The survey approach was used to collect the data for this study. The survey method was chosen because it may be used to gather information from a predetermined group of respondents in order to learn more and obtain insights into a range of interesting topics. Additionally, information was gathered through focused group interviews (FGI), non-participant observation, and secondary sources, including published articles, textbooks, and online resources. The citizens of the Itu Local Government Area make up the study's population. However, seventy (70) informants were chosen from Itu Local Government Area's five (5) clans. From Itam, fifteen (15) informants were selected. Ten (10) informants were chosen from Itu and fifteen (15) from Ayadehe, while Oku and Mbiabo each had fifteen (15) informants. Using an audio-video recorder, information was collected at numerous traditional festivals, rites, and events in the Itu local government. EUDICO

Linguistic Annotator (ELAN) was then used to transcribe, categorise, and annotate the data. The data is descriptively analysed using the ethnopragmatics theoretical framework.

## RESULTS

### New Yam (*Nsuk Udia*)

| | IBIBIO | TRANSLATION |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Àbàsì ányoñ, àbàsì ísoñ* | The most high God, divinities below |
| 2 | *Anantia Ibiono, Anyaan Nsit, Awa Itam, Etefia Ikọnọ, Ukana Ọffọt, Atakpọ Uruan, Akpasima Ibesikpo, Udoe Oku, Abaam Itak, Itiina Iman* | Anantia Ibiono, Anyaan Nsit, Awa Itam, Etefia Ikọnọ, Ukana Ọffọt, Atakpọ Uruan, Akpasima Ibesikpo, Udoe Oku, Abaam Itak, Itiina Iman |
| 3 | *Atimmé atọọtọd àbàsì ndiin átuàk ísọñ. Ídìm ísíkwéñéké ńtán.* | The digging stick must first consult God before it pierces the soil. A stream does not consume all the sand. |
| 4 | *Mmé étté nnyin ékébó ké émáéfré nták, nták atógho. Mʌm-nta íkpóñ ákénám únám anyoñ. Nnyín y'úfók nnyín ídógho éfrémfón. Immédí ádíbó sósóñó* | Our forefathers noted that what a 'purpose' is neglected or forgotten; it gets angry. Selfishness caused the bound animal to loosen. We are not selfish. We have come to say thank you. |
| 5 | *Nnyín ídá mmí mfín ádikóóm mbúfó ké ibededem ye unwam ke adito nkpo nnyuñ ndu uwem ndok ke nsoñidem ye emem (oduok ukod k'isoñ).* | We are here today to show appreciation for the support and help we've received from you to plant, and also stay alive to harvest in good health and peace (pours drink on the ground) |
| 6 | *Nnyin, ibaan nnyin ye ntək nnyin imedi adibo sosoño (oduok ukod k'isoñ).*<br>*Immibén uwa enañ idi (ayak nsén unén atọ ke isoñ)* | We, our wives and children have come to show appreciation (pours drink on the ground)<br>We have come with a cow offering (hits an egg on the ground) |
| 7 | *Nnyin ikisañake ubọk ñkanña. Imiben ñsuk udia idi (anyan ubọk awod udia). Mbók ìbò ké ìdádésìd – o!* | We didn't come empty handed. We came with our first harvest of yams (points to the yams). Please, accept with gladness – o! |
| 8 | *Yak udia ami asiak usuñ uforo k'inwañ ye k'udua inno nnyin. Yak eduek akaiso aba, yak edim adi ke ekemini, mbaak ñkpo iñwañ nnyin afoon idem (oduok ukod k'isoñ).* | Let these yams make way for prosperity in the farm and market for us. Let prosperity abound. Let rain come in time so our plants can flourish (pours drink on the ground) |
| 9 | *Mbok, mme ette nnyin, ibenne mkpa nsek ye idiok udoño ifeb ke iduñ. Yak idia ke emem inyuñ inie nsoñ idem (oduok ukod k'isoñ).* | Our fathers, we beg that you avert untimely death and strange sickness from our land. Let us eat in peace and have good health (pours drink on the ground) |
| 10 | *K'obío ǹnyìn, yàk emém ábá. Kán mkpá yé* | We pray for peace in our community. Take away death and pandemic (pours some drink |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *ídíok údóñó (oduok ukod k'isoñ).* | on the ground). |
| 11 | *Sé ìno mbùʃò ídóhó íbok mkpa, kpà ànyé k'nnyìn inyʌñ ìnwoñ (áwóñ ayúñ oduok nsúhó ukod k'isoñ).* | We have not given you poisoned drink but what we also drink (drinks from the glass and pours the last drops on the ground). |
| 12 | *Ùwuó! Ùwuó!! Ùwuó o o o!!! Ùwuó! (oduok nsùhò ukod k'isoñ).* | Shouts ululation "Uwuo! Uwuo!! Uwuo o o oo!!! Uwuo!" (empties the calabash) |

(Source: Fieldwork, 2022)

**Pictorials**




**Photo 1:** Seaman's Schnapps, one of the most preferred drink for pouring libation in Ibibio



**Photo 2:** Palm wine, one of the most preferred drink for pouring libation in Ibibio

**Source:** Fieldwork. 2022



**Photo 3:** Obong James, one of the informants performing libation during fieldwork

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2022



**Photo 4:** Some of the consultants during a focused group interview

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2022



**Photo 5:** An Elder performing libation

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2022



**Photo 6:** Obong Eyo Inuaenang, one of the consultants performing libation during fieldwork

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2022



**Photo 7:** Obong Peter Ekanem performing libation during fieldwork

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2022

## DISCUSSION

This sacrifice, offered in the month of July, commences the celebration popularly known as new yam festival. In the morning of the appointed day, the people go into their farms to harvest the new yam for the first time. In the evening, the heads of households bring one yam each to the chief's compound for the sacrifice and all the yams are heaped together in the open. In addition, a nanny-goat, a cock, a hen, a tortoise, wine and *nsei* are offered. The village chief officiates. He crushes *nsei* with the usual invocation of the ancestors and sprays the powder on a spot near the heap of yams invoking the earth goddess. He thanks her for the gift of the new yams, prays that its arrival may be a sign of prosperity both in the farm and in the market, and that the people may eat it in peace without suffering illness or death. After pouring libation, then follows a sacrificial meal.

A fascinating aspect of libation performance among the Itu people of Ibibio is that ancestors may be addressed verbally or non-verbally in the course of the libation performance. In Itu libation performance, almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time by convention stands for something other than itself (a symbol). The symbols are water, egg, domestic animals, gin, clay etc.

### *Domestic Animal*

Domestic animals include goat, fowl, cow, dog and sheep. Fowl is very significant in Itu. It has high economic value. Traditionally, fowl is offered at all stages of sacrifices. The He-goat is very respectful to the ancestors. The ram disrespects authority without respect to the ancestors. Although the ancestors are specifically males, homage and respect are given to the females, who are actually the root to fertility and multiplicity. Goat therefore represents respect while the ram is used for destruction. The type of animal offered differ from ritual to ritual.

### *Water*

After the initial pouring of libation with liquor (alcohol), which is mainly used to awaken the ancestors, the use of water is introduced by the performer at some instance as a continuation of the ritualised performance. Based on findings, water represents peace and purity. Itu people regard water as a primary source of their life. Apart from its domestic uses, water is a source of transport, occupation (fishing), and rituals. It is believed to have some healing powers. The people of Itu believe that no one wages war against water

because water has no enemy. It is, therefore, pure, neutral and peaceful. Two reasons have been advanced for the use of water as a component of libation performance among the people of Itu. First, it is aimed to cleanse physically and spiritually to present the people worthy to come before the ancestors. Secondly, and importantly, it is meant to enable the ancestors to grant the peace devoid of any rancour that could eventually lead to calamity, war, famine and other vices in the future.

***Egg***

Eggs are used for all aspects of libation. Egg here is the biggest gift offered as 'sacrificail cow'. The egg is a symbol of life and prosperity, and it is believed that it brings forth life when it is hatched. The egg [as described line 6], is a perfect symbol of life and fertility in libation performance. It is a representative of new life and is, in fact, the life cycle personified. According to an informant, the egg is a source of blessing and fertility to the bride. As the eggs hatch and bring forth life in their numbers so shall the bride conceive and bring forth children to prosper her family.

***Clay***

The clay is said to symbolise beauty in Itu libation performance. Clay has enormous industrial and aesthetic values to the Itu people. It is used to produce bricks for local buildings and constructions; it provides traditional ceramic materials for pottery and a source of local cosmetics particularly used by maidens. With clay, the beauty of the bride cannot be diminished. Beauty in this context is not just defined in terms of physical appearance or outlook but that which is essentially referred to as 'the beauty of the inner being.'

***Coin***

An old coin, usually a British penny, has a great significance in Itu libation performance. The coin is said to be a symbol of wealth or materialism. The ancestors are expected to multiply the coin endlessly in the lives of the people so that they can always live in abundance and riches.

***Palm Frond***

A fresh palm frond signifies protection in Itu libation performance. The palm tree is regarded generally in Ibibio as a magic plant as a result of its enormous domestic, economic and spiritual significance. The ancestors are requested to use this object to place

an injunction against prospective predicaments such as accident, untimely death, ill-health, or attack by forces of darkness.

***Fruits***

The use of alligator pepper in Itu libation performance forms an important non-verbal mode in the communication with ancestors. The performer puts seven seeds of the pepper in his mouth and chews, makes some incantations and spits them away almost immediately. The significance of the alligator pepper, cola, bitter cola, is to add spice to the lives of the people. The performer also uses the left hand to pour the libation to wave away evil spirits and curse other spirit and ancestors who are not in agreement with what is being celebrated. The use of material objects in libation performances, therefore, reveals that these performances are not just cosmological discourses but forms of symbolic communication that strengthens community membership.

## CONCLUSION

This work examined the symbolic interaction in libation performance in Itu, South-South, Nigeria. It scrutinized every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time by convention stands for something other than itself (a symbol). *Libations are performed indirectly at all occasions in the modern day Itu community. In any social – traditional gathering, it is an offence for visitors to drink the last drop of a drink. It is exclusively for the owner of the house 'host' or chairman. Traditionally, it was the ancestors that had the right to drink the drink because they stay back after the celebration. Some other sets drink the liquor after incantation. These activities evoke wrath rather than peace from the ancestors.* The use of material objects in libation performances, therefore, reveals that these performances are not just cosmological discourses but forms of symbolic communication that strengthens community membership.

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