

Ibibio Traditional Religiosity and The Notion of Worship

Enobong Andrew Lot* & Anthonia M. Essien

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

*Primary Contact: enobongalot@uniuyo.edu.ng

Abstract

Religion universally is a relevant phenomenon in every human life and society. This phenomenon provides the idea of Supernatural or spiritual beings, and the adherents are subject to beliefs, practices and observation of certain rituals due to their diverse religious experiences. The work examined Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship, and observed with dismay that the contemporary Ibibio people have been unfaithful in their daily traditional religious worship, displaying syncretic, poor and shallow attitudes towards worship. This, however, seems to be due to their indoctrination by foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) that have thwarted the notion and proper understanding of worship in Ibibio traditional religion. The paper employed survey and phenomenological methods with techniques such as oral interviews and the participant observation model. To strengthen the study, two (2) theoretical frameworks have been employed; namely, Max Weber's social action theory and Auguste Comte's functionalism theory. Objectively, the paper assessed who the Ibibio people are, their socio-cultural and economic life, religious beliefs and practices, worldview, concepts, and issues in worship. The work revealed that Ibibio traditional religiosity is commonly expressed individually or communally, and worship is the fundamental aspect on which the beliefs and practices are based; hence, their worldview influences the worship pattern. The work concluded that among the Ibibio traditional believers, worship is ultimately meant for the Supreme God, but mostly directed through the divinities and ancestors who serve as intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being. It is recommended that contemporary people need to go into their grassroots and observe the constituents of religiosity and the notion of worship in Ibibio traditional religion.

Keywords: Ibibio, Traditional, Religiosity, Worship, Intermediaries

Introduction

It is observed that religion (traditional or foreign) is a relevant phenomenon in every human life and society; yet, it is subtle and indefinable in nature. This makes it difficult to have a single universally accepted definition. The elusiveness notwithstanding, this phenomenon is provided with certain acceptable characteristics, especially the idea of supernatural or spiritual beings, and the adherents are subject to observation because of diverse religiosity. Ibibio traditional religion remains a system of beliefs and practices by means of which the people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. The Ibibio traditional religiosity (the quality of being religious or pious) is expressed individually or communally and in terms of their worship. In their religiosity, the Ibibio people have shown refusal to capitulate or submit to the issue of death, or give up in the face of frustration and do not allow hostility to tear apart their association with their ancestors and sacred beings; thus, demonstrating strong and astute religiosity.

Ibenwa sees religion as a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute being, or simply God. It is an aspect of culture that is composed of shared beliefs and practices related to the identified supernatural being or spirit (136). This identified supernatural being, considered as sacred, established a relationship with man, and also relates man to the unknown world as revealed in their mythology and religious tradition. This relationship provided man with moral definitions of life, religiosity, and cultural patterns in his environment.

The Ibibio people acknowledged the Supreme Being as the Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Controller of the universe. Obviously, the ideas concerning the Supreme Being are not recorded in any corpus, nor do they constitute a form of teaching that is reserved for specialists who could possibly be considered in the same light as our own theologians (Zahan 5). For the Africans as a whole and Ibibio in particular, everything that surrounds them exhibits a sort of transparency that allows them to communicate directly with the Supreme Being and the lesser deities in their milieu. Consequently, the people often use all the materials that are at their disposal in order to express their ideas about God. In their traditional religious setting, they constantly interact with the Supreme God, ancestors and lesser gods through rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. The people believed that the Supreme Being is above the living, lesser gods, spirits, and ancestors (Essien 216). This notwithstanding, they occasionally worship Him, especially in the critical moments of their lives or during important ceremonies and festivals.

Hence, with the soaring influence of modernity on the Ibibio people, it is important to seek a good understanding of what constitutes Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship, and the socio-religious beliefs that provoke them to adhere strictly to this notion of worship. There is a need to establish the worldview of the people, and major issues inherent in Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship. The understanding of these fundamental issues will aid people to formulate ways in which Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship could be better performed by contemporary people.

This study is instigated by the fact that not much attention has been given to the Ibibio traditional religiosity and notion of worship, in spite of the fact that worship is an indispensable ritual in the religious and social life of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This fact has also implied that there is almost a virtual absence of critical materials on Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship.

This study is significant in the sense that it aims at gathering available data on Ibibio Traditional Religiosity and the notion of worship to examine their necessity in the Ibibio traditional religious life, and documents them for posterity. Furthermore, the paper is tailored to examine the Ibibio traditional concept of worship as an essential aspect of their religiosity. Moreso, it shows the potential and contribution of worship as a core religious ritual in Ibibio traditional religiosity that mobilises the Supernatural. Therefore, it is vital that a study like this is carried out in order to bridge the gap of knowledge for the benefit of future generations.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is a systematic attempt to explain observable or measurable events relating to an issue. Theoretical framework, therefore, strengthens the study in the existing knowledge and permits the reader to evaluate it critically (Mokhutso 13). It is an important aspect of research and necessary in order to fully understand basic concepts in the study. Therefore, to strengthen the study, two (2) theoretical frameworks have been employed: namely, Max Weber's social action theory and Auguste Comte's functionalism theory.

Max Weber's Social Action Theory

Max Weber's social action theory states that (social) structure shapes human actions and encourages certain types of motives for actions. Weber argues that before the cause of an action is ascertained, one has to understand the meaning attached to it by the individual or community (Okon 10). Thus, Weber developed two types of understanding. First, the direct observational understanding, where a person observes what people are doing. For example, it is possible for one to observe someone doing a particular action and be able to ascertain (with reasonable certainty) the person's emotional state from their body language or facial expression. Secondly, empathetic understanding, a person understands the meaning of an act or action in terms of the motives that have given rise to it. This type of understanding requires one to find out why a person or persons are carrying out a particular action(s). For this understanding to be achieved, the following questions are developed to get into the 'shoes' of the people doing the activity: Are they doing it because they need to do it? Is it part of their tradition? Are they just doing it because they enjoy it? Actually, any of these understandings is crucial to understanding human action.

For the understanding of human action, Weber developed four ideal types of social actions, which include:

- (i) Traditional Social Action - Actions controlled by traditions; the way it has always been done.
- (ii) Affective Social Action - Actions determined by one's specific affections and emotional state; you do not think about the consequences.
- (iii) Value Rational Social Action - Actions that are determined by a conscious belief in the inherent value of a type of behaviour.
- (iv) Instrumental-Rational Social Action - Actions that are carried out to achieve a certain goal; you do something because it leads to a result.

Using Weber's model to illustrate the Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship, these different types of action revealed how the Ibibio people performed their worship: Traditional Social Action, the people performed their worship because it is their tradition, their grandparents, and parents have developed their religiosity as well performed the traditional worship. Thus, they wish to continue the family tradition. When relating to Affective Social Action, the people perform worship just because they enjoy doing it. They love performing their worship because it unites the people. With Value Rational Social Action, one may engage in the act of worship because it is a part of his/her religious tradition that everyone must perform. Finally, Instrumental Rational Social Action, one may perform worship because he/she want to establish or maintain a relationship with the Supreme Being, or other lesser spiritual beings.

Functionalism Theory

Functionalism theory, as initiated by Auguste Comte, investigates a phenomenon and considers the function it performs in society. Functionalism holds that "the nature of ritual is to be defined in terms of its functions in a society and it aims at explaining ritual behaviour in terms of individuals' needs and social equilibrium" (Onu and Solomon-Etefia 106).

Functionalism examines the positive contributions that Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship make towards maintaining the traditional society. Worship establishes, maintains, or renew relationship with the divine being. It examines the social significance of phenomena such as worship and the function they serve in maintaining a particular society as a whole. Obviously, the functional element, such as worship, contributes to social stability. Functionalists mainly defend the idea that ritual practice as worship is a powerful vehicle for securing the social unity and to underpin a society's equilibrium (Onu and Solomon-Etefia 106). This entails attitudes that are concern with

the sacred and sacred acts or things, and are nothing more than symbolic representations of society. This means that almost every phenomenon found in the society performs useful functions towards the survival of the entire system.

This theory applies to the Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship pointing out that the purpose of worship is to unite the individual or the community with the Supreme Being. Communal religious worship helps in promoting and strengthening social solidarity among the people. Consequently, traditional worship binds individual to the divine being and the community, plays a key role in constructing the society. Obviously, during worship, the religious people experience a “communal effervescence” and identify themselves with their religious tradition.

Generally, religious issue such as the notion of worship helps in the socialisation of the whole population into dominant culture, values and beliefs of a society. The relevance of functional approach to the present study is that it describing the role of worship in the life of an individual and in the community. It examines the positive contributions Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship make towards maintaining the traditional society.

Ibibio People

Ibibio is an ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State, the Ibibio people constitute one of the major tribes that settle in the South-South, Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Udoh submits that the Ibibio land lies to the South-Eastern corner of Nigeria, roughly between latitude 4° 25° and 5° 30° North and longitudes 7° 30° and 8° 30° East. To the south, the land is bounded by the Bight of Bonny; Abia State formed its northern boundary. To the west, the Rivers formed its western boundary, and share a common boundary with the Ijaws, while Cross River State lies in its eastern boundary and shares a common boundary with the western Cameroon (6).

Abasiattai declares that the name Ibibio originally was a generic name for *okop-usem Ibibio* - people who understand Ibibio language clearly, and was applied to Annang, Ekid, Oron, and Central Ibibio, even the Efik; it was never applied in exclusive sense of today to designate solely the Central Ibibio. These various historical ethnic groups who have been known by this generic name ‘Ibibio’ share common origin, customs, traditions, as well as language (86). Therefore, Ibibio is the name by which the people are called, and the language which they speak.

On the origin of Ibibio migration, scholars have tried to suggest the exact origin or where the Ibibio people migrated from to be Usak Edik in Cameroon to their present location. Noah quotes Henry Nau, a pioneer Lutheran Missionary and K.O. Dike who suggested Cameroon as the place where the Ibibio people migrated from; Usak Edik is popularly known as Edik Afaha (Afaha’s Creek). The core of the Ibibio is the Afaha lineage whose original home was Usak Edik in the Cameroon, the first bulk of the people arrived in what later became Nigeria, and they migrated to Ibom in Arochuku of modern Imo State. The Ibibio must have lived in Ibom for quite some time. As a result of clashes with the Igbo people, culminating in the famous ‘Ibibio War’, which took place about 1300 and 1400 A.D., they left Ibom and moved to Ikono, and spread over the present day Ibibio land (26-29).

Udoh maintains that ‘the difficulty scholars faced in obtaining reliable historical facts of the origin of Ibibio people in spite of their good move is due to lack of authentic historical records, and the oral traditions have frustrated their efforts’ (24). However, the Ibibio people in their oral traditions persistently claim to have migrated from the Middle East, Ibibio scholars and historians lend credence not only to the Middle East theory (and belief) of origin but also to the fact of being from Jewish extraction. The Ibibio people of Ini and Ikono are very proud in their claims of being the cradle of the Ibibio people in the present Akwa Ibom State.

The land is within the tropical rainforest belt with evergreen foliage of trees, shrubs, and palm trees. The Ibibio land has two climate conditions: dry season that is caused by dry continental North-East trade wind prevalent between November and late March every year, and the rainy season beginning from March to October with July and September as the months with heaviest rainfall. Moreover, the land is richly endowed with a lot of mineral resources, and exploitable forest resources. There are about 300 species of wood in the forest scattered over the place, there are commercial quantity of salt, limestone, clay, gravels, and silica deposits. However, there are environmental hazards such as drainage and serious erosion problems, and ravines seem to be extending its boundaries due to lack of proper control.

It is observed that the Ibibio traditional society did not have a centralized or unified system of government or political organisation as in the case of other tribes in Nigeria such as Oba of Benin, Obong of Calabar, Emir of Kano ruling over the whole tribe or state. Rather, the Ibibio had and still operates under segmentary unilineal structure which was and is organised on the basis of family, lineage/extended, village, clan, and contemporarily the paramount ruler oversees the traditional activities in each Local Government Area. In Ibibio traditional society, *ufok* - the family consisting of the man, as the head, wife/wives, and children made of the smallest unit in the village, and a combination of families made up *ekpuk* - a lineage or extended family with a true son of the lineage, the oldest and most respectable male member appointed as *Obong ekpuk* - the head of the family. The combinations of three to five or more *ekpuk* made up *idung* - the village. Each village remains autonomous, and independent with its own legislations for the survival of the citizens. Noah maintains that after the Ibibio had settled in their land, they elaborated social, political, and judicial institutions which enabled them to stabilise their societies over time (29).

Socio-Cultural and Economic Life of the Ibibio People

Culture, language and thought are based on symbols and symbolic meanings. It is arbitrary, not based on natural laws, external to humans, but created by people according to the whims of the traditional society. Ibibio people speak Ibibio language. Presently, English language is gaining wide acceptance as the people increase their level of education, and they are moving towards modernization. In all ramifications, the people are well versed with their culture. In mode of dressing, the dominant attire of an Ibibio man is a loin cloth, "*usubo*" with shirt - *ofonidem*, hat - *itam*, and staff - *esang*. The women folk have what is called "*ndot-iba*" with blouse - *ofonidem*, head-tie - *mbobo-inud* and shoe - *ikpa-ukod* to match (personal communication with Sylvester Udofia, May, 2026).

Like in most African societies, the Ibibio people consider family as the cradle of social interactions. The people are happy, cheerful, warm and hospitable to strangers. The Ibibio are proud of their homes and heritage, and sentimentally attached to the tombs of their ancestors, but they reach out vigorously towards modernisation through education. In Ibibio traditional society, the people maintained a high moral standard; their morality manifests in different ways, which include respect for parents, elders and the aged amongst others.

It is believed that the Ibibio cultural folklore, riddles, songs, dances, masquerades, and wrestling provided a platform for socio-cultural interactions, education and recreation among the Ibibio people. Socio-cultural organisations and groups are formed based on gender and age; men's social groups are separate from women. The youth (male) age grade is a social institution performing vigilante/security functions and women age grade helped in the development of the society by sweeping the village, weeding and clearing village roads and surroundings of the streams (Ekong 208).

Historically, economy in traditional Ibibio society is basically a subsistence economy from time immemorial, and the people attached great importance to their land. Udoh maintained that land

has become the very centre of their lives and of their communities. It is their mother earth, because the soil is the source of their livelihood - the river, sea and ocean. Hunting is part of their economic life; men hunt and bring home vast variety of wild animals for meat to the families (23). It is observed that for good harvest to be achieved, sacrifices are performed to “*ekpo inwang*”, a farm deity or ghost who is believed to be responsible for the fertility of the farm. Sacrifices are required to be performed before and after the harvest, and another before the final consumption of the crops especially yam (personal communication with Sylvester Udofia, May, 2026). These acts are believed by the people to be the cause of the bumper harvest then, as compared to the present situation, where fertilizer is heavily used before a little good harvest is achieved. Moreover, indoor occupations such as mat weaving, pottery, and the making of masks and accoutrements for the *ekpo* society became the major occupations during the rainy season.

The African Worldview: An Overview

A worldview is the framework of most basic beliefs that shapes the view of the world and the basis for decisions and actions. It is a blueprint, or a map for reality: first, it helps to explain and interpret life and the world; and second, it is the starting point from to view life, decisions and actions. The beliefs that we are referring to as basic are the beliefs we hold about life's biggest questions. They are "basic" because they are fundamental to all other beliefs and are the assumptions upon which we build our lives.

Kraft sees worldview as the “control box” of culture that determines the people’s thinking, acting or doing, and values (54). Thus, it is the central systematisation of conceptions of reality to which the members of the culture assent consciously and unconsciously to, and from which they develop their value system. It lies at the very heart of culture, touching, interacting with every aspect of the society, and exerts a great influence and power on a person’s life. Worldview is intricately intertwined with religious beliefs and practices and the link between religion and worldview is found in every culture. Hence, it is posited that worldview served as “a definer and creator of cultures” (Okon and Ansa 72).

Moreover, Olumbe submits that worldview depends on the community to which a person belongs and grows up in, and on what is learned from family (9). Actually, religion dictates and shapes the worldview of a person. Conversely, religion is at the core of a person’s worldview, it is essentially a manifestation of the underlying religious beliefs. Thus, an individual’s worldview is reinforced through repetition of familiar religious actions and is generally taken for granted until one encounters a different worldview which forces them to analyse why they do or perceive things in a certain way.

Nwoye quoting Kalu avers that the term “African worldview” is used to refer to the African’s perception of his/her world; such an Africentric cosmo-vision is said to entail a religious view of the universe” (43). Worldview to a large extent is a picture of the universe man creates for himself; hence, it is predominantly a religious phenomenon, a spiritual view of life and almost everything is given a spiritual or religious interpretation. Broadly speaking, Nwoye further avers;

The average African sees his world as being made up of two interdependent, interpenetrating and complementary planes: the visible and the invisible or the material and the spiritual planes. Influenced by the belief that the universe is made up of both visible and invisible forces and agencies, though separated, are in close proximity to one another, most African scholars agree that the average African man or woman holds a precarious view of the universe (47).

This implies that most African people act from their understanding that various types of misfortune, illness, death, and failure arise from the activities of unseen forces, unknown and unseen infuriated

spiritual agencies and revengeful ancestors. The African worldview influences the making of an African humanity. This reveals to him that there exists the phenomenon of mystical causality in the universe.

Therefore, worldview is seen as a construct that makes up life, providing a sense of direction, a locus of destination, and a strategy of unity for human thought, life and action. This construction satisfies and unifies the traditional person in its entirety, giving him a sense of belonging and direction. Worldview, therefore, provides the people with advice, values and guidance; sanctions a wide range of human conduct by providing the notions of right and wrong. It further reveals the religious beliefs and practices of the traditional people, the belief in a Supreme Being who guides the people on what is right and what is wrong, and the belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits. The process of appeal to the gods through prayers, religious rituals for good health, rich harvest, and creates a bond as well as helps the people to understand their origin (Essien 10).

The Concept of Ibibio Traditional Religion

Ibenwa opines that religion is also construed as a belief in and worship of a Supernatural Being, the Creator and the Controller of the universe through an intermediary. African traditional religion remains the belief system that has been handed down from one generation to another (138). It is indigenous to African soil, but the exact founder and how the religion originated are lost in antiquity. The beliefs and practices are indigenous to Africans. To buttress this fact, Mbiti observes that African religion has permeated every facet of the people's life from birth to death. It is a religion that has no scripture unlike other religions of the world (69). The people were born, nurtured and they grew in it. The religion is moderate, tolerant, accommodative and peaceful religion that fights those that attack it or provoke it to anger. The Traditional African Religion is a non-missionary, and its adherents are not converted (proselytes) but members of the society are born into the religion of their ancestors furnished by their traditional culture (Antia 211). Thus, the traditional religion has no room for religious propaganda, or bigotry. The Ibibio traditional religion has no written tenets or literature; yet, it is written everywhere for those who care to see and read. The tenets and liturgies are orally written in the peoples' myths and folklores, proverbs, songs, dances, and pithy sayings.

Religion of the traditional Ibibio people was and still polytheistic. The concept of monotheism did not seem to have had a place in the thinking of the ancient Ibibio people. This idea therefore reflects that the daily life of the people is regulated by the tenets of their religion, that is, the people live their daily lives consciously of their religious beliefs and practices. Their religious beliefs and practices centre around the Supreme Being, who is directly or indirectly worshipped without an image or statue made to represent Him because of His supremacy and uniqueness (Essoh 64). Traditionally, it is noted that the worship of the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*) was usually represented by a small pot with water placed in a clay mound besides "*okono*" or "*itomo*" - the boundary marking plants. This act constitutes "*iso abasi*", the face of God at which the people offer sacrifices. Such sacrifices were direct appeals, prayers, or other supplications to the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*); specifically on "*etaba*" or "*ata – etaba*" market day, the eight day was set aside for the worship of the Supreme Being called "*usen abasi*" (personal communication with Mbosowo Udok, May, 2026).

Additionally, the people believed in the existence of multiple divinities (*mme ndem*) that dwell in various places like rivers, forests, rocks, etc as their sacred place. These divinities were believed to cater for the general welfare of the people they represented, and their power could affect the people either positively or negatively. These divinities and deities were represented by images, and maintained by the priest (*Okuku*) especially through pouring of libations (Udoh 23). Moreover, there were also an in-depth believe in other lesser deities (*mme abasi/ndem*) and ancestors (*mme ikaan*). Notable among the lesser deities include "*abasi isong*", the goddess of the earth, responsible for the

fertility of crops, “*eka abasi*”, the mother of ‘gods or head of deities, responsible for procreation and fertility of women; “*ebe abasi*”, a deified husband; and “*abasi ekong*”, the god of war. Also, there was an inbuilt believe in spirits, witchcraft (*ifot*), magic or medicine or charm (*ibok*), and reincarnation. There was also a market deity (*ndem urua*) who took charge of the markets as well as farm deities (*ndem inwang*). Libations and sacrifices were often offered to appease and invoke them to act accordingly (Abasiattai 88).

The Belief in God in Ibibio Traditional Religion

The concept of God as the Creator of the world and human beings, and He has the final authority in all matters, is original and native to the Africans’ religious consciousness, especially the Ibibio extraction. This idea is firmly entrenched in the religious beliefs of the Ibibio people and it is fundamental to their religious systems. The people have names for God, which are unlike the names given to other spiritual beings they recognize. These special names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to him. To the African people, God is essentially a spirit, a being who is invisible to humankind but omnipresent. The invisible nature of God is usually expressed in concrete terms (Adamo 285). Among the Ibibio, He is likened to the wind, which is also invisible and everywhere. They firmly believe that He is everywhere and can be called upon anywhere. This is in sharp contrast to their concept of the lesser divinities, to whom Africans consecrate numerous shrines and temples. Ibibio believe that God is always good and He does no harm to anybody. The lesser divinities and other spirits however lack consistency in their attitude towards human beings. They have a tendency to get angry and they especially resent being neglected by human beings. Thus, to avoid the danger which the anger of the gods could invoke, human beings must sacrifice to them.

It is obvious that the belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is fundamental in African traditional society. The Supreme Being is the living Eternal Being who is the creator and source of all living and whose life existed from the dateless past. He is self-existed, all-seeing, and all-knowing being whose power sustains the universe. This Great Being has revealed Himself in many different ways, and human beings have always felt His presence and responded to Him in worship (Ushe 155). In Ibibio religious system, the idea of a God is fundamental, the people believe in the existence of a Supreme, primordial being, the Lord of the universe, and His works abound as a testimony of the existence of God. Traditionally, people believe in one single Supreme God who is the Creator of the world, man and everything in the universe. It is at the centre of African traditional religion and dominates all its other beliefs.

Africans see God as King, Ruler, Lord and Master of the world. Hence, the belief in and worship of the Supreme Deity is universal among all African societies. African peoples believe that God is incomparable, He is unique; His uniqueness is one of the reasons why there are no images graven, drawn or painted of Him in Africa. There are many symbols found in many places in Africa, but these are not images. 'The African concept of God in this regard is an emphatic 'no one and none' to the question to whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?' The fact of God's uniqueness implies his transcendence.

The conception of God as king with absolute supremacy emphasises His uniqueness. It is a convincing fact that the conception of the Supreme Being has nothing whatever to do with missionary influence or contact with Christianity. It is noted that the African people had a clear and good notion of God before the arrival of Christianity. For instance, among the Ibibio, there is a common saying “*attimme atotod Abasi, ndion atuak isong*”. Literarily meaning that “the traditional digger must first and foremost inform the Supreme God before embarking on any agricultural enterprise”. This notion informed that the people had a good concept of God from time immemorial. Hence,

Lot observed that generally, among the Ibibio people, the belief in *Abasi Ibom* is unique and incomparable for He has the ultimate pre-eminence; things happen with His approval. He is acknowledged by all divinities as the Head to whom all authorities belong and all allegiances due and His supremacy is absolute. The people hold Him ultimately first and last in their daily lives. However, there is no intimate or deeper relationship among the people in *Abasi Ibom*, and traditionally, He is not actively or directly worshipped (57).

Abasi Ibom was also manifested in the phenomena such as “*Abasi ukod*”, God of in-law, “*Abasi eyeyen*”, God of Grand-children or Grand-Child, “*Abasi imaan*”, God of Kindred, etc. Essoh maintains that “*Abasi Ibom* simply means the limitless or infinite God, and He is being called by various names by the people, such as “*Obof*” or *Obod*”, the Creator, “*Nsinsi Abasi*”, Eternal God and Everlasting, “*Edisana Abasi*”, Holy God, etc (64). Prayers and petitions are addressed directly to God by individuals; these may be in the form of a libation, ritual or casual exclamations. God’s name is often mentioned or implied in many constantly used phrases in different African languages. Such phrases give the recognition that God is the controller of Destiny, and that things happen according to his wishes. God’s name is also invoked when one wakes up and before one goes to sleep. African scholars generally agree that God is unique, supreme and totally distinct from all other creatures. The Supreme Being is known as the Creator and Sustainer of everything, He is the Father of all lesser divinities and therefore not a part of a pantheon of lesser divinities. There is also a general agreement that God is supreme over all in an absolute sense.

It should be borne in mind that most African primal people, the name of God is too emotional with sacredness to be uttered. Thus, a variety of deified related names have been devised referring to God. It is observed that in most African traditional societies, there is a belief in a greater God and lesser gods (deities), as well as in other supernatural beings; many visualise God as ‘Father’, both in terms of his position as the universal Creator and ‘Provider’, and in the sense of his personal availability to them in time of need. The fatherhood of God also comes out in prayers, indicating that people consider Him to be their personal Father in a monotheistic sense, with whom they can communicate. So, in prayers and invocations He is addressed as ‘Father’ (Ete), ‘Our God/Father’ (*Abasi/Ete nnyin*) ‘My Father’ (*Ete mmi*). Great Father’ (*Ekamba Abasi*), Supreme God (*Nkoon-nkan Abasi*) and so on (personal communication with Ini-obong Andrew on May, 2026). Obviously, the sense of God’s fatherhood strongly points to the monotheistic concepts of God. This cosmological view of monotheism and its interpretation is peculiar to a specific African society. It is however, seen that this perception and interpretation is different from the Jewish and Christian monotheistic view.

In Ibibio perspective, the people conceive the universe as comprising the visible, material universe, and the invisible universe which is under the control of the *Abasi Ibom* (Supreme Deity). Thus, both universes mingled and are subject to the *Abasi Ibom* (Abasiattai 88). The traditional religion of the Ibibio people is based on the belief in the existence of a Supreme Being called *Abasi Ibom* and myriads of divinities and spiritual beings that assist *Abasi Ibom* to deal with human problems of moral, social, economic, political and psychological nature. In their social worldview, the people devoutly believe in *Abasi Ibom*. The *Abasi Ibom* is a great king who cannot be approached directly, but through intermediaries – the deities, ancestors or priests. These intermediaries assist the *Abasi Ibom* in governing the earth.

The names given to God by African peoples are descriptive of His character, attributes and that He is a reality. This reality of God forms an expression of their religious thinking and of their religious experience. Among the people, God is also known and addressed as *Obot* - Creator, or *Abansi-nsi* – Eternal Being. He is the Supreme Deity whom the people acknowledged, believed in, and worshipped. He is supreme over all on earth and in heaven, acknowledged by all the divinities as the Head to whom all authority belongs and all allegiance is due and His status of supremacy is absolute.

The belief in *Abasi Ibom* is unique and incomparable. Things happen when He approves, things do not come to pass if He disapproves (Lot 23).

Worship in Ibibio Traditional Religion

In African perception, humans from time immemorial have been in the habit of looking at the forces of nature with awe and reverence. This made them to worship these forces with a belief that they possess supernatural powers. As the Africans looked at nature, seasons, creatures, and their enormous benefits to mankind, they began to associate the earth with a great God who is the Creator. This manifestation and revelation of Supreme God has brought about a living relationship between the people and God; thus, the concept worship developed (Takov and Banlanjo 2014). Worship is expressed differently, in form of prostrating, standing ovation, showing reverence and awe, serving and honouring, sacrificing, giving, or paying homage. Authentic worship manifests in adoration, and respect to Supreme God for who He is and what He is doing.

It is observed that the concept of God enable one to talk about the worship of God in Ibibio traditional religion, especially what constitutes the worship. It is noted that in every religious tradition there is a set liturgy; a predetermined or prescribed set of rituals that are performed. This consists of the pattern as well as subject-matter of worship (Kenan 47). Thus, Ibibio liturgy is unwritten, and does not sound the same when recited outside the context of actual worship. It is a means of communication or communion with a Supreme Being - *Abasi* or divinity within the setting of worship.

Jones maintains that worship is a religious system of reaching out to the Transcendent Being as embedded in human life. It is the activity through which the community expressed its communal life, which it saw as essentially dependent on whatsoever they considered or conceived as the divine. This activity engages the whole being of man, his or her actions, gestures, symbols, expression of a reality in song and dance where he or she felt necessary to express (315). Mbiti posits that worship is a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the spiritual or invisible world (67). Hence, they perform the acts of worship to keep alive the contact between the visible and invisible worlds, between humans and God.

Worship is one of the essential aspects of Ibibio traditional religious beliefs and practices. This involves recitation of the liturgy (uttering the name, attributes, capabilities of Supreme God and/or lesser deity, the expression of confidence and hopes of the people, songs and prayers, pouring of libation, invocation, sounding of a rattle or an instrument of the same import). The divine being is called by names and his attributes mentioned, and he is summoned to accept the worship (Jones 315). During these performances, relationship between God and people are established or renewed and maintained. The needs and requests of the worshippers are expressed and the divine being implored to attend to their needs and satisfy the people.

Worship is seen as the devotion accorded a deity or a sacred object conceived as a divine (Kenan 49). Worship is done before or near the object which represented the worshippers, and such Object of worship is believed to be capable of communication with the adherents. It is reverence, honour, respect, utter submission, civil deference, or veneration paid to a being who is regarded as supernatural or divine. In other words, it is reverence to a deity with supreme respect and veneration or to perform religious exercise in honour of a deity. Worship is therefore, the religious ceremonies that express devotion, action or practice of displaying this by appropriate acts, rites, or ceremonies (Idowu 73).

According to Mbon the acts of worship are addressed and directed to the spirits, intermediaries or messengers believed to be existentially and physically closer to man than the Supreme Being (50). God is only occasionally mentioned or remembered, whereas the divinities,

ancestors, deities are actively involving in the everyday religious life of the people, and directly receiving sacrifices, offerings and prayers offered. This leads the people to turn to the lesser (impersonal) powers for help and to meet their daily desires. Nonetheless, the ultimate recipient of all acts of worship, veneration or sacrifice is believed to be *Abasi Ibom*, and He is above the divinities in the hierarchy.

The constituents of worship include ritual practices, prayer, love, service, religious songs, religious festivals, the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity. It is human response to God's greatness. Worship seems to be an internal experience based on a feeling that a religious believer has towards a divinity. In African traditional religion ritual performance is an important part of worship. In worship, the Ibibio holds God ultimately First and Last; in man's daily life, He has the ultimate pre-eminence, but this belief does not generate any religious fervour or any intimate relationship with the Supreme Being. In Ibibio religious mentality, worship serves as a means of creating harmony in the world of humankind. People turn to God in worship generally when trouble comes. It helps to get back a sense of peace, happiness, security, religious harmony in the lives of the people and in the community. In Ibibio indigenous religion, the worship of *Abasi Ibom* can be communally or individualistic and seemingly, the people seek *Abasi Ibom* at critical moments of life (Abasiattai 87).

Time and Place of Worship in Ibibio Traditional Religion

Generally, in every living world religion, the worship of God is not time bound; God can be worshipped at all times by His people in any place. Christianity had this notion in their sacred text called Bible; that the true worshippers must worship God in spirit and in truth, not necessarily in a particular place and time (John 4:21-24). However, in Ibibio traditional religion, as stipulated by the adherents in their specific localities, people do mark certain periods or seasons as special periods of worship. This is also a common practice among all religions of the world. As one of the common features of world religion; there are specific days, dates and weeks of the year set aside for special worship. In African traditional religion, especially as observed by Ibibio people, special (sacred) days such as *Edereobo*, *Obo*, *Fionaran*, etc or periods and seasons such as planting and harvesting (*uto ye idoké*) are set aside for worship, indicating that Ibibio religion is a living phenomenon. This shows that Ibibio people's daily lives cannot be totally separated from their religious beliefs and practices.

Consequently, it is observed that African religion is seen in all aspects of life, thus, it influences all areas of life of the people. African religion, therefore, has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African peoples through the centuries. Obviously, to be an African in traditional setting is to be truly religious. It has been rightly said that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti 69). This shows that the whole life of an African person is fully marked by rites of passages, stages of development during which special prayers and act of worship are conducted, mostly communally. Man's development, from birth to death is full of worship as marked by certain ritual practices or ceremonies.

It is noted that African traditional religion observes various places as holy and sacred for worship; such places include rivers, streams, forests -*akai*, mountains, grooves, hills, ant-hills – *odionno*, ancestral shrines -*nnwommo*, *iso-ekpo Ete/Eka*, village square - *atai esion*, junctions - *ufet*, graveyards and alters, shrines (personal communication with Anietie Daniel Ikpe, May, 2026). Mcetywa opined that the sacredness of these places is shown by the respect given to them by the people. These holy places are not just visited by any man; hence, some people are not allowed to visit holy places of worship. Some African traditional societies consider strangers, women under menstruations, twins and their mothers, and any other person (non-initiates) considered by the deity as unclean. Therefore, they are not permitted to enter the sacred places (48).

Obviously, such places are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy by the adherents of that religious tradition. Some of them are man-made and others are taken over in their natural form (Mcetywa 49). These places are sacrosanct, respected and feared by the people in the community. There are ethics and taboos to be adhered to before gaining entrance to these sacred places. This is because the places symbolize the meeting point between the divine being and human, the visible and invisible world. Moreover, there are family and personal shrines; these places are used for pouring libation, placing bits of food, performing family rituals, sacrificing and making offerings and saying prayers. They are a centre of family religious life.

Major Issues in Ibibio Worship of God

There is a complex system of worship in every African society; the issues in worship among the Ibibio include sacrifice, offering, prayer, etc. These notwithstanding, differ from one communal clan to another.

(a) Sacrifice (uwa) as one of the major issues in worship consists of the manner or method used when sacrificing. Originally, the material offered as sacrifice in Ibibio traditional religion were either an object or an element or symbol of life (Nana 365). It involves not only a visible gift, but also an action or gesture that expresses the offering. Equally, sacrifice as worship consists of the material which is sacrificed, the method used when making the sacrifice, the place, performer (s), occasion, the recipient(s), and the purpose or intentions of the sacrifice (personal communication, Eti-mbuk Esemé Udoh, May, 2026). The sacrificing may consist of a simple deposition or it may be lifting up of the sacrifice (Kenan 48).

Moreover, in unstratified society such as Ibibio, sacrifices are being offered by family, village, a group or community, and there is also individual sacrifice for entirely personal reason(s) as prescribed by the priest or diviner. The sacrificer may be the head of a family, village or clan, an elder, or performed through a special person, the priest. This is because, humans are always felt the need of a special mediator between himself or herself and the divine being or the object of his or her worship. Hence, Aniefiok Essien (personal communication on May, 2026) observed that sacrifice in Ibibio traditional religion has been regarded as one of the commonest acts of worship among the people, and the method used in sacrificing is highly essential, it may also differ from one community to another.

(b) Offering (eno) is also seen as an aspect of worship in Ibibio traditional religion, and it is unique in Ibibio Cosmology. Clearly, offering has an intention as in sacrifice. According to Stephen Akpan Urua (personal communication, May, 2026), no one can participate wholly and faithfully in worship without offering. Hence, offering or giving is essential for a meaningful worship to exist, and all communications begin with giving, or offering (Kenan 49). Therefore, offering is one of the issues that constitute the worship of God in Ibibio traditional religion.

(c) Prayer (akam) as a major issue in worship is the most real and effective means of communication, cementing togetherness and confirming security. It is observed that prayer is not simply the oral aspect of worship or religious ritual; it is the essential activity and disposition of the religious man or woman. It is the basic foundation of worship and a living communion of the religious man with God, a communion which reflects a form of social relations of humanity. In Ibibio traditional society, prayers are addressed directly to God by individuals and sometimes indirectly through the intermediaries; these may be in the form of a libation, ritual or casual exclamations (personal communication with Ofonime Thompson Uboh, May, 2026).

Prayers comprise the verbal action of religious ritual or ceremony and are often inherited formulations that have been passed down orally from generation to generation. It is a means of maintaining communication with the spiritual realm, actions as well as speech (Essien 9). Thus, prayer becomes a dimension of life that transcends and reinterprets every social relationship and social experience. One of the interviewees (Sampson Archibong Akpan, personal communication May, 2026) noted that the performer of the prayer raises his hands upwards in reverence, saying: *Àbàsì ényọ̀n, ye abasi isong* (the Most High God of heaven and earth; then calling on the ancestors and the clan divinities accordingly while pouring libation) and then uttering his prayers in accordance with his intention.

Prayer remains an aspect of worship because it can be found in many places in Africa. People offered their prayers to God at all times especially during life threatening situations. It is an expression of faith, life, work and the motive of a religious believer (Nana 365).

The Impact of Worship in Ibibio Traditional Religion

It is observed that when people worship, it is through their local culture that they express their faith in God and worship Him through words and images shaped by cultural meanings, feelings, and values. Hence, Ibibio culture is the vehicle through which the people understand God and express gratitude (worship) to Him in songs, dance, and offerings. There are countless cultural forms that have been adapted from various cultures and that are part of traditional Christian worship (Bauer 352).

Worship according to Karani (21) is a devotion to a deity or a feeling of profound love, admiration, or adoration for something or someone. In personal communication with Ekong Etim Udo (May, 2026), he asserted that worship is a lifestyle that can be expressed in different actions depending on whom or what you worship. Worship in the African traditional religious context is construed in terms of performing rituals to divinities and ancestors merely symbolises fellowship since the ancestors and divinities are taken as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living (Karani 22).

Worship is reaching out to God as embedded in human life. Communally, worship is the means by which the community expressed its corporate life and essential dependent on the divine. Effective worship therefore, impact the quality of relationship that engages the whole being of man with (God) the divine. That is why Mbiti (1975) noted that worship is a means where people renew contact with God, or between the divinities. In personal communication with Arit Etim Udo Equere (May, 2026), he observed that the Ibibio people often perform acts of worship to keep alive their contact between the visible and invisible worlds, between themselves and God; it is very sacrosanct. Moreover, the people believe that through worship, one is able to approach the Supreme God, gods, pay respect to the deities, ancestors and divinities. The worship of God is the very soul of Ibibio religion; it is express in actions, gesture symbols.

Consequently, worship is also used as a means of creating harmony in the world of humankind. In personal communication with Affiong Andrew (May, 2026), she averred that people turn to God in worship generally when trouble comes or in their crises situations. They need God at such times to restore their peace, happiness and sense of security. If at the end, nothing is done, the people fear that things will get worse. It is therefore, seen that worship helps the people to get back a sense of peace and religious harmony in their life and in the world at large (Nana 321)

Conclusion

The work examined Ibibio traditional religiosity and the notion of worship. Ibibio is the name by which the people are called, and the language which they speak. Economy in traditional Ibibio society

is basically a subsistence economy from time immemorial. Worship in the context of this work is seen as a devotion to a deity or a feeling of profound love, admiration, or adoration for Divine Being. Ibibio people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being. Thus, the concept of God among the Ibibio people is prevalence in their proverbs, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. The notion of the worship in Ibibio traditional religion is attributed to the influence of their worldview.

The paper showed that among the Ibibio people, the belief in *Abasi Ibom* is unique and incomparable for He has the ultimate pre-eminence; things happen with His approval. The paper further showed that traditionally, the worship of the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*) was usually represented by a small pot with water placed in a clay mound besides “*okono*” or “*itomo*” - the boundary marking plants. Traditional worship which includes sacrifice and offerings, and prayer is often performed specifically on “*etaba*” or “*ata – etaba*” market day, called “*usen abasi*”, the eight day set aside for the worship of the Supreme Being through the intermediaries in the community with necessary rituals.

Presently, though most traditional Ibibio people are registered members in various Christian denominations, whenever they are faced with life threatening situations; they often revert to their traditional religious beliefs and practices. This underscores that Ibibio people still attached great importance to their traditional religion. However, the paper revealed that the impact of worship is to revalidate and consolidate the vertical relationship that exists between the Ibibio people and the Supreme God.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that:

- i. The contemporary Ibibio people need to go into the grassroots of the religion of their fore-fathers and study their beliefs and practices to know how they worship God.
- ii. The Ibibio traditional religious mode of worship should be refined with decency to be accepted by the contemporary people.
- iii. Ibibio traditional religious experts should rise to their vocation; prepare a worship liturgy that is universal, uniform for communal use.
- iv. Ibibio religious worship systems should be developed into a sacred or doctrinal book for posterity.
- v. Traditional religious worshippers ought to form themselves into an organization for formal acceptability and recognition by the government.
- vi. Official day of worship should be clearly set aside by religious community and the worshippers.

Works Cited

- Abasiattai, Monday B. “Ibibio Traditional Religion and Cosmology” in Abasiattai, M. (ed). *Ibibio: An Introduction to the Hand, the People, and their Culture*. Alphonsus Akpan, 1991, p. 86-88.
- Adamo, D. “Christianity and the African Tradition Religion: The Post Colonial Round of Engagement”. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2011, p.285.
- Antia, Okon R. U. *Akwa Ibom Cultural Heritage: Its Invasion by Western Culture and its Renaissance*. Abbny Publishers, 2005, p. 211.
- Bauer, L. B. Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Art. 5, 2009, p. 352.

34. <https://africansdahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Christian-Worship-and-Cultural-Diversity-A-Missiological-Perspective-by-Bruce-Bauer.pdf>
- Ekong, Ekong E. *Rural Sociology*. Dove Educational Publishers, 2010, p. 208.
- Essien, Anthonia M. "The Sociological Implications of the Worldview of the Annang People: An Advocacy for Paradigm Shift". *J LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, Vol. 7, Issue 4, 2010, pp. 216-227.
- Essien, Stella P. "The Significance of Pauline Eschatology to the Ibibio Christians of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria". *World Journal of Innovative Research (WJIR)*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 08-14, <https://doi.org/10.31871/WJIR.9.2.26>. Accessed 22 July 2025.
- Essoh, Peter A. "The Traditional Religion and Belief Systems of Akwa Ibom State" in Akpan, U. A. and Oluwabamide, A. J. (eds), *Nigerians and their Cultural Heritage*. Lisijohnson Resources Publishers, 2004, pp. 63-64.
- Ibenwa, Christopher N. "Influences of Christian Religion on African Traditional Religion and Value System". *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.4, No. 9, 2014, pp.136-147, www.iiste.org. Accessed 8 July 2025.
- Idowu, Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. New York: Orbis Books, 1973, p. 73.
- Jones, C. (ed.). *The Study of Liturgy*. SPCK, 1978, p. 315.
- Kenan, J. S. The Worship of God in African Traditional Religion: A Nigerian Perspective. Unpublished Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 1997, p. 47-49.
- Kraft, M. G. *Worldview of the Spirits – A Biblical Study in the African Context*. Evangel Publishing House, 1978, p.54.
- Karani, S. Worship or Veneration: An Analysis of Whether the African Veneration of Ancestors Equals the Biblical Understanding of Worship. *ShabidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2023, pp.21–36
- Lot, Enobong A. *Christianity and Culture: Ibibio Perspective*. Great Divine Touch, 2023, 57.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religion and Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1969, pp.67-69.
- Mbon, Friday M. "Traditional Institutions and Philosophy" in Petters, S. W. et al. (ed). *Akwa Ibom State, The Land of Promise: A Compendium*. Gabumo, 1994, pp. 47-56.
- Mcetywa, Sitembile A. M. Hermeneutics in the Context of African Traditional Religion: With Particular Reference to the Mponoo People in Lusikisiki, Flagstaff and Bizana Areas of Transkei. Unpublished thesis submitted to the University of Durban Westville, 1991, pp. 28-55.
- Mokhutso, Jacob. African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria. Unpublished Master's Thesis Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, University of the Free State, 2019, p.13. <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11660/10182/>. Accessed 12 Jan 2021.
- Nana, Aniekan E. The Worship of God in African Traditional Religion: Ibibio Perspective. *Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies*, Vol.8, No. 2, 2021, p. www.phjhd.com
- Noah, Monday E. "Early History of the People". In: Peters, S. W., Edet R. Iwok, and Uya, O. E.(Eds), *A Compendium: Akwa Ibom State-the land of Promise*. Gabumo Publishing Company Ltd, 1994, pp. 25-29.
- Nwoye, A. "An Africentric theory of Human Personhood". *Psychology in Society (PINS)*, 54, 2017, pp. 42–66, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2017/n54a4>. Accessed 20 August 24, 2025.
- Okon, B. A. and Ansa, S. A. "Language, Culture and Communication: The Ibibio Worldview". *Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 5, (3), 2012, pp. 70-74. DOI:10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.1000. Accessed 5 August 2025

- Okon, Etim E. Religion and Communal Solidarity among the Ibibio of Nigeria. Unpublished PhD Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School, University of Calabar, Calabar, 1998, p.10.
- Onu, J. O. and Solomon-Etefia, P. O. A Functional-Semiotic Investigation of Traditional Funeral Rites and Rituals in ElugwuEzike in Igboland. *International Journal of Language Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 21 Oct. 2019, pp. 99-128. <https://semanticsarchive.net/Archive/jkzOTQ5N/etefia.pdf/>. Accessed 12 Jan 2021.
- Olumbe, Duncan. "African Worldview: An Introduction", 2008, pp. 9-12, https://watumishiwaneno.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/african_worldview_introduction.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2025.
- Takov, Peter and Banlanjo, Ngoram M. "The Conception of "God" in African Philosophy and African Traditional Religion". *International Journal of Social Science And Human Research*, Volume 05, Issue 07, 2022, pp. 2914-2923. DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v5-i7-19. Accessed 14 July 2025.
- Udoh, Bassey E. O. *Religion and Society: Socio-Ethical, Religious and Cultural Life of Ibibio People*. Okman Prints Ltd, 2008, p. 21-24.
- Ushe, U. Mike. God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3 No 4, 2017, pp. 154-179.
- Weber, Max. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* edited and translated by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, The Free Press, 1949.
- Zahan, D. Some Reflections on African Spirituality in Olupona, J. K. (ed.). *African Spirituality: Forms, Meaning and Expression*. A Herder and Herder Book, 2000, p.5.