

POURING THE LIBATION – TRADITIONAL PRAYER FROM GHANA

Introduction

The traditional prayer from Ghana is a means of communicating with the Almighty. In the specific case of the libation, the prayer is also offered to other gods in order to entreat their attention, favour and protection, not forgetting to praise and thank them for their benevolent presence in our society. This traditional prayer is quite different from others in the way it is offered; it is not simple and straightforward, but involves various phases and actions which become a ritual of their own.

In the past, the use of this prayer was reserved to the King and those close to the throne, whereas nowadays tribal chiefs, heads of families and those officiating meetings or a traditional rite can also chant it. At present, the womenfolk are excluded from this rite.

Let's take a look at the salient features and the main phases of this rite.

The liquor

The use of the liquor for the rite of pouring a libation upon the earth is not only a form of respect towards the gods, but also an offering to seek their mercy for bothering them. The use of water would be a sign of disrespect since water is a less precious offering.

The bottle is held with both hands

This is also a sign of respect for the gods. The right hand holds the neck of the bottle and pours the liquor, while the left hand is used only to support the bottom of the bottle.

In Ghana the use of the left hand, both for giving or receiving, is considered a serious lack of respect.

The liquor is poured into the glass three times

The liquor is poured into the glass not in a single motion but at three separate times. Three is a significant number which refers to the most powerful personages: Almighty God; the gods of the earth, the King and the deceased ancestors; the gods around us (unknown) including transitory divinities and the spirits.

Why the King's spokesman prays and not the King himself

The King is the most important person in his village; he is the chief citizen and also the custodian of traditions. Out of respect for his position, he is always served by his assistants. Before reciting the prayer, however, the King's spokesman always seeks the King's permission to do so.

The appearance of the spokesman

Out of respect for the gods, the person who pronounces the prayer cannot be completely dressed, but likewise, for obvious reasons, cannot be completely naked either. The normal practice is that he should be “topless”, and therefore before beginning the prayer, the spokesman removes the cloth that covers his whole body and winds it around his waist.

He must, however, be dressed differently from the King, who always remains clothed; it is said that, otherwise, the gods might mistake the King for the spokesman and vice versa.

Why the spokesman wears only one sandal

Out of respect for the gods, the deceased ancestors and the spirits, it is necessary to go barefoot. However, while offering the prayer, the spokesman represents the King (who as a powerful personage cannot go barefoot). Ritual practice demands therefore that the spokesman’s left foot (the one nearest the King) should retain its sandal, whereas the right foot remains bare.

The glass is raised towards heaven

At the beginning of the prayer, the spokesman raises the glass towards heaven, showing the liquor to the Lord. Apart from being a sign of respect, this gesture announces the offering and entreats the attention and presence of the gods.

Pronouncing the name of Almighty God and the other gods

At the beginning of the prayer, the name of the Lord is pronounced because without Him we can do nothing: it is He who created the cosmos and the earth and it is to Him that we turn to ask for forgiveness for the wrongs we commit.

The earth was conquered by warfare and strife, but the people needed the help of the gods, to whom the earth has always belonged. They are named and their permission is sought so that men may work the land.

An invocation follows in which protection is sought for all the work that will be performed and for those strangers among us who will perform it. There is a petition for a prosperous harvest and to fend off evil spirits and break any spells that may have been cast.

The remaining liquor is thrown onto the ground

At the end of the prayer, what remains of the liquor is thrown onto the ground three times as an act of thanksgiving for answered prayer. The first time is for the ghosts, the second time is for the known gods, and the third time is for the unknown gods (transitory divinities, spirits, devils and witches) as an offering to ward off their negative influence.

The spokesman spits the liquor behind the King’s back

The spokesman has more liquor poured into the glass and then spits it behind the King’s back, and then bows before the King. This gesture is intended to protect the spirit and soul of the King and all those who are in the vicinity.

“Bodua” the animal’s tail

It is said that the gods will not listen without the “Bodua” and that they like this object very much; its acts as a magnet to attract their attention.

Inciting the gods with the word “WiE”

During the prayer, after every request or supplication, the word “*WiE*” is pronounced. A rarely used term, it is an expression employed exclusively during traditional prayers and speeches made by the King. It means “let it be”.