



# Religio-cultural heritage of libation, memory and Obang cultural history, Northwest Cameroon

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This article argues that libation, often associated with the ancestors, artefacts, images and pre-Christian religious devotions, constitutes sources for articulating authentic African cultural history of Obang community in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It highlights that among traditional memory carriers, the ritual of libation remains trust worthy and pervasive, even among communities challenged by globalisation and colonising effects of Christianity. The article demonstrates the immense potentials of libation as an epitome and stabiliser of cultural memory, and a maxim in cultural resilience in contemporary Africa. Thus, the article calls for revisiting this ancient ritual to expose its potentials as a veritable memory repertoire in cultural-historical studies, especially at a time when social change and modernism continue to challenge the memories of traditional societies.

**Keywords:** heritage; memorial; ritual; libation; culture; cultural history; ancestors; artefacts; history; Africa.

## Introduction

Traditional African perspectives on history and historical records are unique in a variety ways. Before colonial and missionary interventions on the African continent, most societies did not pen their historical memory. The early colonialists and missionaries taught that history starts only when facts are written, and as such, the absence of written records on the African continent for them meant lack of history (Akintoye 1975). African traditional religions have been largely articulated orally, and its beliefs and practices preserved and perpetuated through the memories of individuals – priests, kings, elders and family heads – through cultural, religious, cultic ceremonies, folklores, proverbs and idioms, and through artefacts, images and sculptures, handed down from generation to generation (Tasie 2013:26). Unfortunately, most of those who came in contact with these features in the African universe limited them to religious spirituality and to the paradoxes of remembering and forgetting, modification and subtractions, additions and distortions, exaggerations and understatements, thereby associating them only with the realms of superstition, imagination and fiction, seen as having no element of truth (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:29). Despite the absence of documented history, traditional memories have continued to survive, especially those stored in ritual ceremonies and mnemonic devices that commemorate kingship, and enhance socio-cultural and political life through regular festivals and ceremonies (Vansina 1965).

Scholars, especially of the African continent, have been rather very slow in developing a more comprehensive methodological framework in dealing with the dynamism of rituals, and libation in particular, which largely represents a reliable memory source in traditional societies. Although the debate over the significance of orality as a whole in reconstructing history is almost settled (cf. Ki-Zerbo 1981; Vansina 1965),<sup>1</sup> aspects like libation which remain basically oral are yet to be fully considered in most cases. For Kwesi W. Dickson (1984), this misunderstanding stems from the methodology often used in understanding Africa's past. While traditional societies interpreted their world theologically, Dickson mentions that the West imposed their strictly scientific interpretation on a world they knew little or nothing about. As a result, they defined the so-called 'pre-literate' societies of Africa as primitive and uncreative, thus not historical players (Hegel 2001; Roper 1965; Spencer 1989). Hegel's (1956:9) theory followed the popular view that as Africa had no written sources, it had no history.

1. Although Oral traditions are still being treated with some reservations, scholars agree that it is the only means through which the memories of traditional societies can be recollected. The pioneering work by Vansina, *Oral Traditions*, and the extensive work under the UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa between 1979 and 1984, by Ki-Zerbo (1981), are the first in a series of eight books under the general title: 'The General History of Africa: Studies and Documents'. They are all the outcome of a series of scientific colloquia and symposia on the methodology of contemporary African history. These are the works of exceptional quality, marked by wide research, sober critical judgement and a command of the available evidence of the African cultural past, attested by many artefacts as well as a large number of images of those artefacts. Although these works are such excellence, they remain too general to the extent that they ignored this very important element as libation in all their proposals.

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The problem with Western perspectives on African history is that it was marred by generalisations based on scanty evidence from their experiences and from uninformed interpreters. Themes like Fred Dodd's *Tales of the African Wilds* (1881), F.D. Walker's *Black Continent* (1923), H.G. Brewer's *Invasion of God* (1944) and Jacob Richards' *Cannibals Were My Friends* (1957) were hyper exaggerations, leading to a complete misrepresentation of the African continent (Nmah & Udezo 2012). In reaction to this, a new breed of African historiography emerged which suggested a reinterpretation and reconstruction of Africa to right the wrong images painted of Africa. The trailblazing works of Hayward (1963), Ajayi (1969), Ayandele (1966, 1970, 1979), Gray (1968), Baeta (1968), Idowu (1973, 1991), Kalu (1978); Fashole-Luke (1978), Babalola (1988), among others, are excellent documents that highlight the effects of the missionary enterprise and kick started the drive to correcting the battered African image. It is surely in search of an adequate methodology that Ogbu U. Kalu suggests in his 'ecumenical historiography', which articulates Africa's history as a continuum from her primal cultures (Kalu 2005:2). This perspective answers the question: what is the relationship between Africa's past and her present? (Walls 1978:13). Such a perspective utilises an all-inclusive method, an approach which takes seriously the African primal worldview as source of historical data, and connecting them with the progress of history in their continuities and discontinuities. This is what history meant to the indigenous people: 'a means of transmitting and preserving culture, an instrument for organizing and interpreting collective and individual experiences' (Kalu 2005:10).

Indeed, like it is said of most communities affected by Christianity, globalisation and urbanisation, the presence of the Obang people is meaningless if they are completely disconnected from their roots in the past. Beicho Vivian Che (1998) notes that the first Christian missionaries who set foot on Obang bundled their ritual practices, rites and related artefacts as superstition, only considered as good to be abandoned. The Obang community inhabits most of the fertile valley along the Bamenda–Wum highway in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Because of her central position and following the arbitrary administrative partitioning of some areas of the country, the Obang people were unfortunately divided and shared in three different divisions of the country, namely, Mezam, Menchum and Boyo, forced to live among people with whom they share little or no cultures, history or identity. However, Fon Nanoh II<sup>2</sup> (interviewed 2007; cf. Che 1998) argues that no matter where they have been forced to settle, even in their dispersion, the close to 25 000 Obang people continue to share a unique and common social, moral, economic and cultural heritage, and speak a common language (Obang). This midland position which Obang occupies is both detrimental to the unity of her people, history and culture, but, at the same time, important for her cultural dynamism and her cross-

cultural integration (Esoh 2019:231). The people come together regularly to celebrate annual festivals, deaths and their common heritage.

The fertility of the soil, her location by the river Menchum, makes her a major economic hub in the Northwest of Cameroon. This has attracted both permanent and semi-permanent settlers who have made Obang their destination, bringing along their culture, religion coupled with the internal historical dynamism of the Obang culture and history. As a result, she has continued to wrestle with the tension of continuity and change, tradition and innovation (Che 1998). The Obang people are mostly sedentary farmers, hunters and fishermen who depend on nature for their existence. As their worldview is linked to their environment and how such have been transmitted across the generations, they have festivals, rites, rituals and mnemonic materials that facilitate the commemoration of their memory. Ritual practices are at the foundation of Obang culture and are the basis of their life and thought. Rituals, rites and festivals form the heart of their community life, mark transitions and set the standards for future practices. As a result, they are expected to be respected and observed by every member of the society (Che 1998; Esoh 2019).

In fact, Kwesi Dickson (1984:62) notes that to an African 'a society is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained, and the spirit powers given regular and adequate recognition'. Like most traditional communities that continue to face the challenges of globalisation, urbanisation and Christianity, the Obang community continues to struggle with the relationship and dichotomy between her culture and Christianity.

Although some Obang Christians have been accused of syncretism, especially by those who have embrace the most fundamental strands of Christianity, the overall objective is that of accepting the Christian message without denying one's cultural roots.

The need of this article is to suggest that the cultural-historical framework provides both a conceptual structure and a methodological trajectory in resolving the controversy whether libation and its related rituals, including its verbal and non-verbal performance, constitute arenas in studying African history, culture and identity. The thrust of this article is to show the vast potentials of libation as a vital access in reminiscing African memories, and how they are transmitted across time. In the following paragraphs, I intend to articulate the heritage of libation as a memory repertoire in traditional African societies as a whole, and of Obang in particular.

## The heritage of libation and cultural memory

Libation is not only a host of memory, but it is one of the most reliable vehicles for memory in most traditional societies. As a cultural memory vector, libation builds on a

<sup>2</sup>Fon Nanoh II is the current traditional ruler of Obang. This interview was conducted with him on 12 January 2007 in the village. He adds that, although they are found in different administrative divisions, they all come together from time to time to celebrate the annual *alum* (the Fon's dance) and other festivals.

collection of a society's memory, 'collective' and 'cultural' (cf. Assmann 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Halbwachs 1992),<sup>3</sup> bringing together a wide variety of visual and verbal actions to preserve its patterns. In terms of theory and practice, Alon Confino (1997:1386) posits that cultural memory combines graphical and oral memories, and unites the synchronic and diachronic aspects of memory as Jan Assmann (2006:8) puts it. Cultural memory studies reveal that 'traditional societies, whether patriarchal, patrimonial, or feudal, orient themselves to the past ... by their memories and customs' (Schwartz 2003). An example is the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) or Christian traditions which contain a sustained reference to historical résumés of cultural memory from Israel's past. In some cases, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1999) notes that the Jews had uplifted the act of memorising to a religious command. For instance, Walter Brueggemann (1997:177) says Israel's present and future is only meaningful as long as it is rooted in her past 'exodus memory' which has become normative in Israel's history.

Like other parts of Africa and Cameroon, memory is very important within the *Obang* cosmology.<sup>4</sup> What sustains the community in continuity is her memory of the past, rooted in the mystical figure *Uguo'banyonghe*<sup>5</sup> (cf. Che 1998) and the subsequent generations after *Water'abey*<sup>6</sup> (cf. Che 1998). Libation provides the stage on which the *Obang* people recollect their past, and how this past contributes in the articulation of the present and the future, depends on their ability to remember the same, maintain their culture and define their identity through the regular performance of libation. Libation is the theatre of cultural identity and this awareness of selfhood is basic in cultural history (Ben-Amos & Weissberg 1999). Memory is important in maintaining community cohesion, preserving culture and perpetuating identity. It is in memory (libation) that groups identify themselves in the past, and together, reconstruct their past in the present. Remembering together is a realisation of belonging.

Cultural history acknowledges and reconciles the complementarity and dichotomy of individual and collective memory, upholding their continuities and discontinuities as necessary in the definition of cultural identity. This relationship and dichotomy 'is not totally open and diffuse: there are always frames that relate memory to specific horizons of time and identity on the individual, generational, political, and cultural levels' (Assmann 2008:113; Halbwachs 1992:22).

Continuity and discontinuity are represented by the remembering and forgetting which form the basic elements of cultural memory (Zvi & Levin 2012). Aleida Assmann (2008a) explains the dynamics between 'Remembering and

3. Until Jan Assmann developed his theory of 'cultural memory', Halbwachs' 'collective memory' had occupied most of the areas of social and historical studies.

4. *Obang* is one of the Major tribes in the Northwest Region of Cameroon.

5. He is the most remembered ancestor of the *Obang* people. His life is wrapped up in mystery from birth to death. He is believed to have disappeared into the river.

6. The immediate descendants after *Uguo'banyoghe*. It is to *Water'abey* that the practice of libation is traced.

forgetting' by the words *active* and *passive*. While active stands for intentional remembering and forgetting, passive stands for unintentional remembering and forgetting. As memory is highly selective, to remember something, other things must be forgotten. In forgetting (discontinuity), while the active may be permanently lost forever, the passive has the possibility of being retrieved someday (continuity) because it was not completely destroyed in memory. In this case, remembering can only be made possible by a symbolic 'nod' (Schwartz 2014:7), what Jan Assmann (2008b:114) calls 'identity-index', or 'cultural indicia', as Linda M. Stargel (2018:2) puts it, and 'master narrative' in the words of Carol A. Newsom (2014). According to Newsom (2014), the 'master narrative' theory:

Is important for cultural memory studies because it identifies a culturally authoritative narrative account of a common history. It encodes the cultural memories that are agreed to be of definitive importance. (pp. 42–43)

Master narratives form the basic structures of cultural memory, orally transmitted, and preserved in artefacts or written. Jan Assmann's (2006:9) contribution in this area is remarkable. He attempts a balance in the difference between ritual memory and written memory on the one hand, and the relationship between media forms and religion on the other. The need for this balance is urgent, especially in the face of the boom in electronic media or digitalisation, which, according to Martin Ziefold (2008:399), 'are often blamed for this alleged disappearance of memory'. It is in memory that orality and the written or data-driven mind-set are reconciled. To achieve a perfect knit between memory and history, the role of the historian is vital. As Burke (1997) puts it:

The historian's function is to be the custodian of the memory of public events which are put down in writing for the benefit of the actors, to give them fame, and also for the benefit of posterity, to learn from their example. (p. 43)

There is a kind of connection between history and memory; while memory provides the closest evidence of what actually happened, history is a reflection of memory. In fact, 'history is the life of memory' (Burke 1997:43), just as 'memory's carriers are its primary preservers' (Schwartz 2014:17). A major difficulty in relating memory with history (as written records) has been raised by Pierre Nora (1989:7; Schwartz 2014:14) who based his argument on the unreliability of memory and the fact that it can be easily annihilated by historical processes. He has mentioned depreciation, predictability, mythical, fragmentation and lacking a critical method and theory as problems of memory (Confino 1997:1387). Although these are true in describing memory, historians, especially cultural historians, are increasingly beginning to realise that such limitations are not unique to traditional memory (Nora 1989:7; Schwartz 2014:7). All histories face the same problem as all are based on memories, be it from oral traditions or from scientific research interviews. Indeed, Peter Burke (1989) posits that everything is from memory, short term or long term, rituals, festivals, memory of wars, memories of the missionary encounters in Africa, and so on. The contrast

between cultic (empirical) religion and book (transcendental) religion is reconciled by their roots in a past memory. Just as memory is challenged by historical forces that introduce transitions and transformations, so is the logic of the passing from oral to written. In either case, Schwartz advises against degrading the former (Schwartz 2014:16).

Memory is not just imaginations; it includes a wide array of fields, from 'the most mundane, everyday-life objects (postcards), as well as from the most sacred totems (the Christian cross)' (Confino 1997:1388; cf. Gildea 1994; Rousso 1991). In fact, both religion (ritual practices) and media forms (historical records) are reconstructed from memory. Jan Vansina (1965) categorically states that all data, traditional or academic are derived from memory.

According to the Jews, traditional legends and communal bonds are rooted in memory about the past, which may be lost unless they are re-lived in the present (Schwartz 2014:7; Stargel 2018). Jan Assmann (2006) has mentioned cult religions to show how rituals act as forms of remembrance and, through its persistence, harness and renew the powers of the universe. It is in the sense of a lack of ritual continuity that he claims, 'the universe would suffer or even collapse' (J. Assmann 2006:126). This is not to say that traditional memory provided no space for inventions and innovations. On the contrary, traditional societies adapted their libation and other rituals according to specific needs and situations. For the people of *Obang*, the dynamism of libation is justified by their practice in diverse occasions. For instance, while *sar'h* [libation] is basically an expedition ritual, *ezul* [libation] is a life cycle ritual. Both are performed in the same way, only differentiated by the statements made. This is the difference that is obscured to most outsiders who view libation from a distance. Once their specific aspects are understood, libation cannot be reduced to a particular perspective.

It is in this sense that cultural historians suggest that cultural phenomena should be exhaustively articulated for it to be fully understood. Such, according to Burke (1997:44), is 'conditioned, or at least influenced, by social groups. It is not the work of individuals alone'. This is the approach that was lacking in the missionaries who first came to Africa. As a community project, libation ingrained in their world, and can only be understood as it relates to the same. Among the people of *Obang*, the community's participation during libation brings together their collective and cultural memory, instils in them a sense of their common heritage and unites them in an unbroken historical and cultural relationship with the environment and people, past and present. The following statement by Barry Schwartz (2014) summarises the relationship between rituals in general and libation in particular, and cultural memory:

In Judaism, memory flowed through the recital of lectors, often based on written texts and usually occurring within ritual settings. As a standardized, repetitive, and symbolic activity that allows participants to define their relation to the past, commemorative ritual fixes in mind the events of the past, a process facilitated by the emotional assembling of the community itself. (p. 7)

The usual dichotomy between the socio-historical versus the religio-spiritual does little justice to the amalgam of the social, religious, cultural and historical elements in libation, which the following paragraphs try to highlight by distinguishing two distinct but interrelated nodes of memory: firstly, libation as communication of ancestral memory, and secondly, libation mnemonics as repository of cultural memory. Even these two elements are not exhaustive of the richness of libation. I shall be examining these two nodes as they point to the richness of libation by drawing out their relevance and pervasiveness in the *Obang* [African] cultural history.

## The practice of libation and the *Obang* [African] cultural history

The word *libation* is derived from the Latin *libation*, meaning drink offering(s) usually associated with religious beliefs, connected with gods, spirits and the ancestral cults of primal cultures. Precisely, it has often been defined and described variously as pouring of water, making incantations or prayers, the observance of artefacts, images and the portraits of ancient traditions. Libation is common in most ancient religious traditions (Anti 1987). In addition to its religious significance, among the people of *Obang*,<sup>7</sup> libation is a ritual that commemorates kingship, cultural festivals, and recalls their common ancestry and cultural identity.

Unfortunately, during the most part of the modern period, libation was limited to religious worship of the dead, ancestors, idols and spirits (Effah 2009:19). The idea that libation is *magic*, *Sorcery* or *fetish* (Hegel 2001:112), and *ancestor worship* or *worship of the dead* (Spencer 1989), has been debunked in recent times, especially following the marriage between history and anthropology. This has resulted in a composite understanding of libation. Like John Mbiti (1969, 1975), Kwame Bediako (1995) and many other African scholars, limiting libation to idolatry is a misunderstanding of the relationship and dichotomy between the African spiritual and material worlds. The connections between libation as worship and libation as lineage ritual are both distinct and interconnected. Mbiti (1969:9) argues that libation is a ritual linked by a network of mutual relationships and responsibility, and at the same time, it is the rendering of worship exclusively to the Supreme Being. There is no confusion here among Africans. As the line between these two is very thin, it can be confusing to those who have not taken enough time to understand what actually happens during libation.

Sjaak van der Geest (2013:230) conceptualises libation as 'a social ritual binding together the members of the audience by emphasizing their common roots ... [and] a demonstration of cultural and historical knowledge'. In fact, libation for Mbiti (1969:9) is 'fellowship, hospitality and respect ... symbols of family continuity and contact'. Simply put, libation is a

<sup>7</sup>Within their present location and partition, *Obang* represents a microcosm of the cultural diversity in Cameroon. Following the administrative set-up in Cameroon, *Obang* is located between three administrative divisions in the Northwest of Cameroon. This central position makes her a meeting point between three similar, but distinct cultures in Cameroon. This position is both a cause for her internal division and at the same time a blessing for her cultural diversity.

continuation of the respect given to parents by children (Bediako 1995), otherwise, an extension of 'filial piety' (Lee 1988). This respect continues even after the parents are long dead. Among the people of *Obang*, libation is, first and foremost, an opportunity to assemble the people, those at home and out of home, as a continuous and harmonious community with their ancestors, and, in an artistic way, reminisce their common past.

Doing research among the people of *Obang* as a critical insider-outsider researcher<sup>8</sup> has opened me to new dimensions of the potentials of libation. A major outcome of my research is the realisation that Orthodox religions and modernism have had a rather poor view of libation. Unlike the reductionist perspective which limits libation to worship, I have come to discover that there are numerous facets to the ritual practice of libation. One of such is transmitting the legacies of ancestors through libation as a medium of communication.

## Libation as communication of ancestral memory

A major difficulty with libation is whether the verbal sentences that accompany the pouring of water should be considered as 'prayer', 'incantation' or 'invocation', which signifies worship of the dead, gods or objects. It is here that John S. Pobe (1979) draws his conclusion to deny any association with Christianity. No doubt, some of the statements may presume worship. However, Geest (2013:231) says libation is a 'medium of communication' among traditional societies, conveying the past to the present. It is, first and foremost, the transmission of information to the living who are present and witnesses to the re-enactment of past traditions. By mentioning the names of ancestors, usually in a historical order and feats, the libator is basically recalling and transmitting same to present and subsequent generations. At the mention of a name, both 'cultural' and 'collective' memory are instantly evoked, reminding the participants of an event in the past. Among the people of *Obang*, libation is an indirect or disguise way of communicating events to the living in a round-about way through the ancestors. Elsewhere (Esoh 2019:245–251), I have argued that the *Obang* people did not record dates, but only remembered events bring past memories alive. Mentioning the names of their ancestors during libation, is both an act which recollects events in the past, and engraves the idea of lineage in the mind of the younger generations. Indeed, it is a means of keeping genealogical data. For instance, Kimansi Nehusi (2016) notes that during libation:

Families know the names of their ancestors, starting from many generations and covering many hundreds of years. Persons in these families and clans often recite their genealogy clearly for great emphasis was placed upon remembering genealogies precisely. (p. 28)

At the mention of the name of an ancestor, their world comes alive anew. Heinrich Balz (1995) has suggested that

8. Both an indigene and a critical researcher to the indigenous cultures and foreign influences, respectively.

mentioning the names of ancestors is both a moral reward to them and a moral rearmament for present generations. As morality was a standard for attaining ancestorhood, the performance of libation thus becomes an avenue for post-mortem reward, and at the same time, a moral standard for the living. In *Obang*, hearing the name of one's relatives brings pride to the living relatives. As a result, those who are still alive strive to live in such a way that they could be granted a place in this kind of eternity (Mbiti 1969). Not that all omitted names presuppose immorality, rather at times it simply was because of time constrain to mention such long lists, so it was tactfully abridged (Nehusi 2016:27). Also, women were not left out from libation genealogies in all communities. The *mafor* [the chief's wife] and other women of integrity are part of some specific libation ceremonies among the people of *Obang*.

The historical challenges like slavery, slave trade and colonisation have introduced new dimensions to the understanding of libation. In the contemporary colonial and neo-colonial context, libation functions as a narrative of resistance against the oppressors. According to Nehusi, while colonialism was an act of genocide on the African memory, the practice of libation became an act of remembrance and resistance at the same time (Nehusi 2016:27). As long as the names of the ancestors who were carted away are mentioned in the libation statement, the memory of colonialism is evoked and their experiences form the basis for restating the African identity and self-pride.

Important to note is the command of trust and credibility stemming from the consistency of libation with religious and communal bonds. This helps to put the performance of the libator(s) under the scrutiny of the ancestors and the assembled crowd. Both the assembled crowd and the ancestors form a band of witnesses to the handed traditions. Among the people of *Obang*, the participation of the crowd and the sense of ancestors ensure care and consistency on the part of the libator, whose pride is equally at stake. Formally, libation followed a formal ceremony. In recent times, libation has taken up informal roles among friends, relatives and for diverse situations. It is almost customary among the *Obang* to mention the name of an ancestor while working on the farm, walking along the road, sharing dinner or drinking with friends, at home or in a drinking parlor. When drinking 'corn-beer' with members of the *Obang* community, it is normal for one to drop some drink on the floor and mentioning the names of some of their ancestors in a playful manner. Indeed, the names of ancestors have become part of their daily gestures and exclamations.

Finally, as a medium of education, libation continues to impart knowledge of ancient traditions to impact present and subsequent generations. In this context, when values are constantly shifting, coupled with the need of preserving cultural skills, values, wisdom and norms, libation ceremonies remain a medium of education and communication. Today, the *Obang* child knows about their family history, herbal, agricultural, fishing and hunting

techniques, national and local boundaries, forms of prayers and spiritual connections with the beyond and the past, the ability to master idioms, narrate folktale and decode riddles through regular contact with ancestral memories. Libation is the arena on which the drama of history is staged. Despite the limitations of human capacities to remember because of memory failure, modification and the constraints of time which may warrant summarising without the awe that is associated with the practice of libation, such memories will be lost forever (Ela 1988). The fact that libation has been able to survive the challenges of Christianity and urbanisation, is indicative of its potentials in keeping memory.

Therefore, the prospect is that as a relay performance, libation forms an umbilical link between ancestors, the libator and subsequent generations. Although these connections have been reshaped in various ways, its continuous survival despite the wear and tear of history shows its durability. The role of the libator(s) is very vital:<sup>9</sup> firstly, they gain importance by exhibiting their talents through their strong memory, and secondly, the importance they give to ancestors shows the importance they will receive when they transit. Van der Geest (2013) rightly puts it:

[B]y praising their forebears, the elders prize themselves, by mentioning the names of gods and ancestors they try to save their own name from oblivion, by paying respect to the [ancestors] they hope to earn the dear respect of their younger relatives. (p. 232)

## Libation mnemonics as repository of cultural memory

Most traditional societies affected by Christianity and urbanisation recall the memory of libation by observing some of their ritual remains: bowls, cups, jugs and other material objects handed down across generations. Nehusi (2016:34) notes that the cup, bowl, calabash or the receptacle into which the drink offering is poured are of great cultural significance and value among Africans. The most common objects among the people of *Obang* which automatically bring libation and related memories to mind include bags, cups, calabashes, clay pots and so on. Even when they are no longer in use, such objects contained certain memories that expedite remembrance of a past event. In some cases, such vessels were deliberately created and set aside as memorial object for certain traditions that were necessary to be remembered. Mnemonic devices include tangible artefacts, and ideas coded in either riddles, idioms or folklores as instances of memory. By simply observing, say, the stool, cup, staff or other royal gargets, a bona fide native of *Obang* is automatically connected to the long tradition of kingship. In fact, Jan Vansina (1965:37) argues that material objects are historical sources in themselves.

Certain objects are very symbolic, especially to different social, cultural and even religious groups to the extent that some are given more than just a historical recognition

9. In this case, the libator represents the present transitional generation on whom the future relies. Whatever they do for the ancestors will be done to them. By respecting the ancestors, they are preparing their own stage in the future.

(Carstens 2003). Indeed, in some cases, they are considered sacred. It can even be said that what the cross is to Christianity, could be said of a dead man's cup to the people of *Obang*. In the Hebrew religions, for instance, even when libation was prohibited because of idolatry, the cultic equipment was to remain on the table of display (Carstens 2003; cf. Ex 25:23–30; 35–37 etc.). Also, Christian traditions hold the chalice in awe even when they are empty. The main reasons for these are the religio-historical memoirs they are associated with. The most recent cultic equipment discovered during excavations in Palestine shows evidence of this ancient practice (Fisher 2007:1).

The libation vessels are particularly significant in that they function in connecting human beings to each other in communion, and at the same time symbolise a past memory. Symbols act as markers of connections and remembrance between individuals and communities by preserving their 'collective' and 'cultural' memories (Assmann 2006; Halbwachs 1992). They connect and unite the past (ancestors), the unborn (those yet to come) and the present (the living) into a single community. The artefacts of a particular community or groups within certain communities connect them as members of that community, and equally recalled the ancestor or event that initiated that memory. In the long run, libation mnemonics become the vital force of particular communities (Mulago 1969).

Animals and objects also embody this idea of libation mnemonics among the people of *Obang*. The most common is the 'cup' handed down traditionally through successive family, clan or national heads. This cup is either made of calabash or modelled from the horn of a cow. The origin of some of the cups are obscured, but said to have come from a very long past. Their shape and colour are usually visual testimonies to their history. It was customarily for the head of a household to assemble the kin to drink from this cup before any individual or collective expedition. By drinking from this common cup, they identify to a common heritage and are determined to pursue a common future. Till date, it is almost an annual even for families or an entire clan to congregate and share in this cup.

Like in other parts of Cameroon, among the people of *Obang*, the guardians of cultural artefacts, traditional stools, royal tombs and cups must know their history and in a coherent manner recall the ancestors through whom the item descended. By doing that, the one is narrating the history of the family or village. The custom is that objects are made as souvenirs of important ceremonies, or something that represents a certain exploit by an individual. In *Obang*, the yearly ceremonies to introduce the fishing, farming and hunting seasons are usually accompanied by an exhibition of the objects used by successive generations. Even without uttering a word, memory is refreshed and history recollected by just seeing the objects.

## Conclusion

From the above, it has been demonstrated that libation is so broad to the extent that no single perspective can box it.

Different communities and different occasions direct the significance that may be attached to the practice of libation. Most societies, especially traditional societies, had certain institutions for recollecting past memories, maintaining their cultural continuity and identity. They develop methods of transmission of certain traditions and customs in such a way as to guarantee trust, and to determine the most appropriate way of preserving and passing on the original memories of the key players as faithfully as possible. The role of the historian would therefore be to assess the extent to which the method of transmission used for certain traditions is likely to have been favourable enough for an accurate handing-down of the original traditions upon which it is based.

This study started by debunking the methodological insufficiencies of the West in understanding traditional African perspectives of history and historical records, and highlighting the view that African scholars have been a little sluggish in forcefully providing a comprehensive method which articulates rituals and libation as a historical resource. Building on these gaps, this article went ahead to show that cultic ceremonies, religious rites, rituals, cultural folklores, proverbs, idioms, artefacts, images and sculptures constitute historical data of a high magnitude among Africans in general and the people of Obang in particular. Libation is used to demonstrate that it is the single and most reliable ritual which embodies most aspects of historical memory. Unfortunately, for a long time, this ritual has received an eccentric treatment, resulting in the difficulty of arriving at a methodology which is comprehensive enough in articulating an African history which takes the entire African environment into consideration. In summary, therefore, this study has suggested that the extended borders of cultural history with the help of memory studies give history and African history in particular the amalgam of synchronic and dichromic perspectives needed in articulating a phenomenon as libation.

While acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of memory, this article suggests a reconciliation of the relationship and dichotomy of forgetting and remembering which are basic in cultural memory. I conclude that libation is not just a host of memory, but it remains one of the most reliable vehicles through which memory – culture, history and identity – is handled and handed down from generations to generations. Among the many dimensions of libation, this article highlighted by distinguishing two distinct but interrelated nodes of memory: firstly, libation as communication of ancestral memory, and secondly, libation mnemonic objects as repository of cultural memory. While the mentioning of ancestors recall events unites the community of the living and the departed in a lineage bond, libation mnemonics are coded historical sources in themselves.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

## Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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