

A Phenomenological Approach to Belief in Supreme Being and Divinities in Efik Traditional Religion

Pendekatan Fenomenologis terhadap Ketuhanan dan Ketuhanan dalam Agama Tradisional Efik

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ABSTRAK

Kapasitas manusia untuk percaya sangat besar. Kapasitas inilah yang menyebabkan keyakinan dan praktik keagamaan yang berbeda yang ada saat ini di dunia. Keyakinan dan praktik keagamaan tidak dapat sepenuhnya dipahami di luar kerangka konseptual pengalaman orang. Pengalaman adalah aktivitas sadar yang bisa subjektif atau komunal, pribadi, atau kelompok. Bagi masyarakat Efik, pengalaman mereka di sekitar daerah aliran sungai dan pertemuan mereka dengan beberapa kekuatan spiritual air di lingkungan selama bertahun-tahun telah menyebabkan keyakinan kuat mereka akan keberadaan kekuatan spiritual air yang disebut *ndem*. Meskipun konsep Keberadaan Tertinggi menonjol dalam kosmologi mereka, juga diyakini bahwa Tuhan telah memberikan kekuatan kepada beberapa kekuatan spiritual untuk mengendalikan kawasan perairan untuk mewujudkan atau mengaktualisasikan tujuannya. Inilah yang menginformasikan keyakinan kuat mereka pada ketuhanan *ndem*; roh air, dewa dan dewi air, serta dewa penjagaan orang Efik. Diyakini bahwa dewa ini dan agennya tinggal di rumah-rumah bagus di dasar sungai, laut, dan sungai, dari mana mereka mengendalikan urusan pria dan kadang-kadang muncul di hadapan manusia dengan pakaian yang indah. Pendekatan fenomenologi penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana pengalaman keagamaan orang Efik menginformasikan kepercayaan mereka pada Yang Maha Esa (*Abasi Ibom*) dan *ndem* (dewa laut) lainnya dan pengaruh agama Kristen terhadapnya.

Kata Kunci: Yang Mahatinggi; Efik; tidak ada; keilahian; makhluk spiritual; ketuhanan pengawasan.

ABSTRACT

The human capacity for belief is enormous. It is these capacities that have led to the divergent religious beliefs and practices that exist today in the world. Religious beliefs and practices cannot be fully understood outside the conceptual framework of people's experiences. Experience is a conscious activity that could be subjective or communal, personal, or group. For the Efik people, their experiences around the riverside area and their encounter with some aquatic spiritual powers within the environment over the years had led to their strong belief in the existence of aquatic spiritual powers called *ndem*. Though the concept of Supreme Being features prominently in their cosmology, it is also believed that God has given powers to some spiritual forces to control the aquatic estates to realize or actualize his purpose. This is what informs their strong belief in *ndem* divinity; an aquatic spirit, the water gods and goddess, as well as the tutelage divinity of the Efik people. It is believed that this divinity and his agents live in fine houses on the beds of the rivers, seas, and streams, from where they control the affairs of men and occasionally appear to humans gorgeously dressed. The phenomenology approach of this study highlights how the religious experience of the Efik people informs their belief in the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*) and other *ndem* (marine divinities) and the effect of Christianity on it.

Keywords: Supreme Being; Efik; *ndem*; divinity; spiritual beings; tutelage divinity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many Sociologists and Historians have written much about the Efik people of South-South Nigeria, their origin, migration, culture, missionary contact, and their slave trade history (Burnard 2010; Hart 1964; Greenberg 1970). However, not much is known about their indigenous religious beliefs particularly their belief in *ndem* divinity; the tutelage of divinity as well as the god and goddess of the Efik people. This paper centers on the phenomenology of the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom* which is translated as Almighty God) and *ndem* divinity in Efik traditional religion, namely: how the Efik people experience divinities and express these encounters as their belief.

Belief in spirit beings is a universal experience in all human societies (Undiyaundeye 2010a; Undiyaundeye 2011a; Undiyaundeye 2011b). Almost all religious traditions respond to how one can live in harmony with these spiritual entities in view of being prospered by them and to averting calamities either here or in the hereafter life (Naseri & Ekpene 2011; Naseri 2017). This phenomenological quest is to be bound to these divinities that have engendered in humanity plethora and divergent spiritualities. This global experience is common to Africans in African traditional religions and the Efik people are not left out. In the same vein, Spencer (1983) avers that belief in spirits who dwell in nature like water, land, forest, mountains marked the genesis of deities in primitive societies. The human connection to the spiritual world, realities and consciousness substantiates the dualism in nature. Furthermore, Scharf (1970) argues that dualism in nature is supported by the phenomena of death, dreams, sleep, and trances which gives birth to the belief in another world as well believe in the ghost of the remote ancestors or superior persons became divinities, sacrifice, and a libation poured to appease the dead and the gods.

From the foregoing, sociological origins of religion and belief in spiritual entities could be traced to human consciousness and openness to transcendent beings. Thus, one can say that the phenomenological quests to understand the mysterious happenings and extraordinary occurrences within and outside the human environment marks the beginnings of belief, religion, and divinities. The following are some of the questions asked: where do the dead go? What happens to the spirit of someone when he or she dies? Is there another world, outside the physical world? Who controls the invisible world? How can one live in harmony with nature and the environment? All these questions were raised in humankind's attempt to understand the nature of its being and environment –

physical and spiritual. Consequently, the occurrences that were beyond rational explanations; and that fell outside the ordinary day-to-day experience impelled the belief in spiritual beings and the world.

2. THE EFIK PEOPLE: ETHNOGRAPHY AND COSMOLOGY

The Efik people are an ethnic grouping that settled along the Cross River estuaries and the banks of the Calabar River in Nigeria and they share boundaries with Western Cameroon (Offiong 2011; Olufu & Offiong 2017; Ekpo & Offiong 2020). In contemporary Nigeria, they are found within five Local Government Areas in Cross River State; namely: Calabar South, Calabar Municipality, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, and Odukpani. Their language is Efik and it is widely spoken beyond the aforementioned geographical circumscription (Offiong 2016). Erim (1990) avers that origin of the Efik people could be traced back to the fourteenth century A.D, linked to their migration from Uruan in the thirteenth century with their first settlement at Ikpaene before arriving at Creek Town and the rest of their present riverine locations. For the Efik people, the universe is seen as two interrelated realms: the visible and the invisible. Human beings live in the visible realm, while Supreme Being and spiritual beings exist in the invisible realm. There is a link between the two worlds. The Supreme Being and spiritual beings make their presence felt on the physical realm, while at the same time human beings can project themselves into the spiritual sphere through their oracles and traditional priests to seek or inquire for help, healing, protection, and peace from the spiritual beings. This reality resonates with Mbiti's (1969) claim that the spiritual world of Africans is densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and living-dead.

In addition, to Metuh (1987), the world of human experience is seen as a fluid yet coherent unit, in which spirits, men, women, animals, plants, and the elements are engaged in continuous interaction, both and humankind is at the centre of this dynamic universe as well as sustaining its equilibrium via rituals that sustain harmony among all concerned (Metuh 1981). These rituals are informed by the peoples' cosmology, customs and traditions and general approach to life (Nwala 1985; Essien 2005). Consequently, the traditional religious setting of the Efik people has a very high sense of respect and honour for the sacred. There is reverence for sacred places, persons, and objects and this sacrality in temporal spheres bridges the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the visible and the invisible. Thus, religion permeates every aspect of their life from the cradle to the grave. For the Efik people, religion is not simply a faith or a worship system; it is a way of life, a system of social control, a provider of medical, and an organizing

mechanism (Akpanika 2020).

This consciousness of the invisible presence of God, the spirits and the ancestors compel people to live their life in a manner that is pleasing to these supernatural forces (Offiong 2016). They must tell the truth, be honest in business, and just in their dealings with others. Therefore, whenever one falls below normative standards, the will of the spirits are discerned so that atonement through sacrifices can be done. For the Efik people, life is a ceaseless battle against nature, against evil-minded neighbours and malevolent gods. This all-consuming concept of spiritual powers was and is still very valuable in understanding how a traditional Efik person judges the potency or the efficacy of any new religion introduced to him or her (Akpanika 2020).

For the Efik people, belief in spirit beings is dominantly expressed in their socio-religious celebrations, liturgies, and rituals. Most rites, rituals practices, and festivals are shrouded with spiritual beliefs and constitute vital elements in the experience, expression, and practices of their religion. Their traditional religion and worldview regulated, explained, predicted, and controlled their space and events. Their worldview penetrated every facet of their social, political, and religious life. It promotes and inculcates a sense of communalism among them. Their religion suffused and gave meaning to their life. Aye (1967) opines that the Efik people are polytheistic; believing and worshipping several gods and goddesses to whom they offered periodic animals and human sacrifices. Individual families and households also had their patron gods and goddesses to whom they offered their sacrifices also.

3. TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUAL REALM IN EFIK COSMOLOGY

The Efik spirit world is dynamic, with varieties of spirit beings actively participating in human affairs. In Efik cosmology, spirit beings are found everywhere and can inhabit or dwell in any object or creature. According to Wotogbe-Weneka (2010):

spirits are ubiquitous in the sense that there is no area of the earth, no object or creature which cannot be inhabited by a spirit, hence names are given to them in every locality, depending on where they are thought or believed to be located; hence have the notion of aquatic spirits, land or earth spirits, spirits of the mountains, hills or grooves (p. 27).

This understanding resonates with most African societies and the Efik people as well as their tutelage divinities. Nonetheless, Metuh (1987) classifies them into two; the non-human spirit and the human spirits.

Spiritual beings in the African worldview are broadly classified into two- Non-human spirits and human spirits. The former are spirits who were originally spirits and have never been human beings. These include the Supreme Being, deities, and some spirit forces. The latter group consists of spirits of one-time human beings. They have therefore disincarnated spirits like souls, ghosts, ancestors (p. 63).

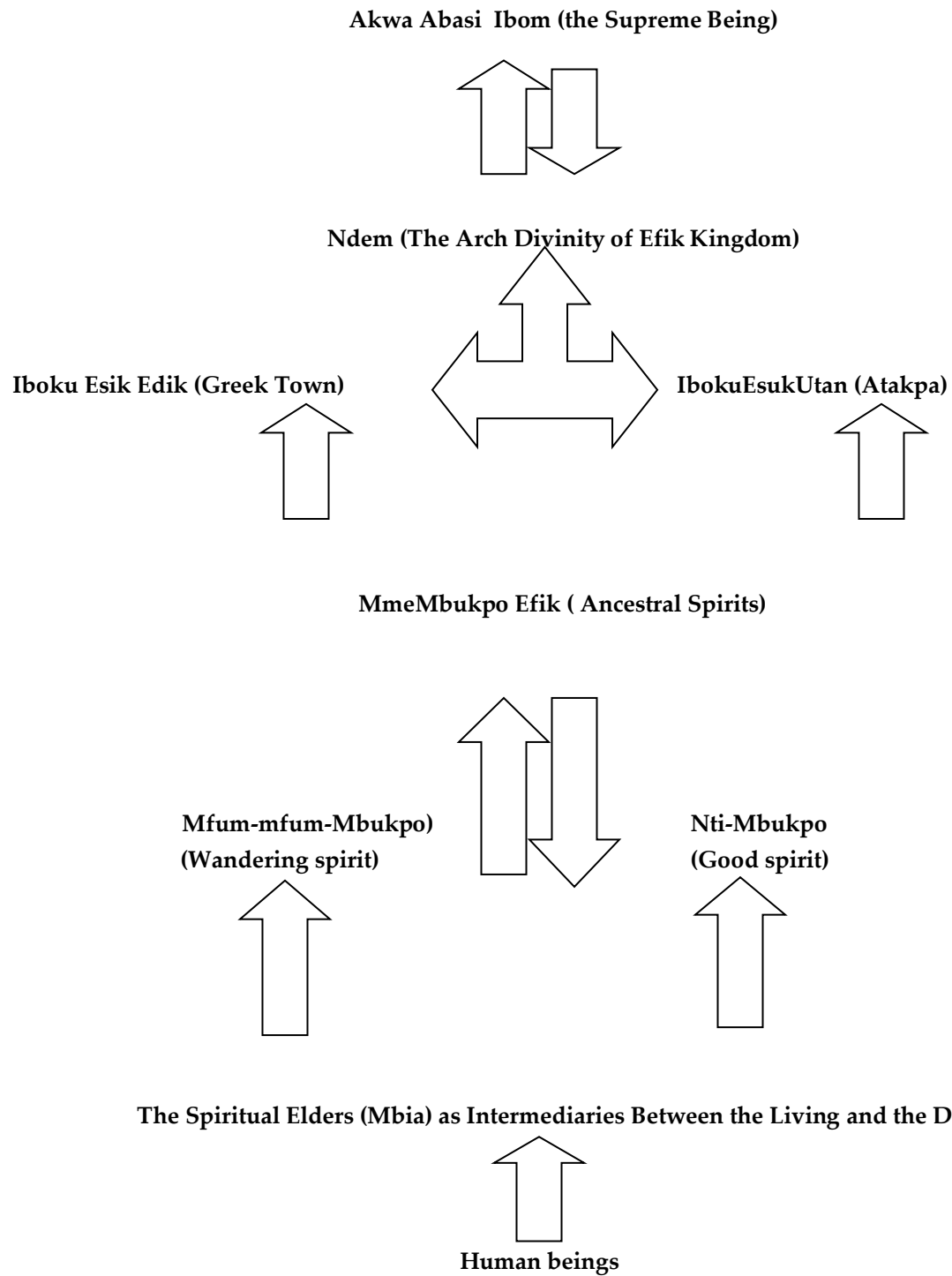
In all its diverse usage, spirits are mostly perceived as intangible and non-corporeal beings with the power to influence the activities of human beings positively or negatively. For the Efik people the term *ekpo* (ghost) and *ukpong* (soul) can be used interchangeably but *ukpong* in Efik differs from the Western concept of soul. While the West expresses the soul as thinking faculties, mental perception, intelligence, reasoning, thought, or mental state; the Efik people see *ukpong* as the soul or spirit of the reincarnated person. For instance, children named after their father living or dead are called Etete, implying that spirit or the soul of the father has come back (*ukpongetesie* or *Eteteesi*). If the child is a female, she is called – *Ekaete*, paternal grandmother *Eteka*, implying that the spirit or the soul of that person has come back.

Human souls are also believed to be twinned with other creatures and this is known as soul-mate: meaning that a person's soul could be spiritually tied to an animal or bird such as an elephant, crocodile, lion, snakes, fish, and eagle. Some people take pride in having some extraordinary power through such spiritual twinning rituals; hence *ukpongurukikot* (snake), *ukpongekpe* (lion), *ukpongoffiom* (crocodile). By implication, whatever happens to the animal in its habitat, affects the person in the physical world. If the soul-mate or soul in form is caught by trap, net, hook or even shot, unknowingly, the physical person whose soul in form is tied to such an animal or bird would suffer the consequence and may even die. However, according to their belief, when such a person is taken to traditional medicine doctors called *mbiaukpong* on time, he or she could be delivered (Edim 2013).

4. HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE EFIK SPIRIT WORLD

From the experience of the Efik people with the non-corporeal beings, their spirit world is hierarchically structured as follows: the Supreme Being, followed by the deities or divinities, spirits, and ancestral spirits. Fuller Robert (2001) opines that in this hierarchical structuring of the spiritual world, all the spiritual beings have the Creator as the source of their being and as tutelage divinities, they influence the human world significantly.

The Efik Hierarchical Structure of the Spirit World



5. THE NAMING OF SUPREME BEING AND DIVINITIES

African traditional societies name their Supreme Being and divinities according to their experience of them. The names given to the Supreme Being in different African societies reflect the intrinsic attributes he or she is known for. For example, among Efik people, the Supreme Being occupies a remarkable position in the religious pantheon. The generic term for God or gods in Efik is *Abasi* whether the Supreme Being or the divinities. The distinction is made by the prefix that is attached to *Abasi*. For instance, *Akwa Abasi*, meaning (the Almighty God) *Nsinisi Abasi Ibom*, (Everlasting God) but divinities or spirits are addressed as *mnenkpiri abasi* (the smaller gods) or *mmeabasilsong* or *Abasi ubokowo* (gods of the earth or man-made gods). The difference in naming consists in five distinctions: firstly, the Supreme Being is spelled in capital letters. Secondly, the gender of the Supreme Being is masculine. Thirdly, his name is rendered in the singular term. Fourthly, the divinities are written in small letters. And fifthly, they are rendered in plural.

In the Efik hierarchy of God-divinities, the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*) is recognized as the Creator of the universe, ageless, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He is "*Abasi Ibom, Akwa Abasilbom, or Abasi Enyong*" meaning Great God, Almighty God, or the God of the Sky. The word "*Ibom*" is "derived from {Efik} word "*Ubom*" meaning expanse, magnitude, wideness, largeness, something limitless. "*Abasi Ibom*", therefore, means a Being that is limitless, very large and very wide. He is "*Abasi emiodudekekupruebiet*" (God Omnipresent), "*Abasi emiofiokdekpupuru Mkpo*" (God Omniscient) and "*Abasi Odudu*" (God Omnipotent). He is so large that the [Efik] people built him no house (Shrine). His abode is in the sky and so he is God of the Sky hence "*Abasi Enyong*" (Charles 2010, p. 455).

In all matters of social relations, the Supreme Being comes first as the Almighty God and Governor of all things. Thus, the name of the Supreme Being is mentioned first before the deities and ancestors during libation to signify his sovereignty over and above other gods and deities. Libation is a traditional prayer of invocation and invitation of the Almighty God through the deities and ancestors for a program. It could be at the council meeting, marriage, burial, naming ceremonies, circumcision, puberty rite, or rite of passage. According to Efik's religious belief, "*Akwa Abasi Ibom*" is the final and absolute authority in all matters of life and death. He is not of the same rank and file as the deities. The deities have no independent existence apart from the Supreme Being in Efik cosmology. It is the "*Akwa Abasilbom*" (the Supreme

Being) who assigns functions to the different deities in whom they owe absolute allegiance. By implication, they only act as intermediaries for the people.

Besides the intrinsic attributes, Mbiti (1969, p. 40) asserts that God also has "eternal and moral attributes" as reflected in his name. *Nsinsi Abasi Ibom* (eternal God), *Edisana Abasi* (Holy God) are some of the names in Efik that reflect his eternal attributes. While names like *Abasi Ima* (God of love), *Abasi Mbom* (God of mercy), *Abasi Idongesit* (God of comfort) and *Abasi Unen* (God of Justice) reflect his moral attributes. It is these moral attributes of the Supreme Being that strengthen the Efik ethical sanctions and uphold communal solidarity. These moral attributes are expressed in the names Efik people give their children. For instance, *Eno Abasi* (Gift from God), *Udong Abasi* (The Glory of God), *Emem Abasi* (Peace of God), *Uduak Abasi* (God's Will). These names reflected both the concept and the moral attributes of the Supreme Being among the Efik people.

6. NDEM: THE ARCH DIVINITY OF EFIK KINGDOM

According to the hierarchical structuring of the spirit world, as discussed above, divinities are believed to be created by the Almighty God to fulfill specific roles. They did not come into existence of their own volition. Their status is mediatory; they are intermediaries between God and creation. As creatures of God, their powers are limited to the performance of their specific assignment, hence the existence of a pantheon of divinities in each African traditional society. As noted in Efik's ethnography above, they live along with the riverine areas and spread down the mangrove and freshwater swamp forest of the coast of Bright of Bonny. Thus, Charles (2010) indicates that this cultural ecology shapes their beliefs and worldview and explains the vitality of their beliefs in *ndem*, the water goddess.

In Efik cosmology, *ndem* is the arch divinity in the earthly realm, the tutelage deity and the god/goddess of people. *Ndem Efik* is a group of marine spirits whose habitat is primordially aquatic. Wotogbe-Weneka (2010) explains that: "the spirit exists in both sexes and they espouse their opposite sexes in the world of men, hence female aquatic spirits marry males on land and conversely, the male aquatic spirits marry females on land" (p. 82). Thus, among the Efik people, it is common to hear of marriage arrangements between *Ekpenyong* and *Ekanem*. *Ekpenyong* is usually the name given to the male aquatic spirit, while *Ekanem* is the female. *Ekpenyong* and *Ekanem* can physically get married in the world of women or men as the case may be. Sometimes, children born as a result of such marriage or as a result of answered prayers or because of offering sacrifices to *Ndem deity* are known as

Ndito Ndem meaning children of *Ndem* divinity. The females are *ibannndem* and the male is *irenndem*. They are usually beautiful and handsome maiden and men, dedicated, sometimes exclusively to the worship of *Ndem* (Akak 1982). They could appear and disappear anytime.

The popular Efik religious sensibility regards the *ndem* as family of powerful divinities who superintend over aquatic environments. They inhabit and control the resources of the waters, bring fortunes and success as well cause calamity. They have agents or commissioners who help them in their operations. Charles (2010) points out that the operations of the Supreme God can be manipulated, by ritual offerings given to the *ndem* (marine divinities), in favour or against human beings. Thus, *ndem* are likened to commissioners or ministers with a special power for a special function. They are seen as a means to an end and not end in themselves. Each Efik clan has its deity. For instance, Creek Town has "*Akpa-Uyok*"; Old Town has "*Anansa Ikot Obutong*", Henshaw Town has "*Esin Ndem Nsidung-Esiet Ebom*", while Eniong had "*Afia-awan Ndem Eniong*", "*Ekuriku Ndem Atan*" and "*Obot-Okoro Ndem Nkoro*" as their divinities, James Town "*Efiat Aya*".

In an *Oral Interview*, the Clan Head of OrukAdakuko of Creek Town, Etubom Efiok Ekpenyong Nsa, asserted that: "Every clan in Efik land, has a major deity, with whom the destiny of the clan is associated with as seen above. These deities are very influential and occupy a central position in the life and activities of the community and individuals. Their shrines are visited in every major occasion whether, by the community chief priest or community leaders" (18th August 2021). Furthermore, they are claims that they live in magnificent houses on the beds of the rivers from where they are being believed to have control or come to interact with the world of human beings. Wotogbe-Weneka (2010) avers that: they live in communities under the seas and lead a social life like human beings. They sing and dance, they eat and drink because they too get hungry; they marry and are given in marriage, and above all, they share a common fate with human beings' death, though they live longer than human beings.

Each Efik community has priests and priestesses (*Oku Ndem*), whose responsibilities are to sacrifice to the Supreme Being and meet with those who come for consultation as the need arises. Notable Sociologists of Religion further opine that they are mysteriously fond of emotional traditional songs and dances which usually accompany the rousing sounds of drums played during consultations. They are constantly in love with everything white, especially when they are at the height

of their spiritual possession; and hate to see black which to them is like showing a red rag to a bull (Akak 1982; Charles 2010). Furthermore, their love for white objects and paraphernalia depict their socio-ethical principle for justice and moral rectitude. In another oral interview, Chief Ikpong Eyo Etim, the Paramount Ruler of EtoNmkpe Yellow Duke Clan in Akpabuyo, Local Government of Cross River State, one of the clans in Efik land stated that: "*Ndem deity* is regarded as God's viceroy on earth, she is the aquatic deity whom God has given the power to rule and control the water as his representative here on earth. She mediates between God and man and also acts as a messenger in the theocratic estate of *Akwa Abasi Ibom* who in his infinite majesty cannot be approached directly" (7th September, 2021).

7. ANCESTRAL SPIRIT BEINGS IN EFIK COSMOLOGY

The ancestral spirit beings come third in the Efik Spiritual hierarchy. They are the living dead who have had their place of honour and recognition in the ancestral world. These beings command a very significant position in the cosmic scheme of the Efik people. Compared to marine spirits, ancestral spirits play lesser intermediary roles. They were once humans, and knowing human frailty and weaknesses, they stand as advocates or agents between the deities and the spirit world pleading the causes of their family members and their communities. The concept of veneration is grounded on the belief that there is life after death and that as one joins his ancestors, he has the power to protect or harm members of the family. It is on this note that Mbiti (1969) refers to them as "living-dead since they act as the invisible police of the families and communities" (p. 83). Ancestors are regarded as *mbukpo* in the Efik language and are usually referred to in plural and age is an important qualification for the office. It is not everyone that qualifies to be an ancestor; there are good and bad or wicked ancestors; the good ones are *mmenti mbukpo* and the wicked ones *mm' idiok mbukpo*. The good ones are those who were noted for their good life, bravery, sane judgment, and philanthropic gestures while on earth. They help in fertilizing the earth for a bumper harvest, care for the welfare of their lineage; the good ones reincarnate again after a few months or years (Udoh 1983).

For one to be recognized as a good ancestor, the person must die a good death, attain a reasonable old age, must have been married with children, and must have held good values and acceptable lifestyle, must not die a bad death, that is death by accident, lunacy, epilepsy, suicide or through any form of violence (Opoku 1978; Offiong & Uduigwomen 2021). Corroborating these claims, Fry explains:

The ancestors are on the side of good values

and openness, free from purely personal interests. They stand opposed to the machinations of those who would go against collective ideals and ignore their social obligations for reasons of jealousy or personal advancement. They represent ideal men who, relieved of personal peculiarities and petty jealousies, can act as moral and just guardians of pure morality (Opoku 1978, p. 21).

Efik people construct their understanding of the hereafter in a purely retributive order. Thus, those who lived the good life while on earth and died good death become ancestors and live in a spirit world believed to be patterned on normal African life; where they share a sense of brotherhood, comradeship, and communal life (Tasie 2001). This is based on the cyclical view of existence by the Efik people and other Africans who perceive "life is a continuum between the two worlds and those who have died belong to both the physical and spiritual worlds; though they are dead, they are alive and very close to their people. They see their people but their people do not see them because they are de-corporealed" (Obiefuna 2018, p. 215).

However, those denied the ancestors status are persons who died by mysterious circumstances, or any form of calamity, death by suicide, accident; falling from a tree, drown in a river, bitten by a snake, accused of being witches or wizards, murderers, sorcerers, deviants and other categories of evil people who do not keep the moral code of their community and are doomed to wander. It is believed that their "place is in the hell of potsherds" (Udoh 1983, p. 258). This damnation is seen as perpetual exclusion from the lineage and community life in the hereafter. For the Efik people, life is a continuum between the two worlds also as rightly captured by Idowu (1973), who opines that:

the event of death enhances the power of the ancestors, who though residing in the spirit world, nonetheless, can still visit the land of the living to aid or hinder them, to promote prosperity or cause adversity...they are intermediaries between deity and their children...it is a general belief that a living father or a living mother, by his fatherhood or her motherhood is endowed with the power to bless or curse an offspring effectively and in this way, they continued their earthly function to their families and communities even though they are dead (pp. 184-185).

Metuh summarizes these intermediary roles of the ancestors as follows:

They are to look after the welfare of their kinsmen, constantly warn their descendants

and kinsmen of an impending disaster and counsel them on what to do to attract the most favourable fortunes as they hope one day to reincarnate... they are the custodians of the traditional laws and customs on which the survival of the clan depends and would punish with sickness or misfortune anybody who flouted them (Metuh 1981, p. 149).

8. THE LIVING ELDERS AS INTERMEDIARIES BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Directly beneath the ancestors in the spiritual hierarchy are the living elders and family heads. Their religious role among others includes: leading their families and community members in occasional or yearly rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices in appeasing the gods and divinities on behalf of their families and communities. As part of their responsibility, the aged serve as intermediaries between members of their families or communities and the supernatural realm. They help to appease the gods to avoid any form of calamity within the family setting or the larger community. Hence, it is common to see the Head of the family in every family or community gathering, inviting the gods and ancestors to share in the eating and drinking of the family. (*Mbukpo Efik, mmeEtinyin ye Ekayin, ebo eke mbufodooo*) (The incantation that is usually said during a family gathering as the Head of the family pours the libation inviting the gods and the ancestors to be part of the gathering); libation is a form of intercessory prayer, invoking the spiritual powers to accept, guard, and guide and the activity in question against enemies of the family or community. They help to consult the gods on issues affecting both the family and the community because all human misfortunes are attributed to the ancestor's discontent and they are appeased in various ways, among which sacrifices are the most important. The spirit of the Chiefs and royal ancestors are more important than those of the commoners. They are the source of communal well-being and prosperity. The old men sit in the honoured section of the lodge during ceremonies and social functions and are given many gifts by those performing the rituals (Kraft 1996).

This worldview is highly cherished and valued among Efik people. For them, life is holistic rather than individualistic, religious rather than secular. The world is an integrated whole that cannot be separated, just as the human body cannot be separated from his spirit, so can the physical world not be separated from the spiritual. The sacred and secular are one indivisible entity that is surrounded by several religious objects and symbols. For this reason, communities are not just bound together by their natural origin or deep common interests rather they are united by the visible and invisible worlds; of those

physically alive and those of ancestors, divinities, and souls of children yet to be born to individual kin-groups. In a wider sense, the Efik traditional community comprehends the totality of the world of African experience including the physical environment, as well as all spirit beings acknowledged by a given group. This idea and structure of human society for the Efik people of South-South Nigeria is essentially part of a worldview that is fundamentally holistic, sacred, and highly integrated. The human community, therefore, has its full meaning and significance within the transcendental centre of ultimate meaning.

9. OBONG OF CALABAR: THE CHIEF PRIEST OF NDEM EFIK

By hierarchy, Obong of Calabar is the patriarch and tutelage Chief Priest of all Efik deities, despite the myriads of these divinities and deities. Obong of Calabar, by his position, is the head of *Ndem Efik Iboku shrine (Oku Ndem)*, for this reason, he is the most revered living patriarch and the focal figure of Efik cultural identity because of his responsibility as the Chief Priest of the guardian divinity. He is considered to be the living representative of all the spiritual and physical components of the Efik people. He mediates between the living and the dead (*mbukpo*) and by knowledge and wisdom; he is believed to be the embodiment of divine powers and custodian of Efik heritage and seen as being more than an ordinary human being since he represents both aspects of existence (Hackett 1988). The functions of the Obong of Calabar are further explained below:

His religious functions overlapped with political functions and often he also handles judicial roles. Age was an important qualification for the office of the Chief Priest. The oldest living person from a designated House inherited this status and role. The Chief Priest's major function was religious. The heads of Efik families assumed political roles and were selected based on age by their respective families. No external influence dictated the selection. These family heads recognize the Chief Priest (ObongNdem Efik Iboku) and often time seek divine guardians from him. He is addressed as Edidem which is an Efik word denoting supremacy and wisdom (Charles 2010, p. 208).

Among the Efiks, the Obong or Edidem was not only the king and the monarch of his people but the spiritual head, the Chief Priest, and the Guardian of "*Ndem Efik Iboku*". As the Chief Priest, his responsibility was to help appease the gods to avoid calamity and also consult the gods on issues affecting families and

communities within his domain. Any candidate, therefore, that was to ascend the Efik throne and the Office of Obong of Calabar must have fulfilled the qualifications of being able to trace his ancestry paternally and maternally to any of the Efik ancestral lineages and must also be the eldest son in that family. The Chief Priest, Obong of Calabar (Obong Ndem Efik Iboku) assisted by families Priests (*Oku Ndem*) were supposed to yearly or as the occasion demands, worship and offer human sacrifice to this divinity, with the victim thrown into the river to appease the goddess, *Ndem Efik Iboku* and other gods; though this ritual of human sacrifice has been replaced with a cow with the coming of Christianity.

This worldview makes life among the Efik people essentially a quest for security against the unseen spiritual forces that work against the peace and happiness of the family and the community in general. For this reason, sacrifices, offerings, and libations are constantly used to appease the spiritual forces to prevent their anger and wrath.

10. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study of the understanding of supreme beings and divinities among the Efik people of Cross River State of Nigeria underscores the importance of human experience in conceptualizing the interactions between the spiritual realm and human beings. It is the encounter of the people with supreme beings that informs the 'naming' of the spiritual entities as well as rules of engagement that these spiritual beings give. The data of experience gathered from the past help the Efik people to be convinced of the fact that the real world is both: seen and unseen. In addition, this conviction cements their belief in the hierarchical structure of the spiritual world.

The experience of the Efik people as regards the connection between the spiritual and the material world makes the belief in *ndem* to be the fulcrum of their cosmology. The question is: is this belief in the relevance of *ndem* palpable in contemporary Efik society? The answer is yes. For so many reasons. One that stands out is that the present-day praxis of Christianity among the Efik people has been partially responsible for the re-think of the reality of the *ndem* and their influence among the people. This is partly because Christian praxis among the Efik people seems to trace all forms of misfortunes to the presence and operations of these *ndem* deities in various families. Hence, the resurgence of interest of Efik Christians in the powers of these *ndem* divinities to control their influence on the physical realm.

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