

## **INITIATION IN IBIBIO CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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### **Abstract**

This work x-rays initiation in Ibibio traditional religion. Initiation deals with rites of passage that are handed down by ancestors to generations after them. It shows basic pattern for genuine change. To gain the right to be admitted among the adults, the adolescent has to pass through series of ordeal tests to undergo initiatory. By virtue of these rites, and of the revelations that they entail, the individual will be recognized as a responsible member of the society. Therefore, initiation introduces the candidate into the human community, and the worlds of spirits and the ancestors. The individual learns behaviour patterns, techniques, and the institutions of adult life. The aim of the paper is to discover the importance of initiation in Ibibio culture and also see it as a very vital sacrament in African society in extension Ibibio traditional religion. This work adopted a sociological approach. Initiation reveals the almost awesome seriousness with which the individual assumes responsibility of receiving and transmitting spiritual values. This work concluded that before one is considered worthy to receive the sacred teaching, one must first be prepared spiritually.

**Keywords:** initiation, Ibibio, culture, traditional religion.

### **Introduction**

Initiation represents one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of humanity, coined from the Latin word initiate, to begin or beginning, "initiation" means to "enter upon", "to introduce", or set going". It means to admit with necessary introductory rites or forms into some society or observance, especially, of occult character. In the Christian parlance, initiation designates the complex of sacramental rites which comprises the final stages of becoming a fully enfranchised Christian, a member of the church, one of the faithful.

In traditional Ibibio society, initiation holds great importance as its makes an individual's transition from one stage of life to another, typically from childhood to adulthood. The Ibibio people are an ethnic group predominantly located in the south-south region of Nigeria, particularly in Akwa Ibom State. The initiation process in Ibibio society often begins with the separation of initiates from the general community. The initiates, usually young boys or girls, are secluded in special camps or sacred groves for a specific period. This camp is heavily guarded and inaccessible to outsiders, maintaining the secrecy and

solemnity of the rituals that occur within.

During their time in seclusion, initiates undergo various physical, mental, and spiritual exercises. These exercises are intended to test their endurance, strength, discipline, and character, for example, the initiates may be required to perform tasks such as manual labor, hunting, rituals, or ceremonies to prove their abilities and readiness for adulthood. The initiates are also taught various aspects of Ibibio culture and tradition. Senior members of the community, often elders and respected individuals, act as members and instructors, passing down knowledge on subjects such as Ibibio folklore, history, customs, morals, values, traditional medicine, and social etiquette. These teachings are very crucial in instilling a sense of identity and reinforcing the cultural fabric of the community.

Apart from the educational aspect, initiation ceremonies also involve spiritual practices and rituals, which are believed to connect the initiates to the spiritual realm and the ancestors. Offering, sacrifices, libations and prayer are made to seek the blessing and protection of the gods and ancestral spirits. The belief is that these spiritual connections will guide and empower initiates throughout their lives. Climax of the initiation process is marked by a grand celebration and a public presentation of the initiates to the community. This ceremony known as *IyomMboppo*, signifies the completion of the initiation and the official acceptance of the initiates as adult members of society. It is joyous occasion characterized by music, dance, toasting, traditional attire, and cultural performances. Initiation in traditional Ibibio society reflects the deep reverence the community holds for its customs, heritage, and spiritual beliefs. It serves as a way to preserve cultural practices, facilitates community integration, and ensures the transmission of knowledge and values to future generations. Though modernization and western influences have impacted some aspects of initiation, many Ibibio people continue to uphold and cherish these traditions, recognizing their significance in maintaining their cultural identity.

### **Types of Initiation:**

The history of religion distinguishes three different groups of initiation, namely:

**(a) Puberty Rites:** this comprises collective rituals whose function is to effect the transition from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, and which are obligatory for all members of a particular society. Ethnologists call this initiation and tribal initiation” or a initiation into an age group”. (Eliada 1967) puberty rite actualizes this transformation and transition into another stage in life. Such transition is mandatory for the youth. To gain the right to be admitted among the adults, the adolescent has to pass through series of ordeal tests and to undergo initiatory. By virtue of this right, and of the revelations such entail, the individual will be recognized as a responsible member of the society. Therefore initiation introduces the candidate into the human community and the worlds of spirit and ancestors. The individual learns behavior patterns, techniques, and the institution of adult life. He or she also learns sacred myths and traditions of the community, the names of the deities and the history of their works.

**(b) Initiation into a secret society/spirit initiation.**

This type of initiation occurs in the spirit cult. It venerates deified shades and effects union between the spirit and its adept, as manifested in the Beschewzi sect of Bunyoro, the Imandwa in Rwanda and in Kiivu, the Bishegu in Urundi (Secretariat 1971:173). Through practices, which are spiritistic and mediumistic, the spirit takes possession of the recipient, makes him his tool, and moves his personality into him. This spiritual possession is only transitory because it only happens and lasts through the ceremony, but the consecration of the initiate to the spirit is permanent. With it, the individual will be one of the close associates of the spirit and his personal safety is assured. Such initiation assures the individual protection against evil spells, annoyance in this life and happiness and joy in the next. (Secretariat 1971:173).

In this form of initiation, the initiate lives in association with the prerogatives of the spirit to whom he is consecrated. He is made to become a new man, living in the style, with the spirit and dignity and privileges of the spirit. That is to say that he is totally in possession and is totally possessed by the spirit into which he is initiated. The spirit inserts himself so completely into him and absorbs him so completely that he takes his side in everything and ensures that he triumphs. This transformation of the whole person occurs in the process of the initiation ceremony.

**(c) Initiation with A Mystical Vocation:**

This occurs in connection with a mystical vocation: on the level of primitive religions, the vocation of the medicine man (*Abialbok*) falls within this third type of initiation. A specific characteristic of this third group is the importance which personal experience assumes in it. (Secretariat 1971:173 – 174). However, those who submit themselves to the ordeals typical of this category of initiation are whether voluntarily or involuntarily-destined to participate in a more intense religious experience than is accessible to the rest of the community. This form of initiation also occurs in the Christian Religion, example, in the ordination to the Catholic priesthood and Methodist as well. We may note that the last two forms of initiation – initiation required for admission a sacred society and the initiation requisite for obtaining a higher religious states – have a good deal in common, and may be regarded as “two varieties of a single class. (Secretariat 1971:73) what distinguishes them in the element of ecstasy which is very central in shamanic initiation. In his approach to them on initiation Bleeker, (1965:51), an ethnologist, classified it into the following headings, namely:

- (i) Initiation into a tribal community: All young people, both boys and girls usually girls, participate in this form of initiation. The initiation are introduced to knowledge of the myth and rules and the customs of the tribe.
- (ii) Initiation into certain societies of men and women: This ceremony is generally celebrated by rites which have either a symbolic or a realistic character, in the latter case they can consist of cruel ordeals.
- (iii) Initiation into a closed society which possess an esoteric truth, sometimes in the form of a secret doctrine.
- (iv) Participation in a type of cult which dramatizes a religious truth or such a

mysterious character that only privileged people are allowed to attend to it.

- (v) Initiation into an office which requires certain personal or extraordinary knowledge, such as the function of the Shamen, the king or the prophet.
- (vi) Initiation into religious truth which happens when a man embraces a certain belief or is converted.

**The Phenomenology of Initiation:** The phenomenology of initiation, especially as it concern circumcision, presents four phases, namely:

- (a) The circumcision in the strict sense.
- (b) A period of strict seclusion lasting from several weeks to several months in a male environment.
- (c) Periods of study for secret languages and key-words
- (d) Occasionally very liberal glimpse at the life of the adults. The initiation finally takes place normally through a rite of passage intended to symbolize the death of the former juvenile life and the life with new forces in the tribe.

Secrecy characterizes some forms of initiation in the African Traditional Religion, especially those ones that mark passage into adulthood. This is binding on all initiates. To disclose the secrets often merits severe punishment on the offender. During the process of initiation, ritual sacrifices are performed for purification, Oath taking prayer are made (Nana 2018:126) candidates experience some psychological shock. (Isizoh 1998:111).

There are also similar rites of passage for young girls and young women in certain tribe. In Ibibio Mboppo initiation is very prominent, Mboppo initiate is a young girl who is put in the house of seclusion for fattening, which involves preparing the young maiden for marriage and her future life under native law and customs (Nana 2023:173). It takes place at the time of marriage and is more secret than that of the young men. The passing from the paternal home to that of the husband represents a 'passage' to a completely new –phase in life, especially, in those tribe where marriage was achieved by effective or ritual kidnapping. The rite consists in “seeking a mask, this being also a manifestation of an ancestor or a spirit. The rite may involve the invocation of the goddess of fecundity, the planet of feminine rhythms or the moon, inserted symbolically between the horns of an ox as found in the ancient temples of Egypt. The viewing of masks seems to have been so important that any woman who had not seen it was unable to be present at other ritual ceremonies held for women. The examples of the rite taken from West Africa show the value of systematic study of the religions phenomenology of each racial group for a better understanding of the religious practiced at the popular level.

Eliade (1995:2) avers that, the entire social and economic life of the community derives its rhythms from these customary initiatory rituals and ceremonies, rites of fecundity and of rebirth, of suckling and of weaning, rites of passing and initiation, rites of marriage, funeral rites. They serve to open and close the sacralised cycles and are performed under the auspices of God and the ancestral spirit. In addition, the operations of seed sowing and harvesting, even in African civilizations of agricultural type, have a liturgical character. They play great role of determining the date of traditional initiation. In this way, they

serve to determine the seasonal cycle.

For Africans, the religious feeling does not always have the same intensity and the ritual oscillates between phases of sacralisation and desacralisation. That this why if we wish to interpret rightly certain ceremonies which appears to be profane we must not lose sight of the fact that religious feeling impregnates the whole life and conceptions of the African. In the agricultural circle, the significance of first-fruits is equally religiously symbolic: through them the African proclaims that the fruits of the earth belong to God (Eliade 1995:2) and the ancestors, and these must be first served before human beings can serve themselves. The manifestations which seem at first to be the folkloristic, such as the ritual hunting and fights, are capable of constituting a catharsis, that is, purification from the evil spirits of the universe is how human being behaves in the presence of divinity in his religious universe with a feeling of confidence and the observation of the rites inherited from the ancestors. Therefore, by performing the rites of initiation, human beings function in an environment of festivity in which they express their joy in living in the society that is best for them.

Dance and song characterize the phenomenology of initiation and have symbolic roles. Through them, man enters into contact with the ancestors and the spirits, and communicates with the cosmic forces. It has an impression of entering into communication with the invisible world in a movement which transports, body and soul, by some correlation existing between words and actions, between the sound waves and the cries of the heart, between the pulsation of muscles and the stirrings of the soul. (Isizoh 1998:112). All these form the phenomenology of initiation in Africa context which acquire distinct roles.

**Birth Rite:** Birth rite is one form of the initiation rites. In traditional Ibibio society, the process of childbirth initiation is a highly significant and sacred event. It involves various rituals and ceremonies that are believed to ensure the well-being of the mother and child, and to invite the blessing of the ancestors and deities.

Before childbirth initiation, a pregnant woman is required to go through a purification process which involves the use of special herbs and medicines to cleanse her body and prepare her for childbirth. This purification process is believed to remove any negative spiritual influence and process is completed, the woman is ready for childbirth initiation. This is typically done in the presence of experienced birth attendants, wise women family members, and sometimes community elders. The initiation process begins with the women being secluded in a special birthing room. This room is considered sacred and is to be gateway between the physical and spiritual worlds. During childbirth initiation, the attendants perform various rituals and ceremonies. They may chant special incantations, sing traditional songs, and offer prayers to the ancestors and deities. The woman is also encouraged to participate by repeating certain verses and performing specific movements to aid the birthing process.

Additionally, symbolic objects are often used during childbirth initiation. For example, a special birthing stool known as “*Okpokoro*” is placed in the room, representing the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. This stool is believed to have spiritual powers to ease the childbirth process. After the birth, the attendants continue to

perform rituals to protect and bless the newborn baby. This includes the naming ceremony, where the child is given a name that reflects their individuality and also connects them to their ancestors. This is the first of the major Africa initiation rites which involves initiating the infant into the world through a ritual naming ceremony Nana (2022:372). Childbirth initiation in the traditional Ibibio society is a sacred and highly revered process. It is believed to not only ensure the physical wellbeing of the mother and child but also to establish a spiritual connection between the newborn and their ancestral lineage.

**Death and Rebirth:** Initiation, therefore includes death and rebirth, a total change of a person's way of living, a shattering, and shaking all the way to the ground of the soul. The initiate becomes as another person's more fully in life emotionally and more spiritually aware. Loss of identity and even feeling betrayal of one's self characterize initiation. Initiation causes a funeral and a rebirth, mourning appropriate to death and a joyous celebration for the restoration of full life. Without conscious rituals of loss and renewal, individuals and societies lose the ability to experience the sorrows and joy necessary for feeling fully human. Without them life flattens out, and meaning drains from both living and dying.

In the African context and Ibibio in particular, initiation deals with rites of passage that are handed down by ancestors to generations after them. It shows basic pattern for genuine change. Eliada (1995:176) avers that for any transformation to be meaningful it must be thorough and, to be thorough, it needs both the ache of loss and a spirit of restoration. Consequently, this form of experience death gives initiation a characteristic symbol. More than an empty tomb, death becomes also the womb of change. In dreams and drama of initiation, death represents change for the entire psyche and life of a person. It means change inside and out, not a simple adaptation or switch in lifestyle.

### **Marriage Rite**

Marriage is a focus of existence. It is a point of convergence where the members of the community meet the departed, the living and those yet to be born. (Mbiti 1999:130). In marriage, all the dimensions of time meet, and the whole drama of history repeats, renews, and rejuvenates itself. Marriage helps to bring the human sexuality to its purpose—the ushering in of new life into the human society. In the Ibibio traditional society; the life of a girl is not a coincidence, rather is essentially a preparation for marriage, which is the goal of her life. When a girl does not reach this goal, her life is considered to have been useless. The glory of a woman lies on her children, and children are born through the union of man and woman in marriage.

Ilogu (1974:46), describes marriage in African society as a drama into which no spectator is admitted. Each party plays either as a man or a woman player. Therefore, together with the various customs associated with it, marriage is another avenue through which an individual shares in the social occasions. The girl's ceremony eventually ends with the celebration of marriage, with marriage songs and expression of good wishes and hopes. In many African societies, residence in marriage is generally patrilocal. The girl leaves her

parent's home and joins the husband and they create a home.

In Africa, the duty to marry and bear children is a requirement that generates from the corporate society and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. (Ilogu 1974:30) one who does not participate and play along with, is considered a stranger, an alien to the human society. The person in Ibibio society is a rebel and a law breaker. Such a person is not only considered as abnormal, but also subhuman.

### **Secret Character of Initiation**

Initiation, in Ibibio traditional society, has secret character. It is mostly conducted in secrecy, either in the bush or another secluded area. Initiates are forbidden to reveal the secrets. Consequently, women and non-initiates are forbidden to enter into the scene of initiation. Its secret character makes it more a mystery, and serves a meeting point between the individual and the sacred.

### **Effects of Initiation in Ibibio Culture and Traditional Society**

- (a) **Acquisition of Right:** It confers rights and privileges to the individual. In Ibibio when a child is initiated from birth into any cult group, the child automatically acquires the status of an adult and receives full rites.
- (b) **Integration into the Community of the Living:** In Ibibio, initiation integrates one into the community. The individual becomes a full-fledged member of the community. According to Mbiti (1975b:83), the integration is a complex reality, which indicates that the community belongs to God, the ancestors and the living members. This integration is not only a social reality it has also ontological and religious foundations.
- (c) **Integration in the Kingship:** At the basic of any communal integration in Ibibio, is the Kingship. One is part of one's kingship before one is integrated into the community. The individual is regarded as an integral part of the whole. This whole derives from the lineage-system called "*Ntoete*" (brethren in the family). The lineage-system plays enormous role in the communal life of the people. It is the source of unity and togetherness, and serves the strongest cohesive force and power in African traditional life. In Africa, the lineage-system and social structure (the hierarchy) are intimately connected with one another. It controls social relationships, and determine the behaviour of our individual towards another. It binds the entire life of the tribe. Almost all the concepts connected with human relationship are understood and interpreted through this system. Moreover, it governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual in the society. (Mbiti 1975b:103). The kingship system has a vertical dimension which embraces everybody in any loyal group. In it, each individuals is a brother or sister father or mother, grandfather or grandmother, cousin, brother-in-law, under or aunt, or something else. Therefore, what effects one, affects the other.

**Conclusion:** In Ibibio culture and traditional religion, initiation plays a crucial role in the spiritual and social development of an individual. The purpose of initiation is multifaceted. It serves as an educational process, imparting wisdom and knowledge about the religious beliefs, myths, history and customs of the Ibibio people. Through this process, the initiates learn about their responsibilities to the community, ancestors and deities. Initiation is seen as a transformative experience, making the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is believed that through the rituals and ceremonies, initiates undergo a spiritual rebirth and acquire spiritual powers that enable them to comfort and overcome challenges in life. The rituals often involve purification, sacrifices, and instruction on how to seek guidance and protection from ancestral spirits and deities. Finally, it serves as an important event that ensures the transmission and preservation of culture and religious practices and beliefs from one generation to another. It serves as a rite of passage, educating, connecting, and empowering individuals to assume their roles and responsibilities within the community.

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