



An Examination of the Activities of Prayer Houses and their Impact on the Human and Economic Development of Ibibio Society Nigeria

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Abstract

This study underscores activities of prayer houses and their impact on human and economic development in Ibibio society and Nigeria as a whole. Notably, prayer houses play significant roles in shaping community life, providing spiritual guidance, and addressing social and economic challenges. Despite these, they are being pegged as informal religion or unofficial religious institutions on the grounds that their activities promote an over-reliance on barbaric spirituality, and an endorsement of the commercialization of religion. Also, there exist few empirical researches that focus on how prayer houses affect both human and economic life of the Ibibio hence created a gap on scholarship concentrating on the strategies to maximize the positive contributions of the prayer houses to human existence. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative survey with analysis of the activities of prayer house leaders and members, and their implication on Ibibio communities. The findings reveal a dual influence, on the one hand, prayer houses contribute positively by providing a contextualized religious roles endearing to the people, offering counseling services, encouraging mutual aid, and promoting microeconomic initiatives; on the other hand, certain practices may discourage formal healthcare utilization, or promote dependency on spiritual solutions for economic challenges. The study concludes that prayer houses are both socio-cultural assets and

sites of contestation in development discourse. It recommends policy engagement with the leaders of prayer houses for efficient productivity that can build rather than tear the Ibibio as well as the entire Nigerian society apart.

Keywords: Prayer houses, commercialization, informal religion, human development, spirituality, economic development, Ibibio, Nigeria.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Nigeria including Ibibio society has witnessed a phenomenal rise in the number of religious centers, particularly prayer houses, which have become prominent religious spaces operating alongside traditional churches and mosques. It does not take much to observe that prayer houses found expression in the economic, social, moral and cultural spheres, thus speaks for the value of religion as a social institution. These prayer houses, commonly referred to as “healing homes,” “mountains” or “revival centers,” are often founded and run by charismatic individuals who claim spiritual gifts such as healing, prophecy, and deliverance.

In Ibibio society, prayer houses have emerged as popular alternatives to orthodox Christian churches. They attract large followers due to their perceived spiritual potency and the immediacy with which they claim to address life challenges such as poverty, illness, unemployment, infertility, and spiritual oppression. These centers are deeply rooted in both Christian and indigenous belief systems, reflecting a syncretic religious environment where modern Pentecostal practices mix with traditional African spirituality.

However, the increasing popularity of prayer houses in Ibibio society raises critical questions about their role in the society as well as their theological foundations. While some scholars argue that they provide essential spiritual and social support in the society faced with economic hardship, unemployment, and institutional failure. Others raise concerns about exploitation, lack of regulation, and the reinforcement of superstition and spiritual fear. This paper therefore seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by examining how these institutions function socially, religiously as well as how they affect the lives of individuals and communities in Ibibio society. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with prayer house leaders and members, and quantitative surveys within selected Ibibio communities.

Activities of Prayer Houses in the Society

The presence of prayer houses is a common phenomenon in African Christianity. Prayer house(s) refer to locations, often informally established, where

individuals or groups gather for the purpose of intensive prayer, spiritual activities, healing, deliverance, and religious consultation. These spaces are commonly found in African Independent Churches, Pentecostal movements, and charismatic Christian fellowships, particularly in regions such as Nigeria, Ghana, and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. They often function outside traditional denominational structures and are typically led by charismatic individuals known as prophets, spiritual leaders, or prayer warriors. Prayer houses may include: Temporary structures, makeshift shelters, or rented apartments. Sites of prophetic revelations, dream interpretations, visions, centers for fasting, vigils, exorcisms, and divine healing. These spaces may not necessarily serve as regular churches, and they often prioritize spiritual warfare and miraculous interventions over structured liturgy (Edet and Johnson, 2025: 98).

A house of prayer is a biblically rooted term referring to a sacred place dedicated to worship, reverence, and communion with God. This term emphasizes the centrality of prayer in the worship experience. It has its origin in the Old and New Testaments, where the temple in Jerusalem is referred to as a house of prayer. The phrases "House of Prayer and Prayer House may sound similar but in biblical context, they are not similar. A house of prayer refers to a place like temple in Jerusalem or any sacred space where people gather to pray and worship God. It is God's dwelling place, intended for sincere, reverent communication with Him. For instance, Isaiah 56:7 (KJV) says: "Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer..." Matthew 21:13 and Mark 11:17, where Jesus declares: "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves." In this sense, house(s) of prayer are consecrated spaces (like synagogues, temples, churches) meant for collective worship, teaching, and especially prayer, aligned with biblical doctrine. On the other hand, prayer house refers to a place established for prayer, often by religious group or ministries with emphasis on healing, prophecy, deliverance and spiritual warfare, often blending Pentecostal and indigenous spirituality.

According to Hackett (2004: 36), such prayer houses have places where patients often stay, the healer having recourse to traditional healing practices and mixing them with whatever religious direction they may consider appropriate. During healing session, mysterious invocations are chanted and rituals are performed to ensure the repeal of the ailment which is considered to be a manifestation of evil. Often, the healing is carried out in such a way as can impress upon the patients and the public that the pastor-healer has specific gifts and charisma which come from some other enigmatic sources only acquired by the healer (Ekarika, 2017: 392). Items used for healing include: Olive oil, coconut, coconut water, potash, limestone, salt, water, palm kernel oil, crude oil, palm oil, black powder, fermented cassava water, rain water (direct from the sky), sand, herbs, root among others. They conduct deliverance for witchcraft- possessed person, marine spirit possession, and

other spiritual attacks. The prayer house also conduct *ubiadnkpo ufok* (breaking of covenant), *uyere idem* (spiritual cleansing), *ukpokho ukpong* (change of soul), *amanakpa* (bathing of stillbirth mothers) and *udianga ekpo and udiانا ebendap* (spiritual separation). Many prayer houses have clinics where sick persons lived there until they are fully recovered from their sicknesses (Edet and Johnson, 2025:8). While staying there, prayers would be said for them and a complimentary spiritual work would be conducted as directed by the Holy Spirit. Before anyone is admitted, the person must pass through spiritual screening to ascertain what is needed to be done for the person's healing and also to ascertain whether the sick person's spirit is clean to prevent the altar from being desecrated by strange spirit (Onunwa, 2005: 77).

Many prayer houses and healing homes, in recent time, have centered their activities on creating seemingly spiritual problems and offering various kinds of prayers to heal these afflictions. These prayer houses manufacture unimaginable fears in men and women, and then create avenues to counter the fears they originally created by carrying out rituals, of course, for some benefits to both the prophet and the seekers (Onunwa, 2005: 77). Again, acts of healing constructed specifically with the African perspective of evil, witchcraft and the world of the spirits are sometimes performed. Within this realm, prayer houses and healing homes carryout healings by casting out malevolent forces from their clients. The process of this healing, according to Onunwa is termed "deliverance" (2005: 78). In deliverance, prayer houses and healing homes try to investigate the historical and cultural past of their clients from their perspective of spiritual attack or domination, and then proceed to construct meaning for the present and future. Indeed, deliverance represents the cultural interpretation of healing, while prosperity significantly provides the very modern and materialist orientation of such movements.

Ethnographic Sketch of Ibibioland and Beliefs

The Ibibio land is located in the South South Nigeria between the longitudes 7° 25' and 8° 25' East of the Greenwich Meridian and between latitudes 4°33' and 5° 33' North of the Equator. The Ibibio share a common border in the North and North East with Ekoi, in the West and North West, they are bounded by the Igbo of Abia State, and share a common boundary with the Ijaws, while Cross River State lies in its eastern Cameroon. In a scholastic piece by Udok and Onunwa (2018:2) there is a strong claim that the historical origin of Ibibio is shrouded in unsettled academic discourse and debate by many scholars of thought. Some writers have tried to trace the origin of Ibibio to the Biblical East namely, Israel, Egypt and Palestine. As rightly opined by Abasiattai (1991), the name Ibibio originally was a generic name for *okop-usem* Ibibio –people who understand Ibibio language clearly, and was applied to Annang, Ekid, Oron, and Central Ibibio, even the Efik. It is therefore established by scholars such as Atteh and Umoh (2014) that the Ibibio race is the fourth largest

ethnic group in Nigeria. It occupies the South Eastern part of Nigeria (now South – South region according to recent political re-mapping – otherwise called Niger Delta).

It has been established by combined sources that the Ibibio originated from their ancestral father in Nubi in Southern Sudan. According to Ukpong, Akpan and Akang (2001:19) the Ibibio migrated to settle temporarily in Mamfe in the Southern Cameroon. Later on, the migrated from the Camerouns to settle temporarily with other groups in the Central Benue valley in the present day Benue State of Nigeria. Again, as Noah (1988) rightly recorded, the Ibibio race is basically the Afaha people (Udok and Onunwa, 2018:3) whose original homeland was Usak Edet in the modern Republic of Cameroun. Furthermore, Henry Nau (1949), a pioneer Lutheran Missionary who worked among the Ibibio, observed that the Ibibio ancestors might have migrated from the Cameroun. On the other hand, Dike (1969:23) observed that all the inhabitants including Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw were migrants from Cameroun highland.

There are unique traditions of the people which are expressed in Ekpo, Ekpe masquerades and dances. In mode of dressing, the dominant attire of an Ibibio man is a Loincloth “Unwanwang Ofong Isin” and shirt with Hat and staff to go with. While the women folds have a Loincloth as well generally called ‘*Ndot-Iba*’ with a piece of it on the head as head- tie with blouse to match. They are also blessed with delicacies such as white soap ‘*afia efere*, *afang* soup, *Edikang Ikong* soup, *ubo nkong*, *efere ibaba*, *efere mbukpap uyo* among others. In the entertainment aspect, the people have various dances and other cultural play like “Ebre” for women, “*asian uboikpa*” for young girls and also the “*akpara*” dance for women.

The men have the “*ekpo*” masquerade, the “*atinkoriko*” or *awade*” for young boys. Among the young girls is the ‘*abang*’ dance for unmarried (Noah, 1994). The young men also have ‘*mbok*’ display, a kind of traditional wrestling competition often displayed by young men before the elder and the cream of the society as a forum of assessing the strength, might and vigour of some youths for wars, leadership and fitness of a king’s assignment. The Ibibio people are predominantly Christians. They believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, outside this, they still have the practice of Traditional Religion with their unique shrines for their various deities like Idiong, *Ndem*, *Ibok* etc. Their belief is that, though they are different, they are messengers of Supreme Being that see to the peace, stability and well- being of the area.

Ibibio Society and the Activities of Prayer Houses

It has been observed that most of the prominent Christian denominations in Ibibio society started as prayer houses. This underscores the fact that Ibibio people are very religious. The Ibibio people believe that there is hardly any problem which cannot be solved through faith in prayer. People afflicted with one problem or

another are exhorted to rely less on medicine and more on divine or faith healing. It is therefore this common factor that makes prayer houses a haven for people seeking material benefits such as employment, promotion, healing from sickness and disease and pregnancy. Thus, prayer houses are problem solvers. This is because many believe that these problems did not just happen, but that they were caused by unseen forces.

Thus, when individuals are being confronted with such problems they approach a prophet. The Prophet then takes his time to find out the root-cause of the problem using his expertise and experience. He would then decide on the line of action to take. If the disease was physical, he would give some herbs to cure it. If it was psychological, he used methods such as uttering words to chase away the evil spirits responsible for the problem, or he could perform a cleansing ritual. Many times, the healing process involves the entire family. It also involves the physical, spiritual, social and emotional aspects of life.

Positive Impact of Prayer Houses on Human and Economic Development of Ibibio Society

The interaction of religious influence on economic performance has occurred throughout history. According to Putnam (2000:54), collective prayers influence attitudes toward labour, productivity, and communal prosperity, functioning as a form of religious capital that fosters ethical diligence, resilience, and cooperative engagement. In this way, prayers houses do not only have spiritual significance but also materially consequential, shaping patterns of work, resource management, and economic behaviour within Ibibio society. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that prayer houses operate at the intersection of spirituality, humanity, and community well-being. They sustain religious identity, promote ethical responsibility, enhance resilience, and indirectly support socio-economic development. Again, spiritual practices, when integrated into everyday life, operate as developmental assets, providing communities with tools for coping with adversity and enhancing socio-economic cohesion. From a humanity perspective, prayers houses reinforce communal values and social identity. Gyekye (1997:67) argues that African philosophy regards the individual as inseparable from the community, where moral responsibility, solidarity, and dignity are cultivated through participation in shared spiritual practices.

Furthermore, many individuals in Ibibio Society have benefited immensely from prayer houses through their counseling services. This confirms Ekanem's (2006: 19) assertion that one of the positive effects of prayer houses is the provision of succour to people who are in serious problems. These houses have given hope to the hopeless. They have also helped many people to solve their problems like illness, cancer, misfortune, trauma, lack of employment, delayed marriage, lack of progress

in one's profession among others. Moreover, Prayer houses and healing homes provide solace, counseling, and emotional support during times of need and crisis. Hence, these houses serve as solution centers for many people in the society. Many souls have been saved and many people have been healed of their different psychological problems in prayer houses and healing homes. There are so many people who believe so much in these houses and homes more than even the hospital. Again, sick people, especially those who need alternative treatment visit these healing ministries for their deliverance. As opined by Onyishi (2009: 11):

The positive result of healing practice in some healing homes is undisputable. People throng to them with incurable disease of all descriptions, (especially madness) misfortune, infertility, lack of success in business, security from threat of secret societies, witchcraft among others.

Many sick people, especially those who could not afford the exorbitant conventional hospital bills, visit these healing ministries (Obiefuna, Nwadiolor and Umeanolue, 2013:45), even though some may ask the sufferer to sow a seed of faith to show their trust in God. People also see these houses as healing clinics and it appears that there is practically no illness and ailment which is incurable before them. They identify two types of illness, namely, ordinary physical ailments ranging from headaches, Moreover, many people lose hope due to the harsh social conditions and the lack of political stability needed to revamp the ever-failing economy. Their expectation that politics could solve their economics problem has been shattered. In desperation for solutions, they turn to religion. With prayer houses flourishing everywhere, many people trooped to them for healing. Thus, focusing primarily on deliverance, prayer houses raise the hope of people

Prayer houses have created sense of belonging by reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness. They often serve as community hubs, fostering social connections as well as support networks (Edet and Johnson, 2025:98). It is worthy to note that many people seek spiritual connection, comfort, and guidance leading to increased use of prayer houses. Apart from this, in a society where the individuals feel crowded and insecure, the development of identity is essential. This is provided in the prayer houses. The need to establish a caring fellowship, brotherhood and kinship and to acknowledge God as the source of all answer in man's are also provided in prayer houses and healing homes. This is because prayer houses and healing homes have been providing solace, counseling, and emotional support during times of need and crisis.

Moreover, a critical look at impact of prayer houses and healing homes shows that their emergence provide social services, such as food, shelter, or counseling, attracting people in need to them while many people seek spiritual guidance and

comfort leading to the establishment of prayer houses and healing homes. Again, prayer houses incorporated African theology in their worship. They are practical and down to earth in their belief, doctrine and response to the problems of the Ibibio people. The world-view of the people is taken into consideration in their beliefs, such as in the forces of evil, malevolent spirits, among others. They also engage in interpretation of dreams, trances, visions among others. Their prescriptions of solutions to problems are varied, such as rituals, exorcism, prayer, fasting, bathing in flowing streams or rivers.

Similarly, prayer houses emphasis faith healing. Faith healing is an attempt to use religious or spiritual insights such as prayer to prevent illness, to cure disease, or to improve health. Healing therefore follows the process of restoring the broken relationship through rite and rituals. It is believed that there is no kind of sickness that cannot be healed through faith in God. Prayer houses equally create new markets for products, for instance, selling of Holy water, Back to the sender ointment, Anointing oil, Stickers, CDs, Statues, Hand bead or band, Rings etc are sold in the premises of prayer houses. These religious items generate income for Prayer houses.

Negative Impact of Prayer Houses on Human and Economic Development of Ibibio Society

There are many clear cases of situations where the founders and purveyors are taking advantages of these prayer houses and their positions to amass wealth and exploit their innocent members. Most founders of prayer houses and are noted for various nefarious acts ranging from extortion of money from members and abuse of position hereby turning prayer houses into their business. This act has dented the image of the church most especially the images of these houses in the society. The glamour and flaunting of wealth by many prayer houses and healing homes' founders and purveyors have made them to become desperate as well as equate success in service to God to mean status and much acquisition of material things. Founders of such houses take advantage of gullible miracle seekers, who will do anything just to have respite from their troubles. The extent to which some of these houses and homes founders go to satisfy their curious followers and rip them off their monies is dastardly. Essien (2010: 12) puts it more succinctly that the mad craze for money has made some people willing to commercialize religion for their own benefits and interests.

According to Hundu and Azembeh (2018: 12), this trend has reached an unprecedented height with the commercialization of miracles by charging people who ask for special prayers, healing or miracles, very high prices. All these are flagrant disregard of the divine injunction by Christ that "freely you received and freely you give" (Nmah, 2008: 17). It is an indisputable fact that a common notion for the emergence of this houses and homes is commercial reason. Religion has been

largely seen as a source of making money. Religion has also been twisted as it were to suit the intents and purposes of the users. Commercialization of religion according to Obiora, is described as "Holy Deceit"- the art of trading in God's name (Obiora, 1998:97). Thus, in the context of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes, no service is free of charge including salvation.

Edet and Johnson (2025:7) recorded how a man whose wife was barren for 12 years, was asked to pay the prophet a sum of two hundred and fifty thousand (N250,000) for the purchase of spiritual items to end the bareness. Again, it was gathered that some prayer house and healing homes are fond of asking people to pay a sum for their healing and deliverance. Moreover, many founders of prayer houses and healing homes are selling religious tokens acclaimed to possess powers capable of bringing solutions to the problems of the users. Such items include oil, salt, handkerchiefs, water among others. Miracles are also fabricated in some of these houses and homes in order to attract crowds and raise money.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to evaluate the activities of prayer houses in Ibibio society of Akwa Ibom State. It is pertinent to note that prayer houses have played significant roles in shaping community life, providing spiritual guidance, and addressing social and economic challenges of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State. Prayer houses have equally contribute positively by providing a contextualized religious roles endearing to the people, offering counseling services, encouraging mutual aid, and promoting microeconomic initiatives. Thus, there is no gainsaying the fact that prayer houses could be a blessing to the people of Ibibio, if properly managed because they provide succor to the spiritual needs of people. For instance, many people have been thronged to them for healing with incurable diseases of all descriptions, especially madness, misfortune, infertility, lack of success in businesses among others.

However, the increasing commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Ibibio society has equally raises a serious ethical, and theological concern about the commodification of spirituality and its implication for religious authenticity and social responsibility. This phenomenon has also challenged the foundational Christian principle of the free grace and may distort the public perception of religion as a moral and altruistic force. Again, there are certain practices of prayer houses that may discourage formal healthcare utilization, or promote dependency on spiritual solutions for economic challenges. In the face of the challenges posed by the exploitation and commercialization of prayer houses to the Ibibio people, this study submits that government should help to salvage the ugly situation. Because there is no doubt that poverty and harsh economic conditions foster the trend of commercialization of prayer houses in Ibibio society.

Recommendations

This work recommends

1. The government to be strongly involved in policy engagement with the leaders of prayer houses for efficient productivity that can build rather than tear the Ibibio as well as the entire Nigerian society apart.
2. The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) to establish a registration centre for all the prayer houses in Ibibio society and also issue guidelines to them on the modus operandi before their operation. They should equally monitor the activities of all the prayer houses and healing homes to avoid abuse of their activities.
3. Founders of prayer houses and healing homes to guide against commercialization of healing and prayer. They should heed to Jesus' teaching of "freely you received, freely, you must give".
4. Government to help to salvage the ugly situation. Government should reduce hardship and poverty; boost educational standards and create more opportunities for employment. This will go a long way to reduce the multiplication of prayer houses and their attendant consequences in Ibibio society.

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