

WITCHCRAFT AMONG THE IBIBIO PEOPLE

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1. Witchcraft: its distinction from magic and sorcery

Belief in witchcraft is still very current in most parts of the world of today, the varying degrees of its manifestation notwithstanding. Among the Ibibio people of Nigeria it is still a major negative influence in the lives of the people despite the prohibitions of criminal law.

The Ibibio distinguish witchcraft (*iföt*) from magic and sorcery. The Ibibio word *ibök* is a generic term used to refer to curative medicine derived from plants. It is also used in its magical sense of refer to charms and amulets believed to enable its user to perform such prodigious feats as becoming invisible or walking barefoot on broken bottles without being hurt. Dispensers of these two types of "medicine" are known as *mbia ibök* (singular *abia ibök*). The precise meaning of the two senses of the term is determined by the context in which it is used.

Sorcery is also known as *ibök*, but it is always qualified by the adjectives *idiök* or *mbubik* ('bad' or 'wicked'), hence *idiök* or *mbubik ibök*. Sorcerers are known as *mbon mbubik* or *mme andidiök* ('the wicked' or 'the evil ones'). They are at times called *mbon ifot*.

Sorcerers, as known to the Ibibio, are not very different from witches because the practices of both are considered to be almost equally wicked. Ibibio sorcerers are alleged to use human beings to obtain their diabolical power and *ekpinon* comes under this category. Sometimes a "medicine" of this sort demands yearly human sacrifice and nothing short of a living human being may be offered. Should the owner of such a "power" fail to carry out his own part of the bargain at the appointed time, then his *ibök* will turn upon him and kill him or do something else harmful.

An instance of such a "medicine" is described by D.A. Talbot in her book *Woman's mysteries of a primitive people*. One chief Idua Ukpong of Idua Eket (a village in the present Cross River State of Nigeria) had bought a powerful "medicine" credited with the powers of protecting people, bestowing riches and avenging wrong done to its owner. The climax of the whole episode came on the eighth day of a continuous feasting which the chief had offered to mark the acquisition of his powerful *ibök*.

«A man who had been bought for the purpose was led forth and slain before the shrine. As the blood of the victim bespattered the fetish, Ukpong cried out boastfully: "See Edogho! This is but a dog! If you will protect me well I will bring you far better offerings!". At once the juju answered: "So ho! It is but a dog which you have sacrificed to me. If you do not at once therefore fetch me a man I will not help you at all!"» (Talbot 1968:181).

Ukpong felt very sorry for his boastfulness and then proceeded to provide another victim, hoping that his aggressive benefactor was going to be satisfied and appeased. But to his surprise, the juju announced, «because of the word you have spoken you must bring me a human sacrifice every year for seven years and the one I choose first of all is your first born piccan». Ukpong was sad and was prepared to give up his juju rather than sacrifice his only daughter. But abandoning the juju meant a total destruction of his family and the whole town, the juju promised. Ukpong, as the story goes, called upon the entire village to assist in providing the victims for the seven years, and to this appeal the village responded. But after this, the "medicine" still demanded the sacrifice of Ukpong's only daughter who had now grown up and was ready for marriage. There was no other alternative, the horrible deed had to be done while the red fresh blood of the young girl gushed forth before the juju shrine. Lamenting and regretting, Ukpong decided he was going to throw the juju into the sea. Once again, the juju announced through the mouth of its priest, telling Ukpong that before executing his plan, it would have destroyed his entire household and property. That same night, Ukpong, his whole family and property, were consumed by a terrible fire that broke out unexpectedly.

Sometimes a "medicine" of this type was owned by the village as a community, for the purpose of preventing stealing and the practice of wickedness. There were cases of destructive

“medicines” of this kind which did not demand a personal physical slaughtering of the human victim, since it was enough that the owner of such a juju performed some prescribed rituals and the spirit of the juju would “take” the offering its own way.

According to the Ibibio and most Africans, witchcraft is both known and unknown, and this explains why most authors describe it as a “mysterious power”.

V.L. Grottanelli’s description of Nzema witchcraft provides a suitable introduction to the Ibibio notion of witchcraft:

«Of all these dangerous powers having their source in human spirit and action, the most feared is witchcraft (*ayene*), inborn in certain individuals from birth or transmitted through contact, almost a second nature that imposes itself on the spirit of the individual, subjugates and corrupts it. Witchcraft may lodge in this or that person, but it is conceived as an autonomous spiritual entity, that detaches itself physically from the subject, going out of his body during sleep, setting itself in flight, accomplishing all sorts of prodigy, but above all attacking other persons in a mysterious manner, making them sick and die with its devouring of the principle of life» (Grottanelli 1977:I, 84; my translation).

Asked by Percy A. Talbot (1967:57) to explain what witchcraft was, one Daniel Henshaw, an Efik, (now dead) described Ibibio witchcraft in these words:

«Witchcraft (*iföt*) is a very deep thing. Among our people there is nothing else so deep, and the dread of it darkens multitudes of lives...Those versed in such mysteries can know what is going on hundreds of miles away, and impose their will upon men afar off. To all who have given themselves over to the power of the devil, long and prosperous lives are accorded, for nothing troubles them. They can look into the future and see what is going to happen; then, if they learn that danger threatens, they have only to call upon the evil spirits to come and protect them against it... A witch or wizard can go into his house and close the door. Those outside think that everything is as it should be, and that the person within is quietly sleeping. Yet maybe, only his body lies there, while his soul is away with his witch company».

From these words we can deduce the following:

- a) *iföt* is a deeply complex and mysterious secret society;
- b) the fear it generates grips tightly on the lives of the people, rendering them miserable;
- c) witches have the power of knowing distant events (telegnosis);
- d) they impose their will upon their victims afar off (telergy);
- e) witchcraft involves surrendering oneself to the devil to be used at will and in exchange to be rewarded with material wealth and protection;
- f) witches can look into the future and control any dangers that threaten;
- g) witches are capable of leaving their physical bodies in an immaterial form.

It is worth noting that the term *iföt* seems to derive from the verb *föt* which means to slip a covering over something. In this case, it would allude to witchcraft being strictly covered by its secrecy. The word *iföt* is sometimes used to refer to the venom (*utang*) injected when a snake bites or a wasp stings.

Another sense of *iföt* is that of having expert knowledge of or the ability to do something. Sometimes a grandchild is jokingly addressed as *iföt*, meaning that he is a "dreaded poison" for those of the mother's family: the Ibibio regard it as abominable to think or do something evil against a grandchild. Punishment for contravening this custom is believed to be automatic and immediate: *cyiyen odo mkpö ibet* ('a grandchild is a tabu').

In these senses of the term *iföt*, other aspects of witchcraft as a subversive secret society are revealed. For *iföt* in its wicked activities poisons not only the morals of those who possess it but that of its victims and of the society in which it operates. It is also the wisdom of those who know how to tap both natural and supernatural forces for their own diabolical ends.

According to one of our informants, witchcraft was first introduced to the Ibibio by the "first white people" who came to trade with them. According to this informant, who admitted being a witch himself, his father "bought" his witchcraft from his white commercial customer. Our informant himself decided to become a witch when, with his mother's help, he discovered his father's witch book which guided him to the "most secret of secrets".

The original name of *iföt* was *mforo* (a rough translation of which would be 'high tricks'). Later on it was also known as *okong nte okong* ('no matter how great or how high you are'). The same informant went on to give other names of witchcraft as *ibök ata* ('defiance medicine') and *ibök eka-ete* ('the grandmother's medicine'), explaining that these other names are used to cover up what witches do.

The "white people" are supposed to have given witchcraft to their Ibibio trade agents as a gift, which was also intended to enable its users to watch over their villages and families. In those early days of its first introduction among the Ibibio, witchcraft was never used to do any harm. Rather, it was employed to detect the evil plans of the enemy, to see the future and take preventive steps against any threats. It was also meant to harden the hearts of slave dealers so that whenever they planned to sell a son, daughter, wife or any other close relative, they would not be moved by pity. This is where *itiat isöng-esit* ('the so-called heart-hardening stone'), one of the witch's objects, comes in.

Yet another informant, himself a witch, confided that witchcraft started as an exclusively women's secret society. In the very words of the written text he submitted to me:

«Women started a play known as *ekpe*. They collected all kinds of human skulls, both the skull of man, woman and the skull of white man. They also collected bat, sparrow and the mother of the white ant or termite's mother. They collected twelve cowries and in vernacular what we call *esitim*. They collected *ekporo* as the father, and red amaranth as the mother. They put all these things into a mortar and pound together with white clay. They formed a circle and rubbed all these things in their bodies and used part to put in drinking. This was during the day time, at night time they found themselves in the forest, where they saw a mighty stone. They danced round the mighty stone, finally they found that among the forty-eight women, of their players, they had with them forty-eight men. These forty-eight men were spirits who showed them how to prepare the stone they saw in the forest in parts of twenty-four. Each of these parts would be a living man and spirit. The general name known by people is *iföt*, also known as *mbuka* or *ibak* in vernacular. This consisted of *ekpo eyo* or abscess and all sorts of wicked sickness. This then calls for human sacrifice as a kind of contribution, when I give mine you give yours. Hence they transformed man or woman into any form of

animals. Hence this sort of play spread throughout our country Nigeria.»

There seems to be a connection between our second informant's account that witchcraft started as an *ekpe* play with women as its only organising members and D.A. Talbot's (1968) assertion that all Ibibio secret societies (*ekpe* is one of them) originally belonged to women. She reports that her husband, who sought to find out why the services of an old woman were needed to bring back a fleeing *ekpe* masquerade, was told that feminine aid was necessary because *ekpe* was originally a woman's secret society. It is also said that an *ekpe* society member who has attained the last rank (there are seven of them) has the power of metamorphosis, a theme that is intimately associated with witchcraft.

The story of how women came to possess the secrets of Ekpe society, according to D.A. Talbot, is that Cameroun women discovered the first *ekpe* at a river at dawn once when they went to fish. *Ekpe* had been brought there by a divine woman who had come down to earth to teach her human sisters the secrets of the cult. Having learnt the secrets, they carried the image to town amidst great jubilation and joy. A shed was built to shelter it, and from thence onwards they kept practising the rites. The author does not specifically state that the Ibibio women learnt the secrets of *ekpe* society from their Cameroun counterparts but it is a likely conclusion seeing that they live in the same region even though the countries are different. It would appear from the above considerations taken together, that the *ekpe* of our second informant's account and that of D.A. Talbot's story are one and the same thing.

But this conclusion cannot stand the test of facts. The *ekpe* masquerade to which Talbot refers still comes out on festive occasions, accompanied by its members who do not hide their identity. Whereas *iföt*, a perpetual enemy of social and moral order, does everything in the darkness of strictest secrecy and members of this secret society would not let themselves be known at all except when forced by tortures or imminent death to do so. *Ekpe* play, as still known today, confers a title of honour and respectability, whereas an *iföt* member is an object of dread, scorn and hate. The *ekpe* play may have its own sacrifices, involving animals and drinks, but *iföt* sacrifices consist in no other thing but human beings. Ibibio witchcraft may have started as an *ekpe* play

but the marked differences that exist between the two secret societies, as we know them today, leave us in no doubt that they cannot be considered as same.

Iföt is a preternatural power raised in man through a ritual manipulation of material objects, the uttering of spells and the use of the spirit of the dead. There are two types: the white type (*afia iföt*) believed to be employed mainly for doing good and the black type (*obubit iföt*) dedicated exclusively to doing evil. Generally it is this second type that comes under discussion. Once this evil power is acquired it corrupts and irresistibly draws its user to doing evil, dancing to its songs and music.

Opinion is divided as to whether this power stays with the witch in perpetuity or whether he can relinquish it. While some hold that witches die and remain such after death, others say that they can rid themselves of it when they wish. In fact, one of our informants who confessed to be a white witch, said he has the power to free both the bewitched and those who wish to give up being witches.

The name *iföt* applies to both witchcraft as a preternatural power and to those who practise it, irrespective of their sexes. When need arises to indicate the sex of a witch, the words *owoden* ('man' or 'male') or *owonwan* ('woman' or 'female') are sometimes used to qualify the word *iföt*. Since the Ibibio do not have single names for male and female witches, but refer to both as *mme iföt* or *mbon iföt*, we shall refer to both sexes using the term witch (not wizard and witch as is the case in English usage). *Iföt* is also a secret society membership to which is gained through initiation.

2. Initiation into witchcraft

Nka iföt ('witchcraft society') is a secret society, and as far as we know there are no Ibibio witches who operate individually. Membership, whether voluntary or not, is gained through initiation. Voluntary membership refers to such cases in which an individual, whether for reasons of acquiring wealth, power, self- and family protection or for any other personal motives, decides to become a witch. Involuntary membership is verified in such cases as when an individual just finds himself practising witchcraft without having personally decided to do so.

According to our informant, who himself is a witch, after

declaring one's intention to a witch, who will also act as the new initiate's patron, the would-be witch will be given some drops of witch "medicine" in the eyes; this will enable him to visit *anwa iföt* (the witches' meeting grounds) for the first time. This introductory visit is done in the initiate's physical body. The intention is to make him see things for himself before taking a final decision to go in for it or to drop the idea.

Should the newcomer decide to go ahead, the next step will be that of teaching him how to effect metamorphosis – that is, changing into an immaterial shape to be able to join fellow witches at their meeting place, or changing into animal shape or anything else to be able to work harm on his victims. It must be recalled here that the Ibibio believe firmly that a man's or woman's "soul" can leave its human body to enter that of its affinity (animal or any other material object). This may not be exactly the same thing as when a witch changes into an immaterial shape.

For, while a witch may need to perform some rituals and make use of certain material objects to effect the transformation, the sending forth of the soul into an affinity is done consciously and at will, outside sleep. The ability to do this can be inherited. It can also be learnt and in such a case the individual has to "buy" the knowledge of doing it.

According to P.A. Talbot, a man who has paid all the fees and has reached a high rank in the Ekpe secret society may be given a medicinal concoction made of leaves, eggs, water and other substances to drink so as to be enabled to effect the so-called metamorphosis known in the Ibibio language as *uwörö-ukpong*. But for an *iföt* initiate, the procedure is much more elaborate. The whole ritual regarding the acquisition of the faculty to transform one's soul into a non-material shape is known as the "construction" of *ubom-ofum* (airplane). According to one informant, the following ingredients are needed:

- a) a bat
- b) the heart of a duck
- c) four seeds of *ekporo* (an edible seed resembling a chestnut)
- d) small pieces of the heads of a man and a woman
(These first four ingredients are to be ground together into powder form)
- e) *eka ekpu* (the mother rat)
- f) *mkpe-mkpe* (a kind of thatched roof insect)

- g) the head of a cat with the eyes
- h) the head of a bat with the eyes
- i) a white sheep
- j) *ikpök ekwöng* (the shell of a snail)
- k) *ibuot utere* (the head of a vulture)
- l) *ibuot asabö* (the head of a python)
- m) *itiat obuma* (thunder-stone)
- n) *nkara ye akpab* for *ebere* (ladder)
- o) *ayana* or *ndam* (raffia)
- p) three yards of white cloth.

The candidate will sleep in the forest for seven nights and then on the grave of a strong man for another seven nights. With the white cloth he will call on the spirit of the black bean (*ibet esere*) and then the initiate will be taken out to a field of *mbuka*.

The same informant explained that the heads and eyes of the cat and the bat were used because these animals see very well at night and since most of the witches' activities take place at night, they needed eyes such as those of the cat and the bat to enable them see. The use of *akpab* (a thorny tree) and *nkara* (a climbing plant), as indicated above, are meant to serve as ladders because witches are said to hold their meetings on top of tall trees.

Sometimes an intending witch may expressly ask his patron for white witchcraft. If the would-be witch is unfortunate to deal with a deceitful patron, contrary to his request he may be given black witchcraft, which cannot do without human sacrifices. Should he wish to acquire *unam okuk* ('money-yielding witchcraft') without offering human sacrifices, the following constituent ingredients must be used:

- a) *ibuot nwan* (a woman's head)
- b) *unen mbakara* (a duck)
- c) *eröng* (a sheep)
- d) *afia unen* (a white hen)
- e) *ibuot asabö* (the head of a python)
- f) *ekwöng* (a snail)
- g) *nsen akarang-abasi* (the egg of a sparrow)
- h) *afia usan mbat* (a white earthenware plate)
- i) *ndom ye edisana mmöng-abasi* (white clay and rain water obtained directly from the sky)
- j) *isip mbakara* (a coconut)
- k) *mmöng inyang emi enimde k'udi nwan emi*

ekenyenede mkpö (sea water kept for seven days at the grave of a onetime wealthy woman).

The informant added: «*Benge enye se afo oyomde ke odudu ntr'ukpum, ndien afo eyenyene*» (Ask what you want in the name of the eagle and you will have it).

In addition, this other ritual must be performed. A whole head of a woman must be bought. A box-like container should be made and inside it twelve *nweweb* leaves should be laid. The human head is placed on these, water is poured and a name is given.

Here again, we would be hesitant to say that we were told everything. For, apart from the enumeration of the ingredients, there are no indications as to how they should be used, no incantations and rituals to be followed. This should not be a surprise as we already know that everything cannot be revealed.

Witchcraft can be acquired involuntarily through food, drink, coming in contact with anything infected with witchcraft, or even when an individual is seeking some supernatural protection. Among the Ibibio (the Efik in particular) it is said to be transmitted through a very delicious food known as *ekpang nkukwö*. Those who snuff can be poisoned through snuffing. It is also said that witchcraft can be acquired by looking at a mirror poisoned with it.

There are some who hold that witchcraft can be inherited by an unborn child in the same manner a child inherits certain qualities or sickness from the parents. Still, according to others, an unborn child can be stolen magically from the mother's womb and taken to the witches' meeting and when it is born it will be a witch.

3. The activities of witches

The activities of witches can be divided into two major categories, viz (1): those that begin and end with witches themselves and (2) those that start with witches and terminate with their victims. The activities of witches being nefarious are always carried out under strict secrecy. Apart from the rite of initiation which we have already seen, there are weekly meetings attended only by members of the same group and general meetings that admit various cells.

A weekly meeting of a particular cell is presided over by the highest ranking witch of the group assisted by the queen and other officers of the group. According to our sources of information there are such offices as that of the gatekeeper, the cook, lead dancers, messenger, table attendant, costume keeper and the priest. The programme of such meetings may entail the admission of a new initiate, deliberations on the activities of the past week and the choice of new ones, and a kind of service which generally concludes with feasting on a human victim supplied by one of the members. Sometimes this is accompanied by dancing and noise making. It is said that men grow as tall as the palm tree.

General meetings involve a large number of witches from various cells. To such meetings witches go either in their transformed or in their human shapes, but the time of departure and return must be kept unknown to common folk. If a witch shares a room with another, he must make sure his room-mate does not know what he is doing. Otherwise, if his room-mate knows that he is out in his witch shape and rubs the physical body left behind with pepper, his witch spirit would not be able to re-enter the body and the death of the witch would occur.

One of our informants, a young (boy) witch of about thirteen, had a bitter experience when his aunt seized his "witch wings" from him at the end of a general meeting held a long distance from his home. Here are his words:

«After the meeting, it was time to return home. My aunt told me she needed my wings to be able to carry her nephews home. With that she seizes the wings she had given me and I was left behind. Were it not that I had gone to that meeting in my physical body, I do not know what I would have done. I remained on the road till morning when a female nurse who was going to work in a nearby hospital, came and met me. She asked me why I was there alone at that place and at that early hour. I had to tell lies, saying that I had come there to look for my mother, but had failed to meet her. I also pretended to be sick, so she took me to her house where I was given food. I stayed with her two days before being taken to Ikot Ekpene Social Welfare. From there I was brought to Uyo and then to Nwaniba Police Station. It was my uncle who came to pick me up in this last place. Since I knew I was going to be beaten for escaping from the family for so long, I decided I was going to tell the truth of all that had happened. When we arrived home, I told my uncle how I had acquired witchcraft from my aunt, how she threatened

killing me if I disclosed what was going on» (interview with Eduche, February 1980).

The boy, according to the informant who introduced him to us, was made to repeat his story before an assembly of the whole village. He even pointed out some of the witches who were in the same cell with him. Till the time we had this interview with him in February 1980, none of the accused came forward to clear himself of the allegation made by the boy.

The activities of witches are as many as beliefs are able to attribute to them. They are said to have the power of causing their enemies such misfortunes as insanity, examination failures, broken marriages, road accidents, taking to bad habits like drinking and smoking, drying up streams, bad crop yields, barrenness in women and even bad weather, to mention but a few.

To cause barrenness in a woman, for instance, the witch will buy a powerful medicine and at night will enter the room of his victim and:

«by magic arts she draws out the "dream body" of the piccan, and bears it off to the bush, where a company of witches, brought thither by the witch-doctor, are waiting to devour it. Witches by their magic can feed upon the essence of things, leaving the tangible forms apparently unaltered. Next morning the baby lies dead within the womb, because it has no soul.» (Talbot 1968).

Barrenness can also be caused by making the victim suffer from internal heat. To do this a witch collects from the woman to be punished intimate clothing connected with her menstrual flow. With this will be mixed a big quantity of pounded hot pepper, African alligator pepper, some hair of the woman; all is put in a metal container with a cover and buried under a hearth. Every time these things are heated, the woman will have internal heat and as long as this continues, she will never be pregnant, or if ever she is, the pregnancy will be terminated by a miscarriage.

Besides causing barrenness, witches are also said to have the power of killing their victims at a distance and without any traces of violence. This, according to one informant, is carried out by the following ritual. The name of the victim is written on a piece of paper and taken to the grave of some one who had been known to be wicked during his lifetime. A hole is made on the grave and the name is dropped there and covered. A cock is slaughtered, wine is poured and the spirit of the dead man is adjured to kill the victim

whose name is mentioned. This, the spirit has to carry out within the time limit indicated. When the victim has been killed, the witches are believed to "eat" the spiritual essence of the victim.

The operations of witches are intimately associated with animals, objects and places. Animal familiars are used to hide the identity of the witch. A person who sees a cat, a dog or a sheep roam about at night cannot suspect anything, since it is normal for these animals to move about in that manner. A witch can also transform himself into a snake or a crocodile and in that shape bite and kill his enemy.

Witches' meeting grounds are generally among tall trees. Their preference for such places is obvious, because witch dances are said to involve "measuring" themselves with the trees around which they dance. In fact, on one occasion, our informant proudly pointed to a tall tree behind a church saying: «looking at such a tall tree, one may think it is impossible to climb it, but we, at night, scale that very easily during our dances».

Ibibio witches do not seem to have the custom of holding their meetings at graveyards, but they do visit graves when in search for certain parts of corpses and when their magical rites prescribe it. Sometimes meetings that involve a large number of witches and entail a lot of noise-making are conducted in thick forests away from the surroundings of common folk so as to avoid the attention of curious eyes and ears.

Dancing witchcraft is always accompanied by songs, among which are: «*Tim nek ke eyo isiereke. Tim nek k'eyo mbara k'odo*, (Dance well, for it is not yet dawn. Dance well, for it is only the time of morning dew) *eyo esiere abaha ekpo y'ikim k'ubök*, (dawn has overtaken the spirit with the gourd in his hand), *mkpök enyin ukub iko, tim kubö, tim kub* (gourd-like eye, open well, close well)».

When announcing that a meeting is going to take place, witches are said to make the sound of an owl using an *ikim* (a local gourd), and the attire for such meetings is *mkipin*, a loin-cloth made of yarns from palm fronds or «woven from cross strands of cotton and palm fibre» (Talbot 1967).

4. Detection of witches and trials

An age-old proverbial saying holds that «it takes a witch to catch a witch». If the detection of witches depended entirely on

witches, as this proverb says, maybe no witch or perhaps only a very small number of witches would be identified. Adverse events do not always lead to the suspicion of witchcraft but very often they do. When, for example, such natural calamities as floods, drought, epidemics and locusts, strike, the cause is generally not sought in witchcraft but in the retributive justice of offended gods or ancestors. When this is suspected or revealed by *idiöng* ('divination'), the reaction is almost always that of offering sacrifices of atonement to appease the offended gods or ancestors.

But when such misfortunes as sickness, barrenness, road accidents and sudden deaths visit a family, witchcraft is generally suspected to be the cause. The question of why Umana, for example, was killed by a car while he kept to his own side of the road, will not be answered by a simple explanation that the driver lost control of the vehicle through sleep or drunkenness, or as a result of some mechanical fault in the vehicle. The questions of why it was Umana who was killed and not some other person, of why he died in this tragic manner, on this particular day and at this particular spot, will be asked. Series of questions without answers will finally give way to suspecting some one with whom Umana or his most immediate relations might have had a quarrel. If this would not provide clues to the identity of the suspect, Umana's hair, nails or clothing would be taken to an *abia idiöng* ('a diviner') and he would be asked to find out the cause of Umana's death. Great *mbia idiöng* ('diviners') or those with "second sight" are believed to have the power of discovering through divination the identity of criminals, witches included.

When the identity of the culprit has been discovered, Umana's relatives may make a direct accusation against the offender while the same allegation will be brought before the Oböng Obio (the village political head). The accused will be invited to come and clear himself of the accusation before an assembly of the whole village, by undergoing the traditional ordeal of eating *esere* bean (Calabar bean). This generally comes as the conclusion of a series of private investigations on the life of the accused. If the accused vomits the *esere* bean and does not come to harm, he is considered innocent. But if he retains it and dies afterwards, this is interpreted as a sign of guilt.

Swearing on *mbiam* or on the Bible, in the case of the accused being a christian, may not be allowed because it is believed that a witch has a means of evading oaths, especially when his witch name is not known. Sometimes sasswood is administered in place

of *esere* bean, being known to be equally poisonous. Occasionally, a powerful *ibök* is employed in the detection of witches.

In recent years, quite a number of "spiritual churches" have emerged, claiming to have the power of detecting witches and getting them to surrender their evil powers. But these churches may never substitute *esere* bean or sasswood ordeals. Apart from the traditional *idiöng* experts, individuals and groups have emerged in recent years, also claiming to have the power of "smelling out" witches. One of these was one Edet Edem Akpan nicknamed Akpan Ekwöng whose name was closely associated with the last antiwitchcraft campaigns in Ibibioland.

He collected around himself a group of young men who called themselves *nka ndisung unya*. These accompanied him while he went around villages identifying witches and getting them to surrender their witchcraft tools as well as give up witchcraft practices. For some time things seemed to have gone on well. But eventually the whole group was rounded up and detained by the police in connection with the death of one Ikwö Ekpo who died during an ordeal session. The trial lasted over a year, after which they were discharged and acquitted for lack of sufficient proofs. This case was taken to the court not as a case of witchcraft but as a case of murder.

A witch trial that took place in court as such was the famous witch case of 1966. One Nyong Udo Udo, 67, a native of Mbiakong, had been suspected of being the cause of her niece's sickness. She was, in fact, suspected of bewitching her niece. Nyong denied this at first. But following her expulsion from her brother's house, she confessed and went back to her witch group to withdraw her (human) gift. But unfortunately, before she could do this, her gift had been slaughtered. Her niece died three days afterwards.

Nyong was outraged and immediately decided to expose the rest of the witches in her group. First, she introduced her confidant, one Uyo Ikang Ukwak, to the "strong room" of the witches' powers and helped him to carry away everything. Then she brought him to her house and showed him what she did to cause barrenness in women. She gave Ukwak *ekim iföt* (a medicine used by witches to help them vanish and remain invisible). This medicine also has the power of protecting its user against attacks by witches. She introduced Ukwak to the witches' meeting place (*anwa iföt*).

Finally it was time to expose her evil companions, whose names she first revealed to Ukwak. Accompanied by him, Nyong went to their village head and reported all that had happened in connection with her niece, admitting to be a witch herself and at the same time accusing other members of her cell to be the same. A meeting of the whole village was called and before the same assembly Nyong repeated her accusation. Those accused by her were asked to pay 8 shillings each before making any statements.

Some of the accused refused to pay, and while a row erupted on account of the traditional court fee (*enim-atang*), word was brought to the police concerning the traditional trial that was only initiating. The village head of Mbiakong, his counsellors, Nyong, all the accused, twelve in number, and Ukwak, were charged and summoned to appear before the Uyo Magistrate Court.

On Thursday, September 13, in a jammed courtroom, Nyong accused herself before chief magistrate Clement O. Ike, the presiding magistrate, of being a witch and accused twelve others as well, of killing her niece Nsa Efiang, by witchcraft. In a dialogue between her and the chief magistrate, Nyong reaffirmed the accusation she had made before the Mbiakong village assembly against one Archibong, that he had the power of witchcraft and that it was he (Archibong) who, in the witches' manner, killed her niece. As proof of her accusation, she promised the magistrate she would demonstrate the powers of witchcraft in court.

After the statements of the first prosecution witness, the magistrate ordered a policeman to show to the prosecution witnesses a cup containing *esere* beans upon which sight the witnesses shouted with fright. The magistrate went on to ask how the villagers used to administer the beans to witches before the coming of the white man. One chief Ekpe, standing in for the village head who could not appear in court on that day, explained that they used to grind the beans into powder, mix it with water and then gave it to the accused to drink as oath. In the course of the trial, Nyong named one Asuquo as one of the witches and added that Asuquo's witch name is *mmöng uyet ubök* ('water for washing hands'). This was confirmed by the defence counsel. Asuquo answered nothing.

The most exciting part of the trial was the performance of the witches' dance which Nyong had previously promised she would stage as one of her proofs that the accused were witches. All the accused were arraigned in court to watch Nyong demonstrate the dance. The oldest woman among the accused, one Ikwö, was

invited by Nyong to join her in the dance and she did, making the sound of the owl, *uwu u*, as they danced. All the others danced to their witchcraft songs and at the end Nyong gave an explanation saying that women danced the way she did while men dancing grew as tall as the palm tree.

Nyong continued afterwards to disclose the identity of other witches. One Mary and another Ikwö were named as witches and were shown *esere* beans in a cup. As soon as they saw the witches' "forbidden seeds", they fell into a prolonged whooping cough. At this point the hearing was adjourned.

On resumption of hearing on November 5, Nyong told the court that she had been a member of the witchcraft society for five years. Having been promised an executive position in their group, she had sacrificed her daughter, Ako, to the witches but without being given any promotion. To aggravate matters they had killed her niece without her consent. For these reasons, then, she had decided to quit the society and to reveal the names of the members of her witch company.

The presiding magistrate, once again, heard the statements of the prosecution witnesses. Twelve of them who had been accused by Nyong made their statements denying their membership of witchcraft. Each of them was cross-examined by the defence counsel. Once more Nyong was brought to the question box. Not only did she reaffirm her accusations against her former witch companions but went on to point out that, with her songs, dances and *esere* beans she demonstrated that the accused were witches.

Judgement was given on Saturday, December 17, 1966. The presiding magistrate, Clement O. Ike, in his judgement, drew the attention of the public to the following:

«On count 1, the accused is charged with representing herself to be a witch, thereby committing an offence punishable under Section 210 (a) of the Criminal Code Law, Cap. 30, Vol. 2, Laws of Eastern Nigeria. On counts 1 to 19 the accused Nyong Udo Udo is charged with accusing each of the complainants mentioned on each count with being a witch, thereby committing an offence punishable under Section 210 (b) of the Criminal Code Law, Cap. 30, Vol. 2, Laws of Eastern Nigeria. For the Prosecution, 18 witnesses have testified. The accused gave evidence on oath and called three witnesses. The Prosecution has failed to call any witness in respect of Counts 5, 7, 8, 9, and 18. Accordingly

the charge on Counts 5, 7, 8, 9, and 18 fails. On Counts 5, 7, 8, 9, and 18 the Accused is acquitted and discharged».

He then went on to state the facts of the case, that Nyong Udo Udo, a widow, admitted before the villagers of Mbiakong and before Uyo chief magistrate Court that she was a witch and that she, though advanced in age, was by no means an old woman and that she was perfectly normal, thus dismissing any cases of the effects of senility or insanity. He also brought in the argument of the defence Counsel that Nyong's action was motivated by her desire to rid her Mbiakong community of witchcraft by exposing the evil of the witches' society; that this was why she exposed the members of the group by songs and dances, thus demonstrating how the witch society operated.

Others among those accused by Nyong later admitted their witch names, dancing to the witch music, and also admitted having made sacrifices to their witch society using their relatives. Putting all these factors into consideration, according to the presiding magistrate, showed that Nyong «made a *prima facie* statement of fact which is true and in which she also made a statement against her own interest».

From the evidences put forward, the magistrate went on to conclude that being a witch had to do with evil, and hence an accusation of this sort put on someone the blame of being an evildoer, which the law holds as criminal offence. But the law does not say who a witch is. Whereas Nyong, apart from admitting to be a witch herself, showed in various ways that those she accused were witches and even gave an account of how people are killed by witchcraft.

The magistrate found the accused guilty on some of the counts; he found that the criminal offence which the accused was proved in law to have committed brought a lot of good to the community, having exposed the hitherto unknown science which was directed towards destructive ends. Concluding, he called on Section 300 and on Section 435 of the Criminal Law Procedure, and ordered that Nyong and those she accused to be bound over to keep the peace and to be of good behaviour for two years each in the sum of £ 200 (two hundred pounds Sterling) in their own recognisance. Failing to maintain the order of the magistrate, they would have to pay the same amount each year.

We began this paper remarking that witchcraft is still a major negative influence in the lives of many Ibibio and other Africans

and this is no exaggeration. Even though "white" witchcraft is said to be also employed in doing good (e.g. acquiring material wealth, protecting the family, saving the lives of the bewitched, etc.), "black" witchcraft is conceived to be essentially an agent of evil.

When a member of a family is suspected of being a witch, such a person is hated and dreaded. His company is carefully avoided by the rest of the family lest he should poison and make others witches like himself. Since the Ibibio say *iföt ata ekpuk* ('a witch "eats" members of his family') close kins have to keep away from him lest he should offer them as victims to the witches.

As members of the same family isolate the suspect, so do others outside the family; and not only the suspect but also his close kins, to make sure that one of the suspect's witchcraft finds its way to them. While this continues, an atmosphere of mutual ill-feelings is created.

Churches are not spared the disintegrating effects of witchcraft. One can only imagine the shock most christians had during the last anti-witchcraft campaigns, when some of their practicing members publicly and freely confessed that they were members of witchcraft. The reactions of the rest of the christian communities were many and various. Those who confessed and surrendered their witchcraft instruments, swearing on a powerful *mbiam* that thenceforth they were going to have nothing to do with witchcraft, were left free. But their churches were branded "a refuge of criminals".

In the churches, there was utter confusion. Non-witches refused to participate in church functions together with the suspects and no appeals by priests could make them change their mind. While some decided to abandon their churches, others became double-dealers. The Ibibio proverb *Abasi unyanga, anyanga idem*, ('while God helps you, you must also help yourself') was translated into action. Double-dealers attended the so-called "faith healing churches" during the weekdays in order to secure anti-witchcraft protection while attendance at their "official" churches was restricted to Sundays. There were others who, while still pretending to stand firm in their faith in their "official" churches, had some protective "medicines" buried in their homes or worn on some part of their bodies.

In the Catholic Church, the bishop had to intervene indirectly and then personally. First he sent out a pastoral letter condemning witch-hunting, trial by ordeal and any associations

with witchcraft. In the first part of the letter, the Bishop condemned lynchings, tortures and any other forms of punishment aimed at forced confessions:

«Any person who engages in these exercises stands condemned by moral and civil law, by the ten commandments and by canon law. Such a person, if a Christian, is to be refused the Sacraments and if he or she dies unrepentant, will not be given Christian burial...All who cooperate in any way in the tortures, lynchings, killings, deaths of any one suspected of being a malefactor or a witch are included in this condemnation» (B.D. Usanga Bishop of Calabar Diocese, Pastoral letter condemning trial by ordeal and participation in witchcraft, 1979).

He reminded the faithful that one of the sins crying to heaven for vengeance: «is the shedding of innocent blood». Continuing, he gave the example of Saint Joan of Arc who was unjustly condemned to death by anti-Catholic groups, following a false accusation that she was a witch. This woman, he went on, died for her faith and was later canonized a saint.

The second part of the letter indicated what a falsely accused Christian had to do. Such a person had to ask a priest to administer to him or her an oath on the Bible to clear himself or herself. There was to be no swearing "on Mbiam or juju", he added. But

«anyone who in his right senses, without force, trial by ordeal, delusion, brainwashing or possession by the devil, publicly admits to be practising witchcraft and killing innocent people, such a person should, after thorough lawful interrogation, if found guilty, be handed over to law-enforcing agents to be dealt with according to law and if a Catholic, be referred to the Bishop for the application of ecclesiastical penalties» (*ibidem*).

Following this last clause in the letter that selfconfessed witches should be referred to the bishop, some christians took the opportunity to block a return to the Sacraments, even of those who were only falsely accused and never admitted guilt, with or without tortures. There was a case in my parish in which a catholic couple refused both to contribute to the purchase of *mbiam* and to swear on it. This family had invited the police to the scene where people were falsely accused of being witches and forced to confess or swear on *mbiam*.

Arrests were made and the case was taken to the court. Taking this and other conflicts which the family had with the village into consideration, the village ordered the isolation of the family. During this period, the family took refuge in the dwelling of one of their sons-in-law that was living elsewhere. While still staying with the son-in-law, the wife died and was brought back home for burial.

No one from the village, not even the church members attended the funeral. The "school-church" room was sealed off by the villagers so that the funeral service might not be held in it. The police had to be invited in to maintain order. I was accused of giving christian burial to a witch contrary to the bishop's instructions. Later the bishop followed up his pastoral letter with personal visits to parishes during which he administered oath and penance and brought back the erring christians to the church.

The last antiwitchcraft crusades had terrible repercussions on every sector of the society. But the adverse effects of witchcraft are not limited to crusade periods. For a person who is rich is also subject to being suspected of being a witch. And in order to avoid suspicion he has to live in poor conditions even if he has the means of providing himself with something better. It is interesting to note that in the last decade or so, many Ibibio have generally improved their living standards without fear of being suspected of being witches.

Some have had to abandon their villages permanently or for long periods so as to avoid attacks of witches on themselves and their families. Witchcraft accusations have often been used to settle scores between rivals and to bring the names of prominent persons to disrepute or weaken the faith of strong christians. A boy or a girl may never be married if his or her parents are suspected of being witches.

There is hardly any need saying that witchcraft represents a great hindrance to social and personal material progress as well as a serious deterrent to moral betterment. There is no doubt that witchcraft beliefs inhibit potential carriers of changes-for-the-better stepping out on the road toward progress. But the solution to this problem does not lie in interpreting witchcraft merely as a social problem. It must be recognised that witchcraft beliefs are part and parcel of a fundamental cultural outlook on the world and life in its more general context.

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Summary

The article provides a brief account of the current situation of witchcraft among the Ibibio of south-eastern Nigeria. The author, a catholic priest and an Ibibio himself, gathered the information by interviewing in the area persons of both sexes, christians and pagans, some of whom declared to be witches themselves; he reports the details of recent alleged witchcraft cases and the reactions of Ibibio commoners and parishioners, of a Nigerian state tribunal and of a religious authority.

Sommario

L'articolo fornisce un breve resoconto dell'attuale situazione della stregoneria tra gli Ibibio della Nigeria sudorientale. L'autore, prete cattolico e Ibibio egli stesso, ha raccolto le informazioni intervistando nell'area individui di entrambi i sessi, cattolici e pagani, alcuni dei quali hanno dichiarato di essere stregoni essi stessi. Egli inoltre riporta nei dettagli alcuni casi recenti e testimoniati di stregoneria e le reazioni degli Ibibio, comuni e parrocchiani, di un tribunale statale nigeriano e di un'autorità religiosa.

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