

## WITCHCRAFT AMONG THE IBIBIO OF NIGERIA

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In November 1978 a witch-purge crusade led by Edem Edet Akpan (alias Akpan Ekwong) took place among the Ibibio people of the Cross River State in Nigeria. Edem claimed that all the evils which afflicted the Ibibio were attributable to the malevolent forces of witches and that he possessed supernatural powers to detect witches. Assisted by a few lieutenants, Edem began his crusade to eradicate witches and witchcraft. He would send messengers to a village to inform its residents that on a certain day of the week all were to assemble at the public square. Members of the village were forbidden to leave, and letters were sent out to those who were already out to return.

On the appointed day Edem or one of his lieutenants would arrive and go around picking out those he believed were witches. The suspects had their hands tied together and red pepper (which the villagers referred to as powder) sprayed all over their bodies and into their eyes, ears, and noses. In addition, large quantities of black ants were poured on the suspected witches. Under agonizing pain, they were asked to confess all those they had killed, those whose money or other property they had bewitched, their rank in the witch society, and so on. They were untied after they confessed. There were others, not selected by the crusaders, who voluntarily went to the village council to confess that they were witches and paid the fine stipulated for them. In this way they were able to avoid the ordeal meted out to those accused of witchcraft by the crusaders.

The meetings in which witches were selected were held simultaneously in several villages, since the leader of the crusade or any of his lieutenants (who had acquired the supernatural powers of the leader) could preside. People moved from one village to the other to watch witches confess.

The Police Commissioner moved to suppress the witch purge, issuing orders to the police to shoot on sight and arresting Edem. Yet, despite these measures, the purge continued into 1979, for the crusade was extremely popular and villagers defiantly fought against the police who tried to disperse or prevent such gatherings. In most cases the police became ordinary spectators, an indication of their approval of the exercise. Even the arrested leader publicly stated that he was given excellent treatment and that he was allowed to make anti-witchcraft charms for people, including the police, while still in detention. The later trial and acquittal (on technical grounds) of Edem merely confirmed to the people the righteousness of their course of action. Traders, farmers, barren and pregnant women, and even taxi drivers were jubilant because they believed that the

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*African Studies Review*, vol. XXVI, no. 1, March 1983.

annihilation of witches and witchcraft in the area would usher in a new era in which people would go about their daily activity without worrying about being bewitched. These men and women stormed houses or compounds of "identified" witches to search for the witchcraft substance that made witches so powerful; in some cases they set such houses or compounds ablaze. Many suspected or identified witches were tortured to death, some were beaten to death, still others mysteriously disappeared from their homes and have never been seen again (presumably murdered); and at least three committed suicide rather than stand the shame and torture, and many others were maimed for life.

Events of that witch crusade suggested that the Ibibio see witches as posing a serious threat to the entire community; that witchcraft is an antisocial act that goes against what Durkheim calls collective conscience; that witches are humans with mysterious or supernatural power with which they can and do harm their fellow human beings. They attribute to witchcraft almost every social evil, political and social backwardness; even personal failures are regularly explained with the idiom and logic of witchcraft. In other words, witchcraft is the psychic act through which socially disapproved supernatural techniques influence events, and this perception is central to the cosmological ideas of the Ibibio.

Despite the obsession with the diabolical machinations of witches and witchcraft, highlighted by the traumatic events of 1978-9, there has not been any systematic ethnographic study of the factors responsible for the phenomenon and the dynamics of the art and its possible effect on the social, political, and economic life of the people of the more than two million Ibibio (1963 census). This study seeks to fill this gap through three objectives: to categorize witches and witchcraft; to describe the behavior and practices ascribed to witches; to describe the techniques for coping with their attacks as well as preventive measures against possible attacks.

Collection of the data for this paper occurred mainly among the Eastern and Delta Ibibio, two of the six very broad sub-cultural groups of the Ibibio, during the time of the Akpan Ekwong witch-eradication crusade in 1978-79. During the meetings in which crusaders picked out witches, their confessions and any other occurrences of interest were recorded. Six assistants working in pairs provided coverage for the simultaneous meetings. By having two assistants attend to each meeting it was possible to check the accuracy of their information as each recorded his observations separately. On the days without meetings there were informal conversations with people, often in bars with the researcher buying palm wine, to find out what people thought about the crusade and the confessions. Since the crusade and witch confessions were the talk of the moment, the researcher used to stop wherever he ran into people sitting by the roadside or elsewhere to talk about those things. Another common meeting-place was the village market, where almost every conversation was about the crusade and its events.

Further research to follow up the original collection of data took place in 1981. This consisted of interviews with confessed as well as suspected witches and with non-witches to get their views concerning the taxonomy of witches and witchcraft enunciated during the witch eradication crusade. Numerous discussions with people from other sub-cultural groups—areas that were not involved in the witch eradication crusade—were also held. Witchcraft is a very sensitive matter, and its investigation requires good personal rapport and confidence. Thus these interviews took the form of personal conversation and always began on a very

informal note and advanced as long as the respondent was willing to cooperate. There was no set of specific questions except that each interviewee was asked if he or she had witnessed the 1978-79 witch purge and what were his or her impressions. Respondents were further asked if they believed in witches. A total of sixty interviews were conducted over a period of three months. Among those interviewed were eight male self-confessed witches, two suspected male witches, thirty-two male non-witches (including six whose mothers were suspected to be witches), fourteen female non-witches, two traditional doctors, and two spiritualists. The ages of the forty-six non-witches ranged from sixteen to forty-eight, and none had less than primary education. It should be emphasized that the primary interest in these interviews was to see if the taxonomy of witches and witchcraft collected during the 1978-79 witch purge would rhyme, and whether or not the respondents believed in witches and witchcraft. Without exception all agreed in various degrees that witches and witchcraft exist.

### WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT

Without attempting a comprehensive description of the Ibibio theology and world view, it suffices to say that most Ibibio “worship an all-powerful deity (*Abasi*) who rules over the physical universe, other supernatural entities of lesser stature and mankind” (Messenger, 1959: 280). A host of spirits (*ndem*) aid Abasi by serving as intermediaries with mankind. They are his assistants or messengers rather than deities in their own right, and perform a variety of economic, social, political, and religious tasks for the deity. They inhabit shrines (*iso idem*) where prayers and sacrifices are offered, which they deliver to Abasi, who responds by sending power (*odudu*) to achieve the desired ends if the supplicants deserve it. In the economic realm, spirits promote the successful growth of crops and so forth, while politically they protect members of the village or lineage and aid the elders in their decisions. Socially, there are spirits responsible for fostering reproduction, health, and longevity. Most spirits perform religious tasks by maintaining contact between the religious practitioners and the deity, by installing souls and fates upon conception, and by observing the behavior of each human being and reporting it to Abasi for subsequent reward or punishment (Messenger, 1959: 281)

The Ibibio further believe that the prognostication can alter the course of a life. A person wishing to have knowledge of events to come consults a diviner (*Abia Idiong*, *Mbia Idiong*, plural) who gains his insights from Abasi through intercession of the spirit of divination. The ability of the *Abia Idiong* to foretell the future depends upon previous acts of the client as well as upon ritualistic perfection exercised by the diviner. Further once somebody takes ill, an *Abia Idiong* is consulted to find out the cause of illness as well as prescribe treatment. *Mbia Idiong*, as we shall see, are well versed in both good and bad medicines and may as well be witches. The ethic of their profession, however, compels them not to use bad medicine against their clients. They depend for their livelihood on their ability to provide good medicine and attract customers. Because of the fear posed by witchcraft and other malevolent forces, most Ibibio—young and old, male and female, wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated—resort to the use of good medicine (or turn to spiritualists) for charms to protect themselves from jealous foes.

The Ibibio distinguish between good (*eti*) and evil (*idiok*). Evil represents the adversities that befall a person as the result of a fate which decrees them, the

machinations of malevolent supernatural beings, or the attacks of a worker of evil magic (Messenger, 1959: 282). Evil can also befall somebody as the result of filial impiety, that is, disregard for the ancestors, or the violation of a taboo. On the other hand, good is viewed as the absence of misfortunes induced by the above agents.

Presently the Ibibio are predominantly Christians. Extremely few profess Islam, while fewer still are pagans. Yet virtually all still engage in pre-Christian and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, although modifying some considerably to accommodate Islamic and Christian practice. For example, the Christian Holy Spirit (*Edisana Odudu*) is dissociated from the Trinity and conceived as the most powerful of the spirits, capable of curing every disease and injury, insuring longevity, bringing wealth, combatting all malicious supernatural forces, and rendering infinite other services. The Christian God (*Ata Abasi*) is syncretized with the Ibibio Abasi, and the Holy Spirit is thought to inhabit the church altar, which is regarded as a shrine where prayers and sacrifices could be made to Abasi. It is believed that the Holy Spirit could possess souls of communicants; thus the denominations such as Christ Army, Salvation Army, Apostolic Church, Seventh Day Adventist, Assembly of God, Cherubim and Seraphim, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, and others countenancing this kind of worship are called spiritualist churches.

Among members of the spiritualist churches are men and women (spiritualists) who are believed to be endowed with special powers by God. They, with the help of *Edisana Odudu*, heal people of all kinds of infirmities, foretell the future, pray for people to get promotion, rescue people from witchcraft attack, and so on. Basing their belief on the Biblical statement that "with God all things are possible," they believe that there is no limit to what they can do. Most spiritualist churches designate Wednesday and Friday of every week as their healing and "request" days. These prayer meetings are always filled to capacity with people from all walks of life asking God for one favor or another. Of all the non-orthodox beliefs among the Ibibio, witches pose the greatest threat.

The Ibibio word for both witch and witchcraft is *ifot*, which they use in two senses. In the first usage, a witch is any person who behaves abnormally; that is, outside the expected patterns of behavior. Parents might thus refer to a child who behaves badly as a witch. Among abnormal behaviors likely to earn one the stigma of being a witch are manifestations of antisocial behavior such as: not being fond of greeting people; living alone in an isolated area; enjoying adultery; exacting too much for sales of anything; committing incest; walking about in the night; crying at night (in cases of children); not showing adequate sorrow at the death of a relative or somebody from within the community; not taking proper care of one's parents (particularly aged parents), children, wife or wives; hard-heartedness. In general, witches are mean-looking, mean-acting, or otherwise socially disruptive people whose behavior deviates significantly from cultural or community norms. What is obvious here is that deviance is not an attribute inherent in certain forms of a behavior; it is an attribute conferred upon these forms by social definitions. It is thus obvious that groups create deviance by making rules, the infraction of which they then assign the definition of deviance. By the same token, the Ibibio define what constitutes proper behavior, and those who significantly deviate from such patterns are generally referred to as witches,

that is, wicked or anti-social or even asocial people. It should also be noted that these characteristics are also associated with sorcerers (*ifot*), but the Ibibio distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery.

In the second usage, a witch refers to the person that the community suspects of practicing witchcraft, a person who has confessed to practicing the art, or a person who has been identified by traditional doctors, spiritualists, or fellow witches to be a witch. A witch usually possesses the qualities described in the first usage of the term. Thus, once somebody confesses to being a witch or is identified as one, people are usually not surprised since the person will possess many anti-social and/or asocial characteristics. Since the characteristics believed to be associated with witches are well understood, anybody who possesses them is labeled as such. Thus, long before the confession or accusation of being a witch occurs, people gossip about the behavior of the person. They will have talked about seeing the individual make any surreptitious visits to people who are known witches; they will say the person chased, flogged, or whipped them in dreams. As far as the Ibibio are concerned, all this confirms that the person is a witch. What this suggests is that witchcraft accusation follows a process of discussion and affirmation among relatives and friends before the accuser actually make the accusation.

The Ibibio define witchcraft as some mystical or supernatural power that causes harm, including death. This power is purely psychic. Those involved in the art of witchcraft practice a form of incorporeal vampirism by removing the soul of their victim and transforming it into a goat, sheep, or cow (or any animal of their choice), thus causing a slow, wasting disease. According to the witches and others interviewed, and the confessions at the 1978-79 witch purge, once the animal into which the soul of their victim has been transferred is slaughtered and eaten by them, the victim dies instantly. The symbolic cannibalism is done invisibly, and only witches know what transpires. Witches, however, unlike sorcerers, do not perform rites and do not use bad medicine. Essentially, witchcraft is a psychic act that bridges the distance between the person of the witch and the person of his or her victim, even though the originators may not voluntarily wish to bewitch their victims.

The Ibibio conception of witchcraft is similar to that of the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), except that the Ibibio do not believe in the "inherent quality" of witchcraft. Both the Azande and the Ibibio believe that witches perform no rites, cast no spells, and possess no medicines; they view it as purely a psychic act. Like the Ibibio, the Nupe of Bida in northern Nigeria believe witchcraft is not hereditary but must be acquired from a person who already has it. It is interesting to note that while the Nupe say that witches are mostly women the Ibibio see witches as being mostly men, but both agree that women are the most dangerous witches (Nadel, 1954; 1952).

Like the Azande, the Ibibio believe that every witch has a physical substance, witchcraft, existing in his other body that allows the soul to engage in errands to harm their fellow beings. The Azande conceive of the witchcraft substance as a "round, hairy ball with teeth" which is passed on from parent to child, with all the sons of a male witch and all the daughters of a female witch being witches (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). Since witchcraft substance is organic, the Azande believe its existence can be determined through a post-mortem examination. While the Ibibio believe that witches have witchcraft substance, wherein lie their mysterious powers, they do not believe that it can be inherited. Every witch must get the

substance from an established witch by physically swallowing the substance. The witchcraft substance of the Ibibio is a special concoction embodying red, white, and black thread, along with needles and other ingredients which the witch-to-be swallows. There are local variations in the substance. Taking the substance opens eyes, so to speak, and enables the person to move about mysteriously and perform many of the things that witches are believed to accomplish.

The Ibibio, like the Azande and the Mende of Sierra Leone, believe in the physicality of the substance in the stomach, but only renowned traditional doctors or spiritualists can use some supernatural powers to bring it out. They give the witch a substance that neutralizes the witchcraft substance in the stomach and forces the witch to vomit it out. Occasionally, at the death of a known witch, the children may ask a traditional doctor or spiritualist to remove the substance by cutting the stomach open. It is not everybody who can see this, since certain supernatural powers have to be used on the substance to make it visible to the uninitiated. The Tiv also believe in the existence of the substance (called *tsav*), which they says grows on the hearts of human beings and some animals. It is said to look like the liver, and it may be rounded or notched at the edges. This substance is believed to be red, black, or white, and it can be good or bad (Parrinder, 1963: 136). The good and bad witchcraft are similar to the Ibibio black and white counterpart to which we shall turn later.

Witches, with the help of the substance, can change themselves into animals and birds such as dogs, cats (particularly black ones), and owls, and give off a glowing light like fireflies. This belief is quite similar to that of the Akan peoples of Ghana and Ivory Coast (Parrinder, 1963: 135). Witches leave their physical bodies during sleep. They can even change into rats and eat up the crops, and can spread diseases among people. They can suck the blood of their victims, thereby making the person look dry or suffer from anemia. Like the Ga of Ghana, the Ibibio believe that witches meet in companies at night while their mortal or physical bodies remain on their bed. They travel to the assembly by flying in their planes, or by canoes or bicycles. They can change into owls and fly to the assembly; or into cats, frogs, or dogs and change into human beings at the assembly. They meet at a particular spot where their victims are said to be transformed into various kinds of animals, killed, cooked, and eaten. Once this is done the victims die.

As the last paragraph suggests, witches are organized. This, in fact, was what the witches said during the 1978-79 witch-eradication meetings. They are hierarchically arranged—some witches are more powerful than others. One's power depends on the ability of the individual to locate an established witch who can provide the most potent power. Having become a witch, an individual knows who has the most powerful substance and can acquire it in addition to that he or she already has. Starting as a novice, a witch aspires to a higher position over the years. The highest rank consists of those who have been in the practice for a considerable number of years and have bewitched very many people. It is from this rank that the president of the chapter comes (each village constitutes a chapter, with the clan chapter as the supreme body). The headship of the witch society is the exclusive right of males, but the most experienced female witch is the recognized leader of all female witches and is referred to as Eka Iban. Women leaders in Ibibio churches are known by the same title. Among the Nupe, on the other hand, a woman is the acknowledged head witch (Nadel, 1954: 195).

The second rank consists of witches who have established themselves in the art and will in due course move into the top-most rank. The third rank consists of the novices. Finally comes the fourth rank, consisting of those who do not know that they are witches. They were given the substance without knowing it and the substance was not properly constituted, so that their eyes are not opened properly. They do bewitch people and also attend witch meetings, but they are not aware of what they do. Apart from the president, chapters have other officers such as the clerk who puts down names of people to be killed and those who have bewitched them; messengers who summon people to meetings and run errands; preachers, who are preachers in the real world—they open every meeting with prayers and a sermon; police officers who act as orderlies and also arrest and bring to the meeting stubborn victims—that is, souls of bewitched victims who hesitate to appear. The police are also responsible for torturing those the witches do not want to kill immediately.

Of great significance was the revelation during the witch-eradication crusade that witches take an oath of secrecy never to reveal anything to non-initiates, particularly the names of chapter members. At their meetings, witches do not answer to their real names; instead, they take on new and funny names, such as Ofim (air, suggesting the incomprehensibility of the person's power); Eyop Ekpo (ghost's oil palm, suggesting his invincibility); Asabo (python, dreaded snake because of its poison and power); Itiat (stone, suggesting invincibility). During the witch purge meetings, before members of any chapter confessed or named others in the society, the president performed a neutralization ceremony of the oath.

The Ibibio identify two kinds of witchcraft—Black (*Obubit*) and White (*Afia*). The purpose of Black witchcraft is to commit evil. Those who possess it are the ones who engage in destructive and diabolical acts, such as bewitching and killing their victims, bewitching their victims' money or even changing into rats and eating up the victims' crops. They can do almost any evil, and thus the Ibibio attribute almost anything evil to them.

On the other hand, those who possess White witchcraft are harmless. They are true witches, but they do not kill or harm people. People also believe them to be more powerful than their Black counterparts. Although they attend witches' meetings, they do not practice the ceremonial cannibalism as do Black witches. Asked during interviews why they became White witches, they replied that it made them powerful. This is another way of saying that it gave them status within the community, because witches are feared and non-witches avoid conflict with them. This is probably one of the reasons why people confess to being witches. People also said they became White witches in order to protect themselves and their family from Black witches. During the crusade of 1978-79, witches said that they often try victims as they do in law courts, and that fellow witches argue as to whether the victim should be killed immediately, tortured, often for lengthy periods, deformed and let go, or be discharged and acquitted. White witches claimed that they defended certain victims whom they thought should be left alone. They do not always succeed but they have recorded successes. One Black witch said he answered Iboto (umbrella) at their assembly because he spent most of his time defending victims who otherwise would have been killed. His name signifies protection for people.

White witches remain harmless as long as they do not join in the ceremonial cannibalism of their Black counterparts. They said at interviews that when

attending meetings they carry a piece of meat or some stockfish so that when Black witches are eating their human victims they will be eating their meat or fish. Once a White witch eats the meat from Black witches he or she must give his or her own meat, which means bewitching somebody. In the usual way, the soul of the person will be commandeered and turned into a goat or any other animal which they kill and eat, and the person dies. Once this happens, the White witch becomes a Black one.

People become witches in several different ways. People may decide to become witches because of their natural tendency to do evil. They are envious or jealous, or may have had some conflict with their relatives or some other persons within the family or community and want to hurt them or other enemies. Enemies can be co-wives, brothers, or sisters, a former husband of a man's wife, somebody with whom a man became involved in a land case, or somebody who took away a girlfriend. In fact, the enemy can be anyone, including one's mother or father, and vice versa.

A person can turn into a witch because he suspects another person who is in a state of enmity with him is about to bewitch him, or that the person is a witch and the only way he can prevent being bewitched is to become a witch himself.

One can become a Black witch accidentally. One way is through seeking to purchase White witchcraft but instead acquiring the Black type. Another way, as one interviewee from a village not affected by the 1978-79 witch purge noted about several people in his and other neighboring villages who were Black witches without their being aware of it, was that the persons who prepared the witchcraft substance made a mistake. The result was that instead of being White witches the initiates are Black witches. Furthermore, since the substance was improperly concocted, these witches do not really know what they are, even though they attend witch meetings and also give their people to be killed and eaten. There is a third accidental way of becoming a witch in which the witch did not seek to become one. He or she may have approached a traditional doctor who was also a witch to provide some medicine or other assistance that will ward off witchcraft. One might then end up at a meeting of witches where he or she partakes in symbolic cannibalism. Once this happens the initiate must also bring a victim, whose soul is mysteriously transferred into an animal and then slaughtered, cooked, and eaten. A fourth way is through gift. In such a case the giver out of love gives someone the witchcraft substance to make him or her powerful so that no other person can bewitch or harm the recipient. The person who receives this gift may be unaware of it at the time but with certainty will one day find himself or herself in a meeting with other witches and begin to act as they do.

On the other hand, an individual may receive the substance out of hatred. In this case the proper concoctions are not given to him or her; the compounds are not complete so that his eyes are not properly opened. He is a very clumsy witch, lacks the proper power, does not eat at the table with other witches and behaves very much like a scavenger. During the witch purge exercise and interviews with witches from areas not affected by the purge, it was admitted that this kind of witchcraft is a form of punishment by the witch who gave the person the substance. Established witches say that the dresses of such scavenger-like witches are used in wiping their hands after eating during their meetings. Further, such witches are very dangerous, according to the other witches, because the powerful and clever witches command them to bring their children and other relatives to be killed and eaten. They are not aware that they are witches except that they dream



about being involved in all kinds of witch activities. In fact, during the witch eradication purge the other witches recommended to the communities not to punish or fine such persons because they were not responsible for their actions.

Although not themselves witches, since they have not swallowed the substance, drummers, dancers, singers, and other such people are commandeered by witches to entertain their assemblies. Through supernatural means such people are brought to entertain witches without being conscious of their role except for dreaming about their activities. During the witch purge many spectators who were drummers and dancers confirmed that they had been engaging in long, drawn-out dreams of how they were entertaining people they did not know.

The Ibibio believe that even in death a witch continues in his art until the substance is removed. Those who voluntarily want to give up the practice go to traditional doctors who prepare for them certain medicines which they drink in order to force out the substance. During interviews the respondents confirmed without exception that they had heard about or personally know of certain people who brought out the substance after being treated by a traditional doctor or spiritualist. One interviewee said that he witnessed a relative bring out an egg which, when broken, contained needles, red, white, and black thread, and a host of other things. Another interviewee also said that he had personally witnessed the removal of the substance from the stomach of a dead witch who had told his children and other close relatives that they all had been earmarked for extinction. The only way to avoid this was to invite a traditional doctor at the death of the man to cut open his stomach and remove the substance, which turned out to be two live snakes (one of which was a python), bundles of black, red, and white thread, and other such items. Another interviewee, who was selected because he was close to an uncle believed to be a witch, said he had refused accepting the substance from his uncle before the latter died. He narrated the story of how, after the uncle's death, other relatives began to die in mysterious circumstances. According to the young man, an oracle was consulted and it was revealed that the dead uncle was the one killing those people—that he was still active as a witch even in death. The only remedy was the exhumation and burning of the skull. The young man said he participated in the exercise, and that it required superior supernatural powers before the attending traditional doctor could get out the skull. The right side of the head was still alive while all the other parts had decayed—the man had been buried for more than three years. The head was burned and from then on the family of the witch was at peace. Similar stories were repeated numerous times by those interviewed. The implication here is that even if all the living witches were to be eliminated, witchcraft would still exist—practiced by the dead.

### BEHAVIOR OF WITCHES

Behaviors ascribed to witches include metamorphosis into various animal forms and the ability to travel at unusual speed, sometimes over vast distances. During the witch-eradication exercises the witches themselves claimed to have various means of transportation, including airplanes. Thus they can travel to any place in the world to haunt their victims, and thus distance is not a problem for witches. No wonder that even when an Ibibio dies overseas the death is still attributed to witchcraft.

It was noted earlier that witches, through their supernatural powers, transfer the souls of their victims into any kind of animal and then kill and eat the animal.

The result is the death of the victim. Witches can kill victims through accidents, childbirth, drowning, and disease, although they do not kill all of them. Some they may decide just to torture. In such a case they remove the soul of the victim and put it in water, hang it on a tree or over a fireplace, or flog it every evening. As a result the person remains in ill health all the time and can only be rescued if the witches are given what they want. At times they refuse to accept anything until compelled by a supernatural power to let the victim go.

Witches decide at their nighttime meetings who should bring the next meat; they have a right to reject what is offered and order better meat. Interviews as well as confessions made during the witch purge crusade stated that in order to attend a meeting the soul of a witch escapes from the body and turns into a familiar bird or animal. If the husband is a witch and the wife is not, and if both of them sleep together, to attend the night assembly he touches his wife, which will make her sleep until he returns. Respondents said that if the wife has some supernatural power in her she can know when the husband's soul leaves the body, and if she wants to kill the husband all she needs to do is to rub his body with red pepper so that when the soul returns from the meeting it will not be able to penetrate the body. The husband then dies. The interviewees said that they had heard of this experiment being performed with success. However, they never showed or named the woman or man who had done this.

We already noted that Ibibio witches are organized, that they have officers, that all cases of victims of witches are brought up at their meetings, and that they are united through taking an oath to keep everything secret. Similarly, Ga witches belong to companies which meet at night to hold discussions and eat human flesh. The company is very much like a court and has a chief, a messenger, and an executioner (Parrinder, 1963: 143). According to confessions by Ga witches, they rival each other at their meetings in performing marvels, and the one with the most demons or marvels is made chief. As with Ibibio witches, since they are believed to meet together, they are believed to be able to recognize one another in the daytime and to be able to tell who are other witches.

Ibo witches are said to form guilds, enabling them to work together to procure victims. Parrinder (1963) notes that when an Ibo is accused of having bewitched somebody he or she marches around the village calling on members of his or her guild to surrender the parts of their victim they had taken. This is exactly what happens among the Ibibio, except that the request that members surrender their portions of meat is done at the night meetings. Similarly, Azande witches also meet together, with elders who are selected from the older and more experienced witches, assembling to the beating of drums made of human skin. The leaders advise the younger witches and also consider their proposals, for no witch is allowed to kill a man on his own; his suggestions have to be discussed and accepted by the whole assembly, as with Ibibio witches. While Ibibio and witches from other societies go out invisibly, those of the Lovedu are believed to go out at night with their whole being, and not just their souls.

Age is of as great significance in the behavior of witches as it is in the real and material world. Age is associated with wisdom. Most of the identified and confessed witches in the Akpan Ekwong crusade were old men and women. Their victims were mostly young, enterprising men and women. If they did not kill them the witches bewitched and stole their money. This is what the Ibibio refer to as *ino ekpu*. Or they cause them hard luck by preventing them from getting a job or, if they already have a job, profession, or trade, involve them in all kinds of

situations where they will waste away their money. They may also cause failures in examinations. The fact of the matter is that the young pose a serious threat to the old people in a fast-changing, traditional society and there is a natural hostility between the two groups; this becomes expressed in witchcraft accusation. By accusing old people of bewitching them, young people provide a theory of causation as far as misfortune, death, and illness are concerned. As Crawford (1967: 104) has noted, "Belief in witchcraft is an attempt by man to rationalize and understand the malevolent forces of nature and the misfortunes of life."

The Ibibio are not alone in attributing almost every malevolent occurrence to witchcraft. Among the Xhosa, for instance, ill fortune traditionally was ascribed to witches and there was a "smelling out" process. After reviewing a vast literature on African witchcraft, Parrinder (1963: 128-29) concludes: "In modern times lack of success, failure in examinations, inability to gain promotion in office or shop, any strange disease, and especially barrenness in women and impotence in men, is attributed to witchcraft." In emphasizing the persistence of witchcraft belief among contemporary Africans, Parrinder notes further that "there is little sign of a decrease in witchcraft belief with increasing education." Conversations with fellow colleagues at the University of Calabar and at professional conferences suggest that most Nigerians still tenaciously hold to belief in witchcraft, as have similar conversations with colleagues from East and Central Africa about such beliefs in these areas. One colleague pointed out, for instance, that President Julius Nyerere in 1980 asked social scientists in Tanzania to investigate the impact of witchcraft belief on the national economy. In January 1969, President Kenyatta "urged a crowd of 40,000 Kenyans ... to give up witchcraft" (Davidson, 1969: 121). Every now and then one reads in the newspapers of football matches being held up because one team has accused the other of using charms against them. All this suggests that Africans still very strongly believe in witchcraft.

### COPING WITH WITCHCRAFT

By now it is abundantly clear that the Ibibio view witchcraft as being irrationally vindictive or inexplicably persistent, and thus quickly attribute overwhelming, inexplicable, or irrational misfortune to witchcraft. Parents whose children die one after the other suspect witchcraft as the cause. Sudden illness in children as well as adults is attributed to witchcraft. Once somebody takes ill there is always an attempt to find out what the cause of the illness is. This happens even when the patient is in a hospital, where traditional doctors frequently are smuggled in by relatives of the patient in order to perform certain sacrificial rites for the quick recovery of the sick. There are numerous cases in which patients have been removed from hospital beds because a traditional doctor or spiritualist has said that the patients are bewitched and no hospital can treat such cases. Further, there are cases in which sick people have been rushed to hospitals at the point of death after all attempts at traditional healing have failed.

Spiritualists claim to have the power to determine the cause of ill health, as do traditional doctors. In fact, every traditional doctor is believed to be either a Black or a White witch; most confessed to being White witches during the witch purge exercise. Traditional doctors consult oracles whom they claim tell them the causes and nature of the illness. On the other hand, spiritualists determine the causes of illness through spirit possession. Having determined the cause, the spiritualists

and traditional doctors state what is to be done in order for the patient to be rescued from the witch attack.

The data for this study overwhelmingly point to the fact that most Ibibio go to either or both spiritualists and traditional doctors in spite of also perhaps receiving treatment in hospitals. The two traditional doctors and two spiritualists interviewed claimed to be making lots of money from highly educated clients. One of the spiritualists who had resided in Lagos said that such was the case there as well. Discussions among students in a social change class of almost one hundred students from all parts of Nigeria indicated that such practices are not peculiar to the Ibibio.

Traditional doctors, otherwise known as Abia Ibok or Abia Mfa, are those Westerners pejoratively refer to as witch-finders. The term witch-doctor emphasizes witch-finding, but in actual fact this is just one of their functions. The traditional doctor may as well be a witch, especially the White type, and thus claims to be able to determine easily and accurately if illness is due to witchcraft. One infers that by being a witch the doctor should have seen the sick person brought to a witch meeting. A witch, by way of emphasis, may be a traditional doctor well versed in the medicinal properties of herbs and roots and therefore a practitioner of good medicine. The witch may also be a sorcerer. Sorcery involves the use of spells, medicines, and rituals to harm others. Further, a spiritualist may himself be a witch. Many spiritualists, as well as those from established churches like Methodist, Catholic, and Lutheran, were identified as witches. Many also voluntarily confessed.

The Ibibio use the term Abia Ibok or Abia Mfa to include the practitioner of good (both curative and preventive) medicine as well as a sorcerer (ifot) whose medicine is used to harm people. Thus the Ibibio generally fear traditional doctors since they are versed in both good and bad medicine. But the ethic of their profession prevents them from harming their clients. The Ibibio could not afford to stop seeing a traditional doctor or a spiritualist because in almost every illness they are likely to suspect the involvement of the supernatural; only the traditional doctors and spiritualists can treat such cases. It is a common practice to travel out of one's community for treatment by a traditional doctor or spiritualist. This is because the witch who is the cause of the illness is in most cases likely to be a member of one's family or community. It is better to be far away from the area.

Once the spiritualist or traditional doctor diagnoses the cause of the illness to be witchcraft (if it is not witchcraft it must be the result of filial impiety or some other thing that will demand traditional or spiritual treatment), the relatives of the sick person will not only seek the cure but will also try to discover who is responsible. The belief is that a witch launches his attacks when motivated by hatred, envy, greed, or jealousy. What the victim or his people do is to review the list of those who are likely to feel such emotions toward him and then set about trying to discover who is actually the guilty person, who usually turns out to be in a state of enmity with the sick person. Often the suspected witch is within the extended family.

Traditional doctors frequently name witches responsible for illnesses. Some doctors have informants all over the area who, when they learn of illness, approach the family of the sick person or the person himself and encourage a would-be client to go with them to consult a renowned traditional doctor. Before they take the client to the traditional doctor, however, they first brief him about the person. Thus as soon as the patient arrives the doctor tells him his or her

name and then begins to describe how the illness worries the client. In such cases the client readily believes that the doctor is really an expert, especially when he names an already suspected witch in the extended family of the client to be the cause of his or her misfortune.

Three informants claimed to have personal knowledge of how certain traditional doctors obtain their clients. These quacks have become very famous through the ingenious use of modern technology for long-established tricks of the trade. A tape recorder is hidden in a particular room, and as soon as clients arrive an attendant takes them to that room. The attendant secretly turns it on and then asks the client to pour a libation telling the gods and deities their names and their problems and then to pray for them to reveal these things to the doctor, who is soon to take on the role of diviner. While this is going on the attendant pretends to inform the doctor that the clients have arrived. By the time the attendant returns the people have completed their prayers. He then takes them to another room to wait for the arrival of the doctor. The attendant then secretly removes the tape and passes it on to the doctor, who thus learns all that has happened to the clients, even the names of their suspected witches. The doctor then appears, sits in his shrine, and the operation begins. All that he does is to recount what he had gathered from the tape, but to the clients he is an expert because he merely confirms what they had suspected all along.

The next and crucial stage is how to rescue the sick. Once the doctor confirms that witchcraft is the cause, he will, as a matter of necessity, describe what is to be done to rescue the sick person. If a spiritualist was consulted and also confirms the same cause, he too will equally prescribe the steps to take. In the old days the practice was for the relatives of the sick person to walk up to the suspected witch and demand that their son or daughter be de-witched, that is, for his or her soul, now with the witches and about to be killed and eaten, be returned to the sick person. The suspected witch would be given an ultimatum and a certain number of days, after which the relatives would take action. If the person did not recover by then, the relatives would machete the suspected witch to death. Although the killing of witches is not as common as it was, there are still cases in which this happens today. In yesteryears, should the accused witch deny the accusation, he or she was given an *esere* bean—*Physostigma Venemosum*—to eat. If he did not die then he was not a witch, but very few ever survived the effect of the poisonous bean. Today a suspected witch is asked to take an oath.

Witchcraft curers are of three categories: (1) those who cast out Beelzebub by using Beelzebub, (2) those who use spiritual means, and (3) those who use White witchcraft (Parrinder, 1963: 182). In the first category, the doctor, who may or may not be a witch, begs and pleads with the witches to spare the life of the bewitched. Usually the doctor makes sacrifices to witches to release the soul of the patient which they have hidden away, often on top of a silk-cotton tree. This frequently consists of placing some rice, yam, groundnuts (peanuts), sugar, crayfish, salt, banana, a shilling, a penny (now kobo), a half-penny (one half-kobo), and goat meat on a white plate and then putting it on a table at the foot of a tree (often silk-cotton), where witches are believed to gather. The hope is that the witches will devour the meal and will in turn release the soul they hang on the tree, pending their killing and eating it. If they decide to release him or her the person recovers, but the release of the soul this time does not mean that the

same person cannot be bewitched again; there are many cases in which rescue from witchcraft is for some people a perennial affair.

In the second category, the spiritualists use the all-powerful name of Jesus and his angels forcibly to wrest the bewitched person from the witches. The spiritualists constitute the Elijahs who rival the priests of Baal—the priests of Baal representing the witches. While the orthodox Christian churches do not, in theory, recognize the belief in witchcraft, data for this paper showed that a staggering number of members of these churches turn either to traditional doctors or spiritualists for rescue from witchcraft. African Christian sects such as Christ Army, Cherubim and Seraphim, Mount Zion, Apostolic Faith, Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, on the other hand, spend most of their time rescuing people from witch attack and other malevolents. Most spiritualists have syncretized certain aspects of traditional religious practices with those of the Christian faith. While it is more prestigious to attend an orthodox church than a spiritual church, highly established Ibibio will surreptitiously steal into a spiritualist's home at night to consult about personal problems, witch attacks, and so on. Similarly, others secretly sneak into a traditional doctor's house at night for consultation. When collecting data for this paper, arrangements were made with spiritualists and traditional doctors to stop at their residences at specified days and times. Each time their residences were filled with cars and people waiting to consult them. A bishop from a spiritualist church said that one of his clients bought his car for him and that others built him a house, wired it and purchased a generator; clients have built him houses in several parts of the country.

It should be noted that spiritualists, particularly those who are believed to be renowned in their trade, are greatly respected. They have better status in the community than the traditional doctors. During the witch-eradication crusade, witches, some of whom were traditional doctors, confessed that they fear the spiritualists because they rarely can stand their power. These witches also said that for other powers they could seek out answers, but with spiritual powers there was nothing they could do. One interviewee, a traditional doctor, said that with other supernatural powers you can give them what they want and then they let you do what you intend to do or you can forcefully neutralize them, but God does not take bribes and you cannot neutralize His powers: all powers originate from Him.

In the third situation, the person who possesses White witchcraft is believed to be more powerful than those who practice Black witchcraft. The most important thing is to be able to locate who possesses it, and the person must be located before the symbolic cannibalism of the witches is carried out. In this instance all that the possessor of White witchcraft does is to order the witches to release the person and his order is carried out.

### PREVENTION OF WITCHCRAFT

Spending money trying to rescue oneself from witchcraft attack is not something that the Ibibio like. Just as the Tonga of Zambia consider a person a fool who fails first to acquire charms that would protect against evil persons filled with envy (Swartz, Turner, and Tuden, 1966), the Ibibio strongly believe in protection against witchcraft and other malign contingencies of fate. Their approach to protection against witchcraft and other evil forces is similar to that of the Wolof of the Gambia. In his study of witchcraft, David Ames (1959) categorized personal protective means against witchcraft into amulets, solutions applied internally and/or externally, and magical devices planted within the home

or compound yard. With the exception of an insignificant few, the Ibibio people either possess charms from a traditional doctor or from a spiritualist. Some highly educated individuals may in conversations with others, particularly foreigners, pretend not to believe in the existence of witchcraft. Pretending disbelief is a mark of education and sophistication, but the fact is that most educated Ibibio do secretly visit traditional doctors and/or spiritualists for potent charms against witchcraft. One traditional doctor said during an interview that election times are usually periods of lucrative business as politicians throng to him for charms against supernatural attacks by their opponents. A bishop stated to the interviewer that he had healed a politician who at the time of this writing is a governor of a state. A politician who is currently a member of the National Assembly consulted a spiritualist as to whether or not he should resign his position as a senior lecturer and acting head of a political science department in a Nigerian university. The spiritualist assured him of winning the election. He resigned, contested, and won the election.

The charms from spiritualists consist mainly of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, blessed handkerchiefs, and gravel that David used in killing Goliath. Amulets are carried about on the person of the believer; they may be hung around the neck, tied on the wrist, placed inside the shoes or on the finger, or tied around the waist. The L. W. de Lawrence Company of Chicago, Illinois, specializes in such amulets, and hundreds of Nigerians order them annually. This company has agents in several places in Nigeria—Ijebu Ode and Munshin in Western Nigeria are examples. All kinds of advertisements for charms against witchcraft and ill luck appear in Nigerian dailies. Certain compounds are believed to immunize people against witchcraft and other malicious attacks by supernatural forces. The commonest immunization is black powder (*ekim*). The skin of the client is cut open at several places with a razor blade by the traditional doctor, and while blood gushes out the powder is rubbed into the wounds. The preparation of the black powder is accompanied by special rites and incantations. Once a person is inoculated, the powder leaves indelible marks on the skin, reminiscent of inoculation against smallpox. The belief is that the powder produces an antidote or anti-toxin that prevents witches from excising the soul of the individual concerned. In other instances, concoctions, both spiritual and otherwise, are put in pots or other containers and buried or hung somewhere in the compound. These protect the compound and the inhabitants from witches' assault. Indeed, preventive charms are a big industry for both the traditional doctors and spiritualists who claim to make such charms. Needless to say, people believe them to be efficacious.

A wide variety of animal and plant materials are placed in amulets or made into solutions. Muslims often write on pieces of what they describe as virgin paper potent verses of the Koran for amulets. Christians, on their part, write potent verses of the Bible, particularly psalms, along with names of certain angels, spirits and saints, on virgin paper for amulets. A religious body known as Life-Study Fellowship, located in Noroton, Connecticut, lists potent verses in the Bible in their monthly magazine called *Faith*, and these verses are to be used each day. The Ibibio love this, as they write the verses on paper and carry them about as protection against witchcraft and other charms. The virgin paper mentioned above is made out of certain sacred animals like ram. These amulets, covered with

leather, cloth, or brightly-colored plastic, along with rings, are carried about, as already noted, by those who believe they are vulnerable to witch attack, including those who believe they were once attacked and were rescued.

Medicines are buried in bottles or pots with the necks protruding just above the surface of the ground. Others are hung on the ceiling of houses or on doors. A very famous type of medicine among the Ibibio is known as *nim etim*. A red piece of cloth of about one square yard, a metal gong, and a decorated gourd with some concoctions in it are placed on the wall. Beneath it is a big stone and other substances unknown to the non-initiate. The owner has to make regular sacrifices, usually chicken, to it. Various other medicines require regular sacrifices. Besides these sacrifices, possessors of these protective medicines are made to observe certain rules including not trying to harm others and not having sexual intercourse with twin mothers. Since the possession of protective medicines calls for moral purity on the part of the possessor, one can detect some unanticipated functions. First, the possessors try to behave according to popular norms—they do not bewitch others or try to hurt other people in any way. If they do, it will surely return to them like a boomerang. Second, the rules the possessors have to maintain provide the traditional doctor with excuses for the failure of his medicine. If the medicine fails to work its possessor must have violated some rules in the form of a taboo. This prevents the client from asking the traditional doctor to return the money paid.

### CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it is clear that witchcraft beliefs form part of the Ibibio cosmology. Because of this, it is essential to see such beliefs against the background of religion and other ideas of the people. Religious beliefs are relevant not only because witchcraft beliefs are, in some aspects, an inversion of Ibibio beliefs, but also because religious beliefs provide alternative explanations for the cause of misfortune. As discussed in this paper, evil can befall a person as the result of fate, filial disobedience, or the violation of a taboo. As explanations for misfortune, all these have negative connotations and one does not elicit as much sympathy as when witchcraft is said to be the cause of the misfortune. Thus witchcraft becomes the scapegoat of every misfortune.

Increasing scientific knowledge does not necessarily destroy witchcraft beliefs. It is obvious to the Ibibio that if lightning strikes a man or a snake bites him he is likely to die. However, “this knowledge does not solve the problem as to why the lightning or snake should have killed the particular person in question. The knowledge that disease is caused by bacteria still does not solve the problem as to why the disease was ‘sent’” (Crawford, 1967: 67). As Parrinder (1963: 168) has noted, “A man is killed by an animal, but the animal may be a witch in disguise, or he was acting under the influence of a spell. Rainfall may ruin one field and not another. The rain is the agent, but witchcraft is seen as the cause.” Once sickness or misfortune strikes, the first question that people ask is why this has happened. Certainly there are many potential witches, but they have to be actuated by hatred or jealousy. The sufferer of misfortune begins to think of those who might have a grudge against him, either for some offense or through envy at this achievement or success.

It therefore follows that witchcraft is often suspected among a person’s closest acquaintances. It is natural that those we know best are the ones with whom there may be the greatest friction. Thus accusations of witchcraft are often levelled



against close relatives and rarely against those who live far away. When a person feels that a witch is responsible for his or her misfortune or sickness, he or she will have recourse to a traditional doctor or a spiritualist to find out who is responsible. Once it is confirmed that a witch is responsible, the afflicted will seek to neutralize that diabolical power and to prevent a future attack,

As already noted, higher education and increasing scientific knowledge have not destroyed beliefs in witchcraft. Modernization has resulted in the disintegration of traditional societies and one repercussion arising from this has been insecurity. There is a great disparity between the aspirations of the people and their real chances of success; this has led to a high rate of failure. People tend to respond to these failures through extra-punitive measures; the individual does not blame his own short-comings but shifts the responsibility to external agents. The commonest of all the agents is witchcraft. This is not common just among the Ibibio.

In the Cornell survey at Abeokuta in Western Nigeria, one-half of all those suffering certain or probable mental disorders believed that they had been bewitched; close to a quarter believed that sorcery was being used against them (Leighton, 1963). Quite a few of them said that the talismans they had purchased to ensure success were "not strong enough" to counter other evil forces. A few of them blamed their failures on the neglect of traditional deities, the omission of sacrifices or infringement of taboos. The fear of witchcraft and other malevolent forces is still prevalent all over Nigeria. As Lloyd (1967: 254) has observed, witchcraft is not feared just by people who fail but perhaps even more so by the successful. The young man or woman who has his or her education financed by a large number of near kin fears the envy of his less fortunate half-brothers, half-sisters, and cousins—or, more especially, that of their mothers. The wealthy man suspects that his relatives and close friends expect greater benefits from his affluence than he is willing to share with them. The usual answer to these situations is to consult a traditional doctor or a spiritualist for a protective charm.

Finally, witchcraft belief provides a theory of causation as far as misfortune, death, and illness are concerned. Thus, despite the generalized anxiety witchcraft causes, its operation among the Ibibio provides an explanation for what would otherwise be unexplainable and hence potentially disruptive. Witchcraft consists of a set of moral judgments, hence it helps to reinforce ideas of what is good and what is bad or evil, and also who is good and who is bad. Generally, people whose behavior conflicts with the social norms is likely to be accused of being witches. Thus witchcraft helps make the Ibibio conform with accepted standards of behavior. The tendency is to equate witchcraft with the sentiments that provoke it, such as envy, greed, and hatred, in other words, the sentiments that are socially disapproved. Since a jealous person can be suspected of witchcraft, he is likely to minimize his jealousy. On the other hand, those he is jealous of may be witches themselves and may try to hurt him; thus, he is likely to control his jealousy. In this way sanctions against witchcraft help maintain the social order.

#### NOTES

I wish to thank the University of Calabar for funding the research in this article.

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