

# Berichte und Kommentare

## Traditional Symbols in Ibibio Social Relations

### The Case of *nnuk eniin* and *eyei*

Mkpi song James B. Ikpe and Ibanga B. Ikpe

#### Introduction

People in traditional cultures have been known to have simple but highly effective systems of social organisation, which enable them to live together without the cumbersome superstructures of modern bureaucracies. One of such groups are the Ibibios of southeastern Nigeria who, prior to the incursion of Westernisation into their traditional space had developed mechanisms of social control that helped them in maintaining peace and harmony within their society. Such mechanisms include the adoption of a plethora of social symbols, sourced from their natural environment, which they use in maintaining an intricate relationship with each other and other objects, ideas, and institutions, that have no physical representation. A symbol is defined by C. S. Peirce (in Firth 1973: 61) as “a sign determined by its object only in the sense that it will be interpreted – an allocation depending on habit, convention, arrangement or natural disposition of the interpreter.” What this entails is that the meaning of a symbol lies beyond its object and can only be fully realised by those who have been inducted into the culture that produced the symbol. Since symbols primarily communicate ideas beyond themselves, they are only useful within social relationships where its power of communication can be fully realised. Thus, a symbol remains a symbol not because it has been so ordained but because it continues to perform valuable social functions for the culture that ordained it. According to Duncan (1968: 22), “if symbols are to become and remain powerful in organizing social relationships, they must inspire belief in their capacity to consecrate certain styles of

life as the ‘true’ source of order in society.” Two symbols which have served such a purpose for the Ibibios are *nnuk eniin* and *eyei*.<sup>1</sup>

The word *nnuk* in Ibibio is used to refer to the horn of an animal, while *eniin* is the Ibibio word for an elephant. Thus, *nnuk eniin* literally interprets the horn of an elephant, which is to say, elephant tusk. On the other hand, *eyei* is the young palm frond that has opened up displaying the single strands. In classical Ibibio, the young strands or leaves, while still folded and in full length, is called *ekpin*. But a single strand plucked from the young folded foliage (*ekpin*) is called *eyei*. The entire stand of folded young strands, made loose into visible single strands by forcefully waving it in the air or being beaten against a solid object, is also called *eyei* and it is this type that is commonly known and used as a traditional symbol. Even though in classical Ibibio there is a difference between *ekpin* and *eyei*, the two words are often used interchangeably in everyday parlance, especially among the younger generation of Ibibio people. This confusion notwithstanding, *eyei* continues to play an important role among the Ibibio and together with *nnuk eniin* remain the two most revered traditional symbols. This study is an attempt to explicate their roles in traditional and contemporary society as instruments of social control and arbitration.

#### Traditional Symbols and Social Control among the Ibibio

Discussing the subject “deviance” and “social control” among the Ibibio, an acknowledged student of the Ibibio culture, Ekong E. Ekong (1983: 84), states that

[i]n a society with no formally written laws, criminal actions were determined mainly with reference to the mores of the system. The mores of any society are generally de-

1 Preliminary data for this article was collected by late Mkpi song James B. Ikpe between June 1984 and November 1996.

vised to regulate and control those matters touching upon fundamental human drives such as economic motives, love, desire for power, ambition to excel, etc. A society's mores are therefore regularized sets of beliefs concerning conducts which are judged to be conducive to societal well-being and are maintained by coercive mechanisms of uniformity. Thus for the Ibibio society criminal behaviours are those considered as threatening the rights or life chances of the individuals or groups against whom the act is directed. Stealing, avarice, subversion, adultery, character assassination, dishonesty, witchcraft are all considered criminal!

As part of these mores, the Ibibio devised a large number of social control mechanisms to forestall criminal acts and regulate social life within their society. Apart from public punishment for various categories of crimes, the Ibibio had and still have certain institutionalised elements and symbols which were, and where applicable still are, used in checking or preventing criminal behaviour. "These included the *eyei* (young palm fronds), *mbritem* (ginger lily or bush cane – *Costus afer* Ker) and *mkipatat* (ferns; *Selaginella*)" (Ekong 1983: 84). *Nnuk eniin* belongs to this class of institutionalised elements and symbols but in a much more superior position and is "particularly useful in mediating feuds between two warring villages" (Udo 1983: 148) nay, between larger communities like two warring clans. Since *nnuk eniin* stands in a much superior position than the other elements and symbols used in checking or preventing crimes, it is only proper that it be considered first.

Law, order, and harmony must exist among people if life must be worth living. The Ibibio people placed great premium on these and *nnuk eniin* (elephant tusk) has been a visible instrument for ensuring and enforcing them in their communities. Samuel Akpabot (1977: 2), for instance, observes "[e]lephant tusks are carried by royalty as a symbol of power and played on *ad libitum*, all of which substantiates Lomax's view, quoted earlier, that the sound of music symbolises a social-psychological pattern common to a given culture." Although Akpabot was primarily concerned with the uses of *nnuk eniin* within the context of music and musicology, his associating it with Ibibio royalty attests to its importance among the Ibibio. Akpabot's view is corroborated by Edet A. Udo who points out that *nnuk eniin* was the *Obong* (plural *Mbong*) *Ikpaisong*'s<sup>2</sup>

instrument of peace and law enforcement and was kept by him in the throne room of his palace as one of the most important items in his *ekpurikpu* (store of relics, insignia, and paraphernalia of office). Udo (1983: 148) vividly conveys the institutional use of *nnuk eniin* when he observes that

[w]henver there was an inter-village dispute or fight, the Obong Ikpaisong in council with the elders of the clan, would send the *Nnuk Eniin* through his messengers to the warring villages and order them to declare a ceasefire. The messengers then fixed a day for the hearing of the case. Such cases were generally heard in the parent village of the clan.

*Obong Ikpaisong* and his council handled all important state functions, occasions, and emergencies like threats of war, murder cases, arson, and thefts of a very serious nature. It was this council that approved the fighting of wars or intercommunity clashes "and from the Obong Ikpaisong came orders for armistice, conveyed by the lieutenants by the blowing of the elephant tusk and the carrying of *eyei* (young palm frond) as an emblem of peace" (Udo 1983: 148f.). The association of *nnuk eniin* and *eyei* with Ibibio royalty confirms Firth's (1973: 163) view that that "the power of symbols lies in their symbolic content and in their association with the modal institutions of the social structure, such as kingship."

*Nnuk eniin* was also used in imposing an injunction over disputed land, especially between two clans. A neutral clan or clans which have *imaan*<sup>3</sup> (blood brother) relationship would opt or be invited to arbitrate on the matter for the benefit of the aggrieved communities. This symbol of armistice and peace also provided the *Obong Ikpaisong*'s messengers with a safe-passage throughout the clan and beyond. Any disregard or disrespect of the elephant tusk was tantamount to rebellion against the *Obong Ikpaisong* and generally resulted in a serious case against the culprit because the elephant tusk was part of the symbol of the *Obong*'s authority (Udo 1983: 148)!

On the use of *nnuk eniin* in restoring order in an atmosphere of disorder and pandemonium, this author is privileged to narrate an occasion he personally witnessed and clearly remembers, among many

2 An *Obong Ikpaisong* is usually a respected elder who had been chosen by his community to superintend over a village as a chief or is otherwise chosen to sit in the elder's council as an opinion leader. The appointment as an *Obong Ikpaisong* is never complete without an official installation ceremony which involves a lot of traditional rituals, aimed at imbuing

the *Obong* with the protection and wisdom of the ancestors as well as preventing him from using his office to oppress and perform such acts, which are inimical to the health and progress of the community. All traditional officeholders in Ibibio land start out as *Mbong Ikpaisong* before being elevated to positions as clan head, lineage head, group head, etc.

3 For a more extensive discussion of this relationship see Charles (2005).

others. In November 1971, the Ikpaisiong Iman Council of Chiefs in Etinan Local Government Area had a matter involving Mbioto village and some other villages in northern Iman to settle. Since it was necessary that as many village heads as possible in northern Iman and other distinguished citizens be present, the meeting was hosted in Lutheran School, Ikot Ekan, which was convenient for most of those expected at the meeting. At 11 a.m. when the meeting was supposed to start, barely only one third of those expected had arrived. The clan head (author's father) and some members of his council arrived quite on time and were seated in the section of the hall arranged to serve as the traditional *itak efe* (base of the gathering). On a brief visit home from Ogoja where he was serving as an Assistant Divisional Officer, the author had been specially invited to the meeting by the clan head as an observer and his personal assistant.

As members arrived, there were warm exchanges of handshakes and cordial but rather too loud pleasantries and conversation which were free for all. These were necessary so that time could be allowed for more members to arrive. Chiefs and other personalities found it convenient to move up to the high table and do obeisance to the clan head, respectfully take his hand, and use that opportunity to chat on one issue or the other with him. At a convenient time when most of those expected had arrived, one of the clan head's close lieutenants, Obong Ekanem Udofot of Edem Ekpai village, rose from his seat, exchanged nods with the clan head and stretched out his arm for a medium size *nnuk eniin* which had been stored in the raffia handbag he carried. He held this in both hands and took a few stately and dignified steps to place the instrument on the floor about a yard away from where the clan head sat. No word was uttered and the chief returned to his seat. The message was clear. "Silence, order, the meeting is about to commence." That was the clan head's order by the unspoken words of the *nnuk eniin*. Dignitaries quickly returned to their seats, some scuttling across the hall; the loud conversation died down to perfect silence and the house was formally and traditionally called to order for commencement of the day's business.

But why the *nnuk eniin* and why does this simple symbol command so much respect among the Ibibio? Daniel A. Offiong (1984: 104f.) attempts to answer this question while discussing the judicial functions of Ibibio chiefs. According to him,

[i]n matters concerning murder, killing some other person through witchcraft and so on, the elders council constituted itself into a special court known as *Isong*. ... *Isong*

is the highest court and once any person has appealed to *Isong* for any reason all lineages must send their representatives (elders). Once an individual had appealed to *Isong* the traditional symbol of the court – an elephant tusk (*nnuk enin*) – must be blown. The elephant is a huge and powerful animal with the capability of trampling any challenger under its feet. Such is the implication of the tusk for it symbolizes the strength of this supreme court and its power to enforce its decisions. If the *Isong* decided that the guilty should be executed, this was carried out by Ekpo.

The above should not be taken to mean that the elders' council is independent of the *Obong Ikpaisiong* or that it can use the *nnuk eniin* without his authorization. On the contrary, *Isong* only has access to and uses the *nnuk eniin* through the *Obong Ikpaisiong* who is also the chairman of the *Isong*. In reality, it is the *Obong Ikpaisiong* and his council that constitutes itself into the judicial body for the purpose of settling disputes of a judicial nature. The efficacy of *nnuk eniin* as an instrument of supreme authority in Ibibio land is recorded by Monday E. Noah in relation to the alternative judicial system set up by the Man-Leopard Society. Citizens who did not find justice in the formal courts would usually approach the society for redress and this led to a number of murders that were initially attributed to wild animals. According to Noah (1987: 49),

[t]he colonial government's initial response included the issuing of gun permits authorizing certain individuals to hunt and kill leopards in the affected Ibibio areas; but as it became increasingly clear that the killings were committed by human beings, the government then banned the Idiong society, imposed a curfew, and billeted troops in the area. None of the government measures proved useful until the Ibibio State Union stepped in. Colonial officials were invited to a number of meetings with the leaders of the Ibibio State Union, and it was agreed that the Union should arrange tours of the areas involved and help stamp out the Man Leopard menace. The authorities provided transportation and a police escort for the delegates who toured the areas and, according to Chief Okon Udo Ndok, by using elephant tusks (*nnuk enin*) and fresh oil palm leaves (*eyei*), the Ibibio State Union was able to bring these murders to an end.

In an interview, Obong Udo James Ekpo Itam, clan head of Okon Clan, Eket Local Government Area, in 1988 said that *mme nnuk eniin* (plural for *nnuk eniin*) were used more commonly before the coming of the white men and some years after their arrival. He was emphatic that it was when the white men started appropriating *nnuk eniin* placed on disputed parcels of land as souvenirs that *eyei* was upgraded to serve the purpose where in ancient days only the *nnuk eniin* would have been used. Elabo-

rating further on this point, the chief said that “it was the white man and his religion that brought the desecration and raping of *nwoomo* monuments<sup>[4]</sup> of the valuable relics and household items that were usually deposited there. They [the white men] usually prayed and cut off the *eyei* at the *nwoomo* before taking away what they wanted. This also led to the gradual disrespect for *eyei* by Christians on traditional matters”<sup>5</sup> Thus in later years, for fear of the *nnuk eniin* being stolen by missionaries or their converts, an *Obong Ikpaisong* would place an injunction over land disputed between two clans or villages by having the *eyei* symbolism displayed on such parcel of land.

The *eyei* symbolism that later replaced *nnuk eniin* as signature of an injunction over a piece of land is called placed *ofuud*. *Ofuud* is usually shaped as a giant question sign and is made of *eyei*, stuffed with a handful of leaves and adorned peculiarly with *mkpatat* (ferns; *Selaginella*). It is usually prepared in such a way that a good length is left of the leg of the *ofuud* so that it is staffed, in an appropriate number, to the disputed parcel of land at appropriate intervals. Where there are overhanging tree branches on the plot that are within reach, some would be tied unto them so that they hang down like swallows’ nests. Obong Ekpo Itam took time to explain that “*ofuud* as an Ibibio word in this context means, that which compresses, that which brings together, that which pulls together from the outer limits to the centre. In effect, therefore, *ofuud* is an element or symbol of bringing together again parties that had been pulled apart, viz., an instrument of reconciliation.” Ntison S. J. Umoren agrees with him but preferred to sum up his definition of *ofuud* as “signal to withdraw hostility and come forward for peaceful settlement.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in many circumstances the *eyei* now plays its traditional role as well as the role of the *nnuk eniin* of old.

Where two villages or clans were involved in a serious but low-level conflict that has the potential of escalating into a violent conflict, a peace settlement can be forced upon them by the combined action of other villages. This is especially so where the intervention of a friendly village or the *Obong Ikpaisong* had been spurned, perhaps because each party believed it would overrun the other. Where

violent conflict is already raging or threatening and the *eyei* peace emblem had been rejected by both or either of the parties, the *eyei* could be hung on an *okono* tree at the boundary of the warring villages. Any village that thereafter crossed the *eyei* to the other’s territory to resume fighting was attacked by all other neutral villages. Such a deviant village was said to have cut the *eyei* (*ekpike eyei*); which in effect meant declaring war against the *Obong Ikpaisong* whose peace efforts were ignored or the community of friendly neutral villages, which were interested in restoring peace and had acted to ensure an armistice and the restoration of harmony.

But “sometimes *eyei* carried an uncompromising message of war,” Ikpe (1942: 6) says, in an instance where two adamant *Mbong Ikpaisong* were prepared to show their teeth. Where village “A” and village “B” are building up for a war, “the former had to send a palm frond (*eyei*) to village ‘B’ to say where and when the war would be fought. Village ‘B’ would then reply by also sending a *eyei* to village ‘A,’ agreeing to fight at a particular place and on a specific date” (Udo 1983: 156). An order was then passed on both sides to the combat and then a bush war-theatre prepared against the agreed day of commencement of war. The exchange of *eyei*, notwithstanding, it is still possible for a neutral *Obong Ikpaisong* or a friendly village to intervene to avert violence. It is also possible for a group of neutral villages to force the parties into a settlement either by hanging *eyei* on an *okono* tree as described above, or by sending *eyei* to each *Obong Ikpaisong* to warn him not to continue with the buildup to war.

### Religion, Society, and Ibibio Traditional Symbols

The traditional uses of *eyei* are not restricted to judicial and arbitral functions, but also include a multiplicity of other uses that contribute to the social life of the Ibibio. The Ibibio child in the village first has a personal contact with *eyei* as a rope for tying firewood. Within this context, the name “Ekin” is often preferred and widely used. When cut from the youthful oil palm tree (*uten*), the *ekpin* is waved furiously in the air or beaten against the trunk of a tree, in order to open up. It is then split into two by holding the two topmost opposite leaves and pulling them apart. Either part of the frond as split can be woven into a rope with a knot at the tapered end. This weaving of the *ekpin* (*udok eyei* or *uwang eyei*) turns it into a rope. As woven, the *eyei* is now a rope and holding firewood loosely together in a bundle. To have a grip hold on the wood so that they do not fallout, a piece of strong stick about a foot long is

4 *Nwoomo* is a funeral house, usually about a meter in height and shaped as a triangle with all but one side closed, where the properties meant for use in the ancestral world by the deceased were kept. See Tolbert (1923: 158).

5 Udo James Ekpo Itam, in a discussion with the author on 9th July, 1994.

6 Ntison S. J. Umoren in a discussion with the author on 14th July, 1994.



used in twist-turning the rope until it presses firmly on the wood. That process is called *ufiakka ifia* or *uyot-to ifia*.

I recall that 68 years ago, each time I returned from fetching firewood for my eighty-two-year-old paternal grandmother, with whom I sometimes spent my holidays, she would welcome me with a caution or reminder that if the rope holding my firewood together was *eyei*, it must not be cut through to release the wood for packing into the house. The *eyei* was to be carefully loosened, pulled out full length from under the weight of the wood, and thrown into the nearby bush. Her reminder many times would end with the words “*Eyei omuum ubon!*” If I tied my firewood with rope derived from the inner bark of the oil palm frond (*efang eyop*) or some other, the old woman did not bother if it was cut to release the wood. On one of such days, I got curious and asked her what the statement or remark on *eyei* meant. She explained that *eyei* is the unifying or binding chord and is, therefore, “that which holds relatives together,” that which maintains the bond between them. The word *ubon* could mean lineage, bonded relationship, relatives and the word *mum* means hold, as in *mum kama*, which interprets hold it firmly (in the palm). *Omuum* is the medium of bringing or holding together, like in the term “*omuum utok*,” which is the go-between, the arbitrator, the reconciler between two angry parties. My grandmother explained that since *eyei* was used in bringing kindred together just as it holds firewood together, it was not customary that it be cut or destroyed. If in some inexplicable circumstance it is destroyed, doing so can conjure some ill omen for the harmonious living of kindred. It may sound superstitious, but the point she made is that *eyei* is revered because of the role it plays in maintaining good relationship, peace, and harmony among the Ibibio people. While agreeing with that position, Ntison S. J. Umoren observed that it is inevitable and sometimes regrettable for phrases like *eyei omum ubon*, pregnant in their cultural meanings, to get lost in the Ibibio current vocabulary and usage because men and women, who are old and wise in the culture and customs of our people, are no more and most children now grow up with their parents in cities where they are not at grips with their culture and tradition and, therefore, cannot learn from their grandparents.

The “native Ibibio” believes that there is a connection between the spirits and gods, the ghosts and the ancestors and the *eyei*. It was believed (and some still tend to believe), that if one called upon the ancestors, the spirits, and the gods and sought their protection over some items left unguarded, say by the side of the village road, by placing a split open

*eyei* on the items, those called upon or invoked by being so approached in the circumstance, would protect the item and be prepared to mete out adequate punishment on any trespasser. In effect, the *eyei* placed on the item carried an ominous unvoiced warning: “The ghosts, spirits, and ancestors are on guard. It is in your interest to keep off!” That act of placing the *eyei* over the items is called “*uñwañ*.” If the items over which protection is sought were firewood (*ifia*), the term is *uñwañ ifia*, if it is about palm fruits (*eyop*), the term is *uñwañ eyop*, or if it is about props and stakes (*mboi* – for the building of a mud house), cut from the bush and assembled by the roadside to be carted away later to the building site, the term is *uñwañ mboi*, and so on. Writing on this, Ekong (1983: 88) states that:

[t]hese plant and animal materials are variously used as *uñwañ* or symbols to warn trespassers that the wrath of the gods and juju had been invoked against them. Thus an Ibibio would protect his faggot of firewood, palm fruit bunches or other belongings by simply placing a split *eyei* or *mbritem* or *mkipat* or *mkipok ekwong* on the property.

Although, as Ekong observes, other symbols like *mbritem*, *mkipat*, and *mkipok ekwong* (snail shells) were and are still used for the same purpose, *eyei* is always preferred because it is believed to be more efficacious or potent.

In Ibibio country it is customary to find *eyei* tied round the stem or tied to the hovering big branches of fruit trees which fruits are in the process of ripening; say, the African plum (*eben*) with fruits that would soon change from the immature and unripe yellow/pink colour to the ripe deep blue/purple one. Such an *uñwañ* symbol warns trespassers not to rip down the fruits, ripe or unripe. To members of the family, the message is that the fruits should be left to ripen until a certain day which would be fixed for harvesting and sharing out to family members and friends. On the day of harvesting, the *eyei* (now dry and brown) would be carefully untied, and this process is referred to as *uwuk-ko eben*; which could be translated as “removal of restrictions on” or “unbanning of harvesting.” Where the *uwang* symbol had been on a publicly owned fruit tree, the act of *uwuk-ko* now means that any passerby can harvest the items for personal use. In traditional Ibibio communities the harvesting of public fruit trees for commercial purposes did not arise since they had little commercial value (everyone had his own); in contemporary times, fruits are items of trade, but harvesting public trees for commercial purposes after the *uwuk-ko* is heavily frowned upon.

At the approach of a new farming season, say in late November and in December each year, *eyei*,

which either have been spread out and tied at both ends to tree branches and shrubs, or cleared of leaves on one side but with the firm middle ridge intact, are pinned to the ground over bushes or fallow plots which would be cleared for farming the following year. This is called *uñwañ ikot* (protecting the bush) and is meant to warn against defecation, which would deter those who would be engaged in clearing the bush in a few weeks time for farming. In general, it is not an offence for anybody under pressure to call into any thicket of uncultivated plot to ease himself, but it becomes an offence to do so once the *uñwañ ikot* symbols are displayed. If one is caught violating the *uñwañ* symbol, the owner of the plot could seek recompense from him by appealing to the village council. But even where the violator is not known, the belief is that the culprit will be punished by the appropriate deity that was involved in the *uñwañ* ceremony.

Among members of *Ekpo* title/secret society, *eyei* has its special symbolism. When an *Ekpo* revelry is to be staged, especially at the *attai ession* (grove arena), warnings would be posted at a safe distance along various roads and paths that could lead to the scene of the revelry. Open *eyei* would be tied to living *ududu* plants which still have some fresh leaves on them. The *ududu* plants are pegged into the middle of the road or path to convey the message “*okpo oku-di-o!*” It is a warning that non-initiate should not dare come near that zone. The message to non-members is: “You go beyond this point at your peril!” The message is also for women and children. At the road or path junction leading to the *Ekpo* grove arena, another but very unique set of such symbols is conspicuously displayed. This unique and peculiar symbol is called *eyei iso akai* and the message it carries is obvious and melancholic in the extreme. If the society’s masquerades, the agents of action which one meets along the roads are variously described as “horribly frightening,” “dreaded,” “fearful *Ekpo*,” “hideous beyond description,” “Ghosts – the Destroyers,” etc.,<sup>7</sup> what would happen to any non-member who would dare them in the forest arena can better be imagined than described. Stepping beyond *eyei iso akai*, for a non-member in the days of *Ekpo* suzerainty was certainly like stepping on a mine. In the *attai ession* itself, if in the midst of revelry, majestic and crooning drumming, and frenzied dancing, an *Ekpo* baron steps out from his exclusive shed with an open *eyei* raised high in his right hand and possibly with loud shouts and strides through the arena, this means that order has to be restored

immediately and the fanfare should cease. Everyone would take his place and quietly wait to hear or see what the elders had next in the package.

It is customary that when an *Ekpo* society member dies, his compound be ceremonially ravaged more so if he is an old and accomplished member. The ravaging is partly a sign of grief and partly to clear off vegetative overgrowth and coverage in the compound, thus creating more room and admitting more sunlight into the compound which would soon be turned into a venue of *Ekpo* revelry. The event itself or the degree of it would also be determined by the dead man’s wealth, age, influence, and importance as well as rank within the society. The ravaging would involve the cutting down of some of the planted trees, whereby some of them were much treasured by the deceased and his survivors. To prevent massive destruction or save some very valuable tree species, markings are made on the favoured trees or plants and *eyei* are tied round their trunks or branches. Each plant or tree so dressed attracts a ransom fee of *okpoho ition*, that is, five manilas or the current equivalent. That act of marking the trees and having them dressed with *eyei* so that they would escape the ravage rampage is called *uñwañ eto* or simply *udep eto*. The action is similar to the biblical Passover, but this time it is not the blood of a lamb on doorposts to save the lives of inmates of the house; it is *eyei* tied around trunks of treasured trees to prevent their being hewn down by *Ekpo* masquerades and other *Ekpo* members. After that *uñwañ* exercise, as many trees as possible over which ransom had not been paid, would be hewn down. But if any plant so cleared for passing over is cut down, even in error, the defaulter pays a heavy fine. The rule governing tree-cutting is that any *Ekpo* masquerade or member who picks on any tree to fell must do so by himself alone. If he failed to cut down the tree, the assailant would pay a fine of *okpoho itiatita* (eight manilas) or its equivalent at the time, and this would be presented along with a bottle of gin.<sup>8</sup>

Within the ranks of *Ekpo* members, *eyei*, as already noted, is used in the grove for restoring order, stopping the high-tempo frenzied dancing, etc. But for the maintenance of order in open and public places by way of restoring peace in an atmosphere of disquiet, pandemonium, fighting, as in free-for-all fights accompanied with looting in market places etc., it behoves members of the *Idiong* society to discharge this responsibility. The *Abia Idiong* would

7 For a picture of the *Ekpo* and description of its regalia see Akpan (1994: 48–53, 94f.).

8 J. S. B. Ikpe; derived from family records on the burial rites of Obong Akpan Ikpe Inyang Ibanga Ekanem Akan, an *Ekpo* chieftain and grandfather of the authors.

rip off an *eyei* from the nearest *uten* (young palm tree), and raising it in his right hand, stride through the area of disorder shouting:

*Idobo-o! Idobo-o!!*

Be quiet! Be quiet!

*Adak! Adak! Adak!*

*Ikang ekpeduk ikot, ese esim mbere-o!*

When the bush fire burns it stops at the fire break!

*Ekem! ndion-o! Ekem ndion-o-o!!*

It is enough! It is enough!

It could also be some other words or phrases authoritatively appealing for or better still ordering a cease-fire, order, and peace. Under normal circumstances, a restoration of peace would immediately follow for the *Abia Idiong*'s role in situations like that were generally acknowledged and respected. But there was an exception in Asuna when an *Abia Idiong*'s peace moves were flouted. The rage was so high and pandemonium had totally taken over the market to the extent that as the *Idiong* priest (a certain *Odung* by name) strode through the market striving to restore order he was mowed down with a Dane gun. That was an abomination and sacrilege and the dastardly event resulted in the market being deserted immediately. To the people, that awful event would anger even the gods of the land. It cost Asuna people many goats and fowl for the gods and the land to be appeased, among other items of sacrifice. Even though no one now appears to be very sure at which of the two markets in Asuna (northern Iman) the event occurred, it has been immortalised with an *Idiong* song:

*Odung tim-me adem ke eya uwot-o!*

*Odung desist or you will be killed!*

*Yo-ho-ho!!*

*Owo isiwotowot Abia Idiong-o!*

Nobody kills an *Abia Idiong*!

*Yo-ho-ho!!*

*Abia Idiong ese anam emem-o!*

*Abia Idiong is a peace maker!*

*Yo-ho-ho!!*

Among the *Ibibio* of old, stealing and witchcraft were regarded as the most heinous crimes<sup>9</sup> and pun-

ishments for these were prompt, severe, and public. When a thief was caught, he was stripped naked and the stolen article, if possible, like in the case of a chicken, was tied unto *eyei* and hung around his neck. He could be painted with charcoal, severely beaten and tortured, and paraded around the village with people jeering and deriding him. In the case of witchcraft, Ekong (1983: 86 f.) puts it this way:

Generally one accused of witchcraft in *Ibibio* society did not feel safe until publicly declared innocent. In order to ensure his/her safety pending public clearance, the accused would seek protection under the village head or the chief of a neighbouring village by tying two leaves of *eyei* to *okpogho* (manilla) and handing this to the chief.

The chief would then send words across to the adversary or accuser and arrange for the matter to be heard and determined. When that is done, it is unlawful or unethical, indeed abominable to molest such a person except at the conclusion of the case and when the person has been found to be guilty. That action of seeking the chief's protection through the use of *eyei* tied to the manilla is called *uduoono ikpin* (note, not *ekpin*, the folded young palm frond, but a different technical and legal term in *Ibibio*). *Uduoono ikpin* has to do with seeking protection or refuge under the law or otherwise requesting intervention or arbitration from a legal personage. Anyone who molested the "refugee" during that period has committed a punishable offence against the village as personified in their chief and the offence was called *udue ikpin* (breach of a stay of action order or of the injunction imposed by the authority of the village) or, more commonly, *uduo obom* (committing an abomination). Ntison S. J. Umoren confirms that depending on the circumstance, "insulting the authority of the village, disregard for the person and authority of the village head in those days could even attract capital punishment."<sup>10</sup>

But the *uduoono ikpin* process or intervention also applies in matters of less severe or serious consequence. All the same, it is a process in the *Ibibio* legal system or social control measures. Chief J. S. B. Ikpe's 1940 records carry the decision of an *uduoono ikpin* case in which he was involved. A relative of his, Daniel, had made certain outrageous pronouncements which enraged him so much so that he initiated moves within the family for that disrespectful young man to be taught the lesson of his life. Realising how severe his punishment would

some legal oversight, relatives of the woman involved will hunt him down and kill him.

10 Ntison S. J. Umoren in a discussion with the author on 14th of July, 1994.

9 Notice that rape is not included here as a crime. The fact is that rape was relatively unknown in the small communities that made up *Ibibio* land. The purity of a maiden as well as the reproductive rights of women were highly treasured and violation of these was tantamount to destroying the life of the maiden as no one would marry her. Such a case usually attracted capital punishment. Where the culprit is let off though



be, Daniel sought the intervention of some Asuna chiefs: Obong Mbede Udo Efik, Obong Akpan Etuk Ekpo, Obong Udo Aba Uso, and Obong Ibong. The case was heard several times and the judgment in which “Daniel was fined a goat” was given on 23rd of December, 1940 (*Urua Ekpe*). That judgment reconciled Chief Ikpe and his kindred again through the intervention of the other chiefs. Often times, in the *uduono ikpin* process, it is the weaker party in the misunderstanding, hostility, or friction, or the one whose public image is hurt, whose character is assassinated that initiates action for protection or redress, as the case may be. Whatever the circumstance, however, the symbolism of the *eyei* in the *uduono ikpin* process is important, since the mere offering of manila without the accompanying *eyei* would not suffice.

At meetings where great premium is placed on confidentiality and secrecy, *eyei* is also brought into play. The chairman or his nominee at such a meeting would commence matters at hand with a package of prayer and libation-cum-invocation of the gods of the land, the spirits who prosper and guide the actions of men, the departed ancestors who protect the living and avenge on their behalf. He would stress that since they were gathered to discuss matters very vital to their welfare and which must be kept secret, they (the gods, spirits, and ancestors) should be present with them, imbue them with wisdom and understanding and punish whoever, upon leaving the meeting, would divulge what had been discussed to anyone. At the end of the libation, the quantity of gin left in the glass over which he gushed out his communication with the unseen elements, droppings of which he had been pouring on the ground as he spoke, would be poured on the *eyei*. Everyone, including the chairman himself, would then leave the hall to the veranda. The chairman would then place the *eyei*, which he had been holding with his left hand while pouring the libation with his right, on the floor across the door and first step over it back into the meeting hall. The others would follow suit. Whoever felt that he would not be able to pass the acid test and keep the discussions secret, thereafter, was free to leave at that point. The author, among others, was invited to a meeting at the palace of H. R. H. Edidem Thompson Udo Uyoata Akpabio (late), Oku-ibom Ibibio and Paramount Ruler of Eket in 1988. The Oku-ibom performed the *eyei* rites himself and we settled down for the meeting. But H. R. H. Edidem Thompson Udo Uyoata Akpabio was anxious to discuss and get clear with an item or two on the agenda with the secretary of the meeting. While the consultation was going on, a late arrival but very important personality came

into the hall. For some inexplicable reason, but perhaps because he was quite late and was in a hurry to take his seat in the hall, he did not quite register in his consciousness the *eyei* at the doorway. After he had sat down and taken a quick look through the hall to note who and who were present, the chief sitting next to him confirmed that a full regalia *eyei* rites had been performed by no less a person than the Oku-ibom himself. After a while, the dignitary rose with a nod to the chairman and walked into a corridor at one end of which the restrooms were located for the convenience of users of the meeting hall and at the other end terminated at the outer veranda of the building. Instead of going towards the restrooms, as attendants at the meeting expected, the highly respected gentleman took the opposite direction that opened to the fore-yard and slid into his car. He never showed up again at the meeting that day. The elderly gentleman, much respected in government circles, was noted for breaches of faith, confidentiality, and trust.

On important public occasions, *Mbong Ikpaisong*, together with some village heads and outstanding public figures, would walk in a procession to the rostrum. At the head of such a procession would be the *Akama Eyei Ikpaisong*, Sergeant-at-Arms, as one would say. He holds a just unfolding *ekpin* (*eyei*), full length, over his right shoulder. In circumstances such as this, *eyei* serves the same purpose as the mace does in parliament. Obong Umoren Umo Essien Unwene of Ikot Mfon, Etinan Local Government Area, is not only the *Akama Eyei Ikpaisong Iman Ibom* Clan, he also functions as *Akama Eyei Ikpaisong* Ibibio when occasions demand. The *Akama Eyei* in this case is like a forerunner, informing people of the status of the persons that follow the *eyei*. A similar function is served by the *eyei* for the *Ekpo* society as Talbot (1923: 188) reports:

Eight days before the first of the new season's crop may be eaten, in every town where this society holds sway, a functionary, whose title is Udokk Ekkpo, i.e. the Ghost's Door, sallies forth, bearing a rattle in his right hand and a palm leaf in his left. He goes as a kind of advance-guard, to warn people that the Ekkpo fetishes will be brought forth on the morrow.

A maiden who is possessed or afflicted by the *ndam* fit is usually decorated with white clay (*ndom*), particularly on her face, hands, and legs, and would have an *eyei* tied on her upper left arm and be confined in the house of an expert for treatment. The *eyei* hand band identification<sup>11</sup> mark conveys the in-

11 The use of *eyei* as a band of identification is also reported by Talbot (1923: 239).



formation that she is not normal and is undergoing treatment to rid her of her affliction or incapacitation. Anyone who finds her along the road or in any way not behaving normally will by the *eyei* symbolism quickly suspect that she is at large from where she had been confined for treatment and was obliged to stop her, and take her, or cause her to be taken back to where she was being treated. The *eyei* hand band indicates to all and sundry that she can neither be courted nor expected to perform the rational feats that are expected of a normal person. Traditional Ibibio society norm demanded that whoever found her straying should protect and assist her. She could be taken back to her parents if it was not easy to locate the treatment centre from which she had escaped.

Every *akwa isua* (Ibibio leap year) and throughout Ibibio land, all shrines including Iso Eka Ekpo, Iso Akakam, and all others in the line up to Nkuku and still down the line to ancestor shrines like Ekpenyong and all *Iso Ibok* are either honoured with the erection of new sheds of *eyei* or have *eyei* laced over fork sticks at their locations.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, these shrines and fetish spots are decorated with woven *eyei* dressed to the base of the trees (see Talbot 1923: 11) at which they are located. In many households, ancestral graves are also cleared and decorated with *eyei*. Where the grave belonged to an influential member of the community, the *nwoomo* (funeral house) is redecorated or rebuilt, and laced with *eyei* decorations. Without the *eyei* decoration the libation and other leap year rituals are incomplete and, therefore, unacceptable to the gods and ancestors. The use of *eyei* at the end of year/new year activities is also confirmed by Justine Ukpogong (1982: 164) who observed:

The first ritual to mark the period is called *utuak ndok* (starting the closing activities) which consists of cleaning up the shrines of the gods and ancestors and decorating them with palm fronds. This is closely followed by a sacrifice called *uwa iwuot isua* (the end-of-the-year sacrifice) offered for the whole village to “send off” the old year and to “welcome” the new, to request of the gods and ancestors a peaceful cosmic transition, to thank them for past favours and beg for a prosperous new year.

*Eyei* is not only for the living, it also plays an important role at death among the Ibibio. Some corpses are believed to be reluctant, clumsy, or stubborn in returning to the ancestors via the grave for one reason or the other. When conveyed to the grave, such corpses are said to be unduly heavy, could

cause the pall bearers to sway towards the bush or come to a forced stop for a while before they are able to move again. If such a corpse is conveyed in a vehicle, the vehicle would be slack of movement, the steering of the vehicle could, inexplicably, veer away from its track, the vehicle could be involved in an accident, etc. To neutralise all these pranks and pacify the stubborn corpse, an *eyei* is either placed inside the coffin, if for one reason or another the pranks had been anticipated, or on the coffin, when traits of stubbornness are noticed upon commencement of movement to the grave. If the corpse is conveyed in a vehicle, an *eyei* is tied to any convenient part of the vehicle, say the frame of a bicycle or the front bumper of a car or lorry. Decorating the vehicle with the *eyei* also serves as a warning to other road users that the vehicle contains a corpse and as such may behave in an unpredictable manner. Road users usually give the vehicle a wide berth in order to avoid being affected by its unpredictable behaviour. In case the journey begins outside the palm belt or for some other reason the *eyei* is not readily available, a tough grass species called *nkimenang* also serves this same purpose, but *eyei* is always preferred and would sometimes be substituted once it becomes available.

## Conclusion

As herein narrated, *nnuk eniin* and *eyei* are two very important items in the sociocultural and economic life of the Ibibio people and this essay cannot be said to have exhausted their roles and usages, especially that of *eyei*. The more the former becomes a scarce species and, therefore, less in circulation, the more the latter virtually takes over the role of *nnuk eniin* or, at least, readily stands in for *nnuk eniin* where it is not available. *Eyei* is at the pinnacle of the palm tree which is, spectacularly the most highly valued economic item and crop in the life of the Ibibio. Like the parent palm that bears the fruits producing oil and kernel and carries the leaves and branches, which with the trunk provide several needs down to the roots that are of medicinal value, the *eyei* comes in early in the life of an Ibibio youth, plays an important part in his traditional belief system and entertainment, regulates his society as a social control mechanism, and may even accompany him as he returns to the ancestors. Yes, indeed, to the Ibibio “*eyei omuum ubon*” is the chord that binds, the conduit of balm for hurt minds, the reconciler and chain of harmony and taking off with the people almost from the cradle but certainly all the way to the grave!

12 The decoration of shrines with *eyei* has been variously reported by Talbot (1923: 13, 18, 22, 37f., 41).

The following persons were of immense assistance in supplying us with a general background and, sometimes, specific information on the subject:

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Obonganwan M. Ikpe, wife of Obong J. S. B. Ikpe (late), clan head of Iman Clan, Etinan Local Government Area, 1962–1973; member Asuna Council of Chiefs, Etinan Local Government Area, and one of the mothers of the authors.

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## Genetic Diversity of Some North Indian Populations of Different Faiths

Gulshan Ara and Mohammad Afzal

### Introduction

The science of population genetics deals with Mendel's law and other genetic principles as they affect entire populations of organisms. Population genetics also includes the various forces that result in evolutionary changes in species through time. By defining the framework within which evolution takes place, the principles of population genetics are basic to a broad evolutionary perspective on biology. From an experimental point of view, evolution provides a wealth of treatable hypotheses for all other branches of biology. Many oddities in biology become comprehensible in the light of evolution: they result from shared ancestry among organisms, and they attest to the unity of life on earth.

Population genetics attempts to describe how the frequencies of the alleles, which control the trait, change over time. To study frequency changes, we analyse populations rather than individuals. Furthermore, because changes in gene frequencies are at the heart of evolution and speciation, population and evolutionary genetics are often studied together.

One of the purposes of population genetics is to study the mechanism of origin and maintenance of genetic variability. The genetic variability is studied in terms of polymorphism of various genetic markers as genetic polymorphism, which is defined as the occurrence in the same population of two or more alleles at one locus, each with appreciable frequency (Cavalli-Sforza and Bodmer 1971). Scholars of population genetics agree that a natural selection and stochastic processes are responsible for the maintenance of this genetic polymorphism in the human population.