

AMUSU: A STUDY OF WITCHCRAFT - AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Essentially, witchcraft is the old craft of the wise (Bramshaw, 2009). It often refers to the traditional religious practices of people and nations, the kind seen in the encounter of Saul at Endor with a witch (1 Sam. 28:7-25). Witchcraft is both a religion and craft (Farrar and Farrar, 1984), at least in its modern form. Until recently, it would be safe to understand witchcraft as the totality of science, arts and religion practiced outside Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It includes sorcery, clairvoyance, necromancy, divination and other physical/material practices all aimed at achieving practical ends. The present work explores the Igbo-African perspective of witchcraft which is often rendered *Amusu*. The researcher found out that the practice of *Amusu* among the Igbo is not homogenous. The work is an ethnological research into the understanding and practices of *Amusu* in the Omambala area, Awka area and Owerri area. It then went ahead to do a comparative study of witchcraft and *Amusu* to find the suitability of the two concepts translating each other. It is this Igbo *Amusu* which the work referred to as an African perspective of witchcraft.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Amusu, Igbo culture, Igbo witchcraft, African witchcraft, Igbo religion

Introduction

Witchcraft is one of the discussions in socio-religious cultures which had gathered attention through the years, Russell and Lewis (2022) described the phenomenon of witchcraft thus:

Witchcraft, traditionally, the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery or magic. Although defined differently in disparate historical and cultural contexts, witchcraft has often been seen, especially in the West, as the work of crones who meet secretly at night, indulge in cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, or Satan, and perform black magic.

It is important to understand the far reaching implication of “alleged” in that definition. At least it can be adduced thereof that the work considers such a widely accepted definition of witchcraft to be an allegation. Quickly the work averred that this impression about witchcraft is a chimera: a figment of imagination. It also referred to it as a stereotype. Yet the description above is the commonplace definition of witchcraft.

The present work is contrived against the background which accept the above description of witchcraft as basic truth, but does not totally agree with it. On that background too, witchcraft is equated with devil worship; diabolical, malevolent, dark and evil. It is a dark art employed by evil people to harm others. Witchcraft activities include simple misdemeanor and mischief; advances to lycanthropy and vampirism. This idea of witchcraft has been brought into Africa by western anthropologist, historians and missionaries and typical of their style, they sought for equivalents of witchcraft in Africa. Most western-trained African anthropologists and sociologists also take on witchcraft from the same prism. According to Offiong (1991):

The Ibibio consider witches as a serious threat to the entire community. Witchcraft is thus antisocial act that defies collective conscience, witches are humans with some mysterious or supernatural power with which they can and do harm their fellow human beings. Witchcraft, to the Ibibio, is the psychic act through which socially disapproved supernatural techniques influence events.

Offiong subscribed to the western definition of witchcraft, what was left for him is to seek within his Ibibio culture characters which match with that definition. In the same manner equivalents were found *Mayya* (Hausa), *Aje* (Yoruba), *Obubit* or *Afia* (Ibibio), *Amosu/Amusu* (Igbo) and so on. On the other hand, Pitchard's (1937) study of witchcraft among the Azande showed a different perspective. Applying the ethno-phenomenological method, this renowned anthropologist found that the entire gamut of traditional pagan practices of the Azande could be referred to as witchcraft. It has many aspects including social control, leadership, protection of life and property, arbitration and so on. In other words, witchcraft was an integral part of the Azande culture which served, enhanced and helped organize their communities. Their practice of witchcraft was based on the metaphysical principle of cause and effect.

The present author identified that something is not adding up about understanding witchcraft, especially in Africa. On the one hand, witchcraft is understood as an isolated phenomenon characterized by evil, sinister, malevolent and antisocial activities. On the other hand it is understood as the whole traditional practices of the native peoples by which they exercise control, leadership and organization among themselves and in their environment.

This work fills the gap of these conflicting ideas. It delved into the historical underpinnings that brought about the contemporary assumptions about witchcraft and re-launched its traditional meaning in the west. It found common grounds which it shared with the *Amusu* concept among the Igbo. It, then studied the Igbo *Amusu* to find its socio-religious significance among the Igbo. Finally, the work offered new ways of perceiving and understanding witchcraft and *Amusu* among the Igbo. The work used data from existing studies on witchcraft in African and western cultures, oral interviews with witches and those who claim to be victim of the witches' exploits. It deployed critical analysis in a multi-dimensional approach collecting and working on the data.

Who are Witches; What is Witchcraft in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic Perspective?

Most of what is commonplace knowledge about witches and witchcraft today, especially among Africans, is the Christian and Islamic rendering of the phenomenon. According to the Christian Bible, part of which is the Jewish Tanakh (Sacred Writ), Moses admonished the Israelites who were making their way to the Promised Land thus:

When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD (Deut. 18:9-12a).

The word ‘Witchcraft’ and allied concepts like sorcery, necromancy, magic etc., appeared many times in the bible. The above quoted portion was exhaustive in describing the practices of the original occupiers of the Promised Land; practices the people of Israel were admonished not to imitate. These practices are known aspects of witchcraft. Most importantly, the admonition underscores that witchcraft was acceptable among the original dwellers of the Promised Land; it was in fact their religion. From the onset, the Jewish God had shown utter repudiation for and unwillingness to accommodate other divine powers or gods. Here Moses is strengthening that character of the Jewish God by rejecting also pagan modes of worship and traditional practices of worshipping their gods and goddesses even if they were deployed to worship the Jewish “one true God”.

Meanwhile, the Hebrew word “*Kashaph*”, found in Ex. 22:18 and Deut. 18:10 translates to “Witch” and in some translations sorcery, magic, divination and so forth. Interestingly, Paul used the Greek word “*Pharmakeia*” (Gal. 5:20) instead which was again translated as “Witchcraft/sorcery”. A reading of that Pauline context offers a dimension of witchcraft which is worth exploring. Paul was admonishing the Galatians on living the spiritual life as against the life of the flesh which he equated with the law. In other words, living by traditional (pagan) practices which were the extant laws of the nations was tantamount to living the life of the flesh, whereas living in the flesh is a sin. It is interesting to note that it accords with Paul’s thought that the normal socio-religious life of people (not Jews) is at the same time living in sin and the practices which constituted that life is witchcraft. This is evident in the kinds of sins alongside which Paul categorized witchcraft/sorcery.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (Gal. 5:19-21).

Proceeding from Judaism, Christianity began to input moral judgment on customary and traditional practices of people. Things they practiced from ancestry and built their society on were judged as morally wrong and inspired by the Devil. *Pharmakeia* was the Greek word used by Paul which was translated into sorcery. In the Book of Revelation, John employed *Pharmakeia* which is again translated as sorcery (Rev. 9:21, 18:23). Meanwhile, *Pharmakeia* has been interpreted by many biblical scholars as the use of drugs/inducements. Jack Kelley insists that *Pharmakeia* never translated to the use of medicine in a general sense (Kelly, 2013). Yet healing was generally accomplished by the same agents who deployed *Pharmakeia*. This suggests bias against the more mystical dimension of the religious practices of healing to create acceptability for the more empirical forms. However, there is a further complication as to the use of drugs in religious rituals among the ancients and Greeks as well, which Paul and John may have also found repugnant. According to Clarke (2021):

The ancient [Greeks](#) used wine in Dionysian rites, and [circumstantial evidence](#) points to the use of a hallucinogenic substance in the most solemn moments of the [Eleusinian Mysteries](#) of ancient Greece: the drinking of [kykeōn](#), a thick gruel of unknown [composition](#). Both the [secular](#) and the cultic use of the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom in

Siberia probably go back more than 6,000 years, and cultic use has spread beyond the cool temperate climates where the mushroom grows. Evidence of the cultic use of [opium](#) in the eastern Mediterranean islands, in Greece, and among the Sumerians points to dates as early as 3000 BCE, though some of this evidence is disputed.

Again, Paul and John, like Moses in the Old Testament, were prohibiting traditional ways of seeking redress for sicknesses and other debilitating human conditions alongside religious practices of pagan nations. This should be expected since it was in sync with the character of the former Jewish God who has adequately occupied the Christian religious space albeit in new forms. However, whether it is “*Kashaph*” or “*Pharmakeia*”, the translations to witchcraft, sorcery, divination, magic and idolatry raises the question of what witchcraft truly is and the basis on which it can be judged as evil. Suffice it to say thus far that for the Jews and Christians, witchcraft is the traditional practices of pagan nations which included their science and religion.

Likewise Islam condemned witchcraft which it understood as: (a) illusory magic (in relation to Moses and the magicians of Pharaoh), (b) perversion from true Islam (in relation to the renege of the Solomon era). Surah 23:102 condemned witchcraft in toto and insinuated its powerlessness over believers. There is an interesting dimension which Islam brought into witchcraft discourse – The Evil Eye. The hadith is replete with instructions on the evil eye especially on how to avoid its effect. According to hadith, the Prophet Muhammad confirmed that the evil eye, borne by jealousy or envy, is real and capable of causing harm or misfortune (Hadith, 50.1.1). The evil (al-‘ayn) is a form of witchcraft by which one out of jealousy or for whatever reason can inflict harm on others through magical means. Majorly, however, witchcraft in Islamic understanding comprised of actions or practices performed by iconic figures in Judaism and Christianity. In part, notion of witchcraft in Islam was contrived to sustain the narrative that Jews and Christians reneged from the divine path and will be eternally damned. Sahih Muslim Book 37, Hadith Number 6665 reads: “Abu Musa’ reported that Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: When it will be the Day of Resurrection Allah would deliver to every Muslim a Jew or a Christian and say: That is your rescue from Hell-Fire”.

The three monotheistic religion of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, coming from the same root, each referred to as witchcraft any practice which fell outside its own doctrinal perimeters and went ahead to ascribe such practices to the Devil, Lucifer or Satan. Consequently, to delve into the reasons for such judgment could also require a good understanding of the foundational idea of the personification of the devil in these three religions, the physical identity of same and how the deities of other religious cultures were identified as this personality. While this is outside the scope of this work, suffice it to adduce that practices which relate to witchcraft are found to be acceptable religious practices among cultures which has not or are yet to accept any of these three monotheistic religions.

Contemporary Witchcraft Practices

In its contemporary form, witchcraft is practiced by the Wiccans. Wicca is a modern pagan religion which began to take shape in Europe in the 1940’s (Berger, 2021). They refer to their members as witches and trace their origins to pre-Christian times. Alongside Heathenism, Rodnover, Romuva, Druidry, Wicca claims to be founded on the principles and practices of pre-Christian

religious culture of Europe. They were religious leaders, lore-keepers, legal authorities, adjudicators, medical professionals and political advisors who were also averse to keeping records/accounts of their practices in written form because they were prohibited from doing so.

Wicca is an integral part of the Western pagan tradition and the tools of the tradition spread wide, from the Norse lands to the Middle East and Egypt, from the steppes to the Atlantic seaboard. (Farrar and Farrar, 1984:22)

However, Druids featured in the writings of Cicero and Tacitus and few others of their contemporaries from other cultures. The little accounts of them kept by these were greatly lost when their orders were suppressed by the imperial authorities of Rome, especially Tiberius and Claudius. Druids were leaders of society in the ancient European world who were eventually overturned by an emergent Christianity. These were witches and active practitioners of witchcraft as a way of life. In our history books, pre-Christian religious practices in Europe are often captured in terms of Theism and more external ritual elements of religion. The internal and mystical dynamics were often repugnant to the emerging Christian neo-platonic culture which either did not pay attention to it or characteristically gave it away as the worship of the devil.

Evidently, until the 12th century, side by side the growing Christian culture, those interior and mystical dynamics were sustained because they preserved the knowledge base of alchemy, pharmacology, metaphysics, medicine etc. which were needed for society to function but were not the immediate concern of the Christian religion at least in its external affairs. Thus western science, especially medicine and mathematics, were appropriated and preserved by Christianity from the former pagan traditions. From the discussion above, science, medicine, pharmacy, mathematics, metaphysics fall into the categories referred to as witchcraft, sorcery, magic etc. According to Williams (2022):

Monks in monasteries faithfully copied out classics of ancient thought and early Christianity and preserved them for [posterity](#). Monasteries continued to teach the elements of ancient learning, for little beyond the elementary survived in the Latin West.

Therefore, for centuries, Christianity lived side by side traditional knowledge and practices of magic, sorcery, necromancy, clairvoyance and so forth, and was understood as the social dimension of people's life. The foundational knowledge of what is known today as science, philosophy (especially metaphysics) and mathematics were appropriated from ancient religious cultures (including those easily given away as witchcraft), preserved in and transmitted from the monasteries. While the Bible and Christianity; Judaism and Islam condemned witchcraft, evidences above show that for each of them, what was referred to as witchcraft were traditional practices other than the new practices of any of these religions.

Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa

On the second level, it is important to re-evaluate the witchcraft phenomenon in Africa, both as impressed by Christian western historians and anthropologists and corroborated by some western trained African anthropologists and historians so as to ascertain the validity of the translation, the equivalence of witchcraft in Africa, the veracity of the moral judgment of witchcraft as evil and to proffer the better way of understanding and regarding witchcraft. This work did extensive search

into the phenomenon; the existing studies and the observable practices which included interaction with the practitioners themselves.

In Africa, it is the Igbo perspective which this study explored as paradigm. Among the Igbo, witchcraft is often translated “*Amosu*” or “*Amusu*”. For the purpose of this research, *Amusu* was preferred. It is common knowledge among Igbo-African that in witchcraft, people turn into animals for the purpose of harming others. Agbanusi (2016) presents the exact sentiment of a typical Igbo-African about witchcraft.

In West Africa, witches and wizards are believed to operate mainly at night and early in the morning.... Both the kind of harm a witch or wizard can cause and his or her method of operation depend largely on his or her level in witchcraft. Generally, witches and wizards operate by making incantations while manipulating some fetish objects. But those who are high up in hierarchy can transform themselves into animals and operate under the cover of some animals.

The animals usually involved are the owl, the snake, the pussycat, the cockroach, the monkey, the hawk and the bat.

The same sentiments were echoed by Ekwueme, Asadu and Ukeachusim (2020) and Ngangah (2020). Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) suggests that there are two types of witches; these are the black witch and the white witch. The black witches are the one that do evil in the society; they use their powers for evil purposes and every negative thing. On the other hand the white witches are considered to be good, they are the witch doctors, and they use their powers for positive things. Each and every one of these writers agree that witches and wizards operate mostly at night, their meeting place is called the coven, and there they decide what to do and which kind of havoc to commit. They could change to animals such as owl, cat, dog, bat, goat etc. While they are asleep their spirit would change to any of these animals, but their body would remain in the room; the body can only gain consciousness when the spirit that supposedly escaped makes its way back to the body. It is important to note that these authors only put into literary form the same stories that are common on the Igbo-African streets. They fell short of the critical inquiry required to venture into this discourse.

Although Stevens (1982) argued that the belief in witchcraft is timeless and universal, yet it is also true that this belief has disappeared in various parts of the world and that it still exists in some parts of Africa till date. However, the position of Joshi, Kaushal, Katewa and Devi (2006) shows that Africans are not alone in this kind of mentality: “Among many societies, accidents, sickness, death, and other untoward events have been thought to be caused by witches that had magical powers, which they used for evil purposes” (p. 146).

Then contrary to these so-called all-inclusive sentiments, Onyejekwe (2003) seem to think differently in this skeptical comment:

One very interesting factor is that no one has ever seen a person metamorphose into a witch or into an animal. In short no one has seen a witch metamorphose into a bird, rat, bat, owl etc. People just “felt” or “knew” that the rat or owl or bat was acting strangely and hence must be a witch.

He therefore represents the crop of modern day Africans who are skeptical about this everyday mentality and Igwe (2010) belongs to this group. How may witchcraft as conceived by the Igbo-African be a reality? Nevertheless, among the Igbo as well as all other African tribes, it is also common to believe that the lives of human beings are everywhere affected by some unseen spiritual forces or agents. These spirits are variously referred to. Witchcraft falls into the areas of operation of such spirits which affect the life of the African negatively; this statement is common knowledge to every African mind. In other words, witchcraft is at the center of human psycho-social life. Offiong (1991) went further than Onyejekwe (2003) to offer reasons for this typical African manner of thought.

Most Africans do not believe in the normal possibility of “natural death.” This is not because they do not know the scientific aetiology of their diseases; the reason is that the Ibibio, like other Africans, extend their diagnosis beyond the immediate causes of death, and ask what may have been the ultimate causes. As far as the Ibibio is concerned, almost every illness, death, difficult childbirth, poor harvest, sickly livestock and poultry, bad luck in hunting, too much rain and long droughts and even sterility are all caused by witchcraft. (p. 16).

Like it has been mentioned, one of such phenomena which impacts negatively in the lives of Africans is Witchcraft; and raises great concern. Witchcraft and evil attacks are common phenomena in the lives of people today, especially Africans. The awareness of these phenomena and their influences in the day to day life of the African is heavily felt every day and its intensity heightens by the day. The accounts given by people about these phenomena have renewed the very important question of their reality. It must be admitted also that even as people pretend to know it, as day goes by less and less of witches and witchcraft are known while much and much of them are felt.

Witchcraft Among the Igbo: The often Unexplored Perspective

Belief in and operations of witchcraft among the Igbo is not homogenous. There could be found three different categories of understanding witchcraft among them. Traditionally, in the Owerri cultural area which extends from parts of Imo state to parts of Anambra State, witchcraft is an anti-social activity that is inimical and threatening to human life. Witches are not often found in these areas. Whatever they know about witchcraft were learnt or experienced from other cultures or Igbo cultural areas where witchcraft is more common. However, these areas are not immune to witchcraft attacks since the believed reach of witches is limitless and in recent times the craft may have been learnt by people of the area. People of these areas fantasize a lot about witchcraft and there is no end to that phantasm. In that phantasm, the least witches do is turn into animals to harm their victims. Otherwise, they have powers also to harm people remotely. For people from this culture area, witchcraft is evil and mysterious. Areas where witchcraft is common are the locations and environs of Benin, Awka, Calabar and communities that border the Omambala River in Anambra State. In these areas, witchcraft is understood differently and care should be taken in studying the phenomenon there, since it is something more than vampirism and evil attacks.

The second category are those who live in Awka and its environs. Nmah and Onukwube (2019) emphasized the belief in witchcraft phenomenon among Awka people. However their work opted for the Christian biblical definition of witchcraft over above the Awka people's understanding of it (p.19). That study stated categorically that there is nothing good about witchcraft, but most importantly, that witchcraft is still much in practice among Awka people. Both statements are typical of academics who delve into matters without involving the matter itself or the factors of the matter whatever. Defining the phenomenon of witchcraft *ad extra*, like Nmah and Onukwube suggested, will surely corrupt the actual meaning and consequences of that phenomenon. There are also areas in which their research stumbled into reality, but were not convincing enough for them to see the positive side of the craft.

For instance, among the Awka people, witchcraft is *Ọ natara Chi* or *Ebu m pụta ụwa*. In other words, witches are born into witchcraft and are destined to be witches. At the same time they acknowledge the possibility of one learning the craft which is often rendered as initiation into the coven. Nevertheless, among them also witchcraft is a social phenomenon which manifests extra-terrestrial powers in humans who are at liberty to express such powers according to their own individual discretion or are compelled to express it in particular ways. Witchcraft is not entirely evil. This author's interaction with the Umuzocha area of Awka reveals that there are witches born to be altruistic. They can only succeed in ventures when they are doing it for the benefit of another. If they engage in anything to benefit themselves, they fail. There are also witches who use their craft to protect others from their fellow witches; these do not engage in anything which may cause harm to another person. The varieties of witchcraft there are among the people are so many, so much so that things which do not follow regular or normal pattern are referred to as witchcraft. Witchcraft is the only explanation for extraordinary things happening among them, negative or positive. If there is a phenomenal person, genius or wiz kid among them, he/she is understood as a witch. However, there are also those who use the craft to do and perpetrate evil.

People who live on the Omambala River stretching from Otuocha to Ogbaru and their environs do not regard witchcraft as evil. Being grafted into witchcraft is part of their rights of passage. In other words, in their traditional society everyone is a witch. This was the point of one of the cases recorded by Arazu (2003; 82) in Case A. There a person from this area testified that he was a witch and in their community witchcraft was not regarded as evil. Women especially were given the witchcraft substance to ingest, by which they become witches. He delineated three categories in which they can operate:

Amusu Nche Ụlọ: This is for the social good of the community. Every female is expected to get married and witchcraft helps her to play the role of maternal protection of her family effectively. In these areas, marine spirits, especially *Nnemiri* and her agents, or other terrestrial spirits, like *Ọnabuluwa* or *Akarogeri* or *Uke* or *Ọgbonuke* or *Ndịmpụrụchiụwa* easily prey on or attack children who need the maternal protection from one who have powers. Achebe (1986) gave a very credible narrative of being born Igbo and the cosmological trajectory of life from birth through death to *Ịlọụwa* to the seventh cycle. It describes the encounter of a new born making entrance into the human terrain with *Nnemiri* and *Ọnabuluwa*. *Amusu Nche Ụlọ* helps the mother to guide her child through this nebulous path to be born without hitches.

Amusu Ikponsi: This is the power if illusory magic by which juveniles and adults play tricks on their targets, many times as pastime. This gives room for mischiefs which could sometimes be

expensive; harming or even costing life. *Amusu Ikponsi* enables one to play tricks on another conscious awareness of the environment. For instance, walking on the road, one may be made see an object nearer than it actually is and on getting to the illusory image, the actual distance plays out to ones chagrin. Such tricks may sometimes endanger the life of others too.

***Amusu Ogboma*:** This is the power to use *Amusu* to wilfully inflict harm on others. Yet for the people in these areas, even this is not inherent or outright evil. The possible evil of *Amusu* is not in the *Amusu* itself but about the person who puts the *Amusu* power to use. Nmah and Onukwube (2019) opined:

The witch is believed to be a prisoner of the evil power within. Thus witches do not need to use ritual words, magic medicines, spells or curses to perform their evil deeds. Instead, the power to do evil comes out from within. Witchcraft is thought to be carried out unconsciously by the witch when he or she is asleep. The witch is believed to leave his or her body and fly about at night seeking ‘to eat human flesh’ (p. 18).

Arazu (2003) also emphasized:

In fact witchcraft by definition is “extreme selfishness or wickedness”....The witch has narrowed his or her consciousness and through the use of psychic powers induced by extreme substances (the witch substance) he or she performs actions that are based purely on selfish qualifications. Consequently, a witch cannot be charitable to his fellow human beings on a permanent basis. Even when he performs charity from time to time, that charity is motivated by selfish reasons (p. 86).

Even if it is *Amusu Ogboma* that these authors were referring to in these allusions, there positions do not square up with witchcraft realities among the Igbo, especially of this part. Among this people. Witchcraft is a social philosophy whose purpose is to organize, protect and administer the society to function for the good of all.

For the mention, Mbuy (1991) studied witchcraft among his ethnic people in Cameroun. To become a native sage or wise man, Mbuy avers, one has to undergo an initiation into witchcraft, so to speak. Like the practice in Egyptian mystery schools or ancient Greek peripatetic schools, these belong to a kind of privileged class who are taught the basic rudiments of life, culture, philosophy and religion. In the instance of Cameroun, as Mbuy represents, such initiation makes of them benevolent witches who use the arcane knowledge of the socio-religious community for the good of all. Meanwhile, it has to be stated that Mbuy opines that there are five categories of witchcraft and the initiation stated above is about the first category. They are:

- A. Wisdom of the Rulers
- B. Diabolical Covenanthers
- C. Natural Witchcraft
- D. Acquired Witchcraft
- E. Psychological Witchcraft

Mbuy’s study agrees with Evans-Pitchard’s (1937) among the Azande where witchcraft is understood as a social philosophy and a means of organization and administration of the society.

Witchcraft and Amusu: A Comparative Analysis

This work identified witchcraft as the ancient religious practices of cultures which were not Jewish, Christian or Islam. This is because these three religions, especially Judaism and Christianity sustain this broad-based understanding of witchcraft. Within this scheme, witchcraft included magic, sorcery, divination, druidry, clairvoyance, necromancy and so forth. Melton (2024) noted that sorcery is a means of divination to fathom the future practiced in ancient Mesopotamia. He stressed that it is a learnt art and that it is inherently evil. He also observed that witchcraft was thought to be intrinsic, but not anymore because modern witches claim being trained into it. Meanwhile he also opined that witchcraft can be evil and good. Witchcraft is currently practiced by adherents of the Wiccan religion and they claim to be reviving the ancient art.

Among the Igbo is a phenomenon and practice referred to as *Amusu*. *Amusu* is not intrinsically evil. *Amusu* is not merely a concept; it is a nature. The nature of *Amusu* is neutral. There are other connotations to its neutrality, nay universality among the Igbo. *Amusu* is in itself what it is; it is in the performance of an action involving *Amusu* that it may translate to the English concept of witchcraft. Meanwhile let it be noted that *Amusu* is at the same time *a state of being, mystical substance and gnoseological principle*.

- As a **state of being**, it is the spiritual dynamo that generates the cosmic harmony or otherwise upon which the Igbo adept bases to emit various forms of vital forces.
- As a **mystical substance**, it is the substance with which humans are impregnated so as to accomplish miracles and extraordinary feats.
- As a **gnoseological principle**, it is a key to knowledge (hidden and uncommon) for all adepts in Igbo religious culture.

This goes to show that a singular interpretation of *Amusu* will not be a fair judgment on the integral understanding of the phenomenon. *Amusu* is a variegated phenomenon. The present researcher is of the opinion that it is the verb attached to *Amusu* which by specifying the action performed also contains the criterion for the moral judgment of good or evil.

In Igbo, it is the verbs attached to the word '*Amusu*' which clearly paints the picture of what is meant; what could be subjected to moral judgment. Obviously, we may not be fair to the phenomenon of *Amusu* as established, if we sweep it under the carpet of just one of its possibilities as is often done by writers on this subject. *Amusu* is properly categorized by the action word that goes with it at each instance; it is the action word which sets the pedestal for the moral judgment of either good or evil.

Ita Amusu

The words '*Ita amusu*' combine the verb '*Ita*' – to bite, chew, masticate, grind or crush; actions that has to do with the teeth – and '*Amusu*' – variegated principle, state and substance. *Ita Amusu* will literally mean biting (a victim through the medium of) *Amusu*. Ekwunife (2011) gave an insight into what this phenomenon could imply:

“Ita Amusu” could literally mean physical biting or chewing physically; it is a symbolic way of expressing a mystical experience of the activity of a witch/wizard, who sucks the ethereal blood of the victim mysteriously as one who chews things physically. (p. 27).

Ita Amusu is an idiomatic expression of bewitching which must be understood by those of the language as a life-diminishing activity. In the first place, biting is an action performed with the teeth and even in Igbo food culture items bitten are not food as such. *Nri* is food and the infinitive form of the verb for it is '*Iri*'. '*Ita*' as a mode of eating has to do with snacks and other food accompaniments. The Igbo do not regard any food item taken in this mode as satisfying of the need for food. Therefore even in the food culture and ethics, *Ita* leaves more to be desired.

Even when the Igbo know that the process of eating a particular food item is chewing or masticating they use the word '*Iri*' for it. For instance, one of the staple food items in the Igbo food culture is yam (*Ji*). In as much as it is chewed or masticated, the Igbo do not say *Ita ji* (when they do, it is a sarcastic way of expressing the unpleasant or unsatisfactory action of eating yam); they rather say *Iri ji*. *Ita* in the instance of *Amusu* merely means 'biting'. With *Amusu*, *Ita* immediately suggests sinister, menace and danger; predating and vampirism. The verb is transitive and requires an object. Therefore there is a vampire and the haunted; predator and prey; cannibal and victim. Obviously this is the very activity which the Igbo fear and with which *Amusu* is associated in everyday Igbo life. Therefore the scare is of *Ita Amusu* and not for *Amusu*; this distinction is important.

Ita Amusu as a witch-activity does not enhance life and in as much as it does not enhance life, is evil. It is motivated and intended to diminish the beauty of creation. This is not, however enough to say that *Amusu* is evil. In Igbo mystical and *Afa* parlance, *Ita Amusu* is the very practice of employing the vital force of *Uga chi* or *Aka-Atulukpa*; *ululu-Obi* in harming creation or creatures. *Ita Amusu* is the activity of the witch whereby, in Igbo belief-system, taking a lycanthropic form, it menaces its victims by inflicting wounds through which blood is sucked to replenish its vital energy and cause its victim harm (Arazu, 2003). The commonest form of evidence of *Ita Amusu* is cracks on the skin. There are cases of people getting up from sleep in the morning with cracks on their skin. Most Igbo people will immediately think that such a person was attacked by some witches who took the form of a rat, bat or something else to perform that action; albeit it could be something else most times, although once that narrative has occupied the Igbo psyche, no one cares seeking that possible something else.

E. Obiorah (personal communication, March 2, 2010) observed that the pertinent question about witchcraft is: "Does it exist?" He recalled one of his encounters with witchcraft cases in Ufuma, Orumba North Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria many years ago: A young girl was brought to him by her mother, who complained that her daughter is being menaced by some witches at night. They suck her blood; leaving evidences of their track-way into her veins like scratch marks on her skin which Obiorah saw too. But Obiorah also noticed that the girl in question bore over-grown and unkempt fingernails worsened by some dark substances (dirt) deposited inside them. Being a pastor; knowing too the conviction of this woman and her daughter; conscious of the mentality of the people, he hesitated to voice his suspicion. He rather gradually and systematically led them to the truth of the matter. He asked the mother to keep watch on her child through the night while the child slept so as to know when the witch that sucks her blood arrives and in what form it does. One night the woman caught her daughter (the purported victim of witchcraft menace) gashing herself with her over-grown fingernails. By morning, the marks on her body were exactly as those before. In this case, keeping her nails, improved personal hygiene and some little medical attention brought the witchcraft menace to a stop.

E. Ezenweke (personal communication, 28 October, 2010) also recalled similar instance when she was a teenager. She had gone to farm with her mother in a thistle-infested area where she was terribly injured by the prickly plant. She ran home and tried to wash the pricking effect off her body. In her desperation, she used sand as scrub and even that did not restore calm to her body. After her search for remedies all failed, she waited for her mother, who eventually took care of the situation, she got better and went to sleep. She was to bath the next morning when she had already forgotten the previous day's experience, then came the sharp pains and on closer looks the scratch-marks on her body like the typical blood-sucking witch's marks. She was panic-stricken and her alarm alerted everyone to another witch menace. Deliberations were already on as to how to go about the mystery when she recalled her crude sand bath in a bout of madness the previous day. In spite of that, it took her a lot to disabuse the minds of those around that it was not after all witchcraft menace.

These two instances when properly analyzed seem to fall in line with the verdict of Igwe (2004) about the basis of Fear, Ignorance, Poverty and Religion upon which witchcraft so-called is built. Nevertheless, whether witchcraft can be swept under the carpet of socio-economic; psycho-political structures remain to be said.

Iri Amụsu

This concept could be approached from either *Cult Dimension* or *Conventional Dimension*. From a cult dimension, it is that suggested by Arazu (2003) by which witchcraft is sharply distinguished from demon-possession. In this cult dimension *Iri Amụsu* will be a process of initiation into the cult of *Amụsu*. Arazu and Offiong (1991) averred that initiation into the witchcraft cult involves the eating of something they referred to as *Witchcraft Substance*. According to Arazu, this substance when swallowed, settles at the lower abdomen. He further explicates: "With the help of this substance they can engage in extrasensory activities. At the appropriate time in the night the person goes out especially through the top of the head – a case of astral travels" (p. 85).

Meanwhile Arazu (2003) did not give details of the nature of this substance. On the contrary, Evans-Pitchard (1937) before Arazu, had given a vivid picture of the witchcraft substance among the Azande. He averred that it is a "round, hairy ball with teeth". In turn, Offiong (1991) was also lucid on the presentation of the witchcraft 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." (p. 83). In all of these instances, the idea is that to be a witch is to be initiated into the cult of those who possess a kind of power or potential to tap natural energy and perform uncommon feats. *Iri Amụsu* in this cult sense is a means by which members are initiated who constitute the society of witches in their various covens. In contrast to this position, we had also earlier referred to Mbuy (1991)'s initiation into benevolent witchcraft.

One silent insinuation made by Arazu (2003) and Offiong (1991) is that this initiation is for diabolical reasons and witches so initiated are essentially evil. On the other hand Evans-Pitchard (1937) and Mbuy posited of the witches some kind of positive value. Either way, however, there is an initiation process which in Igbo is rendered *Iri Amụsu*. Among the Igbo, diabolical witchcraft or vampirism, even *Ogwu* of the harmful category is magical and can present and be presented in various forms. Informants on Igbo witchcraft did not pin down what the witchcraft substance looks like since witches of that kind are believed to be initiated into covens even far from their

geographical boundaries. In other words, one can be in Awka and be initiated into a coven at Calabar. In that case, substances and procedures will take the form of Efik/Ibibio witchcraft.

Among the Igbo, then, it is believed that the potency of a witch is determined by the influence, popularity and potentials of the coven to which he/she belongs; sometimes the farther and more obscure the coven, the more powerful. For instance if the Igbo knows that a particular witch belongs to a coven in Calabar, that witch is super, powerful and irredeemable. So it is also for *Qgwu* made from Ijebu Ode. This diversity of the Igbo in admitting of religio-mystico-spiritual varieties makes the study of Igbo religious culture both complex and interesting. However, the process of initiation –*Iri Amusu*– simply suggests that the eating of something is part of the rites of initiation into witchcraft.

Wiccaning, belongs to this level of initiation; it refers to the initiation rites in the religion of Wicca. Adherents of that religion are also known as witches. Wicca is the witches' religion, it requires diligence, attentiveness, patience, tolerance and carefulness to study it and not throwing a blanket judgment over the interpretation of their activities. However, in Wicca, there is no evidence of substance deposited in the lower abdomen and no eating within the initiation rites. *Iri Amusu*, given the ritual of swallowing the *Amusu* substance is an initiation into a cult; “*Iri*” being to eat which could translate “To swallow” in a colloquial sense. *Iri Amusu* means to eat or swallow *Amusu* by which one becomes *Nwa Amusu*.

Nevertheless, what is eaten is not that presented by Evens-Pitchard (1937) or Offiong (1991) namely “round, hairy ball with teeth” or the embodiment of “red, white, and black thread, along with needles and other ingredients”. What is, in fact, eaten, drunk or swallowed is normal human food or drink; anything at all. The substance, as it were, is magically conjured into the food or drink. It is only when the witch is going through the violence of denouncing the cult that the magical substance manifests itself as those described by Evans-Pitchard and Offiong. It must be noted that this exercise of eating is but the first stage in the initiation process. One of the informants from Awka who pleaded anonymous bragged that he could give the present researcher a certain herb which he may apply to his eyes for three days, after which, he will see himself attending the meeting of their coven at night. There he will decide whether or not to join the coven. That herb could as well be eaten.

In a conventional sense, on the other hand, *Iri Amusu* is an everyday word which refers to the quality of a person's knowledge or craft. Of such a person can be said: ‘*O riri Amusu* (He/she ate/swallowed *Amusu*). The idea conveyed by this phrase is that such a person is a wizard/witch. It is the verb ‘*Iri*’ which adequately conveys the meaning of *Amusu* as expertise. *O riri amusu n'igwu mmiri* will simply mean he/she is a wizard at swimming. This conventional sense has nothing to do with religion or cult, but a conventional way of depicting the expert that the person it depicts is.

Given these two ways of looking at *Iri Amusu*, we cannot immediately conclude that there is something evil about *Amusu*. Even in the cultic sense of the word, mere initiation does not at the same time mean evil rather it can only be said that there is a set of principles to which the initiates are affiliated, and which guides their activities as members. The other extent of the moral judgment of their actions depends on so many factors which this work is not meant to explore. However, it can be said that moral judgment should be guided by the principle of the purpose the being and

operations of these coven/cult of witches are meant to serve for the larger community and for themselves both as individuals and a society of persons.

Ịda Amusu

This concept is not commonly in everyday use but makes a lot of sense as far as initiation into the various cults of Igbo religious culture are concerned. We know of *Ịda Ogwu*, *Ịda Dibia*, *Ịda Agafu* and so forth. The verb ‘*Ịda*’ literally means ‘to fall’. *Ịda* is not a matter of slipping or accident; it is a conscious, deliberate and willful submission to the object of cult. *Ịda Amusu* will mean to fall into or for *Amusu*. Like *Iri Amusu*, *Ịda Amusu* is initiation into the cult of *Amusu*. *Iri Amusu* is a moment in *Ịda Amusu*. We were not able to get at any elaborate ritual of *Ịda Amusu* because the cult does not seem to be specialized as in the case of *Dibia*, *Ozo*, *Mmṛnwu* and so forth. Yet we were able to make the difference that *Iri Amusu* can be done even inadvertently while *Ịda Amusu* is a willful and deliberate act needing the consent of the would-be *Nwa Amusu*; it is a whole process in becoming a witch. In other words the would-be desires and is ambitious about *Amusu* before undertaking the process of *Ịda Amusu*, which includes *Iri Amusu*. Sometimes it appears that *Iri Amusu* could be even inadvertently done before the deliberate undertaking of *Ịda Amusu*. This is only one aspect of the idea of *Ịda Amusu*. In some Igbo dialects, *Ịda Amusu* can be a synonym to *Ịta Amusu* but in that sense *Ịda* will mean to compress in a manner of squeezing. However, in the context of this work, *Ịda* can only stand for “to fall” or “to be subdued” under the control or stipulations of *Amusu*; cult and practice.

Ịma Amusu

“*Ịma*” is the infinitive form of the verb root “*Ma*”. “*Ịma*” means to “know”; with *Amusu* it would literally be rendered “to know (the hidden things of) *Amusu*.” In Igbo, *Ịma Mmṛnwu* or *Ịba Mmṛnwu* is the process of initiation into the *Mmṛnwu* cult. It includes making the otherwise hidden knowledge of *Mmṛnwu* open to the initiate. This action is a mystagogy; a liberation from the shackles of ignorance and taking a step into knowledge which keeps advancing by practice and continued acquaintance with the effective components of that knowledge. *Ịma Amusu* is to be imbued with the gnoseological principle which enables the recipient to know the mysteries behind the operations of *Amusu*. Such recipient does not necessarily receive this knowledge in the manner of an initiate, but knows the techniques, antics and activities of *Amusu*. This knowledge can at best be employed to save oneself and others from the menace of *Amusu*. That knowledge will not be enough for one to operate as *Amusu*; to operate as such one needs to go through the process of *Ịda Amusu*.

From the fore-going, witchcraft is the craft of witches. *Amusu* becomes the mystical principle of a common spiritual humanity that could be developed through training; this training is same as harnessing and channeling a latent energy necessary upon everyone’s humanity. Following up on this is the use of that energy in the human order which can only be social and moral upon which can be made judgment in terms of evil or good.

Conclusion

Deploying western stereotypes in African studies has cost the loss of organically generated meaning in a great deal of African phenomenon. Foreign propagandist religions and presumptive

universalist philosophies have contributed to equipping the African student with a jaundiced perspective when undertaking such studies as this. For instance, an African Christian would want to maintain a perspective of things so as not to be labelled a heretic or unbeliever. He/she may not delve into phenomenon like this in such a way that he/she may be found guilty of meddling with it or stating facts to contradict an established Christian perspective. For all of these, a great deal of knowledge have been lost which make such studies as this problematic.

This study has shown that witchcraft is much more than the man-on-the-street knowledge can afford. The popular perspective of witchcraft found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam has shaped the most accessed knowledge of the phenomenon and has rendered it condemnable and negative. Most researchers coming from the background of these religions find it difficult to uncoil from already acquired impressions to encounter the matter itself. The work found that practices associated with witchcraft, like divination, sorcery, clairvoyance, necromancy, idolatry and so forth were also cultural practices of nations which do not practice the three monotheist religions and in more cases than one, these practices, distinct as they are, were rendered as synonymous to witchcraft. In as much as these practices were undeniable, it is curious why they were vilified and demonized. This makes it needful for a study on the history of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic Devil; its nature, characters and *raison d'être*. When these are explored, it must certainly pan-out that no deity, god or goddess would match what will be found if the religious practitioners in the cult of the deity were to give their own narrative.

Witchcraft survived in the West and is practiced by those of the Wicca religion revived in less than a century ago. The influence of the craft in politics, entertainment, sports and even technology is not difficult to see. *Amusu* among the Igbo, as a socio-religious phenomenon has gone extinct. The Igbo is left with the memory crafted of it by Christianity whereby managers of prayer houses use the witchcraft scare to garner members while some human experiences, otherwise explainable, in the absence of knowledge and skills for them, are swept away under the carpet of witchcraft which no one is ready to investigate. The scare and rejection of *Amusu*, albeit its association with the Devil profiles anyone who as much as inadvertently shows any sign of being a witch, and in as much as no one identifies as witch, it is the unverified narrative of it which remains.

This work concludes that witchcraft and *Amusu* are *not the same phenomenon*. While witchcraft represents a collection of different practices like divination, sorcery, necromancy, clairvoyance etc, even extending to all practices of ancient Mesopotamia and pre-Christian Europe, *Amusu* is power which could be deployed negatively or positively and is a microcosm of practices in Igbo religious culture.

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