



*The spot near an Iroko tree where Ukpong Nyong's body was abandoned

Alleged membership of witchcraft cult: 95-yr-old beaten to death, children dehumanised

BY TONY NYONG, UYO

CALM, indeed normal quiet community life, is yet to return to Ikpe Ikot Nkon, this once peaceful abode of the ancient cradle of the Ibibio. The scene was one of horror. Panic and confusion reigned everywhere and some people were reportedly seen parking their luggage and then waited to see what was to happen next, while those not ready to take chances immediately fled the village to seek refuge with their kinsmen elsewhere. There was pandemonium because a great tragedy had struck, leaving an aged man, accused of using wizardry to plague many with sicknesses and misfortunes, beaten to death by irate youths of the small community.

Not alien to catastrophes and commotion, some however maintained their calm, having witnessed worse scenarios in the perennial communal clashes that often claimed several lives and properties. For now, fate is believed to have played a fast one on the people in a way they hardly could have predicted. Otherwise what would have made Obong Udo Offiong Ekpenyong, Village Head of Ikpe Ikot Nkon, to cause the town crier to beat the village drum to invite all the villagers to assemble in the field of the village secondary school for the purpose of parading all the old men and women accused of being witches and wizards in the village.

Death, unknown to the children of Chief Ukpong Nyong, was lurking around their father, and if they had an inkling of it, chances are that they would have taken him out of the village

having tried to defend him at other times against the same allegations of bewitching some persons from two other members of their families. With this, Ikpe Ikot Nkon has acquired the notoriety of a place where unexpected things are happening and where children have continued to suffer debasement, apart from being victims of jungle justice after being branded wizards or witches. Despite deliberate and genuine efforts by the government of Godswill Akpabio to uphold the rights and dignity of children, they are daily subjected to the most dehumanizing conditions, maimed, burnt, starved to death, abandoned, sent to live in the bush, and exiled from the villages by their families and communities depending on the perceived degree of their culpability. Indeed it sounded like a tale of the unexpected when Vanguard Metro, VM, learnt that a 95-five-year old man and cocoa farmer, Ukpong Nyong was beaten to death by youths of Ikpe Ikot Nkon community after being suspected of being a wizard and infecting some children in the village with same sinister power.

The long journey to ascertain the story unfolded stunning details and



*Horror...Roasted hands of a man tortured for allegedly being a wizard

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horrible accounts of the suffering of children in the village since the commencement of the witches and wizards saga. The children themselves spoke with VM, but less confident at the prospects of surviving the next one week as some youths in the village who have constituted themselves to what they call *Uyo ata*, supposedly meaning men of valour, daily threaten and intimidate them to accept that they are initiates of the dreaded witchcraft cult, and thereafter ill-treat them. The Village Head of Ikpe Ikot Nkon, who is housing about seven of these children and feeding them, disclosed that several of the children have suffered untold hardship, and may starve to death, except government would provide succour.

How Ukpong Nyong was killed: According to Benjamin, third son of the deceased: "It was in January that a small boy, a relation of ours, said that my father told him to bring his mother and father to the witchcraft world. There was some money belonging to my father that was in my custody, about N50,000. And he now said I should give him the money to pay to the village council for them to traditionally investigate him, since he himself is a member of the council of chiefs. He

gave the village head and the traditional council N10,000, five tubers of yams, one goat, cola nuts and other items and said if upon investigation they find out that it was true, they should hand him over to the village deity to deal with him. But the village council did not do that.

"On October 8, 2011, that was a Saturday, by 10.00 a.m. some youths came to our compound and said they wanted my father. When I asked why, they said he should come before the entire village because he was accused of being a wizard. But I told them after they came the fourth time that as long as my eldest brother who is a senior police officer working in Calabar was not around, they should respect my father and they left. Not too long after, Chief Udo

went to the father in the church and other members of the family and told them to have patience, that when I return from a three-day camping in the church, I would take her to the hospital and would also pay half of the bill, and they all agreed. I left for the church but was surprised when my brother showed up at the camping ground to tell me what had happened.

I immediately rushed back to the village and then went to see the village head, who on enquiry said my father was brought before the village council and that if anything has happened to him we should blame other family members. It was later I was told my father was stripped naked, beaten to death and the body taken to the village square. We reported to the police who came the following day and took the corpse to the mortuary. Other elderly men accused of similar offence had all left the village, but my brother obeyed the village council and took my father there only for them to kill him. He was killed by some youths in the village, mostly miscreants who smoke Indian hemp and drink concoctions to fortify themselves against bullets.

Chieftaincy tussle:

On why the village head could mobilise youths to beat a fellow chief and member of the village council to death, Benjamin and Solomon told VM that there was a chieftaincy tussle in the village in 2006 and the father supported a rival contender to the current chief who was finally given the headship about three years ago, and that incensed by this the chief had embarked on vendetta. Their father, the eldest in the family and a member of the village council of chiefs of Nto Nya, same family with the village head, was also suspended from the village council pending when he would have been cleared of the accusations. They said until his tragic death, their father was the chairman of the Awak family; was very active, healthy, and still going to work in his farm before the unfortunate incident.

The village head: Chief Udo Offiong Ekpenyong, Village Head of Ikpe Ikot Nkon spoke on the fate of the children allegedly afflicted with witchcraft ailments, saying the prospects of their realising their dreams were completely bleak. "They have been rejected by their parents and guardians and left to wander all over the village. I have decided to keep some of these children in my compound and feed them with my money in case government should come forward to assist them. They are more than 16 as at the last count, and I told my council of chiefs to do something at least to support me for their upkeep. But as we speak, there is nothing in the council purse. I have nothing against any of the accused, except that when the complaints became too much I had to call the entire village to see how we can reason together for the sake of the children who are really suffering," he said.

Offiong Ekpenyong sent a member of the council who came with some youths of Awak family, who are also of the same family, and said I should come with my father. In deference to the order of the chief I told my father to dress up and then took him to where they were gathered and there he was asked if he was a wizard. My father then said he had given them money to traditionally investigate him and that whereas they have failed to do that, why should they ask him such a question.

Jehovah's Witness member

"Then suddenly one Aniekan Ekebem Awak jumped up and hit my father and when I rushed in to shield him they descended on me heavily. I somehow managed to escape as they would have killed me if I failed to do so. I then rushed to Ikot Ekpen where my immediate senior brother, a Jehovah Witness member, was participating in a camping programme and informed him of the development."

Solomon, second son speaks: Two days before I left for the camping, my brother, Benjamin, rushed to tell me that some people destroyed the door of our father's compound because a second person in the village had again accused my father of being a wizard and of being responsible for the ill-health of a young girl by name Nnewo, in the family. But from what we have gathered, the young girl was pregnant, had an abortion but was later taken to a church. I then