

Ukang: The Rituals of Crime Detection and Control in Annang Social Justice System

Anthonia M. Essien, Ph.D
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Uyo,
Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
eteyesma@yahoo.com
+234 (0)803-359-6961

Abstract

Crime is an integral part of human society; every society aspires to bring crime under control as a result so many methods have been devised by both traditional and modern societies to checkmate crime. This paper discusses the use of *Ukang* (ordeal) as the traditional and religious ritual used in uncovering, revealing and discovering hidden secrets and exposing criminals in Annang society of Nigeria. *Ukang* is believed to be one of the greatest instruments of crime detection and control in the traditional Annang society. Information gathered from our extensive field work, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and oral interviews conducted in the eight local government areas of Annang society, reveal that *Ukang* is very mysterious, often full of dreadful processes that cannot be scientifically proven; therefore, *Ukang* can be subjective. *Ukang*, in the traditional view of the people, work faster, cheaper and easier in the control, punishment and management of crimes due to the fact that it does not follow the bureaucratic process associated with modern legal systems, law enforcement and crime prevention. This paper recommends that *Ukang* should not be mystified but transparent and incorporated into the modern methods of crime control to enhance the people's sense of moral responsibility.

Keywords: Annang, religion, social control, crime, tradition, *ukang*

1. Introduction

The Annang people of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria like most African communities are very religious in every aspect of their culture. As a result of these religious inclinations, they tend to read and interpret their daily social interactions from the point of view of the involvement of the gods in their everyday life. Consequently, religious customs and rituals form a greater part of Annang people's culture. Through these customs and rituals the people are able to establish a relationship with the spirit world, (Antia 2005). It seems plausible to sustain that the Annang people right from the time of their ancestors had established a theocratic way of life in which their daily existence was ruled by rituals and customs with the chiefs and elders of the people acting as mediators between the gods and the people. In such a situation a system is created where the people interact freely within approved bounds influencing and complementing each other for the good of all. In such theocratic society the people also believe in God whom they think lives beyond the clouds (*Abasi Enyong* or *Abasi Ibom*) as supreme and the creator of the universe including the different gods, the ancestors, the spirits (*Abasi Isong*) who are regarded as subjects of the supreme God and in certain situations defenders of all other creatures (Esen 1988)

Within the theocratic society of the Annang people there are several cults used in governance, combating crimes and maintaining the general harmonious and peaceful co-existence within the different communities. Such cults include *Ekpe*, *Ekpo*, *Ekong*, *Idiong*, *Ukang*, *Mbiam* and *Iman*. Obviously according to Mbon (1994), crime has existed since the beginning of the human society and every community in the world has been affected by crime and violence in one way or the other.

The greatest instrument of crime control in the traditional Annang society is *Ukang* (trial by ordeal). *Ukang* is a traditional and religious ritual used in uncovering, revealing and discovering hidden secrets and exposing criminals such as thieves, murderers, sorcerers, adulterers and other criminals. *Ukang* is widely used in detecting crimes and it is believed that miscarriage of justice rarely occurred. In recent times *Ukang* has been used as a means of detecting crimes among the Annang people. However, Iheriohanna (1997) is of the opinion that it could be manipulated in certain circumstances to favour or disfavour the clients. It is against this background that this article tries to examine critically the use of *Ukang* as an instrument of crime detection in the traditional administration of justice in Annang society.

There are many types of *Ukang* among the Annang ethnic group. *Ukang ufiop aran* (ordeal of hot boiling oil), *Ukang nsen unen* (ordeal of egg), *Ukang ikpa unam* (ordeal of animal skin), *Ukang uyet enyin* (eye-washing ordeal), *Ukang ntuen ibok* (ordeal of the alligator pepper), *Ukang Okok* (bamboo ordeal), *Ukang akpe eyop* (ordeal of palm fruit fibers) and *Ukang ndam* (ordeal of raffia). *Ukang* is a direct appeal to the spiritual beings to show by miracle where the right lay. *Ukang* has religious sanction.

Ukang is an important instrument of crime control among the Annang people to keep to one order. This has been one form of social justice and crime control in the area from time immemorial. The basic principle here is that if a person is guilty, evil will befall him according to the words used in administering the *Ukang*. There is no doubt among the people of Annang that the traditional institution of *Ukang* has been an effective instrument of crime control, restoring trust, fidelity, establishing the truth or falsehood of what people say especially on disputed issues and doubtful circumstances (Ekong 2009).

2. Towards an Analysis of the Relevance of *Ukang* in Crime Control

Ukang is one form of traditional instrument of crime control in Annang land administered through the use of metaphysical or mystical powers to discover hidden secrets. *Ukang* is feared much in Annang locality and this fear has contributed immensely to crime control. Based on this statement, J. S. Mbiti supported the above explanation when he observed that:

The gods are the most reliable beings and also the powers that are capable of vindicating the just and expose as well as punish the wicked. As custodians of morality, justice and sincerity, the ancestors, divinities and other spiritual beings are invited to witness any social agreement between men and fellow man. The belief is that God or some other higher beings greater than man will punish the person who swears falsely or break the stipulations of the oath, agreement or statement (Mbiti 1969).

Ukang plays significant role in the control of crime in Annang land. However, this observation was in line with Antia's standpoint which noted that:

All those who committed the most serious crimes of adultery, rape, elopement, stealing, abortion, the profanation of the most sacred traditions, (the eating of new yams before the official celebration of the New Year festival) and murder were given adequate penalties. Unfortunately, all these crimes no matter how carefully manipulated, must be revealed and there was no time limit for their due penalties (Antia 2008).

In addition, *Ukang*, prevents wicked acts among the people because no matter how secret a particular crime is, it must be discovered and the defaulter or culprit would be brought to "book" or punished according to the laws of the land.

Furthermore, the fear of *Ukang* is the driving force in the maintenance of a high level of morality by doing what is right, good and moral and avoiding what is evil, wrong and bad. People fear being exposed through the instrumentality of *Ukang*. *Ukang*, therefore, is potent in social control. *Ukang* is an effective traditional instrument used by the people to discover the truth of a matter, discover hidden secrets and to cast away doubt with reference to the validity and reliability of a statement or accusation in any circumstances. However, according to Ekong (2009) because of the awe it creates in the minds of the people, many people in Annang land have shunned or avoided embarking on any criminal activity. It would appear that *Ukang* is usually used as the last resort when other avenues of crime detection have failed to achieve the desired result (Udo 1983).

According to Essien (2005), there are some other methods of problem solving which adherents of Annang indigenous religions would accept. But popular among these is the practice of *Ukang*. It is an institution which seeks to uncover hidden secrets and detect defaulters in the community. The *Ukang* specialists can "perform" some ordeals to unveil secrets or fish out culprits in a community or resolve difficult controversies in a community. Consequently, there are many types of ordeals in Annang land which explains how the Annang people attempt handling social problems through esoteric knowledge. The *Ukang* ordeals are very mysterious, often full of dreadful processes that cannot be scientifically proven. Essien therefore concludes that *Ukang* and many other ordeal methods in Annang society have their root in the people's religious worldview. Although still practiced to this day, their origin is lost in history; hence,

many people, educated and uneducated, rural or urban dwellers, still patronize the *ukang* specialists during moments of confounding experiences

3. The Institution of *Ukang* among the Annang People

All African societies including Annang society agree on the basic notions of right and wrong as part of their traditional ethics. In these societies, there exist laws that regulate behavior, ensure compliance and obedience to authorities, reward and punishment of people who commit one crime or the other. But there are variations on what constitutes crime in any given human society and as such crime could be said to be relative to a particular society. Since crime is an integral part of human society, every society aspires to bring crime under control and as a result so many methods have been devised by both traditional and modern societies to checkmate crime. However, one way of controlling crime in Annang traditional society is the use of *Ukang*.

Ukang is an instrument of crime detection and control which unveils secret crimes publicly, thus, compelling criminals to accept their guilt or what they had earlier denied. Commenting on *Ukang*, Udo (1983) points out that:

The Ibibio believed that a man could not tell lies and get away with crimes. According to them, an ordeal was a direct appeal to the Supreme God (Abasi Ibom), gods and ancestors to show by miracle, where the right lay.

What Udo said about the Ibibio concerning *Ukang* is similar to the situation in Annang land. However, among Annang people, *Ukang* is concerned with deciding a person's guilt or innocence in a matter in which the truth is hidden. The people consult *Ukang* to find the truth about disputed issues where the truth cannot be easily ascertain.

In the practice of the institution of *Ukang* in Annang land, if a person or a group of persons accused of an unjust or wicked act or crime denied the charge, and there was some doubt about the validity of the accusation, the accused would still be summoned to appear before Annang traditional court or council in the village. The accused person or group of persons would be asked to prove his or their innocence by undergoing an ordeal of *Ukang*. The performance of *Ukang* in Annang land usually creates periods of panic, anxiety and suspense for both the accused and the curious, suspecting and desperate community. Thus, the anxiety is greater for both the community and the accused. However, the result of the *Ukang* takes immediate effect before the very eyes of the community who are watching curiously to know the decision of the *Ukang*. Among the Annang people *Ukang* is administered on an accused person or persons when other instruments of crime detection have failed and *Ukang* becomes the last resort. Anyone found guilty through *Ukang* is made to face public scorn, ridicule, disgrace and stigmatization in addition to facing the official punishment prescribed by the *Ukang* administrator or priest (Ukong 2006).

4. The Different Methods of Administering *Ukang* among the Annang People

On the administration of *Ukang* which consists of various types depending on the one preferred by the community, the *Ukang* administrator says a special prayer, invoking the powers of the gods of justice, truth and morality in Annang land. Among the things he says in the prayer and invocation is that the gods and spirits thus invoked should prove before the waiting and anxious community the innocence or guilt of the accused about to be tried. The *Ukang* administrator then ends the prayer and invocation by pouring the traditional libation and

proceeding to the administration of the desired type of *Ukang*. The several types of *Ukang* that exist as an instrument traditionally employed to control crime in Annang society are as follows:

Ukang ufiop Aran (Ordeal of hot boiling Oil)

The accused person is brought out to stand before the curious and anxious community (Richard 1994). According to F.M. Mbon, the accused is asked to repeat this prayer:

If I am guilty of this thing I am being accused of; if I have told a lie to this noble community; let this boiling oil burn my hand. But if I am not guilty, and if I have told the truth, may nothing happen to my hand (Mbon 1994)

After the prayer, the accused dips his right hand into the pot of boiling oil. If he had told the truth and was not guilty, truly nothing would happen to his hand. But if he had lied to the community, every inch of the part of his hand that touched the boiling oil is burnt and he will carry the scar for the rest of his life as a sign of being guilty of a crime. Meanwhile, within few weeks, the person thus “caught” and exposed by the *Ukang* becomes pale, and parts of his body (usually the legs, stomach and face) become swollen. Invariably, the person dies shortly thereafter. It therefore means that in Annang society, *Ukang* has a religious sanction and is still effective as a means of securing justice as well as a deterrent against criminal tendencies and false accusation even in this contemporary period where science is believed to be the answer to most human problem. Before any *Ukang* was given to an accused person, his parents, and immediate relations had to be invited. The *Ukang ufiop aran* can work in another way. The *Ukang* administrator places hot oil in a big pot and asked the accused to put his hands into it while it is still boiling. If after three days blisters were seen on his hands, the accused was declared guilty, but if not, he was innocent. The people believe that the gods and ancestors would intervene and cause the presence or absence of the blisters. In consequence, according to Udo (1983) the decision was final and no human being could rescind it

Ukang Ntuenibok (Ordeal of Alligator Pepper)

In this ordeal, the *Ukang* administrator uses the seeds of the alligator pepper (also known as “grains of paradise”, (*Afromomum meleguete*) and ritually “command” them to get into the eyes of the guilty in a gathering of suspects. Since the pepper causes excruciating pain when it comes in contact with the human eyes, if the procedure of *ukang* is successful and one of the suspects begins to scream in agony, then he/she is held as the culprit (Anyanwu 2004).

Ukang Okok (Bamboo Ordeal)

This procedure according to A.M. Essien involves the use of a bamboo cut from special palm tree (*elaesis guineensis*) called *ifiaku*. This bamboo is ritually treated with a cock is tied at one of its ends and carried by seven strong, young men. After chanting some incantations, the men carrying the bamboo start running uncontrollably, spiritually directed and empowered through the ritual incantation till they arrive at the house of the culprit of the act the community is attempting to uncover. This ordeal is also employed to discover witches, wizards, sorcerers in the community.

Ukang Akpe-Ayop (Ordeal of the Palm Fruit Fibers)

In this *ukang* the suspects must all have some bunches of the fibers of palm fruit in their hands while kneeling down before the *Ukang* administrator. After the invocation and incantation, it is believed that the bundle of fibers would stick to the neck of the culprit, thereby squeezing and choking the culprit, and until he or she admits the guilt, he may be choked to death by mysterious forces, which possessed the fibers. It is only at that point of admission of the guilt that the fibers would drop off from his or her neck (Okon 2010).

Ukang Ndam (Ordeal of Raffia Palm)

According to this ordeal, some strands of raffia are placed in a basin of water and the suspects are asked to stir the water in turn. The strands of raffia mysteriously coil around the hands of the culprit. The innocent people will stir the water without any effect

Ukang Nsen Unen (Egg ordeal)

In the Annang traditional society, the suspect would be asked to break an egg which has been magically treated by the *ukang* administrator. In this practice, if the egg broke, the accused was guilty, but if the egg failed to break then he or she is declared innocent of the crime accused of. The people have used this traditional instrument to reduce the incidence of crime of all sorts because of the awe it creates and the fear of being publicly disgraced (Umana 2010).

Ukang Ikpa Unam (animal skin ordeal)

In this ordeal the accused person is directed to sit on a leather mat which had been prepared by the ordeal administrator. As the accused sits on the leather mat, the *ukang* administrator makes incantations: *if the accused is guilty, the mat stick to his or her buttocks, but if innocent, let the mat not stick to the buttocks*. Here again, what happens is regarded as a direct answer from the unseen and no one could reverse the judgment which became final (Udoma 2010).

Ukang Uyet Enyin (Ordeal of washing the eyes)

The items used in this ordeal include: clean water in a white basin, three traditional leaves known as *ofuo* leaves, and three arrows. The *Ukang* administrator makes a circle with his right foot on the ground, places the basin with its contents in the circle and asked the accused to squat by the plate and face the sun. He or she is ordered to close the eyes tightly. The *ukang* administrator, standing behind, conjured and rubbed the person's eyes with the contents of the basin seven times. If the accused was innocent, it was believed he or she will be able to open his eyes at the end of the seventh round but not, the person is declared guilty of the crime. The result of this *Ukang* is believed to be from the gods and the ancestors whom the people believe have the final decision in the matter (Akpan 2010).

5. Analysis of *Ukang* as a Means of Crime Control in the Annang Social Justice System

The socio-religious relevance of *Ukang* as an instrument of crime control in Annang land is an integral part of the people's culture and reflects the value of social justice. *Ukang* as part of traditional instrument of crime control is an aspect of the custom and belief of the people which regulates the conduct and morals of Annang people. It provides the norms and standards of behaviour for the people and checks criminal activities on the part of the people and the rulers as they guaranteed the existence and enforcement of the traditional law, morality and ethics. The fear and belief in *Ukang* has helped the people to maintain high moral standard and strengthened cordial relationship between God (Supreme Being, *Abasi Ibom*) and man as well as between humans. Therefore, with the practice of *Ukang*, people in Annang are deterred from committing crimes in the community because of the fear of supernatural punishment. *Ukang* provides checks and balances which regulates and put the Annang community on a steady economic, political, social, cultural and religious balance responsible for stability and meaningful government (Umanah 2010). The mere mentioning of the word *Ukang* automatically called the people to order and direct their actions. *Ukang* as a traditional instrument of crime control is an effective means of securing social justice and serves as a deterrent against social injustice, criminal tendencies and false accusations that are prevalent in contemporary period. The use of *Ukang* serves as a social and religious sanction and therefore recognizes the belief in ancestral spirits and many other divinities in Annang traditional religion which help in detecting criminals,

restoring honesty, morality and justice as opposed to injustice and immorality. The application of *Ukang* according to Mbon (1994) helps the Annang people to enforce and maintain order, peace and ensure conformity to social norms of the people.

The use of *Ukang* as an instrument of crime control works faster, cheaper and easier in crime detection, control, punishment and management of crimes due to the fact that it does not follow the bureaucratic processes associated with modern legal systems, law enforcement and crime prevention. *Ukang* emphasizes the effectiveness of traditional religion of Annang as a reliable instrument of crime control and recognizes traditional means of social justice (Essien 2005).

The use of *Ukang* in crime control in Annang reduced the increasing number of miscarriage of justice through the use of modern methods of crime control. As a result, *Ukang* tends to shape and reshape traditional concepts of human character because the character of a man is supreme in human relations (Monday 2010). This is because it is essentially the character of a man that God and the divinities who witnessed the administration of *Ukang*, as impartial judges look at. Here, wickedness and social injustice, immorality and dishonesty are vehemently condemned and in their place justice, honesty, integrity and fairness are emphasized. *Ukang* helps to restructure man's conscience. The people strongly believed that moral values are not invented by human beings, but are the offspring of religion. Thus, according to Ntuen (1993) people are expected to use their conscience to believe in a morally good way in order to avoid the wrath of God, divinities and the ancestors.¹

As impartial judge, God's judgment is sure and inescapable. Some of the divinities who are in charge of *Ukang* represent the wrath of the gods and for this reason man avoid acts capable of bringing punishment from the supernatural beings. This belief drastically reduced crime in Annang community to a minimal level (Ekong 2010).

6. Conclusion

This study has focused on the use of *Ukang* in crime control in Annang society. It is important to note that crime is a social problem that is difficult to stop as far as human beings exists. Hardly, does any society exist without any form of moral order and restraints. Due to the prevalent rate of crime and other social ills such as witchcrafts, stealing, murder, dishonesty, falsehood and other secret crimes, and the inability for the modern system of law enforcement to combat crime, the people develop their traditional religious instruments to combat crime and address social issues even if imperfectly. One of these traditional instruments is the *Ukang* institution.

Consequently, Essien (2005) in confirmation of the place of religion in social control points out that religion is a powerful social institution that purports to establish a set relationship between the supra-human world and human beings. It deals with explanations about life and living, coping with existential problems and adapting to environmental circumstances. There are hardly aspects of human life which are immune from religious influence directly or indirectly. The pervasiveness of religion, its deep rootedness in human consciousness and its formidable presence, vitality and expansiveness in human activities make it an immense resource.

The *Ukang* described and examined in this study is still very effective as a traditional instrument of crime control in Annang as well as serving as a deterrent against criminal tendencies and false accusations. There is no doubt from the findings of the study that the institution of *Ukang* has been an effective means of crime control due to the fear of supernatural sanctions, social stigmatization, public disgrace, punishment from the gods and ancestors if found guilty. It has created a morally sound community within the Annang land in its ability to

help combat crime, maintain good human relationships, fairness, and fidelity in establishing the truth or falsehood in doubtful and disputed matters.

The problem of crime in Annang has exerted great impact on individuals and society financially, socially, legally, economically, morally and psychologically. There is evidence of the problem and impacts of crime in Annang as we can infer from this article. This article has pointed out that there is a significant role played by *Ukang* as it relates to positive effects in crime control Annang society. It is worthy to state that *Ukang* has faced some challenges and resistance under the influence of Christianity, western education and modernity. Christianity has had a lot of influence on the use of *Ukang* as an instrument of crime control in Annang. Although adherents of Christianity often undermined the authority, verdict and power of *Ukang* and describe it as pagan, savage, primitive, fetish and heathen, the people still practice it as their socio-religious instrument in curbing crime. Offiong (1982) was right in his observations that some Christians in Annang society do disregard anything that has to do with *Ukang*.

Western education and modernity became a veritable social factor disrupting many aspects of traditional institutions in Annang charged with the sole responsibility of controlling crime through *Ukang*. It also condemned traditional method of crime control embedded in *Ukang* and recommended that modern legal/judicial institution such as the court; police etc. should be used in crime control. The existence of police and courts has weakened the power vested in *Ukang* but the people still use it as a quick measure in uncovering secrete criminal acts. Also, western education and modernity undermined the belief in ancestors, divinities and spirits which most effectively control the people's tendency to commit crimes for the fear of supernatural sanctions and punishments. Furthermore, compared to their impact in pre-modern Annang, much of the society's sacred traditional institutions and philosophy have change as a result of the encounter with Western cultural and Christian values. Yet, a lot in these traditional institutions and philosophy have continued to influence the life style and world views of contemporary Annang people. Therefore, in the quest for socio-cultural and economic development, viable conducive society, the Annang people could take advantage of, and exploit the positive values still contained in her traditional institutions and philosophy, particularly *Ukang* (Walter 2005).

Finally, *Ukang* as an instrument of crime control in Annang society can be freed from subjectivity by demystifying it and making the processes of administration transparent and understood by all. If it is properly harnessed and revitalized, it can be incorporated into the modern methods of crime control could enhance the people's sense of moral responsibility.

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Bioprofile

Anthonia M. Essien, holds a Ph.D, (Sociology of Religion). A Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. I was educated in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. I have published articles in learned journals in Nigeria and abroad.