



**TRADITIONAL CONCOCTED OATH (*MBIAM*) AND ITS POTENCY IN
MAINTAINING LAW AND ORDER IN ANNANG TRADITIONAL SOCIETY OF AKWA
IBOM STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The study examines the potency of Traditional Concocted Oath (Mbiam) in Annang society, investigating its cultural, social, and legal implications. The *mbiam* involves an intricate ritual process, including spiritual invocation and communal witness. This traditional oath, which serves as a means of maintaining law and order in Annang land, has faced challenges associated with integrating it with modern law enforcement strategies due to issues such as cultural shifts, legitimacy concerns, and the potential abuse. Utilising ethnographic data and conducting interviews with community members, the study assesses the perceived effectiveness of *mbiam* in contemporary Annang society. The study thoroughly explores the historical origins and development of *mbiam* and its role in upholding social order, settling disputes, and reinforcing communal norms. Furthermore, it explores the ethical and legal implications of administering such oaths in the contemporary context. The study adopted primary and secondary methods of data gathering with a multifaceted approach in historical reconstruction. The primary sources include oral interviews, while the secondary sources are books, journal articles, newspapers, and magazine publications. The findings shedded light on enduring cultural practices and the traditional justice system within the Annang community, offering insights into the complexities of belief systems and social unity in traditional African societies. The study recommends a collaboration with traditional institutions to complement modern law enforcement efforts, particularly in rural areas where traditional methods are more prevalent, and to establish guidelines to prevent the abuse of traditional oath-taking and ensure the usage is fair, transparent, and respectful of human rights.

Keywords: Concocted Oath (Mbiam), Potency, Law, Order, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria



Introduction

The efficacy of mbiam, a traditional mixture derived from vows, in upholding law and order within Annang society, is a noteworthy topic. Annang, recognised for its profound cultural legacy, has employed mbiam as a crucial component of its social structure. Due to the lack of a more suitable term, Mbiam is frequently referred to as “juju,” a term defined by the Lexicon Webster dictionary as follows: Among the indigenous tribes of West Africa, certain artefacts are revered superstitiously and utilised as fetishes or amulets; the magical power is ascribed to these objects. It also characterises 'fetish' as any object perceived to possess enigmatic powers. Mbiam seems to transcend the concepts of 'juju,' 'charm,' 'fetish,' or simple objecthood. It may be a deity regarded by its devotees as the most potent god for both benevolent and malevolent purposes. It may be more fitting, in the absence of sustainable vocabulary, to designate Mbiam as a deity (Antonia, 2016). The study contextualises the historical relevance and function of mbiam in promoting communal order throughout the designated period. Analysing the progression of this traditional practice offers significant insights into the mechanisms of upholding law and order within Annang society. Within the context of the dynamic Annang culture, the utilisation of mbiam has been profoundly connected to the community's values and governance framework.

Traditionally, Annang culture has depended on indigenous methods to uphold social cohesion and address disputes. Clearly, the mbiam (custom-fabricated oath) functioned as a demi-god for the populace. It is an entity of veracity. Mbiam is thought to possess the ability to discern good from wrong. Its methods of operation instilled not only terror but also harmony among people. Mbiam, a mixture originating from oaths in Annang culture, is thought to have mystical attributes. Its application in upholding law and order is grounded in conventional ideas and the communal understanding of justice. Over the years, the preparation and application of mbiam have become a ritualised process, symbolising the community's commitment to upholding its unique cultural identity. The study investigates how mbiam remained relevant in addressing conflicts, ensuring compliance with communal norms, and contributing to the overall stability of the community, even as Annang society navigates the challenges of modernisation within the aforementioned period. The dynamics of its application, the role of community leaders, and the



perceptions of the populace toward this traditional practice are the central themes, shedding light on the intricate relationship between tradition and the maintenance of law and order in Annang society.

The Annang Traditional Society

The Annang Cultural Community Annang is one of the three tribes of Akwa Ibom State, alongside Ibibio and Oron. They are located in the northwestern region of the state. The word Annang is said to have a cosmological origin derived from "anaan," signifying expanse. The Annang people perceive themselves within an expansive universe in which they must contend for existence. In their fight for survival, they demonstrate a shared sense of skill, bravery, and tenacity. Tenacity and bravery characterise the essence of an Annang individual. This is seen in certain phrases and names that closely resemble "Annang." Among these expressions are: "inaanga," denoting an individual exhibiting hyper-courage; "enang," signifying cow; "annanga," referring to tug of war; and "innang," representing the number four, which embodies balance and equilibrium (Edet, 1998). The name Annang appears to be a fusion of two distinct names. Nevertheless, the term encompasses two fundamental elements: expansiveness and bravery. This is corroborated by the words of the ancestors, "agwo annang ade agwo uko" (the Annang individual embodies courage). The Annang individual navigates the vastness of the universe with courage. The Annang people trace their lineage to Bantu warriors and Zulu hunters from Central Africa. They posited that the migration from Central Africa to Cameroon occurred in the 3rd century B.C., seeing that the Annang people's existence has been characterized by centuries of battle for survival against wildlife and nature. The family unit, communal spirit, and social connections are exceptionally robust. The communal disposition prevalent among the Annang exemplifies a characteristic form of amicability and trust. This trust is reinforced by the fear of deities and ancestral spirits, who would readily punish those attempting to undermine any member of the tribe. The Annang people possess distinctive cultural institutions, including Abang, Ekid, Ekpo, Ekoong, Abiakpo, Utu Ekpe, Ataama, Asian Ubaikpa, and Asian Akananwan, among others. The Annang society is characterized by patriarchy. Leadership at the familial, ancestral, communal, or clan level continues to be the exclusive domain of men. In all these aspects, Annang women are not entirely subordinate to men.



They serve as partners and leaders in several facets of the Annang tradition, including roles as female head priests, known as "abia idiong," in the idiong cult, or as healers within the healing cult. There are no conventional cultural impediments hindering women from achieving high-ranking posts. The Annang notion of community refers to a neighbourhood where all individuals are acquainted with one another, characterised by a fundamental group relationship in which members are consistently and completely engaged in communal life. The robustness and resilience of the community are frequently dictated by the connections among its members. The significance of these relationships necessitates the resolution of disagreements as a crucial duty to restore any contentious relationship that may disrupt societal and personal harmony (Ekong, 2001).

Economically, power and riches in the Annang community are measured by the number of farmlands, plantations, barns of yams, number of domestic animals, and dependents. The early economy of the Annang people was based on barter trade. However, their economic growth did not occur in isolation from the rest of the world, as they had profitable economic relations with their neighbours. Economic activities also existed between the Annang people and the Europeans, where goods like clothes, beads, arms, copper, cowries, etc., were brought in and traded for commodities like pepper and slaves. During the 18th century, the shift to the production of palm oil saw a significant increase in investment, manpower, and resources being devoted to the acquisition, transportation, and storage of these valuable resources. The use of palm oil was not limited to just commercial purposes, as it was also an integral part of the local culture and traditional healing practices. The *afiaku* species of palm oil was particularly prized for its medicinal properties and was used for healing and consecration. Unique traditional methods were developed for the collection, preparation, and processing of this special type of oil palm.

Palm wine tapping is an old-age occupation that has been practiced for generations in the Annang society. It is a lucrative occupation that is usually undertaken by men, and it involves the extraction of sap from the palm tree. This process involves cutting the spadix of the palm tree to allow the sap to flow out into a container. Despite the advent of modern technology and the availability of other alcoholic beverages, palm wine tapping remains a significant occupation among the Annang people. It is a way of preserving the cultural heritage of the region and providing a means of livelihood for the local people. The Annang people are also producers of



pottery that was in high demand by their neighbours. They were also involved in wood carving as well as other forms of art and sculpture for grave monuments and other decorative figures. Raffia craft is also a mainstay in the Annang society, with Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area recognized and otherwise called “raffia city”. Iron smiting also thrives in Essien Udim and Ikot Ekpene Local Government Areas, where brass designers turn out ornamental swords, ceremonial staffs, and candle stands. Other metal works include metal boxes, pans, pots, hoes and designed railings.

In Annang society, the political structure originates from the family (ubon) or the household (ufok). The family consists of the father, wife (or spouses), and children. The father or spouse serves as the conventional head of the household. The ufok merges with other ufok heads (family heads) sharing blood affinity to constitute the ekpuk (extended family). Multiple ekpuk with familial ties amalgamate to become a community referred to as Idung. Multiple idung amalgamate to become a clan known as Obio. Numerous obio constitute the local government territory. The Annang had instituted a governance and administrative structure even before the arrival of British colonial authorities in the 18th century. The Annang society functioned as a unified entity under chieftaincy governance. Governance is conducted by senior males who serve as the legislative body, referred to as Afe isong (village chief and clan chief), who functions as the head and top executive, although they lack authority beyond that of the Afe isong. Authority was consolidated within the village council. The village council served as the executive, legislative, and judicial authority. Matters about the village were adjudicated by the village council, and inter-village issues were sent to the superior authority, the clan. The clan leader, known as Akuku Ikpa Isong, was selected from the village heads (mbong idung) by the mbong idung. They formed the afe nkuku and were collectively referred to as nkuku. The dominant political entity in Annang territory is the Afe Annang. The Afe Annang is a traditional political assembly where delegates from many clans convene to discuss matters of Annang society. Their meetings occur in the Afe Annang headquarters (Annang Square), overseen by the Itai Annang (Annang pillar), the paramount leader of Annang territory. Afe Annang was a political construct designed for traditional, social, legal, and political functions



An Overview of the Traditional Concocted Oath, *mbiam*

Every society or community faces the task of getting individuals or groups to adhere to the normative behaviours and standards of any group they belong. *Mbiam* is a magical, potent object traditionally used in swearing oaths, and fortifying one's property, causing sickness to or killing a person who oppresses. It is also seen as a spirit which goes on errand for traditional people, especially in difficult times. *Mbiam* is a traditional oath-like concoction that has been in existence among the Annang people for as long as their history goes. It is believed to possess semi-godly powers and is highly revered by the people. *Mbiam* is a powerful force that can either kill its owner or custodian or bring harm to anyone who crosses its path. Its actions and ways are shrouded in mystery and fear, making it a dreaded entity among the people (Enobong, 2022). However, the fear it instils in people has a positive impact, as it promotes honesty and encourages everyone to speak the truth at all times. *Mbiam's* name is often invoked in times of conflict or to promote peace and harmony among the people. People swore on *mbiam*, also known as *juju*, which was a significant social control tool. Belief in the power of *Mbiam* was more important to the old system's success.

Before the spread of Christianity, *Mbiam* was widely accepted by everyone. To this extent, bribing judges and preventing justice were extremely uncommon because, in addition to asking the accused to affirm his innocence, family members were asked to swear in situations where there was any doubt that the punishment meted out by *Mbiam* might apply to the entire family. When the family realized that *Mbiam* would kill them as well, they typically chose to proclaim the accused guilty and pay the fee or fines imposed on the accused after swearing to *Mbiam*.

In most cases, the family preferred to declare the accused guilty and pay the fine or fines imposed on the accused, on swearing to *Mbiam* when they saw that *Mbiam* would kill them too.

The most powerful *Mbiam* are obtained or derived from the shrines of the most powerful *Ndem* (marine deity). Most of these powerful *ndems* are believed to inhabit springs, rivers, and lakes, but they could also have their abodes in shrines elsewhere. For *Mbiam*, the priest or custodian obtains some materials of one form or another, like mud, feathers, and so on, from the shrine of the gods and uses these materials in the form of a concoction according to his fantasy to



form *Mbiam*. It is thought that there are three different kinds of *Mbiam*: liquid, powdered, and ajei (young palm fronds). The outcome is regarded as spiritually manifested even if they may have physical representation (Ephraim & Iniobong, 2013). *Mbiam* is useful for a number of reasons, including determining an accused person's guilt or innocence, preventing people from violating their word, and acting as an injunction. *Mbiam* is still utilized by several persons in the twenty-first century; in addition to traditional leaders, politicians also use it to control their followers. An accused individual may be required to swear before the shrine of a certain deity said to be strong enough to instantaneously damage criminals; nevertheless, *Mbiam* is not always portable or transferable. It is thought that at specific times, the deity appears in one form or another. By blinding the adversaries, it may defend the village. Usually kept in a shed, *Mbiam* occasionally receives sacrifices from its priest or caretaker. The priest can suffer some sort of harm if he violates *Mbiam*'s regulations. Some forms of *Mbiam*, such as *Mbiam nko*, prohibited people from consuming any food that was stored in a 7-4-7 environment overnight. A tiny bit of the *Mbiam* (if it was liquid) was put in a cup, calabash, or on the ground, and the accused drank it after being given the confession they had made in front of the *Mbiam*. The general belief in *Mbiam*'s potency stems from the fact that the accused were exonerated of the charge after consuming it without experiencing any negative effects. Consequently, prior to taking the oath, the accused were thoroughly interrogated by close relatives and friends and urged to confess if they were guilty. This interrogation was especially necessary when the accuser demanded that the accused also ask the *Mbiam* to kill other members of their family. *Mbiam* is not only taken orally during swearing. Generally, a pregnant woman does not swallow *Mbiam* for fear it could harm the unborn child; rather, it is sprinkled on her toes or her forehead.

To make a formal application to *Mbiam*, the person who is applying does so openly in the presence of the villagers. These could be rulers, elders, youths, and any other interested person. These people stand as witnesses to its application. This is done so that the purpose for which it is applied will not be diverted by evil utterances that can harm the innocence or other people in society, since the heart of man is desperately wicked. Sometimes, for *Mbiam* to be applied, depending on the type and nature of the *Mbiam* or crime, the accused is made to stand naked (as he was born) to swear the oath for it to be effective. *Mbiam* acts strictly and in accordance with



what it has been instructed to do. A person who used it for protection and length of life, when he or she is old enough to die, if the *Mbiam* is not removed, the person will continue to live and may be on his or her deathbed for a long time. This is because the *Mbiam* is still active. This can make the person live a miserable life, at times swollen and smelling (Ephraim, 2013). This is why it is not safe to use it for personal protection.

A person who swears falsely to *Mbiam* suffers terribly from its effect; sometimes the person swells and dies later. This can take up to six months or a year, unless he confesses. If a person confesses, certain rituals are done, and the *Mbiam* will be removed. If the person who went to *Mbiam* does not die within the stipulated period of time given, the person is said to be innocent and can hold a feast to celebrate his innocence.

Composition and Preparation of *Mbiam*

Mbiam is a fascinating cultural practice that has been used for generations in various African communities. It is a unique form of expression that involves the use of various materials and objects to convey strong emotions. *Mbiam* is a complex and multifaceted practice that allows individuals to express themselves in a culturally significant way. The materials and objects used in *Mbiam* are incredibly diverse and can include natural elements like sand, grass, and leaves, as well as everyday items like clothing and animals. The use of such a wide range of materials and objects, some of which are animals, pieces of clothing, sand, saliva, leaves, grasses, waste, and many other items, is very significant. It is important to keep in mind that *Mbiam* is often associated with swearing by names of dangerous deities who are believed to have the power to punish those who swear falsely (Michael, 2019). Additionally, *Mbiam* can take on various forms, such as powder or strange-looking concoction liquids stored in small earthen pots or calabashes.

The corpse of a person could also be used as *Mbiam*. This happens mainly if the cause of the person's death is suspected to be unnatural; therefore, there is a need to unveil the truth. The road can also be a form of *Mbiam*, where the accused is asked to swear that if guilty, he or she should die as a result of a road accident. *Mbiam* could also come in the form of *ajei* (young palm fronds) used as a traditional injunction placed on any item or property where no one is expected to be or make use of until the dispute surrounding it is resolved. The dead bodies or corpses of the



Mbiam victims were sometimes forbidden to be buried. Rather, they were put together in a pit at the *Mbiam* shrine. These bodily remains of victims were also used as *Mbiam*.

The ritual was usually prepared by a traditional medicine man known as *Abia Ibok*, who would call upon one or more dangerous deities to bear witness to the proceedings. One of the key elements of the ritual was the digging of a pit, known as *ube*, which was used to hold a mixture of palm wine and local gin. The pit was also used to mix the blood of a slaughtered goat, which was then scooped and given to the oath-taker to drink. As the oath-taker drank from the pit, a young palm frond known as *ajei* was placed on their head. All these actions and items were highly symbolic, representing the conjunction of the earth, sky, and the world. The pit symbolized the earth, while the area on the oath-taker's head represented the sky. The mixture of palm wine, local gin, and goat blood represented the world, bringing together various elements to bear witness to the truth spoken by the oath-taker. Overall, the ritual was a powerful invocation of *Mbiam*, the god of justice, and was believed to ensure fairness and truthfulness in legal proceedings.

The Role of *Mbiam* in Maintaining Law and Order in Annang Traditional Society

The traditional belief system of *Mbiam* holds significant importance within the cultural practices of the Annang people. It serves as a versatile tool for upholding law and order, addressing societal issues, and regulating moral conduct. In particular, *Mbiam* plays a pivotal role in dealing with concerns related to witchcraft, death, deception, theft, and various other transgressions. This belief system is intricately intertwined with the spiritual and judicial aspects of the community, functioning to ensure social cohesion and justice. *Mbiam* served as a fundamental instrument of justice and social control within the Annang society. In its strictest sense, anything that one swears by could be categorized as *mbiam* (Udonta, 2014). The belief system played a vital role in maintaining law and order not only within the Annang society but also in other communities and tribes across Akwa Ibom State. The existence of *Mbiam* instilled a sense of fear, dissuading individuals from engaging in any form of deviant behaviour within the society.

Mbiam is a traditional ritual used for the protection of individuals from harm, including protection from witchcraft and spiritual attacks. This ritual is believed to ensure or achieve a long and healthy life for the person performing it. Also, members of the community and even family



members would sometimes undergo *Mbiam* rituals to protect themselves from witchcraft or to provide additional spiritual strength and protection to those who were suspected of being involved in witchcraft. *Mbiam* holds a significant role in mitigating conflicts and preventing deceit within the Annang society. It is often called upon to establish the truth in cases of deception, where the accused must swear an oath or participate in a ritual to demonstrate their honesty. The belief that falsehoods under *Mbiam* will result in severe consequences serves as a deterrent, promoting truthfulness and dissuading individuals from engaging in deceitful behaviour. One of the most prevalent uses of *Mbiam* is in matters related to theft.

The fear of supernatural retribution serves as a deterrent against theft, as the community believes that *Mbiam* has the power to bring misfortune or illness upon thieves (Uwem, 2017). In instances of theft, *Mbiam* is employed to identify the perpetrators and facilitate the return of stolen goods. Culprits may also partake in a cleansing ritual to restore harmony and rectify their actions. Some individuals also utilize *Mbiam* symbols to warn others against trespassing on their property. Furthermore, in the resolution of disputes, *Mbiam* rituals provide a fair and just means of settling conflicts. The spiritual authority of *Mbiam* commands respect from all members of the society, leading to the widespread acceptance and binding nature of its judgments. This reverence for *Mbiam*'s authority reduces the prevalence of bribery and miscarriages of justice, giving hope to the common people for impartial and just outcomes

Mbiam and the Annang Traditional Law and Order

In traditional Annang society, the use of *Mbiam* as a tool for social control and maintenance of law and order has had a significant impact on the community's dynamics and relationship with other groups. *Mbiam* serves to promote moral guidance by specifying particular behaviours that are encouraged and others that are prohibited. This helps to establish a framework for ethical conduct and fosters a sense of responsibility by delineating what is considered right and wrong. The underlying principle of *Mbiam* is to cultivate a sense of mutual understanding and collaboration among individuals within a community. This philosophy encourages a shared commitment to upholding harmony and structure, thereby emphasizing the concept of collective accountability for preserving tranquility and organization within the community. The *Mbiam*



rituals and oaths hold a special significance in the community, serving as a powerful force that binds individuals to their promises and obligations. The consequences of breaking the sacred commitments are believed to be severe, ensuring that people adhere to their agreements. Individuals are required to swear by *Mbiam* as a solemn pledge to honour their commitments in personal and business relationships (Uwem, 2017).

Mbiam involves the imposition of particular sanctions on individuals who violate its precepts. These sanctions are thought to be imposed by spiritual powers to guarantee that wrongdoers face consequences for their behaviour. It was seen as the last resort for common people who felt their rights were under threat. People turned to *Mbiam* when they believed their possessions were about to be wrongfully taken from them. The belief in *Mbiam* was based on the trust that it would not bring impartiality and act as a beacon of hope for those who had no other means of representation. It is believed to be so powerful that bribery and corruption in the judicial system were kept in check (Ofonmbuk, 2022).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the use of *Mbiam* had both positive and negative outcomes. When utilized in the right way and within the appropriate context, its impact was positive. Conversely, innocent individuals who were unaware of any wrongdoing could sometimes fall victim to the negative consequences of it. This could occur due to familiar connections or having unwittingly stolen items. According an oral informant that might not want his real name to be mentioned, he noted that, in a particular community, an incident of theft occurred involving a stolen palm oil. The suspect, who was caught, denied the accusation and insisted that he was framed. Interestingly, his friend was also implicated in the theft. The owner of the stolen palm oil reported the case to the community chairman, who then, escalated it to the village head and subsequently to the village council for resolution. After much deliberation, and with the involved parties maintaining their innocence, the decision was made to resort to *Mbiam* to establish the truth. A mixture of oil and water was prepared, and the suspects were required to swear upon it. They were given a period of one year and six months, during which, if they survived, it would prove their innocence. Unfortunately, both suspects succumbed to the test and perished within a year. Following their demise, specific rituals were conducted, and their families were required to make certain payments before their burial and also to assuage the gods.



In another instance, Edem Asuquo an informant in Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area of the State, noted that, a young man always brought hoodlums to a certain community to steal some items. And whenever he brings them, they carry out heinous crimes like rape, theft and killing. The village head and the council members assembled all the men, young and old, to swear an oath to prove their innocence of their knowledge of these happenings in the village. The youths complied except for the person responsible for such crimes listed above. He ran away but was caught. He claimed he didn't know anything about it and that his faith as a Christian does not permit him to swear. However, nemesis still caught up with him. Nevertheless, how the oath was taken goes thus: they spat on their palms, made some incantations, and concluded by licking their saliva. Eventually, the culprits became mad within six months. These events were revealed within the period this research covers. It shows that, despite the changes caused by modernization and civilization, the *Mbiam* traditional practice is still carried out in the Annang traditional society.

Conclusion

The examination of the *Mbiam* (traditional concocted oath) and its significance in maintaining law and order within the traditional Annang society reveals a complex and intricate system. A deep dive into this traditional practice exposes its multifaceted influence on social control and community dynamics. The *Mbiam* oath, rooted in ancient tradition, serves as a robust mechanism for upholding communal norms and regulations. Its administration in carefully arranged ritualistic settings amplifies its impact, drawing upon deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices.

The detailed findings of the research shed light on the diverse functions of the *Mbiam* oath. It symbolizes not only commitment but also serves as a powerful deterrent against deviant behaviour. The fear of severe consequences for breaching the oath serves as a powerful motivator in fostering adherence to rules and deterring misconduct, ultimately enhancing community cohesion. Moreover, the ritualistic nature of the oath nurtures communal solidarity and emphasizes the collective responsibility of community members to uphold harmony and social order. This intricate network of influence underscores the complex ways in which the *Mbiam* oath shapes the social fabric of traditional Annang society.



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