

# THE PHENOMENON OF WITCHCRAFT IN UTUGWANG COSMOLOGY

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## **Abstract**

The Utugwang society is of a type which places a greater value on human life and communal belonging which is indicative of the name they bear Utugwang, which literally translated means – “Let’s come together”. However, this coming together has not been without blemish as the believe in witchcraft by the Utugwang people like many other African communities has hindered the growth and progress of the community. This paper is an attempt to investigate the phenomenon of witchcraft which essentially is a metaphysical phenomenon that cuts across gender and all ages, contrary to the opinion that witchcraft is a phenomenon that is predominantly found among female. It reveals further that, witchcraft is an act that is shrouded in secrecy and mysticism. It submits that this phenomenon of witchcraft poses both metaphysical and epistemological challenge in the in Utugwang cosmology. It also shows that basically witches are classified into two categories in Utugwang cosmology. The black witch that causes pain or harm and the white witch that is endowed with wisdom.

## **Introduction**

Every society has evolved a philosophy through which her immediate socio-historic problems are reflected upon in search of sustained answers. Hence, when we are confronted with some form of sorrow or pain, we are compelled to square our experience with our religious/traditional beliefs. Most times, we see bad things happen to even those we consider to be good people, just like the biblical Job. Most people suffer the things that are ordinarily

believed they should not suffer. We talk of so much evil in the world, and we are dazed and perplexed as to the cause of evil in the world. David Hume, as cited by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop captures the problem thus;

“Is he (God) willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance surely, from some cause then. Is it from the intention of the deity? But he is perfectly benevolent” (375-376).

The traditional Utugwang man believes in the existence of God, who is the Supreme Being and he is all powerful and intervenes in the affairs of men to rescue man most times in the moment of affliction. But they also believe that, evil forces such as witchcraft are responsible for most of the sufferings, sickness and deaths in the world. Essentially, they believe that, there are two equal competing realities – one good and the other evil, but that the good supersedes evil.

This research attempts to investigate the phenomenon of witchcraft in Utugwang cosmology. The paper reveals that, there are broadly two types of witchcraft in Utugwang cosmology like many other African societies. The “white witch”, (*uti ihung or isibibi ihung*) the good witch that is endowed with wisdom and the “black witch” (*Utti ishi or isibibi Ishi*) the black witch that perpetrates evil. The research further also reveals the activities and approaches to witchcraft. This conception of witchcraft has its foundation in Utugwang cosmology.

### **Utugwang Cosmology in Perspective**

The term cosmology is derived from two Greek words namely *cosmos* and *logos*; *cosmos* meaning the world and *logos* meaning science or study. Thus, etymologically, cosmology means the science or study of the world. Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics

that is concerned with the rational explanation of the cosmos or world. The Utugwang people have their own cosmology. Before delving into discussing the conception of the cosmos in Utugwang culture, it is pertinent to consider who the Utugwang people are.

Legend has it that, the Utugwang people originated from Uturu, in Benue State, Nigeria. They travel south of Benue and now reside in Obudu Local government of Cross River State, Nigeria. Utugwang which literally means “let’s come together” has four local dialects. We have Ukworgung, Mgbenege, Okworogun and Utukwang. When we consider that, African philosophy is built on a strong pillar of humanism, where brotherhood, communal living, solidarity, complementarities and integration are emphasized, it becomes an undeniable fact that the Utugwang people are truly African and live by the basic principles that undergird African philosophy, of which their cosmology and name reflects.

The Utugwang’s like many African societies, sees the cosmos as a given reality, a creation of God in which mankind find themselves. Utugwang thought abhors the type of dualism found in Western philosophy, where substance and accident, for instance, operate at different poles. For the Utugwang, human person is both physical and spiritual. Thus, in the human person is found a centre of unity relationship between the material and the spiritual world. Here, man can influence actions at both levels. He can physically act, as when he harms another with instrument, say a knife or a gun, or when he develops and build another. He can as well exert spiritual control over those he is stronger than and other lower creatures like animals and trees. However, he does not forget that he himself is under a superior spiritual powers of the ancestors and even his creator *Ulim* (God). That is why for the Utugwang, nature is imbued with divinity and anyone who is close to nature is close to the ancestor or (and) God. For example, the traditional healers use the things of nature in their raw form, for they believe that each created reality has some latent powers, the air, trees, shrubs, soil and animals.

From the above analysis, it can be said that the world, in Utugwang reality, is divided into two – the physical and the spiritual. The physical world is the human world where all physical, visible, sensible realities are found. The spiritual world is the non-physical, non-sensible and invisible world where spiritual entities such as God, the ancestors, spirits are found. It is germane to note that this is contrary to the Western view that the world is dualism of spirit and matter, wherein spirit and matter resides at different poles, the Utugwang people, like other Africans, believe that both spirit and matter resides at diverse poles they still interact but none can exist and realize its essence without the other. This brings one to the view that for them, the world is an inseparable duality of the spiritual and the physical, which are in a mutually complementary relationship where agents of both worlds are constantly interacting with each other, as the realities within them are also interacting. This is possible through the interpenetration of realities, which comes with the principle of duality. By this, each of this worlds and realities in them, influence themselves, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, but there is an undeniable point of interaction.

Essentially, the Utugwangs believe that, it is the spiritual world and its constituent realities that control the physical world and its constituent realities. The rationale for this is that hierarchically, the spiritual world and the constituent realities within it are ontologically superior to the physical world and its constituent world, but both stand in need of each other; none can exist and realize its full existence without the other. Oladele Balogun aptly captures this point when he assert that, “in African cosmology, the universe is seen as an integrated whole. There is also a hierarchical ordering of beings and persons. With God, being at the apex of the hierarchy. The gods, spirits, ancestors, man, animals and plants follow in that order. This arrangement of things, allows for mutual interaction between beings and all the other entities that exist” (74). The point here is that, although there is mutual interaction and influence between both worlds and the realities within them. The realities/agents in the

spiritual world are hierarchically above those in the physical world. This makes them superior to those in the physical world but they both stand in need of each other.

Also, for the Utugwang, representatives of the supernatural forces like the deities or ancestors are pictured with a human form. The only difference between them and other living mortals is that, the former occupy a higher spiritual status than mere mortals in the hierarchy of being of the Utugwang people. Within this framework, Utugwang's believe that God is at the top in terms of the hierarchy of being and that He created both the heavens and the earth, and everything that is within it, and oversees and controls it, He is also the giver of life and every good thing of life. Some of these Utugwang names acknowledges or depict this belief in God. *Ulimuke* (God's gift) *Ulimasi* (thank God) *Ipehulim* (praise God) *Ulim Uwfeh* (God is supreme). Therefore, for the Utugwang, all things that are found in the world are seen as direct or indirect creation of God; and man is at the centre of or apex of God's creation. He is both a physical and spiritual being endowed with both human and superhuman powers which can be tailored towards doing good or for evil. This makes human the centre of the cosmos, therefore Utugwang cosmology can be regarded as a humanocentric cosmology. It is germane to note that even the activity of witchcraft is centered and related to human beings. With this said, it becomes pertinent to turn to the concept of witchcraft.

### **The Concept of Witchcraft in Utugwang**

Hinnells as cited by Owete Kingsley and Iheanacho Ngozi, maintained that, "witchcraft refers to a maleficent power innate in certain people, who can mysteriously harm others. It is different from evil magic (sorcery): a witch cannot help being one, and may not even know that he or she is" (Owete and Iheanacho 146). Hinnells' definition suggests two things. Firstly, that one does not learn to become a witch, it is either one is born with it or

acquired it through initiation. Secondly, one may have it without knowing: This poses a philosophical puzzle. Can anyone lay claims to a knowledge he does not know he has? Raven Grimassi, approached the discourse on witchcraft from its etymological meaning. He avers that, “in western culture the earliest word translated into English word is the Greek word pharmakute or pharmakis. This is also the root of the English word pharmacist” (18). The definition of a witch from its etymology as adumbrated by Raven Grimassi seems to suggest that a witch has the ability to manipulate a man’s health, either positively or negatively. Since, as it is known that some drugs that are being administered by our modern day pharmacist can either cure or complicate a man’s health situation. It is the position of this paper that, the tendency for witches to do good is slim. This position corroborates E. G Parrinder’s position. Parrinder notes that “witchcraft is an evil thing, it is often hereditary, many of its practitioners are women. All kinds of trouble may be caused by witchcraft, from barrenness in human beings to a bad harvest” (Parrinder 123). This work agree with Parrinder that the activities or operations of witches are wicked but it does not agree that many of its practitioners are women, as research has shown that, both, women, men and even children are caught up in this heinous practice. This is very true of the Yakurr people, but in this case, it is not only by inheritance that one can acquire the craft, it is also by initiation and this is the most deadly as they are initiated against their will (Etim Okon and Gregory A, Onah 32). There are other forms which witchcraft takes and manifests. These include:

i. Sorcery:

According to Kingsley Owete and Ngozi Iheanacho, “sorcery is medicine made in the offensive and destructive direction through manipulating the cosmic order and forces” (145).

This definition suggests that, sorcery is a dimension of traditional medicine that employs and utilize the powers acquired from bad and wicked spirits, through esoteric means to inflict pain, cause misfortunes or even death to their victims. It is important to note that, sorcerers attack their victims through the use of objects that have direct contact with their body. For instance, the victim's urine, faeces, hair, nails, tears, sweat, or material objects like books, biro, knife, cloths, etc, are being manipulated to cause harm to their target.

## ii. Magic

Essentially, magic is a special way of manipulating and controlling the supernatural or spiritual realm to one's advantage. Thus, "magic is the use of material objects or medicinal plants and the invocation of verbal formulae to control and manipulate events and the surrounding world" (cited in Owete and Iheanacho 140). The point to note here is that those who engage in magic have some supernatural powers, either personal or acquired. It is predominantly employed for the purposes of medicine or healing.

Parrinder observed that, in traditional African societies, "Witchcraft frequently mistaken for magical practices and sorcery. Just as a witchdoctor has been confounded with a priest or even with witches themselves" (122) hence, it is germane, to differentiate the witch from, the sorcery or magician. Corroborating Parrinders point, Emmanuel Eyo and Felix Ojong maintained that, in most African Traditional Societies "the terms witchcraft, magic, sorcery and medium are used interchangeably. This is because it is generally believed that without the powers of witchcraft, the sorcerer, magician, enchanter, medium, etc cannot function to a greater capacity of being beyond the physical real of matter" (Eyo and Ojong 128-129). The Utugwang people do not hold a view far from the view of Eyo and Ojong as they belief that witchcraft, sorcery and magic are the same in all respect and that they are focus on inflicting harm to other humans beings. This position exposed the link between these agents. In the case of Utugwang, these agents are well dreaded, based on the belief that there are not empty (*ere jire*); they possess some supernatural powers.

In this connection, for the Utugwang society, the understanding of the term witchcraft is necessarily linked to the conception of man as a being that is made up of body and soul with supernatural abilities to influence the cause of nature usually negatively. Eyo and Ojong argued further that “the soul of man in the psychical world is again divided into two, that is, the one that animates the human frame, shape or structure, and the ferocious bush soul. The bush soul can be transformed into anything, such as air, cat, snake e.t.c” (129). Their position is that when a witch is on any given assignment, be it good or evil “he or she sends out the bush soul which has the capability of floating invisibly through the town till it gets to the place where the deed has to be done, and immediately the deed is accomplished, it returns home to its owner” (129). This is a common belief among the Utugwang people. It is believed that witches sleep with their mouth or anus open where the “bush soul” as Eyo and Ojong put it, pass through and proceeds for their operations, and the body remains lifeless until, the spirit or bush soul returns. It is also believed that during this period, a person or witch whose bush soul has gone out either through the mouth or anus is at great risk to the people around him, because, if their mouths or anus is blocked with cloths or any material, the bush soul may be unable to return as the door to their original abode has been shut. This will mean the death of the victim unless the channel is unblocked. This is also very true of the Yala cosmology on Witchcraft. Once, the position of a witch who has gone on astral travel for spiritual operation is changed, the witch may not be able to return back to the body, hence resulting in death ( Gregory Ajima Onah 116 )

However, it is not common for witches to fall prey to this kind of trap because they usually hypnotize those around them to be able to carry out their operations. In addressing the kinds, initiation and influences of witches, Talbot summaries them into seven as cited by Eyo and Ojong.

❖ **White witchcraft:** This particular classification of witchcraft is indeed supposedly



used to save human life or rather, in general term, for the betterment of human condition. It is a form of witchcraft that seeks to enhance life and by implication make life on earth much more meaningful in all standards. The Utugwang people call it *utihung* meaning white witch. They believe that most elderly men in their community who are gifted with great wisdom have it, sometimes; they even associate wisdom with this kind of witchcraft, because it is believed that people who have this kind of ability only use it to enhance human progress. The Yala equally believe the white Witch may use such power to enhance the life of one or more of her children or and often times to rescue victims of the black witch, as the white Witch are believed to acquire a higher spiritual and potent power than the black witches ( Gregory Ajima Onah 114 )

❖ **Black Witchcraft:** It is the opposite of white witchcraft. It seeks not the amelioration of human ills or misfortune, neither does it aim to better the life of humanity, rather it seeks the destruction and exploitation of humanity. Hence, it treats humanity as a means to an evil end. An Utugwang person believes in the existence of this kind of witchcraft. This is the most dreaded type of witchcraft. Talbot as cited by Eyo and Ojong also talked about, crab witchcraft; most African communities see the crab as a creature that “charms” other faster fishes by making them unable to move. The crab, irrespective of its characteristic slow movement is able to prey on faster fishes because it possesses witchcraft.

❖ **Daylight Witchcraft:** This class of witchcraft in simple terms-is practiced in broad day light, and it is done in the human flesh without any recourse to disguising oneself. It has to do with sheer malignity towards someone who is assumed or regarded an enemy. This type of witchcraft is believed to exist within the traditional Utugwang society. Here, the witch, takes cover by standing backing a tree firmly, usually on a

lonely path, the witch is stark naked with his hands raised up so that the herbs on his palms does not touch him otherwise, he becomes the victim. He/she can be there for several hours if his victim does not show up, he robs the herbs on the grounds or on the tree, and the tree would dry up in a matter of days. Contrary to Talbot's position, the Utugwang's belief that, this kind of witchcraft is not only practiced in the day time, but even at night.

❖ **Money Making Witchcraft:** It has to do with human sacrifice which is intended towards money making. It is highly dreaded, even though, it is not very common with the Utugwang as an individual practice, but it is seen as a family fortune (*agburungu*) Agburungu. Agbrungu is a family deity that wills fortune to members of the family. Any member of the family that has been selected to benefit from the blessings of the deity becomes successful at whatever trade or career. He may not even be aware that he is benefitting from the family fortune, or that such a deity exist in the family, but if he has been appointed in the spirit realm to benefit from it, he becomes successful. There is always a special encounter of the deity in the family who does all the sacrifices as may be required by the deity, the person also has the responsibility to rotate it to another person when the time is due, the new beneficiary starts benefiting from the deity's fortune, and the influence of the old beneficiary begins to fade. The Utugwang's believe that those who are in charge of manipulating this deity are not ordinary, as they see them as people who possess witchcraft powers.

❖ **Porcupine Witchcraft:** Porcupine is regarded as a great diviner with the possession of great charms and there is hardly any good diviner without this witchcraft. Although the Utugwang believes that witches can transform to any kind of animal, but it is not their position that all witches or diviners possess the porcupine spirit.

❖ **Eye Witchcraft:** This kind of witchcraft can be possessed by none initiates of the cult. One who is in possession of this class of witchcraft can attend any meeting held by witches without their notice. The traditional Utugwang man does not believe in this type of witchcraft. This kind is recognized by the Yala people. Among the Yala, they are regarded as blind Witch, a victim in the hands of black Witches, whose they perpetuate their evils without their knowledge of their acts. ( Gregory Ajima Onah 113 ). Basically, the Utugwang man classifies witchcraft activities into two, either you are white witch or a black witch, but that does not suggest that all the citizens of the community are witches. This can only apply when we are talking about witchcraft in Utugwang cosmology. Haven said this; let's look at some approaches to witchcraft in Utugwang cosmology

### **Some Approaches to Witchcraft in Utugwang Cosmology**

In a typical traditional African society like Utugwang, when people are faced with severe economic, political, religious, health or family challenges, it is often attributed to the workings of-Witches. The Utugwang recognizes the suffering involved and has always made frantic efforts to curtail the menace of witchcraft activities, thereby, protecting inhabitants from witchcraft. They do this through some agents like, the witchdoctor, and the traditional rulers and witch hunt cults.

a.) **The African Witchdoctor in Utugwang Cosmology:** It is worthy to note that, an effective witchdoctor is an eccentric and ascetic person. He is by nature a good, honest and organized person. He is an attractive character when one encounters him outside or during his work. Tatah Mbuy, described him as a "PAGAN SAINT" (Lantum in Mbuy 33). Because, he will do nothing for which society can reprimand him. A typical witchdoctor has the ability to

handle witchcraft cases. A witchdoctor like in Cameroon can remove evil spirits and can also bewitch someone” (33). The witchdoctor is believed to possess extraordinary powers. He is a visionary and can foresee and forestall evil occurrences. He is closely linked to nature and his ancestors, this accounts for why it is believed in Utugwang cosmology that, the ancestor or the gods (*etiti en tang*) reveal to the witchdoctor any impending danger on the community, family or individual. This seems to be a privilege accorded him, for his dedication and mortification.

In traditional Utugwang cosmology, the witch doctor is seen as a mediator between the spirit agents that reside or operate in the spirit realm and humans that operate in the physical world. When a case is presented before him, he first, cleanses/purifies himself to ensure that he is in close link with the divine, before he can then consult the oracle to check the merit of the case, before he begins his cure.

(b) The Traditional Ruler: It should be noted that, in Utugwang cosmology the ruler is seen both as a spiritual leader and a physical leader, who is the custodian of the customs and tradition of the people. This is why, when a king is to be enthroned, some sacred rites are being performed. Sometimes the king that is to be enthroned is asked not to bath for 3 or 7 days depending on the kind of kingship, there are certain foods he must not eat or things he is forbidden to do within this period. It is commonly believed that you must become an initiate before you can become a real ruler. “In African (Utugwang) traditional culture, the parameter for deserved leadership role is constituted by the qualities of fairness, competence, transparency, fear of God (the divine) passion for selfless service, good and proven character and wisdom are required” (Balogun 352). To be a good leader within the traditional Utugwang setting, you must fulfill the aforementioned cultural and normative requirements. The traditional ruler as an initiate of the most potent authority in the land, has the power over Witches and Wizards in the area of authority and therefore can ward off any evil or threat by

the Witches when such acts do not receive the approval of the powers that be, especially in the invisible realm.

(c) Death and Burial of Witches and Wizards: It is a common believed in traditional Utugwang society that some witches are more dangerous and dreaded when they are dead, than when they are alive. In most cases, they visit the living either in dreams or haunt them physically and try to strangle them. Legend has it that, this is due to the fact that some witches feel they were not accorded a befitting burial, or some can't just stop being wicked. To forestall this, Tatab Mbuy maintained that, "witches are buried with a special ritual" (37). In Utugwang cosmology, special prayers of rebuke are offered at the grave side by family member of the deceased Witch. Among the Yala people, once it is discovered that a dead Witch is still operating in the land of the living, the grave is usually dug open and a gun is loaded and fired directly at his skull. This is believed to abort any further harm by the dead Witch or Witches ( Gregory Ajima Onah 117).

### **Proofs of witchcraft in Utugwang**

In African societies, discussion about witchcraft activities is rampant. The most popular opinion of those who engage in such discussions is that, witches use their powers to manipulate the spiritual realm of the universe, for evil intention against other people. Therefore, witches are primarily seen as enemies of progress and agents of frustration, hardship and evil. Essentially, the two critical traditional branches of philosophy that are relevant to a study of witchcraft are metaphysics and epistemology.

For instance, witches are often accused of taking delight in drinking human blood, destruction of human lives, inflicting pain, and blocking one's progress. They haunt for

victims to suck their blood, spiritually eat up parts of their body, as meat. Such victims suffer severely and die painful death” (Owete and Iheanacho 147). A careful perusal of the aforementioned claim calls for both a metaphysical and epistemological question. At the realm of metaphysics, the question is, was this action metaphysical? The Utugwang people believe that, when witches and wizard eat human flesh and drink their blood, it is not done physically but spiritually, the victim will be transformed/turned into an animal, say cow, goat, pig or any animal the witches may desire to eat, then spiritually they will consume the person, but the person will still be moving as a walking corpse until the heart is consumed. Most times the person who takes the share of the heart keeps or preserves it for some times before consumption. To corroborate this point, Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, wrote that, “the Nupe people of Nigeria...believe that such eating is spiritual not physical (380). He goes further to state that, “Christians, too admit to a spiritual sharing in the body and blood of Christ each time they take communion. But they do not eat actual human flesh nor drink actual human blood (380).

At the epistemological angle, classical epistemology has been preoccupied with the pursuit of truth. How can an individual engage in cognitive activity so as to arrive at true belief and avoid false belief? Since epistemology generally is concerned with the theory and origin of knowledge. How do we know if a story is true? Since, there are no known scientific laboratories to test and confirm that Mr. A or B is a witch? Some of the known traditional ways of handling witches are through the witch doctors and the community or traditional rulers. Back to our question, even if someone has confessed to being a witch, do we just believe them based on their confessional statement? What if the confession is false, or if they are true? How do we know? This poses a lot of philosophical challenge here? Maybe, the person needs to perform some actions intended as witch, whereby, we can simply believe that he is a witch. Ozumba’s integrative epistemology can help us to approach the truth here. In

his inaugural lecturer, Ozumba, maintained that, in integrative epistemology, “we are talking of seeking knowledge from a wholly contextual and integrated points of view”. (12). He went further to submit that, “we have knowledge from the absolute, relative, objective, subjective points of view. However, our view is that all human knowledge should draw insight from both spiritual and physical dimensions of reality so as to attain the most comprehensive and reliable version of knowledge that the context can yield” (12). Hence, even if stories and confessions about the existence of witchcraft do not prove the reality and certainty of witchcraft, they no doubt affirm the belief in their existence. And the belief in the existence of witchcraft, somehow, also provides a remedy to the existence of evil in the world. Because, the knowledge gathered from such beliefs in witches, and their practices will help humans to organize themselves well and live his life to the fullest. Ozumba succinctly puts it thus, “integrative humanism...tries to integrate the physical and spiritual realities of man to see how man as a being unto eternity can organize himself to get the best of the two worlds” (16).

In *Utugwang* cosmology, those who are believed to possess white witch *Uti ihung* are highly revered, premised on the notion that they are endowed with extraordinary wisdom and they use this wisdom to build a viable communal society, because, they are characteristically bold and objective in the assessment of any matter. Through this virtue, they can even expose those that are believed to possess the black witch *Uti- Ishi* with their nefarious activities of manipulating the destinies of humans negatively.

Hence, amongst the *Utugwangs*, it is a thing of honour to be identified as someone with *Uti ihung* (white witch). Whereas, it is a thing of dishonour to be seen as someone with *Uti-ishi* (black witch).people do not associate freely with this category of persons because it is believed that they can easily harm those around them.

From the discussion presented here, it is apparent that witchcraft is a reality in Utugwang cosmology. It is apparent that it is a metaphysical phenomenon, which throws an epistemological challenge to an inquiry mind. Here, it has been noted that even though witchcraft manipulations take place at the metaphysical spiritual realm, its effect is manifested in the physical realm. This makes witchcraft an epistemological and metaphysical issue that African scholars need to probe further into.

## Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to investigate the phenomenon of witchcraft in Utugwang cosmology. It reveals that, the activities of witches are generally regarded as being against society, there are mischievous and harmful to the wellbeing of, and co-existence of any society. Their nefarious activities turn to divide the society, instead of uniting the society. Hence their activities are strongly condemned. Even at that their actions are still very visible today. This calls for a critical study of this seemingly never-ending epistemological cum metaphysical social phenomenon.

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