



Divination among the Etche of Niger Delta

EMMANUEL ECHEZOLOCHI AMADI, PIUS BARINAADAA KILL
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract. The unusual occurrences such as a tree or a branch falling down especially when there is no wind or rain, a sheep growing a horn, the appearing and disappearing of millipede and by extension frequent death, in explicable diseases, resulting in fear. However, form the basis of divination among Etche as a means to proffer solutions to the above circumstances. the paper posits that divination has helped to ascertain the underlying causes of these occurrences. The paper also argues that these occurrences not only portend messages from the supersensible realm but are also manifestations of the anger of the supersensible entities. The study adopted phenomenological approach to interpret and describe the causes of these usual signs. The study also adopts primary and secondary sources (primary sources-oral interviews; report of the custodians of Etche custom and tradition and handed down tradition and secondary sources (published materials). Findings reveal that divination among Etche is so significant not only in the religious life of the people, but also as a means to offer explanations to inexplicable circumstances.

Keywords: Etche, Diviner and Divination.

1. Introduction

Among the Etche, divination is considered so significant in the religious life of the people. This is because in Etche, the two worlds of existence the physical tangible world and the spiritual invisible are believed not only to be unshaken but also real among the people. The latter for the people is believed not only to be the abode of the living dead and other spirit beings but also to have far reaching influences on the everyday existence of the people. That is why when there is an impending doom or unusual occurrences in the land an Etche man would say he is going to conduct a search. This, however, further explains that he is going to consult a diviner to find out what such

occurrences are indicating. For the people, divination is so significant if the ontological relationship that exist between the two realms must be maintained.

Two factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. The first, was to document for posterity the beliefs and practices relating to divination especially in this period of cultural globalization and the second was to examine the importance of divination among the Etche and to see how this has helped to unravel the causes of unusual signs.

1.1 Background of the Study

Etche is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State. It is located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor-Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Abia State in the East (Nwiyi, 2012, p. 68). According to Etche Socio-Political organization, there are five outstanding clans that make up Etche. The clans are, Mba, Okehi, Ozuzu, Igbo Agwuruasa and Ulakwo Umuselem. The essence of this, is for ease administration (Amele, 2000, p. 1).

As for their economic life, the people of Etche are predominantly farmers. They engage in production of palm oil, cocoyam, etc but the most important ones are yam and cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people located within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, they experience the normal Niger Delta climatic condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy and dry season. The rainy season take place between March and November. The dry occurs between November and February (Amadi and Uwom, 2023, p. 12).

With regards to their religious life, there is a strong believe in the existence of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (The God who created

everything in the universe). Etche, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly rather He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities.

1.2 Methodology

This study was carried out as an interview-based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz:

- i. Reports of custodians of Etche custom and tradition about meaning of divination.
- ii. Handed down tradition about meaning of beliefs and practices relating to divination

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewees and some of the considerations are: the position of the informant in the society; the cultural organization he/she belongs to the position or title he/she holds; the level of the interviewees' cultural affinity. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the local community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people.

2. Diviner

According to Tasié (2013) a diviner is a person who is primarily concerned with the acts of divination (p.6). For Erivwo (2001) a diviner (*oboepha*) among the Urhobo is regarded as a doctor of divination. According to Erivwo, he is an expert in divination, able through the system to communicate with the unseen and supersensible world, and transmit messages from ancestors, spirits and divinities to his clients. He is not only able to see into the future, but also to uncover the past (p. 86).

According to Metuh (1987), person may become a diviner among the Yoruba through hereditary sometimes passing from father to son or another member of his family. In other cases, a person may be called directly from Orunmila, a divinity in charge of divination (p. 219). Generally, for Usifo (2009) diviners are mediums for divination and they are empowered by the divinities, men and their circumstances. Such power enables them to tell their clients the object of their mission at their first appearance; even before they had to anything (p.84).

As for the taboos, the diviner according to Tasié (2007) is subject to many taboos. Some of these as he noted forbid the consumption of certain foods. Others as he further noted forbid mundane activities on days

set aside for communion with the deities. Also, important according to Tasié is the fact that the diviner has to avoid defilement of any sort (p. 30). According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) they may either be priests connected with the cults of certain divinities or they are men of power (p. 147).

3. Divination

In the words of Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), divination is the practice of attempting to foretell the future, reveal the known, or find out the wishes of a divinity or spirit (p. 97, 47). Gerald (2008) defines divination as a magical and supernatural method of accessing information which is unobtainable by other means. Such information includes knowledge of the future events, the recovery of lost objects, insight into hidden character-traits, etc (p. 142).

Similarly, in the words of Tasié (2007) the Isiokpo term for divination is *ogbaaha*, a phrase which by implication means the manipulation of ritual objects through various techniques to ascertain the future, to identify the underlying cause of diseases, to proffer solutions to problems that cannot be solved by the ordinary man, or to fathom the desires of the deities and determine which of sacrifice requires (p. 9).

Among the people, as he observes, there is no clear-cut distinction between a diviner and a medicine man, since ideally, in order to diagnose and cure disease, the latter should possess not only the gift of communicating with the supersensible world, but also that of going beyond the physical changes in the body's condition that indicates illness, to unraveling their spiritual causes. However, the Isiokpo, as he further noted, still acknowledge the fact that certain *dibia* (as both diviners and medicine men are called/are more strongly endowed with the gift of healing with roots, herbs and other ritual preparations, whereas others are more strongly endowed with the power of foretelling the future and seeing clearly into the spiritual realm. The latter, as he explains, are described as *dibia no ohuizor cham* ("medicine man/diviner who sees clearly into the spiritual realm).

Explaining further, Tasié pointed out that there are many different systems of divination in Isiokpo. These includes, palm reading, mirror gazing, the interpretation of bird behaviour as messages from the spirits; the casting of bones, cowries, or lobes of kola nuts and the interpretation of the patterns with which they fall as messages from the gods; and divination through spirit possession (pp. 29-30).

Similarly, Owete and Iheanacho (2009) identified ten basic ways of divination:

- (1) Through dreams (which give either obvious or symbolic meanings that are further analysed).
- (2) Presentiments (a personal type of divination in which an individual develops a feeling, or presentiments about something).
- (3) Body actions like sneezing, twitching, and hiccupping, which may be interpreted as in predictions of rainfall, or good or bad luck, drought or some other events.
- (4) Ordeals-live threatening tests administered to a suspect to ascertain the veracity of his claim or guilt in a matter, for them, this method varies from culture to culture.
- (5) Spirit possession-this-facilitate the diviner's insight and knowledge to fathom mystery, and concealed knowledge.
- (6) Necromancy a technique of seeking 'signs' from the departed (dead), or through the method of close observation of a corpse lying in state.
- (7) Animal types- a form of divination technique in which knowledge is inferred through the observation of living animals.
- (8) Mechanical technique- a type of divination in which knowledge is derived through manipulation of given number and type of objects, which are interpreted in the process.
- (9) Nature divination- a type in which answers are inferred and determined from the observation of signs in nature, such as the positions, and or movement of heavenly bodies, or the way leaves wither and fall.
- (10) Yet, there are sundry ways of divination techniques, in which the medicine man fathom mysteries, and prescribe cure for one's ailment (p. 130).

According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) the Yoruba is believed to have the most highly developed divination system in West Africa. This divination system called *Ifa*, is connected with the Yoruba deity Orunmila (translated Heaven knows salvation), said to be a child of the Supreme Being, (Olodumare) and his deputy and oracle on earth. The diviner is called *babalawo* (father of mysteries). The basis of the *Ifa* divination as they observed is a larger collection of proverbs and parables correlated with a set of 256-divination figures, called *odu*. Some diviners claim that they can recite eight proverbs and eight parables for each *odu*. This would give about 4, 096 of the oracle provers and parables. The proverbs are meant to illustrate it. Finally, the application is made by the diviner to the needs and requests of the enquirer

There are two methods of selecting the *odu* divination figures. For Awolalu and Depamu, the more complex pattern involves a rectangular divining board and a set of sixteen palm nuts. Before the divination process, the

diviner may make a sacrifice to *Eshu* deity. While shaking the sixteen palm nuts in his loosely clasped hands, he rapidly tries to lift all the nuts from his left hand to his right. If two nuts are left in his left hand, he marks one stroke on the powered divining board. If one is left, he marks two strokes if more than two or none is left the process is repeated. He continues this process until he completes two columns each with four markings.

A shorter method as they further noted involves the use of a divination chain or string on which are attached eight halves of seed pods or shells. The chain is held in the middle and thrown in such a way that the pods fall in two parallel lines. Pods that fall with their concave side upwards are equivalent to one line on the divining board while those that fall with the concave side upwards are equivalent to two lines.

Once the set of eight marks arranged in two columns has been obtained by either process, the diviner gives the proverbs and recites the explanatory parable attached to it. This gives the oracular reply to the enquirer's problems. The rule of the diviner is simply to apply this response to the specific needs of the customer. Sometimes this may be necessary for the parables can be self-explanatory in some situations. The parables generally refer to occasions in the past when the deities, ancestors or some animals consulted *Ifa* about certain problems, description of the situation and the sacrifice that was prescribed. The practical application may be that the enquirers should likewise make a sacrifice to a named deity, and so avert the threatened danger or obtain his protection for a project in hand.

The *Ifa* divination is consulted at all important occasions in a person's life. It is consulted at birth, before marriage, during serious sickness, after a series of misfortunes, to obtain a job, to pass an examination, before building a new house, etc (pp. 147-148).

Similarly, for Tasié, divination is crucial at all levels of Isiokpo social life. At the level of the individual, it is employed at birth, to ascertain the identity of the ancestor incarnated and so to know the appropriate name to give; when the person reaches adulthood, as a means of finding a suitable marriage partner; throughout life, as a way of identifying the causes of misfortune and the means of prosperity; and even at death, as a means of identifying its cause. At the level of the group, it is employed in discovering the causes of collective misfortune and the means of achieving collective prosperity, and in choosing a priest or other office holders (p. 30).

For Olumati (2013) divination is so significant among the Ikwerre especially in cases relating to reincarnation. According to Olumati, amongst Ikwerre of the Niger Delta many of the cases of reincarnation are known through divination. When a new born child as he pointed out is manifesting strange and persistent traits, the parents quickly consult a diviner to find out the person that reincarnated in the child as well as the remedy to the situation (pp. 108-109). In the remaining section of this essay, we shall be examining divination among the Etche.

The Etche term for divination is *igba aha*, which literally, means the manipulation of ritual objects through various techniques to unravel the future, to identify the hidden cause of disease to proffer solutions to problems that cannot be solved by ordinary man, or to discern the wishes of the gods and to be double sure which of them requires sacrifice.

Thus, the Etche name for the diviner is *ogba aja*, which means the one who discovers what is hidden or revealer of secrets beyond the ordinary. Among the Etche, there is no clear-cut distinction between a diviner and a medicine man. According to our interviewee, Amadi Josuah, this is true in the sense that both are called the profession but are more strongly endowed not only with the gift of healing with herbs, roots and other magical preparations but also with the gift of communicating with the supersensible world (Amad, J. 05/06/2025, oral interview).

Among the Etche, the diviner is hedged by many taboos. Some of these taboos forbid to pass across a river or to see a river, to drink in the public. Others forbid mundane activities on the days set aside for communion with the deities. In addition to this, are the qualities of the diviner. Among the Etche, the diviner as another interviewee, Anele Moses, disclosed must be identified with certain qualities. As he noted, he must be trustworthy, honest, friendly, transparent and dutiful. Also important is that the diviner must be approachable and available at all times (Anele M, 10/06/2025, oral interview).

Among the Etche, *ilenyiyo* (mirror gazing) and *ichiokwe* or *nkpuruokwe* (casting of beads/cowries) are two major systems of divination. Our interviewee, Friday Manueke has it that before the diviner begins the real ritual (that is, the divination proper) the diviner will first perform the pre-ritual exercise; here, the diviner pours libation to his deity, draws four lines on the floor, with *nzu* (native white chalk) rhythmically beats the small drums of *ekwe* (wooden song) and *ugele* (metal song) respectively and chants the eulogies of the deity. When this is done, the diviner while in the

full glare of an enquirer casts his beads/cowries which in the process scatters about the place. Here, the diviner interprets the pattern with which they fall on the floor as messages from the deities (Friday, M. 15/06/2025, oral interview).

Divination is important at all levels of Etche life. At pregnancy, it is employed to ascertain if there is any impediment as to remove to protect the unborn child for safe delivery, when embarking on an important journey; to be double sure that the journey is successful, when choosing a priest especially where priesthood is not hereditary, it is also employed at birth (when a child is born) to ascertain the ancestor that returned as to know the suitable name to give when he gets to adulthood, when traveling in search of greener pastures outside the shores of Etche to ascertain the new environment is conducive as to bring home success. Also important is that it is employed in times of the unnatural signs or omens such as hooting of owl at night, bat cries at night, beehives in the compound, a big tree or a branch falling down especially when there is no wind or rainy, a cock crowing at odd times especially at midnight, to dig out what these occurrences portend (Nwogu, 2003, p. 93).

4. Conclusion

Among the Etche, the unnatural occurrences (frequent death, inexplicable diseases, hooting of owl at night, a big tree or a branch falling down especially when there is no rain or wind, frequent appearance and disappearance of millipede and other misfortunes, for the people are regarded not only as situations of uncertainties but often times defiles solutions from the ordinary man.

This, however, explains the importance of divination among the people. For the people, divination here, becomes a means to ascertain the underlying causes of these unnatural uncertainties; the danger inherent in them but also proffer appropriate solutions to the above circumstances.

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