

## KEFUH MYIN: A THERAPEUTIC MEDICINE IN OKU

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### *The Logic of Medicines in the Oku World-view*

IN a world-view typical of traditional African societies such as Oku, serious illness and death may be attributed to transcendental powers rather than natural causes. The task of the diviner is to establish the ultimate (or 'occult') cause and to determine the necessary action to be taken. The illness may result from the anger of a spirit or ancestor, or from attacks by witches. Depending on the diagnosis, either particular sacrifices may be necessary, or action may be needed to detect witches and destroy them with powerful medicines. In any case, peace must be restored before treatment begins or action taken.<sup>1</sup>

In Oku, God and the ancestors endow the world with *keyus*, but only so long as their laws are obeyed. *Keyus* may be translated as 'life-power', but also as 'soul' and 'breath'. Not only living beings but also important things, such as the sun, earth, rain and iron, have and need their own *keyus*. It is noteworthy that even medicines, family groups and political communities have *keyus*. *Keyus*, however, is granted to men only when they respect

1. This work is based on ethnological research carried out in Oku and other Grassfield kingdoms during six visits between 1975 and 1981, covering a total period of more than eighteen months.

the law. The Oku ideal is a social group (family, village quarter, secret society or 'tribe') that is united 'in one speech and meaning' (*kesugnen kemock*), 'in one breath' (*kejni kemock*) and, above all, in one *keyus*.<sup>2</sup> Tranquil sleep is characterized by peace and harmony, since witches and evil spirits are held to attack at night. Prayers explicitly ask for good, undisturbed sleep in addition to general blessings.

The ancestors (*kwesaise*) will punish those who disturb the peace of a family. Such punishment is manifest in illness or catastrophes and can be overcome only by expiatory sacrifices, which must be performed by the family head in his compound in the presence of all concerned. Palm-wine is drunk and a chicken sacrificed and eaten. The ancestors will also receive a share. The point is not primarily to eat but to unite a family in dispute. This involves confessions of bad feelings and expressions of regret. The ceremony is called *ntangle*, which strictly means arbitration and the resolution of disputes, without reference to the accompanying sacrifice.

What is most important here is the notion of unity expressed in commensality. In Oku it is an offence to the ancestors to share a meal with an enemy. The logic of this works both ways: the ancestors are appeased by the sacrifice offered at *ntangle*, and this commensality implies that the ancestors are no longer angry with the living.

The Oku concept of *keyus* is fully consistent with the *ntangle* rite. During *ntangle*, ancestors are said to gather at the bottom of the large wine pots (*eking myin*) so their *keyus* enters the wine and mixes with the *keyus* of those who drink it. This reinvigorates the drinkers with *keyus* and links them directly with their ancestors. Some Oku informants elaborated on this by claiming that the ancestors received the *keyus* of the living and were themselves strengthened thereby. Most simply said that the ancestors were pleased to see peace restored and to see that they had not been forgotten.

God and the ancestors, however, do not only reveal themselves to the living directly through blessings and punishments, they also have influence indirectly through the medicines they originally gave to men for their general well-being, and above all for protection against all hostile influences, especially witchcraft. Nearly all extended families in Oku possess a masquerading society whose medicine gives protection against all enemies. For such medicine to be effective, it must be produced secretly and never in the presence of women. New members of the masquerading society and those seeking higher ranks within it need special protective medicines against all the dangers they will encounter. They must also pay their dues in the form of palm-wine and chickens. The rules of the masquerade societies and also their medicines and masks were protected by this 'bad' medicine.<sup>3</sup>

2. For a detailed interpretation of the Oku world-view and a further account of *keyus*, see Koloss 1986 and 1987.

3. For a comparison between Ejagham (Cross River) and Oku medicine, see Koloss 1984 and 1985. For a more psychological perspective on Oku medicine see Krauss 1990. The reputation of Oku as a centre of strong and powerful medicines is such that it is known as

A basic distinction is made in Oku between 'good' and 'bad' medicine. 'Bad' medicines include those that are used to deter witches which can cause death. Many of the masquerading or other 'secret' societies have such 'bad' medicines to protect their sacra buried in the 'medicine corner' of the masquerade society's house. Anyone who looks at forbidden things will suffer the consequences, as will any member who reveals the secrets they have sworn to protect. The main medicine of some societies, such as the military society, is itself a 'bad' medicine. The most neutral gloss for this type of medicine is 'dangerous' or 'deadly'. The societies serve to channel the use of these 'bad' medicines to socially acceptable directions.

God and the ancestors also created 'good' medicines for the welfare of humanity, which masquerade societies possess. Apart from those of the secret societies, these can be produced and used in public. 'Good' medicines are not dangerous. Like 'bad' medicines, they are made in the course of rituals and on the part of ritual associations. Their production is far from merely following a recipe.<sup>4</sup> In all cases palm-wine and food must accompany the taking of the medicine proper. The wine must be served from a pot which is addressed in the prayers, since as we have already seen, the ancestors are held to gather in the bottom of wine pots. The efficacy of medicines stems from their transmission from the ancestors (and ultimately God). Medicines are inherited or created after a dream in which an ancestor asked for the medicine to be made.

The most important of all the Oku 'good' medicines is *kefuh myin* (the medicine of the gods), which is also called *kefuh wan* (medicine for a child) because its main use is to ensure the well-being of children. The importance of the *kefuh myin* palm-wine pots (normally stored in the house of the family head) is also expressed through the use of the term 'house gods' or more literally 'handmade gods' (*Emyin me bomin ne ngoh*), although strictly this appellation is restricted to the seventeen differentiated spirits or lesser gods for whom sacrifices are made by the *Ebfon* (king).

*Feyin* is the term for the High God in Oku, who created men and the whole world. In the plural (*emyin*) it can designate not only God and the seventeen lesser spirits or gods but also the ancestors. By extension it can be applied to all those who do good. This is the justification for the description of the *Ebfon* as *Feyin Ekwoh* (literally, 'God of Oku'). The study of prayers from different rituals may clarify the relations between the different aspects of Oku cosmology.

The general term for sacrifice in Oku is *echise myin* (literally, 'to give a good sleep to the gods'). *Echise myin* and *ntangle* are sharply differentiated, the former being only for gods or spirits, the latter exclusively for the ancestors. *Echise myin* consists solely of wine and *fufu* (the maize porridge

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the 'small India of Cameroon', and people travel long distances to be treated there. [Editor's note: India has a reputation in Cameroon as a source of powerful medicine.]

4. Recipes do exist and are kept secret. No attempt was made to study the recipes themselves.

staple), whereas *ntangle* involves animal sacrifice (fowls, or goats for royal ancestors). *Echise myin* is performed regularly once a year, usually in the dry season. *Kefuh myin*, the ritual that I will concentrate upon in the remainder of this article, may be interpreted as a part of *echise myin*, since it concerns the gods in a more general sense. On the other hand, *ntangle* is only performed (in theory) when the ancestors need to be appeased. In reality, however, many people perform *ntangle* without a particular issue in mind save for remembering the ancestors.

*Kefuh myin* is found throughout Oku, and I now turn to a detailed description of it. *Kefuh myin* is primarily concerned with the health and well-being of children, although it is sometimes performed in order to help overcome the problems of an adult.

All adult men may own *kefuh myin*, acquiring it through initiation from someone who already owns it and who is paid for teaching the neophyte how to perform it. Although it is exclusively men who carry out *kefuh myin*, women play a more prominent role in it than in other Oku medicines. Indeed, it is said that women were the original owners of *kefuh myin*, and it is often inherited matrilineally (from a mother to her daughters). Adult men often have *kefuh myin* for all their wives. It may be seen as a ritual counterbalance to the practice of patrilocal residence (at this stage of marriage) and serves as a unifying medium between the family of the husband and those of his wives.

*Kefuh myin* is normally acquired through inheritance, and most family groups in Oku possess it. However, some types of 'special' births require *kefuh myin* to be performed, and this may lead to *kefuh myin* being acquired. Twins or breech births are the commonest examples. It is believed that such children are likely to become diviners or healers in adulthood. Diviners also recommend *kefuh myin* for weak and sickly looking children.

### *The Performance of a Typical Kefuh Myin*

The sequence of actions in a typical *kefuh myin* ritual is as follows. First the officiant meets some of the other family members in the house where the *kefuh myin* equipment is stored. Principal among these objects are *eking myin*, *ebseck myin*, and the *bass myin*, which are further described below. Water is used to wash the palm-wine pot (*eking myin*), the gourd for the ancestors' wine (*ebeseck myin*) and the broken calabash (*bass myin*). Each is then placed on three special leaves. Medicine leaves are then prepared, being ground on a grinding-stone. The 'good' medicine is prepared before the 'bad' medicine. Some *egusi* (pounded pumpkin seeds) is mixed with oil and placed in a special container. After this the 'eyes' of the palm-wine pot are repainted and two vertical white lines are drawn on the side of the pot opposite the 'eye'. Then the gourd for the ancestors' wine

and the broken calabash are rubbed with bad medicine. Following this, two small snail-shells and a small stone that comes from the sacred lake of Oku are rubbed with bad medicine and placed inside the pot (they are used for a type of divination later in the ritual). Some vines are twisted round the neck of the pot.

Good medicine is then mixed with some pounded cocoyam, after which a variety of medicinal plants and two 'life plants' (*Dracaena* sp.) are put into the broken calabash. The officiant pours a little wine on the floor at the doorway and greets the ancestors. He then pours the wine into the wine pot. This is the occasion for a long prayer which explains the reasons for performing the ritual and asks the ancestors for their help. Then gum from the African plum tree (*elei*) is burnt in front of the wine pot. The smoke from this gum is said to drive away insects, dangerous spirits and bad dreams. This is followed by another prayer to the ancestors which accompanies 'the cleaning of *emkan*'. Two *emkan*<sup>5</sup> sticks are shaved into the palm-wine as a blessing. The remains of the sticks are then thrown on the ground, their fall being interpreted as an oracle.

Meanwhile the snail-shells floating in the palm-wine have been watched, and their orientation relative to one another interpreted. The best sign is if the tips of the shells are close together. Bad signs are the shells crossing over one another, or floating in different parts of the pot. This is taken to mean that the ancestors are not yet happy, that there are problems that are yet to be settled. The worse sign of all, however, occurs when one of the snail-shells is seen to sink and rise again three times. This is interpreted as warning of a death to come.

The gourd of the ancestors' wine is now filled and closed with a 'life plant'. Once the ancestors have had their share of the wine, the men present start to drink the wine. As each person is served, but before he drinks, a little wine is poured back into the pot in order to allow some of the *keyus* of the person to mix with the *keyus* of the other participants and with that of the ancestors. Next they make *njimte* (a ritual dish of pounded cocoyams and 'good' medicine). Small pieces are thrown into the four corners of the room as shares for the ancestors and a piece into the fire as a 'gift' for the 'bad' spirits. The men present then eat the remainder. After that the broken calabash is filled with water, and some of it is sprinkled around the room and on those present to bless them.

After the part of the ritual reserved to men is over, the women and children are called into the room. They form a line, each touching the person in front, with the principal woman being treated in front holding the hand of the officiant. He then rubs the wine pot, the broken calabash and the ancestors' calabash with more 'bad' medicine. A chicken (called 'the chicken for the child') is brought, given some *njimte* and rubbed with 'good' medicine. Some feathers are removed and stuck to the wine pot, the bro-

5. The *emkan* tree is found in the forest region of West Cameroon. It is used in several rituals in Oku and throughout the Grassfields.

ken calabash and the ancestors' calabash. The chicken is then given to the mother of the ill child. This chicken must never be killed. If it dies it must be replaced. It and its descendants become the property of the child for whom the *kefuh myin* has been performed. Finally the closing acts are performed: the room and all those present are blessed with water sprinkled from the broken calabash. The women and children are given some *njimte* and good medicine. Bad medicine is rubbed on the sternum of the sick child. The same vine that was already twisted round the wine pot is twisted round the neck of each participant. These are left in place for a few days as a sign of having been blessed in *kefuh myin*. Finally the rattle is shaken near to the ears of the children present.

As described, the *kefuh myin* ritual takes from two to three hours. It is frequently performed in the dry season in memory of the ancestors without any precipitating cause such as illness or birth. Either of these will occasion a *kefuh myin* performance which has an additional section, called *ngeo myin* ('the stream of the gods'). This is performed outside the house where the *kefuh myin* ritual has occurred. The officiant sprinkles some of the liquid from the broken calabash on to the ground. He then takes some of the wet soil on the point of a spear and holds it twice to the mouth of the sick child. All present then go to the 'stream', where a basket of medicinal plants is prepared. The *emkan* sticks are shaved over this basket as previously over the wine pot. The ancestors are summoned (often silently) to attend to the ritual as this is done. A ritual doorway (*ebchundah*) is then constructed. A spear and a stalk of elephant grass are stuck into the ground and the tops bound together so that they form a doorway. Two holes are then dug under this doorway and filled with medicinal plants. Between the holes the officiant places two iron implements, a hoe and a knife as used by women for farming.

Iron is held to contain a very large amount of *keyus* because its production is so difficult and dangerous. An implement will also contain some of the *keyus* of all those who have used it, so objects such as old hoes are held to be extremely powerful and are often kept for ritual use. They have a particular role to play when people are to be protected from danger or freed from bad influences. It is believed that during the ritual the ancestors will gather in the implements, just as they do within the wine pot and that the iron implements act like magnets to extract all malign influence from those who pass through the *ebchundah*.

As they pass through the *ebchundah* the participants stand on the hoe and are then washed with some water from the baskets that were prepared for this part of the ritual and with liquid from the broken calabash. Once everyone has been through the doorway, the medicinal plants are removed from the basket and the mother of the sick child puts a plant into each of the holes while holding her hands behind her back. The hole is then covered over with soil in the hope that one of the plants may sprout.

Cowry shells are thrown and the pattern interpreted as an oracle of the success of the ritual. A chicken is then placed between the two holes and

killed with the mother's help. Some of the feathers are stuck into the ground round the holes. Everyone present has some camwood rubbed on their forehead, and they then re-enter the house to lick some good medicine and drink the remaining palm-wine while the chicken is being roasted. Once it has been eaten and the wine finished, the ritual objects are returned to store. The leading officiant is given a chicken and a good quantity of palm oil.

### *Objects Used in Kefuh Myin*

Apart from the wine pot described above, the other objects used in *kefuh myin* are as follows:

(1) *Eking myin* (the wine pots of the gods). Wine pots (such as *eking myin*) are the most important objects in all 'medicine' rites, *kefuh myin* among them. These pots hold the palm-wine which links the participants with the ancestors who are held to gather within the pot (see above). Two circles, described as the 'eyes of God' (*eshea feyin*), are drawn on the *eking myin*, one on the outside, one at the base of the pot. These circles are drawn with a white concoction which is itself a 'good' medicine, and is licked by the participants in the course of the ritual. The interior of the circles is filled in with a different medicine, black in colour, which is described as a 'bad' medicine which must not be eaten. It can be directed by the ancestors against anyone who violates the restrictions that surround the *kefuh myin* rite; for example, it can affect the owners of *kefuh myin* should they omit to perform an annual sacrifice for *kefuh myin*. The participants are rubbed with this 'bad' medicine which will act to extract anything bad from them (this is similar to the treatment of children with a minor illness). When not in use, the *kefuh myin* wine pots are stored in the house of the family head; they are used only for ritual purposes. They are not made in Oku but are purchased from the neighbouring chiefdom of Babessi. If *kefuh myin* has to be performed urgently for a child, a large calabash can be used if the parents do not already own *kefuh myin* and are purchasing it for their sick child.

The masquerade societies and other associations have similar wine pots, which are slightly larger than those used for *kefuh myin*. They are called *eking mkum* (pot of the juju) and they are also distinguished from those of *kefuh myin* by using red as well as black and white to mark the 'eyes' of the pots. The black 'bad' medicine is the same as that used to protect the musical instruments and the headpiece of the masquerades from the gaze of non-initiates.

(2) *Ebseck myin* (calabash for the gods). This is a small, long-necked calabash which holds the palm-wine sacrificed for God and for the ancestors. It is sealed with a 'life-plant' (*Dracaena* sp.).

(3) *Keghen myin* (half-calabash for the gods) or *bass myin* (broken calabash for the gods). This is the blessing calabash which has great prominence in ritual practice throughout the Grassfields. It contains the plants and liquid of the *kefuh myin* medicine which is splashed over participants to bless them.

(4) *Ebsie myin* is a small pot holding a small amount of *egusi* (pounded pumpkin seeds).

(5) *Keal myin* is a dish from which the participants eat *njimte*, a ritual dish made nowadays from pounded cocoyams but formerly from guinea corn and *egusi*.

(6) *Ebom myin* is the cup from which palm-wine is drunk.

(7) *Kecheake myin* is a rattle shaken near the ears of children at the end of the ritual. It is said to improve their hearing.

### *Case-Studies: Some Kefuh Myin Rituals*

Having described the general pattern of a *kefuh myin* rite, let us now consider some examples that I observed during fieldwork undertaken between 1977 and 1981. These help to illustrate how the general form of the rite is adapted to the particular circumstances that lead to particular *kefuh myin* performances. The prayers that follow were spoken in an ordinary conversational style, as if addressing a living person present in the room. There is no distinct genre of speech in prayer.

#### Case 1: Oku-Keyon, 1 December 1977

Fai Bafon had died on 20 July 1976 but there had never been a *kefuh myin* ceremony for him 'to loosen his hands from the medicine'.<sup>6</sup> One of his daughters had become ill, and a diviner diagnosed that her illness was the result of the failure to perform this ritual. The ritual was carried out in the usual way, but in addition the palm-wine pot and the walls of the room were wiped with a chicken to 'drive out the bad spirit of the dead father'. The chicken was later killed and eaten. When the *njimte* was thrown into the four corners of the room, the dead parents were asked to bring all their siblings to bless their sick daughter. The prayer continued. 'The living can do nothing at the moment, only the ancestors can help. The good gods should

6. When the owner of a medicine dies, this ritual must be performed so that the successor can safely use the medicine. The ritual asks the spirit of the deceased to approve and bless the successor.

eat with their mouths, the bad gods with their noses.’ This is a common metaphor in this context.

#### Case 2: Oku-Elack, 29 December 1977

The family of Fai Keming carried out a ‘normal’ *kefuh myin* without any illness as precipitating cause.<sup>7</sup> Fai Keming made the following invocations in the course of the ritual. While pouring wine at the threshold, he prayed:

‘Oh gods of this area or the ancestors of this compound, take this wine and put it into this pot. Give us blessings and give us one *keyus* so that we will work together. And give sound sleep to everyone. Stop us from having bad dreams.’

When the wine was being poured into the wine pot, he prayed:

‘Oh, Chiekoh [his dead mother], call the fathers of this place so that you are the one who is pouring it into the pot. Chiekoh, it is now dry season, give one *keyus* to the family. Tangte, we will harvest coffee and we hope to get much money from the Cooperative through your help. Call Nyamsai and Chiekoh and all of you should come under this wine pot and also Keming who founded this pot [i.e. the first owner of this *kefuh myin* medicine], which was later forgotten by the people. I say it is now dry season and time for harvesting coffee. I say that you should send us blessings and also to the whole world. Send good *keyus* to all of us, because this is the time that people renew the wine pot.’

Finally, when the *emkan* sticks were being shaved over the medicines, he prayed:

‘This is *emkan*. When it mixes in this pot with the wine, our prayers and our *keyus* will mix. Now it is dry season. It is time for money. We wish every boy and girl to get money so they can buy salt and oil and protect their lives. We do not hate strangers. But send away bad people. Bring us good people who can show us good ways, whether people with medicines or other people. Send away the bad and bring us the good. How is it that other groups have progress but we do not see any development? We are always praying and begging that good luck should come to us.’

#### Case 3: Oku-Ngashie, 5 December 1978

Fai Mankoh performed both *kefuh myin* and another ritual called *ngeo myin* for a new-born child. Two of the prayers he uttered are as follows:

7. This *kefuh myin* ceremony was filmed (Koloss 1988) and has formed the basis of the documentaation of the main elements of the ritual.

'Gods, we are here with children before you. Take away all evil from them and bring them just good things and health. Let them grow up in the way the modern world demands. The world now belongs to the white man. Take away evil and show us the way of the whites.'

As the *njimte* was being thrown into the corners of the room, he prayed:

'We call on you, mother of these children, to join us today in making *kefuh myin* for these children. Take this *njimte* [cocoyam] and give it to the other elders so that they may join us too. Let the bad gods take this with their noses and run away with evil far from us. Let the good gods take this food with their mouths and bring us the good.'

Case 4: Oku-Elack, 20 November 1981

Fai Keming performed *kefuh myin* because of the illnesses of one of his daughters and of her daughter. A diviner diagnosed the anger of the ancestors, who felt forgotten because no *kefuh myin* had been performed for a long time. While pouring the wine into the wine pot, Fai Keming addressed them as follows:

'Call all the former medicine men. Take this wine and put it with one *keyus* into the pot. Although I am pouring the wine, it is your doing. If I have forgotten any leaf, put it in for me. I beg you to give these people good dreams and good health. Also the dead fathers of this place should call the gods of this place [i.e. some of the seventeen Oku divinities] to bless these people with their *keyus* and give them good dreams and a sound sleep.'

Case 5: Oku-Ngashie, 22 November 1981

Pa Kegham from Oku-Mboh performed *kefuh myin* after a diviner diagnosed that it would help the treatment of a young boy. While the *emkan* sticks were being scraped over the wine pot, Pa Kegham prayed:

'Oh Tambong [an ancestor] this is *emkan*. Call Kinkoh [the father of Tambong]. All of you should meet and clean this *emkan* for us and put its shavings into the medicine for the child. God should send his blessings. Oh mothers of this child and Tango [another ancestor], everything is in your hands, you should join together and send blessings. We know you can see what has happened. So send away bad dreams and give a good sleep to this child. *Emkan*, let Tango call all the mothers of this child and everyone will talk with one mouth.'

My presence along with my interpreter was noted, and my interpreter was explicitly mentioned in the prayers:

'Oh, this boy here, you have been made a *nchinda* [i.e. he had become a member of *kwifon*, the most important secret society in Oku as in many Grassfield societies]. These are your blessings. As you are travelling with this white man, may God bless you in all your doings. If the white man gives you anything, let it be of use to you and your family. The world has changed. I hope it is your own good luck (which Oku gave you) and bless too, this white man.'

### *Conclusions: God is First*

Oku believe in functionalism! Peace and social harmony attract the blessings of the ancestors and the supreme God *Feyin*, who is the ultimate recipient of all prayers and the ultimate source of all *keyus*, the life-power. Traditional healers and diviners have a large repertoire of rituals and medicines available to them and great knowledge and experience, but they say that all of these things depend, in the last resort, on *Feyin*, the source of all life. As they say, *mbiy lu Feyin* ('God is first').

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