This essay is a brief study in the sacrificial system of the Ibibio people of Nigeria. It involves a description of the different sacrificial types offered by the Ibibio and a theoretical reflection on their religious significance. Attempt is also made to explicate in footnotes some ritual symbols as a full treatment of this aspect is not possible within the space limitation.

I. Background

The Ibibio, the sixth largest people in Nigeria, number about three million people spread over ten clans in the South Eastern part of the country. They dwell mainly in villages with farming, trading and fishing as the principal occupations. Their society is structured around a patrilineal system of descent with significant matrifocal elements. The household (ufok), which today is giving way to the elementary family as the basic social unit, consists of a man as the head, his wife or wives, his unmarried children and married sons with their wives and children. All owe allegiance to the household head and occupy the same homestead (otung) which may comprise up to four buildings. A number of households acknowledging a common unbroken agnatic line of descent constitute the lineage (ekpuk) which is considered a permanent unit comprising not only living but also dead members who are thought still to influence the course of events within it. There may be up to seven ekpuk in an average-size village, and the village, which may number 1000-5000 inhabitants, is a politically autonomous unit headed by the chief (obong idung). To assist in governing the people, there are in every village a council of elders and cultic associations which are religious in character and to which all, both men and women belong. A group of villages make up the clan each of which has a dialect, a uniform custom and a clan head. Neither the clan nor the people is
a political unit. The clan head performs purely ritual functions in the clan and there is no tribal head.  

For understanding Ibibio sacrifices, it is necessary first to understand Ibibio theoretical conceptions of the world and of life. For them, the world has two aspects—visible, that is the domain of ordinary human experience; and invisible, the domain of God, the gods and the spirits. We shall refer to these two aspects as "the world visible" and "the world invisible". Human life passes through these two domains in a cycle: the adult becomes aged and passes into the world invisible to be re-incarnated and born again as a baby into the world visible. Birth and death are therefore moments in the life cycle. But premature birth, twin birth, and birth with legs first; and death by accident, the death of young persons and even serious illness, are considered as abnormal and are attributed to the influence of unfriendly invisible powers.

The Ibibio believe that there is a high God (Abasi) who created all things including the gods (ndem) to whom He also gives charge of the different aspects of human affairs. Thus there is ndem isong (fertility goddess) to look after land fertility, ndem udua (market god) to protect the interests of those who buy and sell in the market, etc. Below the gods are unincarnated spirits like eka abasi, the spirit mother who looks after young children. Then are the spirits of the dead who may be good like the ancestors, or bad like the spirits of wicked people. All sacrifices are directed to one or other of these invisible beings and are officiated at by the clan head, village head, household head or the medicine man depending on the occasion. They are not offered in temples or on altars, for the Ibibio do not have these, but inside dwelling homes and at such open places as crossroads, unused pathways, bases of trees and the riverside. Sacrifice may be offered in the morning, evening or midnight, but never at midday.

II. SACRIFICIAL TYPES

We shall discuss Ibibio sacrifices according to the following classification:

A. THE ANNUAL SACRIFICE: The End-of-the-year Sacrifice

B. AGRICULTURAL SACRIFICES
   1. Cultivation Sacrifice
   2. New Yam Sacrifice