

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RESTORATION/SUSTENANCE OF PEACE:
AN APPRAISAL OF OATH TAKING AND COVENANT MAKING IN
AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION.**

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Abstract

Conflict is a natural incidence among human beings. Hence, whenever people gather in social, political, religious, communal, ethnic and family groups, the possibility of conflicts abound because man is competitive and aggressive in nature. So the origin of conflict can be explained by man's nature and his unavoidable and insatiable aspirations and wants. This paper maintains that conflicts are sometimes resolved without sustaining peace, especially when resolved using western/modern method of conflict resolution characterized by litigation. Hence the traditional Africans appear to have more confidence in traditional method of conflict resolution than the Western method, because the traditional methods insist on the truth rather than superiority of argument (as is the case in litigation) in its judgement. The main target of traditional method of conflict resolution is peace and reconciliation, not compensation and punishment as is the case in litigation. Oath taking and covenant making being some of the extra judicial methods of conflict resolution play a major role not only in conflict resolution but also in restoration/ sustenance of peace. Its quest for truth, preventive potency, and reconciliatory values made it very unique, more result oriented, and desirable by the traditional African society. Using the analytic, historical, and descriptive methods, this paper seeks to carry out an appraisal of oath taking and covenant making in African traditional religion with particular reference to their role in conflict resolution and restoration/ sustenance of peace.

Key Words: Conflict, Peace, Oath taking, Covenant, Religion.

Introduction

Naturally, man as a competitive being, has some element of distrust, and has insatiable desires. All these characteristics of man make conflict inevitable in human relationship and the society. Conflicts occur due to differences in our opinion, ideology, goals, and interest. Being part of human nature, conflict entails struggle, competition, rivalry for objects to which individuals and groups attach value, which could be material or no material. It entails the expression of disagreement, opposition, and confrontation in the face of incompatible values.

Because conflict is inevitable in human relationship, hence the need for not only conflict resolution, but also for restoration and sustenance of peace. Knowing that sometimes we resolve conflict without restoring peace among the conflicting groups, and also knowing that peace and conflict are two different situations that impact respectively on the living condition of man constructively and destructively, there is therefore need to restore and sustain peace whenever and wherever conflicts are resolved to prevent reoccurrence of the same conflict in future.

Though African traditional societies are known to hold secrets of peacemaking and peacebuilding locked in their culture formed from customs and norms (Nwolise 2004), the pre-colonial African society was not at all times peaceful, there were moments as we witnessed today when tension and open physical conflict ensued. Some of such issues that spark off deep misunderstanding among individuals, families, and communities includes marriages, inheritance, religious affairs, land disputes, cultural activities and so on (Umezurike 2016). Conflict resolution measures in the pre-colonial

African society were embedded in the tradition and culture of the Africans. So African traditional method of conflict resolution has its religious dimension.

This paper therefore, examines oath taking and covenant making in African traditional religion with particular reference to their role in conflict resolution and restoration/sustenance of peace in Africa. The paper also emphasizes the importance of restoration and sustenance of peace whenever and wherever conflict is resolved. It is the position of this paper that the conflict resolution strategies embedded in African traditional religion especially oath taking and covenant making have shown resilience, significance, and functionality from the pre-colonial period till this modern time in seeking the truth and restoration/sustenance of peace during conflict resolution. This paper therefore, uses ethnographic approach, historical analysis, evaluative and critic-analytical methods to appraise the oath taking and covenant making in African traditional religion in relation to conflict resolution and restoration/ sustenance of peace in Africa.

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict: Conflict according to Lewis Coser (1956), is “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals”. In other words, conflict entails struggle, competition, and rivalry for objects which individuals and groups attach value, which could be material or nonmaterial. It also entails the expression of disagreement, opposition, and confrontation in the face of incompatible values. Conflict arises whenever individuals have different values, opinions, needs, interests and are unable to find a middle way. Conflict can be as a clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements and even sometimes perception. It can arise between individuals, groups, communities, states, countries, etc.

McLean (2005) on the other hand gave a more subtle view of conflict as follows:

The physical or psychological struggle associated with the
Perception of opposing or incompatible goals, desires, demands,
Wants or needs. When incompatible goal, scarce resources, or interference
Are present, conflict often results but it doesn't mean the relationship
Is poor or failing.

This implies that conflict is not all that evil, rather it is a fundamental human and social trait since a completely conflict free and harmonious society is impossible.

Summarily, Hocker and Wilmot (1991) outlined several principles on conflict as follows:

- #Conflict is universal
- #Conflict is associated with incompatible goals
- #Conflict is associated with scarce resources
- #Conflict is associated with interference
- #Conflict is not a sign of a poor relationship
- #Conflict cannot be avoided
- #Conflict is not always bad

African Traditional Religion: African traditional religion refers to the indigenous or autochthonous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts, society and so on. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the world view of the African people. (Jacob k. Olupona 2000). From African traditional religion can be said to encompass all African beliefs and practices that are considered religious but are neither Christian nor Islamic. It is mainly concerned with rituals, ceremonies and lived practices and tradition.

Though every ethnic group in Africa has developed a complex and distinctive set of religious belief and practices, they all have common features which make those beliefs and practices uniquely African in nature. In other words, despite their seemingly unrelated aspects, there are common features to these systems, suggesting that African traditional faiths form a cohesive religious tradition because religion permeates all aspects of traditional African culture. Africans are deeply spiritual people. Their traditional religion are perhaps the least understood facet of African life.

African traditional religion is polytheistic in nature, hence African myths frequently describe numerous lesser deities who assist the Supreme Being while performing diverse function in the created world. This view is explained better by African Cosmogony and cosmology which form the core philosophy of African traditional religions. African cosmogonic narratives explain how the world was put into place by a divine being, usually the supreme God in collaboration with lesser supernatural beings who act on his behalf or aid in the creative process. African cosmology on the other hand, tends to assert that there is a supreme God Who is helped by a number of lesser deities. Unlike other world religions, African traditional religion has no predominant doctrinal teachings, rather they have certain vital elements that function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination.

Oath Taking: Oath taking is the process of conflict resolution in African society which hinges on the recognition of the ancestral powers and authority (Olaoba, 2005). It is one of the rituals and a highly respected institution in Africa. Oath is therefore seen as a solemn to a deity or to witness one's determination to speak the truth or keep promise (Merriam Webster's dictionary 2010). Oath taking according to Ele, (2017) "is a ritual practice of making the disputants and their witnesses prove the sincerity of their allegation, assertions, and demands in the process of conflict resolution". The oath is sworn by either the accused to exonerate himself from an accusation, or by the accuser to prove the sincerity of his accusation. Generally, oath is taking to establish the truth, maintain good human relationship, and maintain the secrecy of an institution. (Nnadi 2012). The oath is usually administered either by verbal utterances, drinking of concoction, touching or crossing over the deity's insignia. Oath is usually taken in the presence of a shrine, deity, chief priest, or ancestors, and their presence is being invoked. It is believed that anyone who swears the oath falsely suffers hardship, affliction, sickness, or death as the case may be. (Ele, 2017). In the view of Nwakoby (2004) "Time is normally given within which the offending party is expected to either be killed by the gods or be sick so as to confirm that he is the offending party". In other words, it is expected that the gods will visit the suspected defaulter with one affliction or the other within the stipulated time/duration which may be immediate, days, months, or latest a year, otherwise the suspect is declared innocent, and is free to celebrate his innocence in any manner of his choice. This implies that "an oath taker's guilt or innocence is established depending on whether or not the accused dies or falls sick within the time given." (Oraegbunam, 2009).

Covenant Making: Covenant is " an integral part of judicial system...employed to effect genuine reconciliation and thus re-establish confidence between disputants whose relationship had been so strained that normal intercourse was impaired"(UKESSAYS 2018). It could be between individuals, families, kindred, Villages, or neighbors, as the case may be. Duru (2009) outlined the materials that could be used in making covenant as follows: blood, kola nut, palm wine, hot drinks, ofo stick, water, etc. Ele (2017) maintained that "though the methods and materials for covenant may vary, but the formulae and the incantations used to invoke the supreme beings are essentially constant." The process usually starts with the invocation of gods, spirits and ancestors, then a declaration of the

points(which has been agreed upon) at issue which gave rise to the ritual, and finally, consumption of the edible item (which may be either blood, kola nut, palm wine, water, etc.) used for the covenant as a seal to the bond. It is believed that “those who breach the terms of the covenant are severely punished by the gods, deities, or shrines in whose presence the covenant was made”(Ele 2017). The punishment may be inform of sickness, sudden death, madness, infertility etc. as the case may be.

Appraisal of the Role of Oath Taking and Covenant Making In Restoration/Sustenance of Peace
Conflict resolution methods in African society were embedded in the religion, tradition, and culture of the Africans, conflict resolution has its religious dimension as the supernatural, priest, ancestors. Shrines, deities, and the Supreme Being are invoked as witnesses to oath taking and covenant making. Oath taking and covenant making are very important religious and extra judicial methods of conflict resolution in Africa. It is important to note that the ability of oath taking and covenant making to restore and sustain peace after conflict resolution is what makes the two methods unique and different from every other methods of conflict resolution. Though the roles of oath taking and covenant making are intertwined to some extent, which is why most scholars of African traditional religion sometimes confuse the two, it is important for us to note that in as much as their roles are similar to a certain level, there are points of divergence in their roles. For instance, while the main aim of oath taking is to establish the truth and boost confidence among the disputants, the main aim of covenant on the other hand, is to smoothen the relationship, establish a bond, and guarantee trust after conflict resolution. So the nature of the conflict to be resolved determines whether oath taking or covenant making, or both will be used. If there is need to ascertain the truth in a conflict, then oath taking is needed. On the other hand, if there is need to smoothen the relationship and establish a bond between the disputants to prevent each from secretly harming the other, then there is need for a covenant to be made. In all, “oath taking and covenant making are conflict resolution strategies found in African traditional religion which have both preventive potency and reconciliatory values” (Ele, 2017). And these strategies in African traditional religion have shown resilience, significance, and functionality from the pre-colonial period till this contemporary period.

Oath taking and covenant making play very unique roles in restoration and sustenance of peace during conflict resolution, some of such roles will be analyzed one after the other as follows:

Ascertaining the Truth: Oath taking is the surest way of ascertaining the truth in Africa during conflict resolution, because it is a statement or assertion made under penalty of divine retribution for intentional falsity (Nwankwo 2017). In the words of Oyitso (2013), “Oath taking isa confirmation of the truth by naming something held sacred, a statement or promise confirm by an appeal to a sacred higher being to enforce the attached sanction.” Because it establishes and reveals the truth during conflict resolution, It is therefore, according to Ayisi (1979), a significant feature of the administration of justice among the Africans.

Genuine Reconciliation: Both oath taking and covenant making guarantees genuine reconciliation during conflict resolution in Africa since there is often the appeal to a higher power who is believed to be unbiased towards or against any party involved, while at the same time, the higher power served as a witness or/and as a potential sanction to punish whosoever fail to carry out the statement promised on oath or covenant as the case may be. The higher power could be God, a local deity, an ancestor, etc.

Elimination of Deep Rooted Enmity: oath taking and covenant making play a major role in eliminating deep rooted enmity between the disputants. Any reconciliation involving either oath taking or covenant, or both, is always purposeful, result oriented, functional and lasting because the oath taking and covenant making assuage injured feelings, restore peace, and reach a compromise acceptable to both disputants.

Promotion of intimacy: Here, “the parties Directly submitted to the supernatural tribune to settle disputes brought before the deity (Ikeora, 2016). By so doing, trust and bond is restored during oath taking and covenant making, and intimacy is also promoted between the disputants. Speaking about oath taking, Mabel (2013), pointed out that “it binds two people together in a mutual confidence that there would not be a betrayal of the confidence they repose in one another.

Peaceful coexistence/Harmonious Relationship: When trust and confidence is restored through oath taking and covenant making, there’s bound to be peaceful coexistence/harmonious relationship between the disputants for the oath and covenant give enough assurance to the disputants. In summary, James (2000) outlined some functions of oath taking (and covenant) as follows: (a) fosters unity among communities (as was seen in Aguleri and Umuleri community), (b) enhances mutual trust between the parties, (c) enforces loyalty and faithfulness. All the aforementioned functions result in peaceful and harmonious co-existence and also preservation of lives and property.

Conclusion

Each people, race, or identity group in the world including Africa had (and still have) their own way of doing things especially as it concerns social control and conflict resolution. Having stated earlier that from the pre-colonial Africa till date, Africa was not at all times peaceful, and also that there were moments as we witness today when tension and open physical conflict ensued, past efforts to control these conflicts, resolve them, and restore/ sustain peace through administrative and bureaucratic machinery, coupled with theories and methods crafted in Euro-American institutions have failed to yield practical results (Mezie Okoye 2016). This is because, African traditional societies are known to hold secrets of peacemaking and peacebuilding locked in their culture formed from customs and norms before the coming of the colonial masters disrupted them. Even with the modernization, these traditional institutions still holds sway, keeping the heart of the society in harmony (Mezie Okoye 2016).

Africans individually and collectively were spiritual people, and every aspect of their lives including conflict resolution, restoration and sustenance of peace are controlled by some supernatural influence. Hence “the supernatural influence.... Facilitates peace and harmony” (Adewoye 1977). This also makes it possible for each disputant parties to go home happy and satisfied, without feeling cheated or victimized, in other words, there is no victor nor vanquished in the process of reconciliation in African Traditional Religion especially when oath taking and covenant making is involved in the process. This is simply because oath taking and covenant making (characterized by quest for truth, preventive potency and reconciliatory values) clears the doubt, suspicion , and grudge from the heart of the disputant parties, and at the same time restores and sustains peace between the disputant parties. In all, Not all cases are suitable for litigation or police settlement, especially cases where the need to restore a lost relationship, save or ease pressure or preserve family or privacy is high, Hence the importance of oath taking and covenant making in traditional conflict resolution.

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