

**OATH-TAKING: A RELIGIO-CULTURAL PATHWAY TO JUSTICE IN
WEST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY**

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Abstract

Oath-taking is a formal promise by way of swearing, to do something, keep an agreement and not default or betray one another. It is the act of calling upon God or a god to witness the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says. A solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words. Africans are traditional people who believe in God, gods, divinities, deities, and ancestors. Oath or swearing is very common in their worship life and interpersonal relationships to gain trust from the other party. In West African society, there is the problem of trust among neighbours and that is the driving force for taking of oath. When an oath is taken as proof of innocence or a vow to keep to one's part of the agreement, the supernatural being is invoked as the judge and dispenser of justice and retribution to defaulters. This paper explores the concept of oath-taking as a religio-cultural pathway to justice in West Africa's traditional society and the shrine as a sacred place for dispute resolution/justice via oath-taking. The analytical method is utilised. It further makes use of books, journals, internet sources etc., and recommends amongst others, that truth-telling should be employed by individuals rather than swearing, which may have a high level of spiritual and supernatural negative impacts since the gods can be bribed at times.

Keywords: West Africa, Justice, Oath, Religion, Shrine, Tradition and Swearing

Introduction

The use of traditional oath is not strange to Africans, as many cultures and communities use it as a means to deal with criminality in their societies. Corruption is a social malaise in Africa which necessitates the use of traditional oath-taking as one of the strategies to tackle it. In the process of oath-taking, various shrines are usually the beehive of these activities. Such shrines include Ayelala, Ogun, Shongo, Okija, Asigidi and Oronmila just to mention a few in Nigeria. These are perceived to be powerful deities that the majority of Nigerian politicians fear more than their creator– God.

Shrines are vessels in two important senses. They can act as homes in a literal sense for the spirits of ancestors and deities who must be regularly placated and petitioned for blessings, requests for intercession, and divine sanction. These spirits or entities must be venerated with pilgrimages, offerings such as money, food, beer, spirits, and sacrifices of animals. Spiritual intercession from ancestors and deities is sought for a wide range of events, including, but not limited to: births, marriages and funerals; the appointment of a new chief; the building of a new home or compound; political or military success; protection against witchcraft; a safe journey; and, perhaps most importantly, the planting or harvesting of a season's agricultural produce. According to Thompson (1998), supplication to a shrine is motivated by the same reasons that a Christian might use to go to church or a Hindu might offer to support their local temple to Ganesh.

The gravity of an oath's binding nature is attested in typical African traditional society where an oath is an important factor in conflict resolution. As such, the result of conflict resolution is always to accommodate all parties involved in the conflict, through genuine cooperation. In doing so, unnecessary antagonism is avoided, because the ultimate aim of conflict resolution is an amicable settlement by persuasion, mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, arbitration and negotiation, not necessarily resorting to the use of force or coercion at all cost. The power of oaths endures in modern court proceedings/traditional cultural practices and is bolstered by severe penalties for perjury. Venerated as well are traditions of swearing oaths upon objects considered to bear special powerful spiritual forces, such as the bones of one's ancestors. As an aspect of African Traditional Institutions, oaths are taken at crossroads, with Bibles, standing on stones, and certain kinds of graves. This research seeks to examine the potency of oath for justice in West African societies, as well as, the consequences of taking false oaths. Obviously, due to negative consequences from supernatural forces associated with false oath-taking, honesty is expected from anyone who is involved in taking an oath.

Conceptual Clarification of Vital Terms

In this section some vital terms will be briefly explain. The clarification of these terms will help any reader that might come across the paper.

Oath-Taking: Oath-taking is a distortion of values in politics, to the extent that it transfers allegiance from the system to an individual, who for selfish ambition or depravity, decides to take the place of God in the life of the oath-taker(s). It is a sign of degeneracy that oaths are taken, whether for loyalty, monetary or pecuniary gain in our politics. It presupposes the harboring of an act that is not for the public good, as no politician with an altruistic purpose will subject fellow citizens to oath-taking rituals. The ultimate aim is to short-change the public good by privatizing public affairs through a fetish cage (Odumakin 2009). Oath-taking in the traditional sense requires absolute loyalty or adherence to a certain agreement and conditionality. It is prescribed and administered to sustain agreement, and the exercise is usually fetish. It is expected that whoever has taken such oath will not escape the punishment or sanction of a certain supernatural force or deity if the oath is flouted (Okorie 2009). Obioha and Etifiok (2023) state that an oath in African traditional conception is defined as a solemn promise made by an individual or group of persons having a deity as a witness to the terms of the agreement. It can also be seen and regarded as an affirmation of an intended action or deed, binding on an individual with an obligation to be fulfilled. Such promises may either be a verbal formula or a symbolic ritual.

Oath-taking can use various open religious beliefs to protect and uphold the Constitution and the interest of Nigerians whose resources they are to manage on their behalf. Unfortunately and regrettably too, godfathers in Nigerian Politics and Public Administration have shifted attention from the Constitutional provision for public office oath-taking, to secret and fetish oath-taking geared towards their firm grip of all the instruments of governance and by extension perpetuate their wealth at the expense of Nigerians (Okorie 2009). He further states that the oath concludes by pronouncing that he who remains true to the oath shall prosper, while he who does not shall attain 'the opposite lot', inviting the scrutiny of the gods themselves upon his actions.

Pagan oaths to trees, the sky, etc., are found at the level of votary practice, as well as, swearing by the saints and the hair upon God's head, attested in diverse Christian homilies and penitential (Schulke 2005). Among Christians, the seventeenth-century Protestation Oath, sworn against papist doctrine, fulfilled a function of dividing friend from foe and was accorded a degree of ritual status (Gaskill 1992). Other Christian sects, such as Quakers and Anabaptists, prosecute taboos on oath-taking, based on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 5 to swear not at all (Matt 5:34). Indeed, oaths

of secrecy among practitioners of the magical arts are a feature of sorcery from the most ancient records. If an oath is easily broken, it is often the case that the strength and power of its bond were of insufficient integrity to begin with. However, as with all forms of mundane commitment, one's honour, both among the gods and men, is the issue at stake. In the case of breaking a magical oath, the erosion of one's honour before the spirits may result in a self-invoked curse or the spiritualist forsaking the practitioner. This was well understood in ancient Mesopotamia, for the spirit of oath was *mammitum*, sometimes regarded as a demon, and at other times a goddess, having the power, not only to threaten retribution upon oath-breakers but also to deliver them a curse, Abusch (cited in Schulke, 2005). Nana (2020) opines that an oath is taken to ensure that the parties of an agreement fulfil their assigned roles. In traditional oath-taking, deities and ancestors are called to be witnesses to the agreement. The oath is a fearful ritual, and during rituals; words connoting calamity and death are used to pledge, stating that a person will keep to one's part of the agreement.

Upon an oath, one does not swear to the detriment of his/her life, rather it is wholly committed to that which is just and beneficial. It is, thus, wise to embrace the pagan origin of the Holy Sacrament, for the meaning of *sacramentum* is 'oath'. Its original usage referred to the pledge taken, under Roman law, between parties engaged in a lawsuit. The *Sacramentum* was thus binding before the gods, and those taking oath placed both their lives and possessions in their hands, Abusch (cited in Schulke, 2005). It may be rightly spoken that the acts of oath-breaking and swearing falsely by their nature repudiate belief in the power of the gods and spirits.

Culture: Culture is generally seen as the people's way of life which in the Nigerian context reflects the West African lifestyle. According to Sibani (2014), culture as a concept is only meaningful in the context of human society. As an entity that incorporates the totality of a people's way of life, culture is both incorporative of and synonymous with a given society's way of life. Culture is handed down from age to age, generation to generation and has its traits transmitted to newer generations. Culture identifies and makes for the uniqueness of a people by indelible imprints it carries on the people's lives. Culture though transmissible is also acquired by learning and sharing through education. It goes on to impact their customary practices, dressing patterns and language(s).

According to (Arinze, 2006, p.116):

By implication, if a people's culture dies, it dies with the people's identity. Just like people live, culture also lives: it lives with the people. Since all living contingent entities are mortal, culture is also mortal. In other words, culture can die. The dying of culture is referred to as cultural extinction.

Most cultural traits are inherited from the older generations and the usefulness and the reason for the existence of some of them are hardly comprehended by later generations of the inheritors of such cultural practices. In the view of Nmah (2008), individuals may use culture in their own ways; they may change elements in their culture, yet what they use and change is social. Culture is the social heritage they receive and transmit. It is human achievement such as a canal, an arrowhead, houses, food, education, tradition, myth, science, arts, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, inventions, technologies, and the like. Howard (1986) said that culture has three principal aspects: behavioural, perceptual and material. The behavioural component refers to how people act, especially how they interact with each other. The perception is the views people have of the world and the material component of culture refers to the physical objects that we produce. Culture is a group effort and is socially shared.

Justice in the West African Traditional Religion

The need and the quest for justice in the micro and macro societies, and by extension, the global world, is increasingly becoming inevitable in the wake of all kinds of violence and orchestrated social disorder and breakdown of law that characterize our world today. Justice cuts across and assumes a high degree of importance in every sphere of human endeavor, such that it is a recurrent concept, an ideal in ethics, jurisprudence, governance and every other form of human undertaking that involve human relationships, management and administration. At the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, it is a cardinal virtue such that with it, global peace is guaranteed, and without it, our world will remain a place of horror and discomfort. As a result of this, the concept of Justice has become real and very topical in contemporary societies.

Man has never bothered himself with what justice means since it is a natural law. Instead, the problem of natural justice has bordered on its hermeneutics. It borders on justice calculus – what natural justice is and what it is not (Dukor 2003). The reality of justice is felt whenever somebody cheats us, or our group is marginalized in the share and distribution of national resources and properties. However, the concept of justice cuts across national boundaries and assumes a very important place in international politics, that is, politics between and among states. There is something anthropologically and ontologically common to man and objects, creatures and phenomena of the universe.

Although justice has taken the coloration of cultures, philosophies, individuals and schools of thought, still the bottom line of this concept is that it is synchronically (a historical) in terms of definition. Whatever differences there may be in the definition of justice by scholars, broadly speaking, the concept pictures integrity, impartiality, rightness and fairness as constituting the notion of justice. However, more fundamental to

the concept of natural justice are natural rights, which constitute the most original, inalienable and natural, form of justice. Ogunmodede (2005) identifies justice as the oldest human virtue in the world. It is mentioned among the 42 virtues of “Negative Confessions” called the Book of the Dead (Hilliard 1987) by the Ancient Black Egyptians. The Egyptian term “Maat” is the oldest word for justice and it means “truth, justice and righteousness” of life among men and before the gods.

Justice is keeping what is properly one’s own and doing one’s own job, (Plato 1974). Justice is the sovereign virtue and the major purpose of the state. Justice is treating equals equally and unequal unequally and in proportion to their relevant differences (Aristotle 1976). He further maintains that “unjust means either lawless or unfair; therefore justice means either lawful or just”.

The Shrine: A Sacred Place for Dispute Resolution/Justice in West Africa

The word shrine is derived from the Latin word *scrinium*—meaning box or receptacle, as in containers of sacred meaning and power (Courtright, 1987). Referring to the shrine as a box is based on its function in incubating divinities. It is at this place that the divinities manifest their unseen presence to man through their emblems. Van Binsbergen (cited in Ezenweke and Nwachukwu, 2017) defined a shrine as an observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localized and usually immobile. Because of this, the shrine could be adjudged a cultural institution encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural material of the community. Within the fabric of this building lies the tradition of the land. “A shrine is a sacred or holy space dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint, daemon, or similar figure of respect, wherein they are venerated or worshipped” (Onyewuenyi, 2004, p. 21).

Bruce (2011) explores different types of shrines allocated within buildings and in temples designed specifically for worship. Household shrines can be found in homes. Small household shrines are very common among the Igbo, where they keep their Chi. These shrines are usually small structures or a setup of pictures and figures dedicated to deities that are part of the official religion, to ancestors or to localised household deities. A shrine is usually the center of attraction in the building or place and it is given a place of prominence. There are also yard shrines; shrines that are found in people's compounds. Religious shrines are found in most religions. Nwankwo and Agboeze (2016), posit that shrines from the secular point of view, can be categorized into typologies according to their ownership and functions. This includes family shrines, community shrines, religious shrines, individual shrines, village shrines, state or national shrines, festival shrines, etc. Shrines often contain idols, relics, or other such objects associated with the figure being venerated.

A shrine at which votive offerings are made is called an altar. Shrines are found in many of the world's religions, including African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Shinto, Indigenous Philippine folk religions, and Asatru, as well as, in secular and non-religious settings such as war memorial. (Onyewuenyi, 2004, p. 23).

Nwachukwu (2017) avers that traditional shrines regardless of their varying topologies still serve unique functions and purposes in the traditional African society which include protection, provision, guidance, revelations, and also dispute resolutions. These unique functions have attracted much audience and veneration to these shrines as found in traditional African society.

In West Africa, shrines are more than just spiritual vessels or points of worship, they are powerful symbols of ethnic solidarity, group cohesion, knowledge about the landscape and a place of justice. According to Dawson (2009), shrines are vessels, they can act as containers in a literal sense for the spirits of ancestors and deities who must be regularly placated and petitioned for blessings, requests for intercession, justice and divine sanction. The spirits or deities must be venerated and sacrifices offered. Spiritual intercessors from ancestors and deities are sought from the shrine for reasons including but not limited to; justice, birth, and protection, against evil. Ojiekwe (2014) posits that shrines are places of consultation with esteemed extra-human forces to answer unanswerable questions in order to allay fears and provide solutions to problems. Shrines, therefore, remain the important sacred places which are significant in promoting justice, peace and social cohesion in various communities. For traditional West African society, the shrine is the highest place of appeal for justice and settlement of disputes. It is a place where all forms of alternative dispute resolution methods take place; arbitration, meditation, conciliation and even negotiation, the disputants are more at ease and confident in the outcome of the resolution knowing that it was done in the presence of a deity that is, ready to play its own role in a peaceful resolution, and this is in line with Ireogbu (2009), who defines shrine as a sacred place which inspires awe and elicits reverence because of what it stands for and no one dares go against the verdicts of the deity for the fear of being killed or infected by a strange illness.

Shrine can be a holy or sacred place, a small area or monument dedicated to someone, or a place known as the site of a religious occurrence or a historical event. It is also a place in which gods or spirits live or have manifested themselves or where their statues, symbols, holy objects, or relics are enshrined, an abode of the gods (Arinze, 1970). Uchendu (cited in Onyeozilu and Ebbe, 2012) asserts that the highest court of appeal is the oracle (deity) and its verdicts are unquestionable. The disputants can decide to consult the deity on their own or with their mediators, arbitrators or any person(s) who is aiding

the process of alternative dispute resolutions and they can be; the family heads, village councils, elders in council, diviners or the king and his council of chiefs. In the shrine, alternative dispute resolution can take the form of oath-taking and it is a mechanism in the traditional justice system, believed to be a reliable means of ensuring peace and justice in West Africa.

The chief priest is the custodian of the indigenous shrine and the link between the people and the deities, and he or she oversees the oath-taking which is usually done in the presence of the deity, while the deity acts as both the witness and the executor of the terms of the oath, to justify the truth or punish the one telling lies. Africans believe that oath-taking consists of external and internal actions; the external action is the physical ones performed when carrying out the ritual and it is what the observers see but the deity sees both the external and internal dynamics (Onunwa, 2005). Oath-taking according to Ekhaton (2019) is a very important part of any customary arbitration process in Nigeria. It is a method of ascertaining the veracity of evidence in traditional African dispute settlement proceedings. An oath is a solemn promise that invokes a divine being, in dispute resolution in a Traditional Shrine. Traditional West African society and the essence of a divine oath is to call on the divine agency to be a guarantor of the oath takers own honesty and integrity in the matter in question. By implication, this invokes divine displeasure if the oath-taker fails in his or her sworn duties. Oath-taking is done in the name of any deity that has a cult and a shrine which includes; gods of the hills, water, rock, caves, snakes crocodiles and other objects that are believed to have magical powers or are symbols of deities. The tripod stand, guns, machetes, farming implements and earth are also believed to be the chief objects of oath-taking. In resolving issues with oath-taking at the shrine, care must be taken by the mediator or the person settling the dispute to ensure he or she employs the services of a truthful and honest chief priest, and a powerful and just deity, whose shrine is truly sacred. This is necessary to ensure that the parties to the dispute are not with charms that will negatively affect the efficacy of the oath being taken.

Oath-Taking as a Religio-Cultural Pathway to Justice in West Africa Traditional Society:

Oath-Taking as Instrument of Justice for Infidelity in West Africa: If a married woman is accused of cheating, she would be made to take an oath at the shrine to prove her innocence. She would be naked and swear that if she cheated, let the gods kill her, but if she did not cheat, let her live. Within seven days, if she dies, she is guilty of the accusation, but if on the contrary, she is innocent, (Ugochukwu, 2006). When taking an oath on infidelity, the woman will be told the consequences. The following consequences

may be mentioned by the person administering the oath as part of the ritual: death of the woman, illness of the woman, death of the woman's husband, death or illness of her family, death of the woman's children. Akinlabi (2016) indicated that the impacts are emotional and psychological on the woman as they make her believe that something more powerful is controlling her. If the woman's child falls ill, after the oath, depending on her education level and belief system, she will believe it is a result of her infidelity.

In matters of oaths and rituals for infidelity, the woman will be made to kneel in the shrine and asked to put her hand on a Bible, sometimes very late in the evening, to feel the "aura of the oath" (Akinlabi, 2016). The same source noted that in some shrines, the ritual takes the form of a "blood oath," a practice in which the woman or the husband is cut, and the woman must then swear on the blood. Similarly, Attah (2016, 79) states that "the exact form of the oath varies from family to family". Agueue (1998) also describes a ritual that occurs in traditional society in which the woman takes an oath to prove her innocence following an accusation of infidelity, and then drinks a potion; if it does not have an effect within 7 days, she is innocent, but if it does, she is deemed guilty. Similarly, the Centre for Women Studies and Intervention representative mentioned an infidelity ritual that occurs in traditional society that involves the drinking of a potion.

According to Oputa (1975, 71), "an infidelity oath can involve a woman swearing to her marital faithfulness at a shrine, or at a diviner or in front of a medicine man or woman, or at the bank of a river or stream". Oaths are sworn for various reasons, including the prevention of infidelity, a promise to be faithful as a newlywed wife or to prove innocence after an accusation of infidelity. Oaths are administered by a traditional chief priest. According to Precious (2021), oaths of fidelity/oaths of marriage: Can be an oath taken by a woman to be loyal to her family and extended family. A man can bring in his wife to take such an oath before the shrine of the family ancestors. In contrast, a woman cannot summon her husband to take such an oath. A woman can also voluntarily present herself for the oath of fidelity. Marriage oaths can be taken by several women married to the same man to ensure that they would not kill each other's children or harm one another, and that they will love their husband and not kill him. Omorodion (1993) opines that marital oaths of fidelity have been used to address the issue of child mortality, usually seen as a result of witchcraft. Oaths of widowhood are taken by a woman upon the death of her husband, and made to swear that she did not kill him.

Oath-Taking as Justice Panacea on Criminality in West Africa: Any act or conduct that violated the cherished norms and values of the community or group, and which was visited with severe sanction, can be referred to as a crime. A crime or an offence could be minor or serious depending on the circumstance. However, there are some major offences

which amount to serious crimes. These are referred to as ‘abominations’, due to their propensity to arouse strong indignation and condemnation among the people. Before the advent of colonialism in Africa, Nigerians had in their tradition, an elaborate organizational structure in which their social life was anchored, and upon which their philosophies of life were propagated.

Aguene (1998) observes that in a traditional society, the absence of any organized system of public control does not imply that such a society has no form of social control in which its laws are enforced. He further maintains that, in those societies, all their institutions, patterns of social interactions, and customary practices serve to regulate the relationship between the members of the society and thus, maintain law and order, (Isichie, 1977). Whoever is accused of stealing or committed a crime would be taken to the shrine to swear an oath of innocence or otherwise. Some standardized norms in which severe sanctions are usually applied are carried out by the leaders at the shrine but there must be an administration of oath to resolve the issue and to exact justice (Basden, 2006).

Igbo (2007) explains that ‘traditional crimes or offences, which were generally regarded as abominations, include murder, theft, adultery, rape, incest and suicide’. He identified three major types of offences or crimes in traditional society as offences against individuals, offences against the community, and offences against the gods or spirit world. Offences against individuals include assault, stealing of one’s property, murder and serious breaches of trust. In these offences, the victims and their relatives took appropriate measures in seeking redress or revenge. Such measures often led to an endless cycle of offences and retaliations, including killings and counter-killings (blood-feuds) between families and communities. ‘Offences against the community’ include acts of sabotage, like aiding and abetting enemies of the community, witchcraft, murder, adultery and incest, which were believed to bring about terrible consequences and woes to both the offender and the entire community.

Offences against the community also attracted severe punishment. In this regard, Oputa (1975) notes that in traditional West African society, notorious evil-doers are usually rid of, as done in the case of insanity nuisance, by removing it. He stated that these evil men were removed either publicly, or put to death, usually by burning, in the case of notorious witches, or by being thrown into a ditch in the case of notorious thieves. According to him, such killing methods of today would amount to murder. But in traditional West African jurisprudence, it was justifiable homicide and crude justice, and an effective deterrent to evil-doing.

Offences against the gods or spirits were actions and conduct that were believed to offend the gods and ancestors of the land, with serious consequences for the living. These include many of the offences against the community, as well as, the desecration of sacred places and shrines, and the killing of sacred animals associated with shrines and the earth goddess. According to (Ifemesia 1979, 56),

The concept of Mmo (or Mmuo) was based on the idea that the long-dead ancestors continued to take an active interest in the affairs of their living descendants. The author further points out that “offences against ‘muo’ were not private matters but public issues, which provided one of those rare occasions on which an assembly of the whole village... and beyond, was convened; and the consequences could be dreadful for the offender.

Offenders in this category of offences were either killed, ostracized, or banished from the community in order to placate the gods and ancestors so as to avoid general negative consequences being unleashed on the whole community by the offended forces in the spirit world. According to Elechi (1981), if murder occurs in the course of a robbery, it is viewed as a crime.

It cannot be overstated that oath-taking is an acceptable practice and a common feature of customary law resolution of disputes in Africa. The killing of a kinsman is viewed more seriously. It is an abomination, for which the remedies are punishment and cleansing and expiation. As (Amadi 1990, 88) observes:

In many tribes, the killing of a kinsman, the antithesis of caring for him, was not only a crime but also an abomination. After the murderer had been executed, his family would perform sacrifices, rites and take oaths to remove the stain of evil and ward off the anger of the gods.

He further notes that the murder victim's family and the murderer's family met to negotiate appropriate compensation. Reparation negotiations were always under the watchful eyes of the entire community. The bargaining was always supervised by the elders of the community.

Oath-Taking as Justice Instrument for Peace-Keeping in West Africa: Trust is seen to be very fundamental in West African cosmology, as one cannot determine the intent of a neighbour's heart, hence oath-taking. This is seen to be the solution to trusting one another without suspicion. In situations of disputes, oath is seen as a panacea for peace-keeping because it involves the presence of a god/deity believed to be capable of dispensing justice by killing anyone who goes against the binding oath. Oath-taking is universal, though it is believed to serve the same purpose(s), its processes differ from one culture to the other. Oviasuyi (2011) asserts that “Oath from the Anglo Saxon is an explicate pledge invoking a god, spirit, ancestor, place, or sacred object as witness unto

the truth of the words sworn, and is among the most ancient forms of ritual solemnity”. A much-venerated pagan relic is the Hippocratic Oath, a pledge of medical ethics held in high esteem among healers from the 1st century onward. Its preamble calls forward the gods of curing to bear witness to the oath:

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses... The oath concludes by pronouncing that he who remains true to the oath shall prosper, while he who does not shall attain ‘the opposite lot’, inviting the scrutiny of the gods themselves upon his actions, (Oviasuyi 2011, 23).

The implication derivable from the nature of oath is that it has to be honoured by the oath taker and the god by whom such oath is taken. This is evident from the wordings of oath in which the oath taker placed his/her life and possessions in the hands of the gods through whom such oath is sworn. Failure to honour the contents of a traditional oath is believed to have a great adverse effect on the violators for such beings are bound to face the wrath of the deities in the presence of whom the oath is taken.

Sibani (2022) avers that oath-taking in West African traditional society is herculean in nature. It is believed to have a metaphysical backup. In a matter of necessity, it is held in high esteem. The West African people therefore do not play with oath-taking, especially when it has to do with duties and responsibilities. The nature and procedure of oath-taking in West African traditional society is sacrosanct and a means of codifying the essence of truth in discharging one’s duties to the community. It is important to note that the anchor of oath-taking in West African society is believed to be the gods and deities and any person who takes an oath to perform a task and run contrary to the allegiance of the oath he/she is disposed to stand the wrath of the gods/divinities.

Oath-Taking as Justice Instrument for Installed Leaders in West Africa: Africans believe more in the supernatural and the efficacy of traditional oaths than the conventional oaths. Every traditional leader (kings/queens, chief priests/priestesses) must appear before the shrine to take an oath of office and vows to uphold the traditions and dispense justice to the people. Oath-taking is a method of ascertaining the veracity of evidence in traditional West African dispute settlement proceedings which is common amongst the Igbos, Yorubas and Hausas, (Awolalu, 1979). The Ogoni people use trials by ordeals, oath-taking and divination under customary arbitration in criminal matters where an offender is unknown for the detection of criminals. In traditional West African society, the installation of leaders has to do with more rituals and then oath-taking (Sibani 2022).

Recommendations

The following recommendations will help the people of West Africa and beyond:

- ❖ Indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution should be encouraged and incorporated into modern methods to achieve better and more reliable results.
- ❖ The relevance of traditional shrines should also be highlighted and brought to the limelight, especially in the area of conflict resolution in West Africa.
- ❖ Oath-taking, traditionally speaking in most communities in West Africa has been compromised as some custodians of traditional shrines are not truthful in administering justice, hence traditional leaders must give close monitoring for fair treatment to their subjects.
- ❖ Any youth who may be suspected as criminal or found to be one should be compelled to take oath at the traditional.

Conclusion

In covenant enactment, oath-taking forms an important feature among Africans and is understood as the strongest bond that could exist between individuals. It is used in ending serious disputes and in the establishment of peace between, within and among individuals and communities. The potency of the African traditional oath for peaceful co-existence cannot be overemphasized as the practice stands unchallengeable to any other system, and the violation of its tenets always results in severe consequences. Onunwa (2005) says, settling a dispute in the shrine in Africa is practiced by consulting deities and supernatural forces to explain what and how a dispute can be settled. Those who are afraid of swearing an oath use divination to seek or discover the unknown and future by manipulating some supernatural means and guidance from supernatural sources. It is used to unearth any mystery surrounding the causes and possible ways of settling disputes. Through oath-taking, long disputes are resolved especially where the initial parties to the disputes do not want to let go. Several areas of dispute resolutions in African society utilise oath-taking to convince fellow disputants, community, family, colleagues, etc., of one's innocence and trust because Africans are notoriously religious.

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