



Oath-Taking, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution in Traditional African Society: The Izzi Example

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ABSTRACT

The reality of human history reveals the age-long traditions of different people in their quest for survival. Over the ages, African men have continued to search for peace and security in their immediate environment. Hence, to ensure that man lives safely and peacefully, the forefathers of different African societies invented the culture of oath-taking as a means of survival. This study thus examined the place of oath-taking in the lives of the Izzi people (a North Eastern Igbo sub-group, in South Eastern, Nigeria). The study drew data from interviews with key informants and also sought information from documents in order to come up with its conclusions. The study revealed that oath-taking was used in resolving conflicts in the Izzi clan. The importance of oath-taking is that it bonds society together and discourages different forms of violent behaviours. The implications became that in that traditional society, there was more peace in the izzi environment due to the peacebuilding contributions of oath-taking. The analysis led to the recommendation that the culture of oath-taking needs to be revived and promoted as a means of peacebuilding in African societies. This is fundamental as it will enhance advanced studies on oath-taking as a peacebuilding strategy that would help in creating a more peaceful society in the global village.

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INTRODUCTION

The quest for peaceful coexistence occupies the central tenet of Afro-communal living, which is the doctrine that emphasizes the oneness, togetherness, rationality, and sociality of human beings. However, the desire to achieve this has suffered a setback as the conflict remains an inevitable reality in the human circle. In pursuant to this goal, the forbearers of African traditional society instituted certain mechanisms to salvage society and man from the Hobbesian state of nature that is characterized by brutish, violent, rough and nasty behaviours. These measures were evolved by the ancestors of the African people to handle confrontations and the reality of social disorder in their various manifestations. One such mechanism is traditional oath-taking which is suited and capable of maintaining and sustaining justice, peace, and harmony in the community.

In African Traditional Religion, the human person is expected to be in a covenant relationship with her fellow human and her object of worship. The implication of this is that any harm done to one member affects the other. Thus, it becomes necessary for the members of a cultic or religious group to seek the well-being of one another and avoid any action that amounts to the breaking of a promise or covenant. With this in mind, the traditional Africans often handled the phenomenon of oath with utmost care to move society forward. Another point of interest in covenant-keeping is the corporate type of existence resulting from it. This is because the oath binds people together; thus, a member does not live her life alone. She is a member of the corporate body. On this purview, Menkiti in his endorsement of Mbiti's view of personhood asserts that "without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be dangles to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply."¹ Thus part of the bonding that sustained the traditional African society was the culture of oath-taking. Through this African traditional oath as a mechanism for peace and social order incorporation, individuals do not live for themselves, rather life and prosperity belong to all in a community and man's endowment was progressively and communally shared. Through oral interviews and other research methods, this study analysed how Africans, particularly in the Izzi clan of Southeastern Igboland, Nigeria make use of traditional oath-taking to foster peace and resolve conflict as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In typical African traditional society, 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 collaboration by all, in the search for effective compromise. In doing so, unnecessary competition is avoided, because the ultimate aim of conflict resolution is an amicable settlement through persuasion, mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, arbitration as well as negotiation and not necessarily reverting to the use of force or coercion at all costs, or any cost. From the jurisprudential perspective, African societies have a judicial sense where people are joined to make litigations. Their traditional oath serves as a device for keeping the actions of man under checks and balances and generally, to enhance sanity in the interrelationship between men and the gods. With the advent of Christianity, the practice of the African traditional oath became regarded as "barbaric, fetish, uncivilized, and mysterious to the point of terming it a dirty oath."² While the Annang calls the traditional oath *mmiam-oath*, the Igbo call it *inwu iyi*. Other cultures of Afro-society also have various names for their traditional oath. Obioha Precious Uwaezuoke and Etifiok Udominyang maintain that African communities express their deep inter-human relations in different ways, which include oath-taking.³ The implication was that people individually and collectively developed covenants as a way of living a more peaceful life.

The African Traditional Oath practice is a practice between man and God and there stand various intermediaries such as deities and ancestors as well as rituals, medicines, and other spirit beings that help in sustaining its effectiveness. The deities are especially seen as expressions of God's grace and each of these forces/beings derive their life and power from God to help rule and judge on his behalf, even if they do so in an unpredictable, arbitrary manner. This pantheon of spirit beings within the African Traditional Religion (ATR) cosmology "stands at the centre of ritual oath activity with oath-taking temples and shrines functioning as locations where deities and humans meet."⁴

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 within the African society. 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. According to Mbiti, it could be "administered on two individuals or

¹ I. Menkiti, "Person and Community in Africa Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. R.A Wright (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984).

² I. Ekong, "Preaching In The Context Of Ethnic Violence: A Practical Theological Study within the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria Calabar Synod" (University of Stellenbosch, 2011).

³ Obioha Precious Uwaezuoke and Etifiok N Udominyang, "African Traditional Oath as a Mechanism for Peace and Social Order," *AMAMIHE Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2023).

⁴ E. A. Iniobong, *Sociological Effects of Trafficking* (Calabar: Wist Porch Publication, 2019).

community to promote and strengthen bonds of friendship and foster good human relationship. It binds them mystically, restraining them from hostility towards each other."⁵ This kind of oath creates what Mbiti describes as 'blood brothers' in which the parties involved relate as if they were real blood brothers and would not in any way act or behave in a manner that would create hostility between them. This implies that, throughout time, the African traditional oath has been viewed as a powerful traditional tool for the establishment and re-establishment of order, movements, allegiance and restoration of justice, as well as the promotion of peaceful coexistence with human and communal boundaries.

Ademowo maintains that rituals and blood covenants were used to remove fear and promote trust.⁶ It also helped to bind families, villages and communities together, thereby preventing the chances of war or armed conflict. Nwoliise maintained that oath-taking involves blood-covenant and powerful deities of the land, which makes it not easy to violate such oaths, bearing in mind that violation would bring dire consequences.⁷ There are extensive studies in different parts of Nigeria that reveal that oaths help discourage violence, conflict, dishonest attitudes and evil actions by members of different Nigerian society thereby promoting peace and conflict resolution.⁸ This is because the individuals and townsmen were often warned about the negative implications of taking an oath falsely or breaching the provisions of the oath. This is because such false disposition before taking an oath or breaching the conditions of the oaths in many cases would unleash shame, madness, and death.⁹

Traditional Oath-taking in Izzi

According to Nico Van Steencil, "There are different types of oaths in Izzi, that are differentiated by the punishment which is mentioned when breached. Oaths can be divided into two groups: the oaths that are not very serious *eri angu* and the more serious oaths *eri ego*, *agu enwa* and *eri nte*. *Agu enwa* is the most general word, which means invocations of *Ali*, the earth goddess and the forefathers. *Eri ego* has usually to do with making a person free of the accusation of sorcery (*mgbashi*). The more serious oaths, on the other hand, can be divided into five categories: Oath of death (*enwa anwuhu*), Oath of no yams and no children (*ukpaji I'ukpa nwa*), Oath of loss of all property (*enwa uburu*), Oath of being caught next time (*mkpafu all*), and Oath of the traditional leaders (*atu-ukephefu eswa*)"¹⁰ These oaths are explained below:

a. *Eri angu*

The characteristic of these oaths is that they are usually taken voluntarily and without being asked. The oath is usually taken at the beginning of a speech to assure the people that the oath-taker will speak the truth. When people meet the chief to settle a case, they normally take this oath. For example, a man may say, "Chief Nkwuda, we have been long together in this area and we have never had any misunderstanding. Now what I am going to say, may I die if I include any lie!" If people exclude an expression like this, it may even raise suspicion that they will lie. People can take these oaths without any ritual, but they may also touch the soil with their index finger and then point to heaven. The meaning of that ritual is, let 'earth (*Ali*) and heaven (*Igwe*) hear me! Another ritual is that of touching the soil with one's finger and then unto the tongue. The meaning is: "May Ah kill me, if ..!" Children are normally found taking these oaths under the mango trees in the bush. One child may accuse another of having taken his mangoes or other fruits. The accused one would say: "If I took your mangoes, let me never collect any mango from this tree again." Or: "If I took it, let me be caught when I do such a

⁵ John S. Mbiti, "The Gospel in the African Cultural Context," *Australian Association for the Study of Religions Book Series* 9, no. 9 (2022).

⁶ Adeyimi Johnson Ademowo, "Conflict Management in Traditional African Societies," n.d., https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281749510_Conflict_management_in_Traditional_African_Society#fullTextFileContent.

⁷ Osisioma Nwoliise, *Traditional Models of Bargaining and Conflict Resolution in Africa: Perspectives on Peace and Conflict in Africa* (Ibadan: Archers Ltd, 2005).

⁸ Adeyinka Theresa Ajayi and Lateef Oluwafemi Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," *African Research Review* 8, no. 2 (2014): 138–57.

⁹ Adeyemi Johnson Ademowo and Adedapo Adekunle, "Law in Traditional Yoruba Philosophy: A Critical Appraisal," *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2013): 345–54.

¹⁰ Nico van Steensel, *The Izi: Their History and Customs* (Abakaliki: Ogbo Ohabama Izhi, 2009).

thing again." When they say to a woman: "Did you take the water I put here?" She may answer: "May a car kill me on the road, if I was the one who did it." Or: "May God punish me when I do it." When a boy says to his friend: "Did you pass gas?" He can answer: "Let me fall dead if I did so!"

b. Mkpafu ali

This oath is usually taken in case of theft. When one is suspected of having stolen an item, he/she has to take this oath saying: "If I have stolen, let somebody see me when I steal again, or let the things be found in my place." God is therefore asked to use all ways to let the person be caught. The oath is believed to put a spirit in the person which will make him/her commit the crime again, till he/she is caught. For instance, where yams have disappeared from the barn, the owner of the compound can ask all the people of his compound to take this oath. When many yams have been stolen in a village, the village head may call all the men of the village together and ask them to take an oath that they did not steal the yams. In such cases, the lineage representatives will usually swear on behalf of their lineages.

c. Enwa uburu

This oath is mainly used in cases when an individual denies causing damage. This oath is taken in cases where one kills another's goat, but denies it; or when one makes a purchase in the market and accidentally overpays the trader, but the trader denies that it is the case. This oath can also be taken when a theft takes place within a family. It is generally taken in cases where serious suspicion is cast on an individual. In such cases, the suspect must say after having called on the gods: "If I have done this thing, let me lose all my money, let all my yam be rotten, let my goats and cows die and let all my things spoil." When two people put the yams they have bought in the market in one basket and at home one says that all the big yams are his own, he will be expected to take this oath. Or when they find some stolen things in one's compound and he/she denies having hidden it, this oath must be taken. Since this oath is mainly associated with trade, hence traders revere it.

d. Enwa anwuhu

With this oath, the punishment is death. In this case, the accused person will say: "If I was the one who did this, or who caused this, let me die before this month next year in such a way that everybody will know that I was the one." This oath is often taken in land dispute cases and when people are suspected of having killed a person with a charm or caused the death of a person by committing adultery. Also, when the eyes of a child are open after they die, it is a sign that somebody has used a charm to kill the child. When *ajibya* points to the mother as the cause, or when a dream points in the father's direction, the father may decide to take this oath. The father will address the dead child: "If I know what killed you, let me lie down as you are lying now. But if I do not know what killed you, you can go and lie well in the land of the dead." The mother will also say: "If I know what killed you, or if I am the cause and this is from my hand, mouth, or leg, let me die and follow you. But if I am not involved, you can go well and stay in the land of the dead, you are dying in your own time." As a part of the ritual of taking the oath, the accused will take some meat out of the mouth of the dead child and chew it. This is known as *atiu ego*. If the mother is guilty, she will die, the same as with the father.

In some cases, the parents celebrate the occasion when one year has passed and nothing has happened. An example of where this oath was taken is presented. A very special oath *anu ego utara all* was taken at Okworeka Ezaa-Inyimegu by people accused of killing people with their juju (African charm/*eme mgbashi*). The legs of the accuser and the accused were put together so that they faced each other. They were allowed to wear a wrapper but were still to sit with bare buttocks on the ground. After the usual prayers, some fuili and sauce were put in small holes dug in their midst and mixed with some soil. The sauce was prepared from bush mango only. One person dipped two balls in the sauce and made the other person swallow and vice versa. Then they had some palm wine which was mixed with some of the soil. From the first cup, the first person drank the first half, the other person the second half; from the next cup, the last drank the first half and the other the second half. They stayed overnight in that compound and did not return to their compounds. The reason was to prevent them from going to lick the egg of a vulture *ekwo udele* to avert the ritual. This is because the Izzi believe that whatever

oath one takes if he/she quickly licks the egg of a vulture the oath becomes ineffective. Consequently, the guilty party died.

e. Ukpa ji 1'ukpa nwa

This oath is also taken when serious crimes are committed. The threatened punishment is a scarcity of yams and children. If the accused has not yet married and he/she will take this oath stating that, "nobody will like his daughter to marry you." The person would say: "Let God who made everything and who knows me, if I am the one who did this, let God not give nor leave me with children or yam. But if am not the one who did it, even when I marry an old woman, let her conceive and bear many children for me." This oath is usually not taken by women, as it will make them useless in the sight of their husbands when breached. This oath is taken in case of theft of yams out of the heaps *avoji* and in case of suspicion of adultery *eri ogori*.

The Mode of Oath-Taking

When one of the following oaths is taken (*mkpafu all*, *enwa uburu* and *enwa anwuhu*), a small hole is dug on the ground. From the leaves of a palm tree, a rope is tied and this rope *akpoko* is put around the hole. This is the weakest rope, which signifies that the person who violates truth will never be strong and whatever he does will be weak. Some kola nuts are put in the hole and the accused proceeds to kneel. Before the people will kneel down, they will say;

"Heaven and Earth, you know everything

If I am the one who did it"

They then proceed to make the following statements in accordance with the type of oath being taken:

"May I die before this month next year!"

"May I never have children!"

"May everything I do in this world be in vain!"

Then the person will kneel down and take the kola with his mouth so that his nose will touch the soil and he will chew the kola. When the kola is spat out, the oath has not been taken properly. When there are many people to take the oath, each of them will do the same in turn. When public oaths are taken, prayers to the forefathers of Izzi are usually done before the ritual. It has already been mentioned that the special form of *enwa anwuhu* is when people chew the meat out of the mouth of the dead child.

The ritual for *ukpaji I'ukpa nwa* is slightly different. Also, a small hole is dug and a rope is put around it. However, no kola nuts are laid in it. Instead some very young palm kernels *akoko*, *edoduru mini*, ashes *ntu*, and male flowers of the palm tree *ophuripho* are put in the hole and some small yams are laid around it. The young palm kernels contain only water and signify that the child will bear will not stay long. The ashes are just signifying uselessness in life. The male flowers of the palm tree never give fruit and signify that whoever violates the oath will die without children. After addressing "Igwe" (heaven) and earth ("Ali"), the man will lower his trousers and touch the soil with his penis. A woman will do the same with her left breast.

Atu uke phefu eswa

This very serious oath is taken by the ukes of a village in case

- A person is killed and nobody agrees to have done it;
- A house is burnt and the person who set it on fire is unknown;
- Someone brought trouble upon the head of the villagers without admitting it openly.

This oath is also taken before and after discussion of heavy matters, when more villages are involved and the *uke* of the *unuphu* villages of the tribe are called to help. It is also taken when there are conflicts between two communities, in land dispute cases, or in any other evil thing done to a village by another. The oath is taken to ensure that everybody will speak the truth and not take sides with any party. The forefathers are called to witness and all gods, but especially Ali (earth goddess), are aroused to keep their eye on the matter. The call upon the gods is left for the *uke* of the *unuphu* villages; *Ebya* for

Agbaja and Nkaleke; *Anmegu* for Inyimegu; *Iseke unuphu* for Iseke. Up to 25 gods are called, of which the most important are: *Okemini Izi-ophu*, *Ubvu-elomu-onggele*, *Eze-nwanyi*, *Ibyina-ukpabyi*, *Enya-1'egu*, *Uke-egbuenwe*, etc.

This is an example of prayer:

Okemini-Izi-ophu, Awake and have your eyes open,
Thank you, thank you, it is four times, the One higher than you.
Thank you, thank you, it is eight times, Or in Izi:
Okemini-Izi-ophu,
Leka! Leka! O du eno! Okalibe no e ngu.
Leka! Leka! O du esato!

Then they move to the next name. After this prayer, the *uke* divide themselves according to their lineage *ipfu*. One *ishi-uke* carries the spear *anva*. All *uke* will hold this spear or when there is no room anymore, will hold the shoulder of one holding the spear, then they all together shout: Hee-haa! Heehaa! (eight times), they hit the soil with the spear every time they shout. Then the *ishi-uke* takes a bundle of grass, pulls it out, and throws it away. The guilty one will perish like this bundle of grass, even before one year has passed!

After this ceremony, the real words of the oath are spoken: "As we have come for this matter between our sons, if anyone covers the facts, let him die! If any one of us takes money secretly, let him die! If anyone wants to use a charm to harm us or our sons, let him die! Any person who wants to live, but does not allow his fellow man to live, let death carry him away in such a way that he will not be buried!" In the case of land cases, after marking the boundaries of the land, they say: "If anyone passes this boundary, let him die!" Because of the serious character of this oath, it cannot be taken more than twice a year.

METHODOLOGY

This study was developed using primary and secondary research data. The study had a qualitative research design. The primary goal was to integrate primary data and secondary materials in a way to achieve sustainable research output. The primary data was collected through interviews with respondents. The respondents cut across male and female practitioners of oath-taking. All the Izzi communities have a representative of the oath-taking respondents. The researchers also engaged in focus group discussions in Amachi, Nduechi, Agbaja and Inyimagu in order to eke out public opinion about oath-taking in contemporary times.

The data was collected through recorded interviews and direct communication with the researchers. The data collected was subjected to critical evaluation by the elderly Izzi men. Two serving chief priests to an earth god served as validators and reviewers of the opinions presented by the respondents in order to confirm their validity in line with the existing culture of the people. All the data collected were thematically interpreted and their findings were presented to suit the different sub-themes of this study. Worthy of note is that the researchers adhered to standard ethical considerations in the collection and presentation of data. The respondents were clearly informed about the objectives of the research and the purpose it will be used for. They gave their voluntary consent to be interviewed and the responses of those who wanted to be identified were presented in the reference, while the majority chose to be presented anonymously in the research.

DISCUSSION

According to Nwibo Oriphe, "In every traditional oath-taking, the forefathers are called upon to bear witness in the oath. It is believed that they have supreme power over all living beings."¹¹ They are believed to have a full knowledge of whatever happens in this world. They know when one is telling lies and who is speaking the truth, who is guilty and innocent. Forefathers are trusted that they can pass free and fair judgment, irrespective of the person's status. They are believed to have the capacity

¹¹ Nwibo Oriphe, an Oral Interview, Ogbuchie Amachi, Farmer, 20th July, 2024.

to punish whoever is guilty. It is because of this that everybody fears and honours the forefathers are the last hope of the common man in giving acceptable judgement.

In another interview with Chief Obasi Nwiboko, the researchers were made to know that “oath-taking is used to make peace between family members, for instance, if members’ family are having conflict among themselves, elders of the kindred can gather and resolve the problem using oaths.”¹² The evidence that marks the resolution of conflict goes with oath-taking by the members of the families. The most elderly person in that kindred takes a kola and invokes the ancestors to bear witness with them on the resolution of the conflict, if anybody keeps malice to any person or tries to charm any person, let the oath hold them responsible. After this incantation, every person in the family will take the kola as a symbol of the covenant of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Morse so, the researchers interviewed Augustine Inyioma from Ette Amachi, who equally asserted that “oath-taking is used for peacebuilding and conflict resolution between two villages or two communities.”¹³ For when two communities are struggling over a piece of land and several efforts have been made to bring peace between them all to no avail; the final approach to restoring peace is usually oath-taking. The elders of both communities, the Uke, the Okoro, the village heads of both communities and the Amaegu people would gather at the boundary between both communities very early in the morning. The Amegu people will first and foremost roast yam and present it on the ground together with kola and do some incantation by saying what will happen to the communities that are not owners of the land in question. After the incantation, Amaegu people will tell the oldest persons in that community to collect some portion of the yam and kola with their mouths kneeling. Consequently, Amaegu people will tell both communities to abstain from the land till the fixed period they have fixed oath-taking to fulfill it manifestation of punishment against the offender before the decision is taken. This brings peace to the conflict-ravaged communities in the past.

The researchers had the opportunity to interview Nwogha Ezumanshi and he stated that “oath-taking could be used for peacebuilding and conflict resolution between two communities in Izhi land.”¹⁴ For instance, if two communities are engaged in a war; for peace to be restored, Nduishiuke and elders from Amaegu (Izhi ancestral home) will be invited after hearing from both parties. The communities have to pay some fine for spilling the blood of a brother and contaminating the land. The ritual to be done will centre on oath-taking. Nduishiuke and elders from Amaegu will lead the people at the boundary between the two communities and make a covenant that henceforth there will be no war between them again, and if any of the community plans war or engages in war with other communities let the ancestor of Izzi destroy them.

Usually, both the accuser and the accused will take the oath, when a particular person is accused. People who take an oath may also have the oath look back at the person who accused him *g'anya ghaa enya I'azu*. When he said: "If I am the one who did this, let me have no children and no yams." He may add: "But if I am not the one, let this happen to the one who accused me!"

There is a proverb in Izhi: "enwa ka nshi ire". This means that oaths are more effective than the power of charms (juju). Therefore, the family in general will do everything to persuade a person not to take an oath for any reason. When they are not completely sure that you are not involved in a matter, they may even say that it is better to pay for the damages, than to face the consequence of taking an oath. This is particularly true for young people because an oath is considered a wrong way to go about life issues due to the fear it connotes in the minds of men. However, older people do mind this very much. Therefore, a number of them will shrink back from taking an oath. This counts especially when there is an experience in the family when a certain oath is powerful and an unknown type of oath is less feared.

The main reasons for taking an oath in Izhi include to give hope to victims that God at the appointed time will show who did wrong to them and reveal that they were falsely accused, or give them their property back. After people have tried their best to find out the truth, they commit the whole matter in the hand of God or *Ali* who sees everything, knows everything, and rules everything. A strong

¹² Nwobasi Nwiboko, An Oral Interview, Okpuitumo, Civil Servant, 5th Sept, 2024.

¹³ Augustine Inyioma, An Oral Interview, Ette Amachi, Civil Servant, 2nd Sept, 2024.

¹⁴ Nwogha Ezumanshi, An Oral Interview, Obegu-Amachi, 3rd September, 2024

conviction that God will do to everybody according to His acts in this life is the basis of this use of oaths in ultimate judgement and decisions.

It is general knowledge that an oath will work for one year. Therefore, stipulations are made that rule what will have to happen after that one year. There are two possibilities: either the oath has caught the person who took the oath or the oath has left him: hence, he is vindicated. Then it is said that he has vomited the oath, *gboru ego*. When the oath is taken, the one who requires the oath will stipulate what the person who will be caught by the oath will pay him to be delivered from the curse of the oath. In the other case, when one is vindicated and appears to have been falsely accused, he will stipulate what the person or village that demanded the oath will give him as atonement price. If he took the oath of death *enwa anwuhu*, everything used for the burial of a person will be given to him by the one who accused him falsely. Compensating someone who is set free by the oath is called to clean the mouth *arwa onu ego*, because his mouth became dirty during the oath-taking because he took the kola with his mouth from the ground.

If a person took a serious oath and died as a consequence of the oath, his relatives will pay the required fine to the village, otherwise, they will not allow the dead person will be buried in their village, not even in his own compound. In Anmachi and Okpitumo Unuphu, however, one who dies from *ego mgbashi* cannot be ransomed; he can never be buried in the village but will be thrown in the bad bush *ochieja*, because he took the oath in the village. The village cannot cleanse his mouth, because they own the person. However, it was only when the oath was taken at the shrine of an *agwa* in another village that they could cleanse his mouth.

When the oath was taken at a special location, like at the eye of the land *enya-ali*, or at any other shrine that is trusted to be capable of releasing a fair judgement, the person who took the oath will as soon as he is freed by the oath, thank the juju or *agwa* for vindicating him. Often, wine, a female goat, a leg of bush meat, and kola will be presented to the *agwa*. There will be no cleansing of his mouth by the one who accused him in this case. If the oath catches and kills the man, however, the family will still pay the village the required ransom. Later on, the village can give something to this *agwa* to remove the witch or witchcraft out of their midst “*kele o lofuru phe nku enwuru*”

A story was told at a focus group discussion. Early one morning, a woman, by the name of Anigo was in a hurry to pay the poor man who in her absence finished the job she had given him on her farm the previous day. At a distance behind her, a man by the name of Alegu Egbe followed her along the same path. Somewhere along the path, Anigo stood still to tie her wrapper tightly and then continued her journey. After a short time, she realized that the money that she had tied in her wrapper was no more there. She stopped and returned to the spot where she tightened her wrapper. On the way to the spot, she met Alegu and asked him whether he saw any money on the way behind her. However, Alegu who just picked up the money, denied it. Anigo passed him and reached the spot where she loosened her wrapper to retie it, but she did not see any money there. She turned again and ran back and caught up with Alegu. She asked him: did you really not pick up my fifty naira? Alegu strongly denied that he had not seen any money. Anigo continued to accuse the man of picking up her money, as no one else passed that place since she lost her money there. She caused a scene as she continued to argue with the man so that other people gathered, those who were passing by or were working on nearby farms. The people who gathered gave their opinion that Alegu would have to take an oath, viz, the one called *mkpafu ali*. However, before taking it, Alegu was told that he should go home and examine himself. Also, Anigo had to check very well whether she came out with that money in her wrapper. This is the exchange that went on:

Alegu: There is no need to go and examine myself as far as this matter is concerned. I am not a child; I am ready for any type of oath.

Anigo: I am completely convinced that I had the money with me, but that it fell down when I tightened my wrapper, and it is Alegu Egbe who picked it up. If he is not ready for the oath now, let him tell me when he will be ready or let him give me my money, because I don't want any trouble.

Alegu: (pretends to be insulted and jumps up): I am ready for the oath now or never! I will take the oath immediately. Truth shall prevail. But I am sorry for what will happen to this woman if I am free from this accusation.

Kola was brought and the two parties were led to a nearby junction. There the kola was broken into pieces and placed at the middle of the junction *mgbakata uzo*.

Elder: This matter is not so serious; I therefore suggest that the oath should be *uburu* and not *anwuhu* or *ukpa ji l'ukpa nwa*.

People: You are correct; you are correct! Let it just be 'uburu', so that if the suspect is guilty, he can come and beg and appeasement be made.

Alegu: I agree. But if I am free from the oath, she would pay me double the amount in the presence of all of us present here today.

Anigo: But if that oath catches you, you have to pay me four times the amount.

All: Yes, that is okay.

Elder: You, the earth and the heaven, come and hear this oath that is being taken. You, this junction, you are the meeting point of both human beings and spirits; you, the morning sun, the ancestors that made this land, come and hear this oath and make it effective! If Alegu Egbe did not pick this money, fifty naira, let this oath not catch him. But if he picked it up and was now denying it, let the oath catch him and let him continually be losing his properties, until he comes to confess that the oath has proven him guilty. He will be freed from the oath when he fulfills the condition of appeasement.

People: Yes, that is how it is! Let it be so.

Alegu: (when taking the oath) You, that made man; you, this junction; you, the land and the sky; you my personal god; if I am the one, who picked Anigo Nkwegu's fifty naira this morning, let this oath hold me, so that from today I continue to lose my property until I come to confess and fulfill all the conditions guiding this oath. But if I am not the one who picked the money and I am being insulted and disgraced simply because everyone in this village knows that I am poor, let me be free from the oath; let this oath be a blessing to me; let this oath bring me wealth in abundance; I say let this oath bring me long life and prosperity. *Nokwa g'o du*. (He knelt down, picked a limb of the kola with his mouth, chewed it and swallowed it.)

People: Yes, thank you. You are a man.

Elder: Let the oath be as it is taken.

In due course, the guilty man was trapped by the oath and he began to lose his belongings. This continued until he confessed and paid necessary atonements for the false oath.

This is the value that Nigerians place on oaths. They are not to be taken lightly as the repercussions can cause damage to generations yet unborn. This sacred rite must be upheld to protect the sanctity of the culture of societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has presented practically the dynamics and types of oaths taken in Izzi land using specific examples of their efficacy. Consequently, the study recommends the re-invention of the traditional oaths in conflict management, peacebuilding and societal resource management. This has become necessary considering the growing collapse of the traditional values of the people due to the make-quick-money syndrome that has overtaken human society. This use of local oath in conflict management should be endorsed and promoted by the traditional authorities and institutions in Izzi as a path to societal transformation. Finally, there should be the introduction of regular oaths for the different types of people who administer the oaths. That will serve as checks and balances to ensure that they do not arrogate absolute power to themselves and become very corrupt, hence helping to keep the sanctity of traditional oaths. There is a need for the sustenance of the African traditional oath.

CONCLUSION

This study has been developed from data collected from respondents and focus group discussion on the dynamics and role of oaths in conflict resolution and societal peacebuilding. It has revealed that the African traditional oath prevents unfaithfulness in human relations and at the same time builds trust as a valuable social capital in society. A covenant made in the form of oath-taking, either in front of divinity or religious emblems makes African people comport themselves well in society. Oaths, therefore, give meaning and cohesion to society and enhance the sense of seeking the good of others

and the community in its totality. This being the case, the peace and social order that was and is still enjoyed in African society to be transferred to the future generation. The potency of the African traditional oath for peaceful co-existence cannot be over-emphasized as the practice stands unchallengeable in the face of any other system and the violation of its tenets always results in severe consequences. Whereas the modern justice system of the post-colonial society is perceived as an alien system because of the deep-rooted culture of miscarriage of justice causing the outcome's inability to appeal to the ordinary people, the masses tend to trust the efficacy of their powerful earth goddess in oath-taking. Another problem with judicial settlement is that it excludes the people from participation, and by application creates divisions and promotes individualism, while the African traditional oath remains inclusive and enhances relational ties among its participants

Finally, the enhancement of the consciousness for harmonious living by African traditional oath is of immense importance as Africans have realized that they can only fulfil their destiny when they live and act harmoniously in the community. This complementary interrelatedness that characterizes the ontology of African beingness and commonality makes it obvious that one is seen in others and others in one.

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