
The Need for Traditional Oath-Taking for Good Governance in the Niger Delta Region

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Abstract: *The crave for political offices in recent times is overwhelming, this is as a result of the believe that such offices are accompanied with plenty of financial benefits which are capable of catapulting a person from poverty to a life of wealth and recognition. Using the African philosophy of 'live and lets live' this paper will x-ray the need to swear oath of office based on ones religious inclination. The study employed the historical and sociological methodology in its analysis, in course of this study, it was discovered that the drift from the traditional form of oath-taking is as a result of the consequences in the event of failure to conform to the tenets of the traditional oath of office. The paper concludes by positing that peoples religious life should be properly scrutinized before they are allowed to take the conventional oath; it therefore recommends that those who secretly patronize African Traditional deities for personal aids and profess to be adherents of either Christianity or Islam should be subjected to the traditional form of oath-taking in order to curb the high level of corruption in governance in the Niger Delta.*

Key words: *Good governance, traditional oath-taking.*

Preamble

Prior to the era of colonialism morality was a cherished virtue of Africans. People lived a life of uprightness and integrity because good name was more than money thus no man in his right senses would want to risk involving himself with activities that will dent his integrity. People do not necessarily need to swear or take an oath to live in conformity to the norms of the society. In fact children were warned to always remember whose children they were. Thus, subconsciously people's lives were guided by their different family values because morality was seen as part of a people's cultural heritage. However, at the dawn of independence and the high level of intercultural cum interreligious interface, oath taking which was also part of the traditional society became legal and a common feature in the law court (Deezia 2014.). Furthermore, with civilization and religious mix, the Christian and Islamic form of oath-taking has taken the center stage; these forms of oath-taking became preferred to the traditional form of oath-taking. This is because in the traditional setting any deviation from the ground norms of the society attract severe consequences or immediate punishment thereby making it look dreaded since the punishment in the oath of Christianity and Islamic religion is futuristic (Ecclesiastes 8:11) thereby resulting to a drastic decline in morality in virtually every works of life including politics, thus, despite the oath administered to public office holders today, there is still a show of insincerity in governance as politician loots public funds and use tax payers money for personal gains. Oath-taking today is seen as 'fulfilling all righteousness' or 'window dressing' since it lacks the potency to enforce its sanction as it is practiced in the traditional setting under the different deities of the land. Allegiance to oath has been so trivialized that one wonders if the

phenomena has any serious value to the people.

From time immemorial, the use of oath has been to formally and legally make a pledge that should be binding and with the invocation of God or any other deity considered sacred to the individual or personality, the administration of oath is thus a very serious business. Its administration is usually accompanied with what in general term is called swearing –in ceremony. Both oath and swearing in of a personage to public office connote a sacred initiatory process and a public utterance of sacred obligation to the yearnings and aspirations of the people involved (Deezia, 2014).

This paper therefore advocates that, in the political arena, indigenous oath taking should be encouraged at all three tiers of government for political office holders and political leaders; especially if it is discovered such a person does not have any serious affiliation with any of the new religious groups. This process would reduce the abuse of power and office.

The Concept of Oath-Taking

The Webster College Dictionary (2010) defines oath as a solemn appeal to a deity or to witness one's determination to speak the truth or keep a promise. Similarly the Collins English Dictionary (2003) defines oath as a solemn pronouncement to affirm the truth of a statement or to pledge a person to some course of action after involving a sacred being or object as witness. From the ethical perspective oath is seen as a solemn affirmation of the truth or a solemn declaration of an intention of do this or that to say what one knows (the Catholic Encyclopedia 1999). Therefore, to be untrue under oath is to commit a grave sin, to swear to do something without the intention of doing it or without in fact doing it (The Dictionary of Christian Ethics 1997).

According to Ogunleye (2013), an oath is word of promise recited in a conventional formula when taking up an official position. It is a process whereby solemn allegiance is being taken or entered into by individual or group of individuals. This oath taking or oath of office is sacred and requires steadfastness, truthfulness and loyalty without which the individual or group of individuals lives are at a risk. More so, the paraphernalia of office must be respected by the chosen or appointed leader. In the traditional setting, this oath taking is very sacred and religiously upheld with corresponding effect if not religiously and truthfully upheld.

Oaths have religious undertone that is why at the end there is always a call to a deity to bear witness to the promises made by the oath takers. For Ogunleye (2013) Oath taking and its administration are very sacred human phenomenon. They are sacred because they have the underlining of spirituality brought to the fore of material or physical realm. First is the pledge of self, the individual to uphold the constitution of the country, serve with all resolve and then the affirmation and conviction in the utmost help of God of the understanding of that individual being sworn in or on whom oath of office is being administered.

Types Oath-Taking

Oaths binds people together and creates an atmosphere for peaceful co-existence as result there are different types of oath; this study shall examine just a few with emphasis on divine oath and African Traditional oath since it is in consonance with what the study is advocating.

Divine Oath

These kind of oath are seen as statement or assertion made under penalty of divine retribution for

intentional falsity. It is a solemn appeal to a god for something holy or revered as witness or sanction of the truth of a statement (The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, 1976).

The essence of divine oath is an invocation of divine agency to a guarantor of the oaths takers honesty and integrity in the matter under question. By implication, this invokes divine displeasure if the taker fails to abide by the oath sworn. This means the oath taker are always very careful in order to earn the wrath of the gods. In the pre-modern era, tribal groups like the Igbo, Urhob, Isoko, Ijo, etc. where there were no central political power before the advent of the British administration in Nigeria, oaths of varying degree were entered into by different communities and villages to ensure peaceful co-existence (Nabofa, 1984). Richard Janko 2010 avers that in oath swearing the oath is in effect to invoke powers greater than oneself to uphold the truth of a declaration, the speaker or wearer makes a declaration asserting a promise which he must fulfill in future, calls on the Supersensible or deity to bear witness of his declaration and finally calls for a curse which should befall him in the event of failure to fulfill his promises.

Among the indigenous people of the Niger Delta oath taking is usually called for in a protracted case where the nature of the matter makes it difficult to discern who is right or wrong in a case. This is because oath taking is a direct submission to the supernatural for settlement of dispute because the verdict of the deities is final. Sometimes this appeal to the super natural is made when human effort fails or when no confidence is reposed on the human panel. This is practiced in very serious cases; in the event of failure in keeping to the tenets of the oath under the divine oath, time is normally given within which the offender is expected to be revealed by the deity either through sickness or death (Nwakoby, 2004). Accordingly, to reduce the rate of bribery and corruption Kenyatta (1965) stated that oath is the most important factor among the Gikuyu tribe controlling the society. Oath served two purposes namely; to prevent the people from giving false evidence and to help bring the offenders to justice through guilty conscience and confession thus, eliminating bribery and corruption and ensured impartial judgment. Divine oaths are associated with taboos which must be adhered to in order to avert the consequences inherent in the oath (Lawrence-Hart, 2009).

African Traditional Oath

In the African traditional setting oaths are to seal agreement. Oaths once taken must be kept as the consequences are imminent; these oaths most often are used to settle conflict as well as instrument for peaceful co-existence in the society (Tasie, 2001). Oath-taking is so potent for peaceful co-existence in the traditional setting because violation of its tenets always results to severe consequence; more so, the gods and the ancestors are called as witnesses to offenders. Reason being that the gods are the security agencies of the community whose duty is to punish offenders (Owete, 2010). Consequently, when people secretly violate the oath taken in the traditional setting they are punished and also made to appease the deities where necessary; thus the fear of being punished puts a consciousness of doing the right thing on an individual thereby leading to a peaceful communal living. Furthermore, oath is taken to strengthen good relationship between individuals and communities (Mbiti, 1969)

Conceptual Framework

This paper is viewed within the concept of African philosophy of human rights as postulated by Keba Meba (1991) It is a human right system within the Traditional African culture which implies that it is the prerogative of every individual and every people to enjoy in just measure the

goods and services produced thanks to the effort of solidarity of the members of the community. The Traditional African system of human rights not only affirmed the rights to life and freedom of expression, association and religious liberty, but also the obligation to provide for those without means of sustenance. This implies that the natural resources which is God-given and managed by those elected into office should be enjoyed by all. Furthermore, the proceed from the dividends of such natural resources should be felt by all via the building of good roads, provision of portable water and other social amenities.

Traditional Oath-Taking and Governance

Oath-Taking is one of the rituals in African Traditional Religion which has different analytical interpretation by scholars of religion; this is because the African society is a dynamic one in which relationship exists at different levels. The traditional oath is taken to maintain stability and harmony among individuals (Okafor, 2011).

Odivwri (2005) avers that Nigeria as a nation lacks honest and visionary leaders especially since after the independence. This is because the nation is still wallowing in poverty; more so, leaders act without the fear of God which has resulted to extreme poverty on the people, unemployment, corruption, bad leadership and lack of development. Political office holders have always refused to identify themselves with the traditional oath system so that they can be accepted by the society but behind the scene they go to take secret oath with their sponsors popularly called “godfathers” before a deity. These godfathers controls and dictates what happens in the government house including how monies are spent. Onwuzirigo (2005) revealed that desperate political office seekers go as far as giving out postdated cheques to the detriment of the populace who now become the end looser because the campaign promises that made the electorate to vote the candidate in question will become mere rhetoric. Worthy of note is the fact that the oath of secrecy which is done before the traditional deities is strictly adhered to, due to the fear that any deviation from the terms of agreement will attract severe punishment or death depending on the terms of the oath taken. The fear inherent in the traditional oath taken by political office holders compels them to deny the masses the benefits of good governance. For this reason, this paper advocates that political office holders who allege to traditional deities for one reason or the other should be subjected to traditional oath of office even though such a person have done the conventional swearing-in exercise, this is necessary because it will help to curb the excesses of political office holders and fast track development to the region.

Reason being that in the traditional setting oaths are revered due to the immediate punishment incurred by the oath taker. Ogunade (2010) supports the fact that traditional ritual oaths by politicians vying for nomination and election into party offices at the ward, local, state and national levels should be encouraged and promoted so as to have responsible and responsive, less-corrupt, and god-fearing leadership whose major preoccupation is selfless service to the people. From all indication, It is crystal clear that indigenouse oath taking is very effective in the punishment of those who do not keep to their promises/pledges; that is why politicians run from the traditional oath but run to the traditional deities when they need help; so it should be encouraged for leaders who are selected, elected or appointed. Consequently, the fear of the consequences inherent in the traditional oath will help to curb the high level of corruption in the region.

This assertion is made explicit by Ogunleye (2010) when he stated that oath of office can be administered by either a court or its delegate, it involves pledging loyalty to perform faithfully

the duties associated with the office. The exercise allows a person to swear an oath of office with the religious paraphernalia or cultic symbol of the religion one belongs to. He cited example with the Nigerian context where adherents of traditional religion are allowed to swear to Ogun (god of iron) represented by a piece of metal while Christians and Muslims could swear with the Bible and the Quran respectively. He maintained that the purpose for using these religious objects is that, as sacred objects, they were believed to have the potentials to instill fear in the people who swear by them. However, of all the leaders that have been taken oath of office, it is rare to see any one taking his oath of office in an indigenous way. They either take it in a Christian or Muslim way, knowing the nature of their God who will postpone judgment till the judgment day while African gods are capable and known for instant justice. Adesina 2005 in Ogunleye 2013 maintains that “In Nigeria today, the average politician exhibits three main characteristics, first, he sees himself as somebody above the law, secondly, to serve nobody but himself and thirdly, to make as much money as he can. “To him, the end justifies the means”. The voices of oppositions are rarely heard in as much as they get their own share of the national cake leaving the voiceless masses to suffer in abject poverty and deprivation. This idea according to Amoah (2009) was borrowed from the westerner’s attitude of exploiting resources in Africa to enrich themselves. Hence the increase in cases of money laundering, corruption and electoral manipulation in various states of the country are still fresh in our memories (The Nation, 2006).

The denial of the traditional oath during swearing-in exercise by political office holders made the phenomenon loose its potency. The position of this paper is that the traditional system of oath-taking should be enforced on those who patronize deities for one reason or the other because it will help to curb the misuse of public resources. More so, traditional setting nobody is above the law as every office holder in the society is subject to the oath-taken irrespective of the status; every transgressor is made to suffer the consequences (Nabofa, 1999).

In respect to the effectiveness of the traditional oath, The Nation 2010 has it that a renown king Oluwadare Adesina was dethroned on the 10th of June 2010 by his subjects due to gross misconduct and violation of his oath of office. This goes a long way to show efficacy of traditional oath. The neglect of the traditional oath has contributed to a great extent to the set-back experienced in governance.

Despite the fact that most political office holders deny the traditional oath and opt for the Bible and Quran during the swearing-in ceremony, they still patronize deities when they are in need. Emaka (2003) disclosed that “government houses across Nigeria are now centers for the practice of juju, witchcraft and voodoo” He maintained that the political office holders use the traditional oath to get what they want and abandon it when it time for their swearing-in exercise. This, according to him is the reason for the set-back in the development process of the country despite the avalanche of natural and human resources.

The Niger Delta

For decades, the Niger Delta region has been enmeshed in all manner of crises political, social and economic. The volatility of the region arose from absence of impact of good governance in many of the over 500 communities making up the area. There are six states making up the Niger Delta geo-political zone. They are Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Delta States. Outside the zone, other oil producing states include Ondo, Imo, Abia, Anambra and recently, Lagos. There are no good roads, potable water, electricity, hospitals, and other social amenities. Despite all these, the environment is highly degraded as a result of inhuman attitude

of many of the multinational oil companies operating in the region.

The Niger Delta though blessed with abundance of natural and human resources are bedeviled with infrastructural setbacks due to bad governance; this is because all her leaders hide under the cloak of civilization and modernization to take their oath of office with either the Bible or Quran. Conversely, this same leaders go to patronize the traditional deities when they are in need, one wonders why the traditional system of oath taking is mundane when it has to do with making commitment for public offices and public good but becomes useful for solving personal problem. This is a strategy to avoid the consequence of the traditional oath which will hold them liable if they deviate from the tenets of their oath. This act also shows that public office holders especially the politicians are always concerned about their personal wellbeing and not the good of the masses which negates the African philosophy of public or communal good. The Niger Deltans should rise and take a stand to ensure good governance by enforcing strategies like the traditional oath system on public office holders who patronize the traditional deities for any form of assistance. This will instill fear in the heart of public office holders. If drastic steps are not taken to curb the high level of corruption in the region it will lead to continual crisis. This is because the goose that lays the golden egg for the nation is impoverished as the oil wells in the Niger Delta creates the commonwealth upon which the bulk of the country's national income is derived.

Most worrisome is the fact that the ecosystem of the area is destroyed due to decades of oil spillage without proper remediation by the international oil companies. This has resulted in loss of means of livelihood by the farmers and fishermen of the Niger Delta as the soil, having been degraded can no longer be cultivated for any farm produce. The water too is polluted with the aquatic life destroyed by the highly toxic oil spills. Thus, those professional farmers in the region have lost their means of income. Due to environmental degradation, the people of Niger Delta do not have clean water to drink neither do they breathe good air as a result of chemical emission in the atmosphere; their roofing sheets get rusted easily while their skin is always looking rough and discolored.

For so long, the international oil companies operated with impunity in the region. They constitute themselves into parallel government. They damage the environment, refuse to develop their host communities, fail to pay appropriate taxes and royalties, sponsor divisions in many communities, abuse expatriate quota, discard local content laws and engage in all manner of sharp practices and malpractices. They jettison international best practices or minimum operational standard in Nigeria because there is no good governance (Finomo, 2010). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/environmental_issues_in_the_Niger_Delta accessed 15-2-2017).

The Concept of Good Governance

The United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) report on governance maintains that good governance is about the processes for making and implementing decisions. It's not about making 'correct' decisions, but about the best possible process for making those decisions. It further states that governance can be seen as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. The core characteristics as identified by UNDP are as follows: rule of law, participation, transparency, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and strategic vision (web.worldbank.org../).

Conclusion

The Niger Delta region that is blessed with natural and human resources is no better than regions with minimal natural resource no thanks to bad governance and leadership of those that have piloted the affairs of the region. The environment has remained underdeveloped for decades; there is high level air and water pollution from the multinationals operating in the region. The various leaders of this region have never deemed it fit to work out modalities of how to improve the region instead they are interested in amassing wealth for their personal use. This is made possible because there are no adequate checks and balances; more so, the oath of office sworn on the day of swearing-in exercise does not have punitive measure to serve as deterrent to those who negate the oath of office as enshrined in the oath they took before the public holding either the Bible or the Quran. This is not so in the traditional oath-taking as every promise made must be abided by else the oath-taker will be made to face the dire consequence. For this reason, the leaders of this region have continually taken cover in the Christian and Islamic religion to perpetuate all manner of selfish behavior in their leadership. The communal African spirit of “live and let’s live” is gone to oblivion, good name and morality which is a highly cherished virtue in African philosophy is now a common slogan and not a virtue to pursue as people are encouraged to grab their own share once it is their turn in office.

Interestingly, these leaders who swear with the religious text of the duo religion mentioned above pay homage to the local deities in their communities and patronize them when they are in need. Thus, this paper advocates that the traditional oath-taking be employed in the swearing-in exercise, even though a person has taken the conventional oath and it is discovered that such a leader has gone the local deity for any kind of need such a person should be made to take the traditional oath. This is possible because every leader is always under public watch, so it is easy to discover them just as individuals go ahead to find out the secret life of political leaders from their date of births to academics, certificates, work experience and different kind of information either to discredit and ruin the person’s political career or promote the person.

Therefore, this paper is of the view that having a second phase of oath-taking for those who patronize the traditional deities will go a long way in raising political leaders who will stick to the tenets of the oaths they have taken which will fast track development in the Niger Delta region.

Recommendation

Political office holders who patronize traditional deities for any reason should be subjected to take the traditional oath of office even though they have taken the conventional oath.

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