

Covenant in Peace Building among Igbo Africans

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Abstract

This work studies covenant in peace building among the Igbo people of Africa. Insecurity is a global pandemic that is ravaging the globe. It is the cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the globe and has brought both health and economic hazards to humanity the world over. In order to bring insecurity to its barest minimum, there must be peace among the people. This peace will be possible if the rebel groups could earn the trust of the people in government. In Igbo culture area, when there is lack of trust among two warring communities, villages, towns or even two sworn enemies, covenant is employed in securing trust. This study is a survey research carried out in Igbo land. Data were collected through oral interviews and unobtrusive observation method from selected Igbo culture areas. Interviews were randomly done across titled men and women, youths, traditional religious adherents, Christians and elites. The essence was to ascertain why, how and when covenant is used in settling dispute in Igbo culture area. The work found out that covenant can be used to regain love lost between friends, spouses, siblings, villages, communities and towns. It also found out that it is used as a last resort in settling dispute and quelling insecurity in warring communities. This work recommends that covenant should be used in Nigeria to gain the trust of the aggrieved. When this is

achieved, socio-political unrest like kidnapping, banditry, cultism that engenders insecurity will be brought to barest level.

Keyword: Covenant, peace building, Africa, Igbo and Culture.

Introduction

Before the Europeans set their foot on the African soil, they had their own ways of resolving any dispute that erupted between their citizens (intra-national resolution) and the rest of their neighbouring nations (international resolution). The Igbo people of eastern Nigeria had their own way of resolving their problems also. This was due to their belief in the use of their deities to help in unraveling of any suspicious occurrence, mistrust or mystery among them.

Man as a social being comes in contact with each other every day of his life in the family, clans, villages and community gatherings, farms, markets and worship centers. In these places, man encounters, relates, communicates and makes transactions with fellow human beings. When two or more people gather together, there is bound to be suspicion, hatred, and jealousy, malignancy arising from malice, envy or lack of trust. When this type of situation arises in the Igbo culture area, people have their ways of winning back the trust of the persons involved in suspicious malevolent acts: this is achieved through covenant arrangement

The Igbo People

The Igbo is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are found in the eastern part of the country mainly in the five eastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. They are also found in Delta and Rivers states.

According to Alloysius Duru, the Igbo people are predominantly found in south eastern and parts of the south-south geo-political delineation of the present day Nigeria and they are very industrious, energetic and enterprising people that speak the Igbo language. They are basically skilled in merchandising and they indulge in agricultural and other economic activities like trading of their agricultural products, fishing, palm-wine tapping, carving, and molding, potting and weaving. By the nature of their economic engagements and interactions, there is high level of socio-economic interaction among them and even beyond Igbo land, hence such interactions can and most times give room for mutual and peaceful co-existence as well as mistrust and conflict. Hence the need to institute an idea which can help sustain peaceful co-existence of a lasting time led to covenant (2009).

Covenant Explained

Covenant is a religious ritual which is used by the partakers of the rites to bind themselves together through the understanding and invoking of God or gods (deities/divinities) to deal with the defaulters of the covenant accordingly. In a lay man's definition, covenant is an agreement between two people. It is a spiritual exercise engaged by two or more people to help in mutual understanding and help in the comportment of their behaviour towards one another. Elazar defined covenant as a morally informed agreement or pact based upon voluntary consent, established by mutual oaths or promises, involving or witnessed by some transcendent higher authority, between peoples or parties having independent status, equal in connection with the purposes of the pact, that provides for joint action or obligation to achieve defined ends (limited or comprehensive) under conditions of mutual respect, which protect the individual integrity of all the parties to it (1995). On the other hand, Fischer explains covenant as a means of

“constitutionalizing” relationships within a political context, in that their “bonds are used principally to establish bodies political and social” (2017).

The term "covenant" is of Latin origin (*con venire*), meaning a coming together. It presupposes two or more parties who come together to make a contract, agreeing on promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities. In religious and theological circles, there has not been agreement on precisely what is to be understood by its biblical term. It is used variously in biblical contexts like the Noah covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Jacobic covenant, Mosaic covenant and Davidic covenant. Covenant is how God has chosen to communicate to us, to redeem us, and to guarantee us eternal life in [Jesus](#). These truths, revealed in the Bible, are the basis of Christianity. The Bible is a covenant document. The Old and New Testaments are really Old and New Covenants. The word "testament" is Latin for Covenant. In political situations, it can be translated as treaty; in a social setting, it means a lifelong friendship agreement; or it can refer to a marriage.

The Igbo Meaning of Covenant

The Igbo term for covenant is *igba ndu*, and it is used as the last resort to settling disputes especially when one's life is threatened by another person. When one is suspecting that one may be harmed by one's associate, *igba ndu* is used to mend the fence. Alloysius Duru explains covenant, which is *igba ndu* in Igbo to literally mean to bond life, *igba* stands for bond or tie while *ndu* means life in Igbo language. However the concept of *igba ndu* is better understood as a covenant between individuals or groups. He says that this practice emanated not only out of fear of the unknown, especially with the knowledge that man is inherently wicked, hence to check on the **wiles** of men, covenants or *igba ndu* is entered into to help safeguard the life

and confidence of the parties that have entered into the agreement. Another reason for the Igba ndu is as a result of man's desire to maintain peace, orderliness and harmonious living among themselves, hence where such is existing; there is the need to consolidate such harmony among people (2009)

Meaning of Peace-Building

Wikipedia explains that Peace-building is an activity that aims to resolve [injustice](#) in [nonviolent](#) ways and to transform the cultural & structural conditions that generate deadly or destructive [conflict](#). It revolves around developing constructive personal, group, and political relationships across [ethnic](#), [religious](#), [class](#), [national](#), and [racial](#) boundaries. This process includes [violence prevention](#); [conflict management](#), [resolution](#), or [transformation](#); and post-conflict reconciliation or [trauma](#) healing, i.e., before, during, and after any given case of [violence](#). Murithi says that the African continent continues to be faced with the challenges of establishing peace and development. Numerous peace initiatives have been launched on the continent. Vast amounts of resources have been utilised to craft peace agreements which have often collapsed under the weight of competing interests. (2006)

Firchow & Anastasiou say that peace-building is a term that spans a wide array of activities influencing sustainable peace in different phases of conflict. It can be found at all points on the war to peace continuum, but it attends primarily to the requirements of conflict-affected communities. This includes concerns related to development, security, legal and institutional reform, peace education, and indigenous peacemaking efforts. (2006).

What is culture?

Culture in a lay man's definition is the totality of a people's way of life, their language, food, house pattern, dancing pattern and musical instrument, marriage styles and beliefs. Alfred Kroeber sees culture as the mass of learned and transmitted reactions, habits, techniques, ideas, values and the behaviour they induce (1953). Lending support to this, Humphery Nwosu and Ogbu Kalu aver:

Culture refers to the gamut of the knowledge, beliefs, customs, traditions and skills that are available to the members of a society. Cultural practices are man-made rather than God-given. They are designs, prescriptions and responses, which are deliberately fashioned to guide all aspects of a people's life. (1978:3)

The researcher accepts this definition because the Igbo culture prescribes that whenever conflict arises between siblings, clans, villages, business associates or friends, the best way to douse the tension and build trust again is through covenant. Uzodinma Nwala on culture, asserts that

Omenala (culture) refers to Igbo attitude to life and their basic conceptions about nature, society and life. It embraces the whole system of civilization of the Igbo in both theory and practice. Indeed, it contains, within itself, the principles for propagating and protecting Igbo traditional civilization and way of life. Myths, rituals, traditional system of initiating, educating and socializing the young into the traditional way of life, and sanction, were the means of propagating and protecting Igbo traditional civilization. (1985:8),

What this means is that every aspect of Igbo man's life is embedded in his culture. And this makes covenant part and parcel of this culture. Corroborating Nwala, Bali Dev Raj says that culture of a society

“... implies its general way of life. It implies a

general behaviour pattern of a society. Thus, their customs, beliefs, language, ways of thinking, feeling and acting constitute the culture of a society. Culture refers to all that man has acquired as a member of society” (1997:120).

Types of covenant in Igbo land

There are different types of covenant that exist in Igbo Culture. These covenants derive their names from the type of objects or materials used in making them and some are based on those involved in the covenant making. Those that derive their names from the materials are the well-known and practiced among the individuals that engage in these covenant. From an interview conducted, we deduced that there are four types of covenant in Igbo culture and they include: palm-wine covenant (Igba Ndụ mmanya Nkwụ ọcha), blood covenant (Igba Ndụ ọbara), kolanut covenant (Igba Ndụ ọji) and eating cooked food together from this same pot/bowl. (Igba Oriko)

Palm-wine Covenant (Igba Ndụ mmanya Nkwụ ọcha)

This covenant exists between husband and wife. It is made during marriage ceremony in Igbo culture. According to a male respondent, many youths of today and those who are not well tutored in Igbo culture do not know the implication of the great “sipping of the palm-wine” in marriage. The respondent explained that a bride sipping palm-wine from a cup and handing the remnant of the wine over to the groom is a type of covenant in Igbo land. He said that before the bride sips from the cup, which normally is a wooden cup in Igbo culture called ‘iko’, prayers are made by both the elders of the families of the bride and the groom. They invite the ancestors of their families, the gods, deities and divinities being worshipped by both families to come and bear witness to the consummation of such union. What this means is that the wife is submitting herself wholly and entirely to her husband in the presence of the people

gathered there and all the divinities, ancestors, deities and gods that were mentioned by the two elders of both families during their prayers- called “Igò ọfọ” in Igbo language. This interviewee called this covenant between the spouses. The man on the other hand is pledging that he will not in any way bring harm to his wife.

On the other hand, a female respondent explained that sipping of palm-wine in Igbo culture is a covenant between a bride and groom because it is this that makes a wife culturally the wife of her husband. The wife has agreed not to cheat on her husband: her body, wealth and children belong to her husband. The respondent said that sipping of wine by the bride means total surrender to the groom. The respondent went further to explained that this covenant is the reason many of the Igbo women go mad when they defy the covenant and defiles their body outside by engaging in extra-marital affairs. In many parts of Igbo land like Awgu in Enugu State, the husband of such a woman will start to develop oedema of the legs and stomach- *ụkwụ ọzịza na ito afo*, if he goes into the wayward wife. When this happens, the wife will be questioned by her husband’s kinsmen about her sexual escapades. If she denies cheating on her husband, she will be mandated to eat ‘the earth goddess food’ called *Nri Aniin Igbo*. This food will be cooked by the kinswomen of the husband of the suspected wife. If she is guilty, she will run mad or die, and if she fails to succumb to any of these consequences of infidelity, she has proven her innocence.

However, if she disagrees to submit herself to the earth goddess food, her husband’s kinsmen will mandate her to go back to her father’s house. If her husband still desires her, he will pay another bride price on her head and the sipping of wine re-done to enact another covenant of faithfulness on the side of the woman and to avoid a gradual bloating fatality of the husband,

as she has broken the first covenant by sleeping with another man other than her husband. This type of covenant made between husband and wife also exists in Yoruba culture, according to Ogunleye. He says that once a woman is married to a man, she becomes one with him. In order to retain their marriage agreement, both the wife and her husband will enter into this covenant. (2013).

Blood Covenant

This type of covenant according to a respondent is enacted by using blood as the material bond. This covenant is usually engaged in by lovers who feel that one of them may leave the other person. It is also engaged by friends who have lost trust in each other, or business associates who feel that one of them may breach the term of their agreement. This is done by making the necessary pronouncements or saying some words read out by the priest of a deity or divinity contracted for the covenant. This can be done inside the shrine of the deity or outside of it. The priest of the deity will use a sharp object to pierce their hands and those involved in the covenant will say something like: “Today being afo in the sixth month of this year, I, Nwankwo Nwaekwe of Umuigwe Ezioha Ogboli Awgu is promising that I will not harm Nwangwu Ekpete of Umuoviete of Amaejirija Uhuegu Awgu, I will abide by our trading condition, sharing our profit equally without hiding anything from him. Any day I try to cheat or harm him Agbala please do not spare my life”. After these words, two of them will use kola nut or añara fruit to scoop blood from the pierced body of the other person and eat. This type of covenant is very effective and difficult to defuse, because, if tomorrow any of those involved in it want to opt out, it cannot be re-done.

That is why before going into blood covenant the chief priest will ask the(two) parties involved whether they are in stable mind to handle such covenant. They are made to go home and

sleep over it for at least one month or two before it will be consummated. Blood covenant is never done in a hurry in Igbo land as the consequence upon those who defy its rule is death. Those who perform blood covenant see themselves as brothers or sisters and behave as such towards one another. John Mbiti explains that blood covenant makes two people who are not related become relatives when they undergo blood covenant because they go through a ritual which often involves exchanging small amounts of their blood by drinking or rubbing it into each other's body.(1969). What this means is that the blood of the two people involved in this covenant is now flowing through their veins. And that is why it is difficult to destroy blood covenant. Nowadays, lovers, brothers, siblings, neighbours, politicians, friends and business associates are making blood covenant without the knowledge of its implication only to come out and start crying when the head is already off.

Kolanut Covenant

Kolanut is widely celebrated in Igbo land. It is one of the many Igbo customs that survived the onslaught of the Igbo culture by the Europeans. Whenever a guest arrives in an Igbo man's house, the first gift the host offers to his guest is kolanut. A male respondent said that the rites and rituals that follow the kolanut presentation, sighting of the kolanut, praying over the kolanut, breaking of the kolanut, serving of the kolanut and eating of the kolanut are beautiful, fun filled and a great lesson to the Igbo people and non- Igbo people who are privileged to witness it. Anytime kolanut is broken between relatives, friends, siblings, in-laws, host and guest, chief and his cabinet, it is enacting covenant. This is because, during the 'igò oji' rite, prayers are offered for the wellbeing of the host, the guest, those present at that particular place and those who are not present, their loved ones at home and abroad, the living and the dead, the seen and unseen.

By calling on all the deities and gods of their land, their ancestors and the divinities of their various towns, they are enacting covenant between the host and the guests at that place. That is why the first invocation of kolanut in Igbo land is “whoever brings kolanut brings life”. Onye wetara oji wetara ndu. A host who wants to harm his guest will not offer him a kolanut in order to avoid the rituals of ‘igo oji’ rite. Also a guest that is harbouring a bad intention for his host cannot accept kolanut in Igbo culture. That is why when someone is sent on an errand and he refuses to accept kolanut, the matter with which he comes to deliver will be treated urgently in order to avoid casualty. In Chinua Achebe’s *Arrows of God* when Akukalia was sent to deliver a message of war or peace to Okperi people, he refused to accept kolanut offered to him by his mother’s kinsmen, the outcome of it was what led to the war between Umuaro and Okperi in which Umuaro was disgraced for the first time in war. (1964). So in Igbo land, kolanut rites and ritual performed between host and his guest is a covenant that none will harm each other.

Eating from the same bowl/ pot ‘IgbaOriko’

This covenant is often made by brothers, siblings and kinsmen who are quarrelling and have lost trust in one another. Parrinder avers that eating together means union in close relationship between equals. He says that when two Thonga brothers in Mozambique have quarreled and wish to make reconciliation they say ‘let us eat out of the same spoon, drink out of the same cup and be friends again. Sometimes an animal may be killed and the two men to be reconciled plunge their hands into the stomach of the animal after cooking and eat some of the flesh/offal. (1962).

In Igbo land, Pita Nwanna describes how Omenuko made this type of covenant with his people after he sold his kinsmen who

were his apprentices to slave traders, after the boat mishap that claimed all his goods. When Omenụkọ made it in life financially and was encountering challenges by his acquaintances, he longed for his dear native land. He sought from his friend Igwe what he would do to be able to be readmitted to and be incorporated in his home land again. He was requested by their king to make this type of covenant - IgbaOriko. He was requested to bring one cow, eight eggs, one cock, eight big yams and eight small yams. The cow was slaughtered at the covenant sight, cooked with the yams and eaten by all present including Omenụkọ who before the immolation of the cow pleaded with his people to forgive him of his wrongdoings and promised not to do such in future. So by this eating together from the same bowl, Omenụkọ and his people became one once again, signaling the end of enmity between him and his people. He regained his people's trust once again and they now believed that he would never harm them in future. (1963)

How Covenant can be used to build peace in Africa

From the foregoing, we have seen the different people that engage in covenant in Igbo land, how it is used to bring peace, amend relationship that was battered and how it is used to bind wife to her husband. So, in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, covenant can be used to build peace in the Area of religion and politics – the two great institutions that are ruling the world.

Religion

Religious fanaticism and bigotry has plunged the African continent into untold hardship. Many of the wars that have been fought in Africa were religious war: Rwanda, Iraqi, Kuwait, Zimbabwe, Central Africa Republic, Syria and Iran. All these wars were fought because the rebel groups of these countries were religious fanatics that view other religions as fake and their followers as infidel. They wanted their countries to be

declared their particular religion as the national religion, thereby creating avoidable bloodletting in their various countries.

Many of the terrorist groups that are ravaging the face of the continent and causing havoc to both human and material resources are religious fanatics, the Al-Qaeda, Boko-Haram, Islamic State of Syria and Iran (ISSI). They are all clamoring for the eradication of other religions especially Christianity which they see as a threat to their religion. They claim that Christians are infidels; these Muslim fundamentalists do not trust them because they are following the Western teachings. If Muslim faithful and other religions can enter into covenant to bind them together and make them trust each other, there will be relative peace and this will forestall many of these guerrilla wars being fought in countries like Nigeria, Cameroun, Chad and Niger. This can be done by the representatives of these religions by signing documents and abiding by the law that they will no longer from that day harm other people from another religious sects, that they will live together in peace and harmony and allow each and every one to practise their religion without fear or favour. When this is done and practised, by each religious sect, peace will be built in that country.

Politics

Politicking is another area that is causing sleepless night to the people of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular as they never get it right whenever it comes to election time. The candidates for elections in Nigeria are those who want to eat from the 'national cake'. Many of them do not have the interest of the masses at heart. The candidates and the electorates can enter into covenant in order to avoid embezzlement of the public funds that are supposed to be used in the development of the country, state, constituency, local government areas and wards. The candidate for any elective position into any public

office like the councilors, L.G. A. chairman, governors, state or federal legislators or the president of a country should be made to sign a pact with his people that if he fails to perform his duty, he should be recalled. It should be made mandatory and written and passed into law. This will enable any money mapped out by a country for consistency project to be used for that project. The covenant that will be made with the candidates and electorates can be a paper one signed into law by the various organs responsible for this.

If this can be achieved it will go a long way to making our politicians wake up from their slumber of non- performance to working politicians. Money mapped out for various project will be used for that particular project because an elected public officer is answerable to those that elected him as in Igbo culture where leaders and followers enter into covenant not to betray each other. The candidates of any political office will be mandated to sign pacts of good conduct and meaningful representation at various levels of the government. They will sign the pact that they will not be part of making obnoxious laws and that they will perform to the best of their abilities. They cannot betray the electorates by embezzling the money meant for the masses to enrich themselves. The councilor will know what to do in his ward, the local government area chairman will use the money meant for the development of his area to work to better the lives of those in that local government area. The state and federal legislatures will stop filling their garages with exotic cars, alienating them to the hungry citizens and engage themselves in constituency projects that will be of benefit to the electorate for the betterment of the every individuals: pipe borne water, good road network, electricity, good market structure and erecting of social institutions will be beneficial to the citizenry.

Governors on the other hand will use the security votes to

secure the lives and properties of those living in the state that they are the chief security. The unending clashes of herdsmen and farmers will be a thing of the past if the governors will imitate the leaders in Igbo culture who, when going to war or hunting expedition would make covenant with his followers to lead them in good faith and all would come back as a body without trading them off to their enemy. This story of governors buying expensive mansions overseas with security votes money and looted treasures while the people such money is meant to secure are being slaughtered in scores by Boko Haram jihadists, herders, bandits, kidnappers and armed robbers does not speak well of our leaders. If governors are using the security votes to secure lives and properties, circuit camera televisions (cctv) would have been mounted at all nooks and crannies of each state like other countries of the world that value human lives. This will go a long way to reducing to barest minimum rampant assassination, rape and burglary that are the order of the day nowadays in this country, as the circuit camera televisions will capture and expose the culprit to be brought to book. The president will be made answerable to his people through covenant. Justifiable loans for even distribution of infrastructure will be procured. Conscious of covenant, he will avoid borrowing loans in order to siphon it through looting; instead the president should use available funds for the development of the country. He should build or revive industries and companies where the teeming youths of the country will be employed. When they engage themselves in gainful employment, social vices like prostitutions, kidnapping, drug addiction, rape and cultism will be at its lowest ebb as the youths will have less time for all these as they are busy with their jobs.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Igbo people have a way of resolving all manner of conflict in their culture. They know

how to build peaceamong themselves and how to live in harmony and regain trust of one another whenever it is lost. All these are made possible through covenant – an agreement between two people to live a life of harmony and peace devoid of harming one another. If Nigeria in particular and African in general will adopt covenant as their way of taking oath of office, many of the atrocities that are committed by public office holders will be history as they will be wary of the terms of the covenant.

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