

## **COVENANT: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICE IN AFRICAN SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

Covenant is a contract under seal, a promise to do or not to do certain action or that a given state of thing shall exist or not. Because of this complex nature, African people do not have just a word for covenant. Thus, African words for covenant includes, promise, oath, vow, bargain or agreement. In modern society, this can be called a contract. However, this is a very intimate kind of contract. It is believed in Africa that the notion of covenant is not in any way foreign to African Tradition Religion. In any typical African Religion, the very idea of religious worship presupposes some form of covenant relationship between the worshipper or worshipping community and the deity. However, the covenant normally does not terminate at the vertical pole. Besides the fact that the members of the community themselves may actually enter into particular covenants among themselves, the bond between each individual and the gods also has horizontal covenantal implications in their daily life interactions. This paper x-rays the view of Africans on covenant. The method adopted for this paper is sociological approach. This paper believes that “there is a covenant between earth and man. The earth produces the food that man eats. The earth becomes the greatest supernatural force that controls every product that is in it. Covenant is very sacrosanct in African religious view. This work also concludes with the types of covenant obtained in the African society and reasons for entering into covenants. People resort to covenants administered with the ancestral staff and other objects such as kolanut. The administration is usually by a ritual leader or a priest before a shrine. We therefore recommend that our society should resort to covenant to restore discipline and tranquility in the society.

**Keywords:** Covenant, socio-cultural, practices, African society.

## **Introduction**

A Covenant is an establishment between two parties. It is a type of oath, though it is stronger than an oath. According to Iwuchukwu (2002:11) covenant was generally employed to establish agreeable and lasting relationships between the leaders of two communities. He claims that the reason for establishing a covenant is for the two communities to come into common understanding with each other.

To become a Christian does not imply that the cherished culture of the people must be thrown away, especially those aspects of culture that are in tandem with the Christian beliefs and doctrine. African traditional norms have no doubt played an important role in shaping the minds of the people and sanitizing their society. In those days people were afraid of committing crime whether deliberately or in deliberately. Once a crime is committed whether personal or public every effort must be made to appease the spirit or the earth goddess, which is regarded as the mother of morality lest the spirit strikes the person or even visits the community with death. Covenant making is, therefore, one of the means of restoring trust and confidence between parties and anyone who goes against the norms is visited with punishment such as death or diseases.

Typically, covenant has three major characteristics. These are: parties involved, terms of reference and the punishment/reward that will accompany obedience or otherwise to the terms of the covenant. It is a serious commitment that hinges on solidarity and reciprocity with the objective of achieving peace. Covenant, as used in this work and in everyday language, refers to a political agreement or treaty between two parties (Sawyer, 2009). It is pertinent to say here that covenant is of different types and each type has its own peculiar method of processing.

Covenant prevents unfaithfulness in the African traditional society. A covenant made in form of oath taking, either in front of divinity or religious emblems, makes African people to comport themselves well in the society. A newly enthroned king who swears to deliver justice without fear or favour is duty bound to keep it. Anything contrary to the oath leads to disaster. Covenant therefore gives meaning and cohesion to society and enhances man's sense of seeking for the good of others and the community in which he lives in its totality. There are different types and levels of covenant among the African people, such as covenant between friends, husband and wife, a king and his chiefs, and between man and divinity. Nyoyoko in Patrick Eluke

(2016:85) asserted that one element of covenant in African traditional religion is the fact that the God of the covenant is simply and essentially a covenant giver whose next most serious occupation after giving a covenant or being a witness to it, it appears, is to avenge its transgressors squarely. Truly, the covenant-giver God of the traditional African was not known also to be a grace-giver who would go all out of his way to support the believer of his endeavor to keep the covenant.

### **The Concept of Covenant**

McBrien (1995) describes how covenant is understood among the Israelites. He says that Covenant is an agreement between two parties. In the Old Testament, there are two kinds of covenant. The first is unconditional, that is, an outright grant is made by one party to the other as a reward for faithfulness. Examples are the agreement between the Lord and Abram in Genesis 15, Phinehas in Numbers 25, and David in 2 Samuel 7. The second kind of covenant is conditional, that is, continuation of the agreement depends on fulfilling its requirements, as in the Sinai covenant between the Lord and Israel. On the other hand, Hornby (1989) sees covenant in two ways. The first side according to him is that covenant is a formal agreement that is legally binding, written, signed and sealed, usually concerning property. The second side is that covenant is an undertaking to make regular payments to a charity, trust. However, among the Africans, covenant can be made between two individuals or groups to clear some doubt, fear or suspicion. It can as well be made before the spirit of a sacred tree or a shrine to ratify an agreement between individuals Okeke (2012:46). Hence, like Oath-taking, covenant solidifies all honesty, harmony, peace and co-habitation.

### **Covenant in African Traditional Religion**

Generally speaking, covenant is an agreement between two or more persons with laid down conditions and guaranteed benefits, depending upon a person's keeping or breaking the covenant (Fleming, 1990). Covenant is a contract under seal, a promise to do or not to do certain acts or that a given state of thing shall exist or not. In modern society this can be simply called a contract; however, this is a very intimate contract. The basic theme of such a covenant is, 'what is mine is yours'. Typically, covenant has three major characteristics. These are:

- a. Parties involved
- b. Terms of reference
- c. The punishment/reward that will accompany the obedience or otherwise to the terms of the covenant.

It is a serious commitment that hinges on solidarity and reciprocity with the objectives of achieving peace Richard, (2013:65-68). By the doctrine of African traditional religion, man is expected to be in covenant relationship with his fellow man and his object of worship. The implication of this is that any harm done to one member affects other members. Thus, it becomes necessary for the members of a cultic or religious group to seek for the well-being of one another and avoid any action that amounts to the breaking of covenant Richard, (2013:69). Another point of interest in covenant-keeping is the corporate type of existence resulting from it. Covenant binds people together, thus, a member does not live his life alone. He is a member of the corporate body. Life and prosperity belong to all and are shared together. When a member is in sorrow others share it with him. Likewise, when one rejoices, others share the joy with him. Daniel (2005:32). Material things are owned and shared together, punishment too is shared together corporately in form of feeling of pain or sympathy. Covenant, therefore enhance oneness and helps to rid society of evil since an evil done to a member will surely affect others.

Covenants were drawn in all African societies to cement a wide range of human relations and interactions in issues like marriage, agreements, settling of disputes, adoption of individuals, admission into societies, and arrangement for buying of land and trade. These operated mainly as preventive measures against the potential threat to peace and tranquility as well as cultivation of peace, good relations, mutual friendship, respect, love between people and spiritual forces Kasomo, (2009:97). Covenant is entered into, to help safeguard the life and confidence of the parties involved in the covenant or agreement. It serves as a rallying point for a people. Through covenants, humans and their institutions are enabled to enter into dialogue. It helps to consolidate their desire to maintain peace, orderliness and harmonious living among themselves hence it tries to eliminate deep seated hatred and calm frayed nerves especially on issues concerning land disputes and other communal or individual squabbles. It strengthens the unity

between the reconciled individual groups and communities. This checks communal and inter-ethnic conflicts resulting from land disputes, murder, adultery and many others. Covenants serve as preventive measures against the potential threat to peace and tranquility. They cement the parties involved into a mystical relationship. They carry obligations of giving and receiving. Their intention is to cultivate peace, good relations ties, mutuality, friendship, respect and love between people and between people and spiritual realities (God, divinities and spirits, as the case may be).

In African society, it is believed that to be trusted by a friend, to be bosom friends, to eat together, or to be received hospitably as a guest, is to enter into a covenant which involves moral obligations. Therefore, to resolve imbroglio among families and regain confidence among all parties involved, requires covenant. Kasomo (2009:97) view is therefore relevant as he states that, the most profound dimension of African beliefs and practices were embedded in covenant of peace after warfare. These covenants restored the relationships of warring communities. They affected the entire community, the living, the dead, the ancestors and gods as well. Very serious consequences were believed to befall anyone who broke such solemn covenants, the most obvious one being death, or serious suffering from natural calamity by the offender.

### **Types of Covenants in African Society**

Covenant is a cultural and religious phenomenon which helps in maintaining order, cohesion and integration in the society. It is obeyed or honored because, apart from being sanctioned by God and deities, it is guarded by the society as well. Covenant in African societies may take various forms and each has a ritualistic basis.

Basically, two types of covenants are identified in African religion. These are suzerainty covenant and parity covenant. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (2005:233), the suzerainty covenant is that made between man and God, or between man and divinity, as in, becoming the votary of a divinity. This covenant in nature has terms that were unilateral given by a person in authority who undertakes to afford the vassal protection and security. Such covenant terms very often involve certain restrictions from things which are forbidden in consequence of the nature of the divinity and promote good relationship between him and the worshipper Bolaji, (1962:152). This type of

covenant is more commonly seen in the call of an individual to enter into this type of covenant with God or other spiritual forces to become a religious functionary like a priest or medium.

On the other hand, parity covenant is a covenant made between two persons or parties who are on equal terms or status and is usually reciprocal. Parity covenant also requires the call on a divinity to bear witness to the covenant Awolalu and Dopamu, (2005:234)

According to Waapela (2008:118), there are other subtypes of covenants in African religion. These include: the ancient man covenant, marriage, age set, joking relationships, secret societies covenant, and blood covenant.

- A. **The ancient-Man or Pre-Historic Man covenant:** This is the first and foremost covenant type in African religion, like in the creation covenant in Christianity. In Africa, according to some stories of creation, man was originally put in a state of paradise, happiness and immortality Mbiti, (1975:95). He was to observe the single law laid down to test his obedience; upon this law, God laid the penalty of death as a sanction. Peter (1976:22), asserted that as can be seen in the Banugrwanda story which states that, God was looking for death (and instructed man not to hide it) but the woman decided to hide death and death has ever since remained with them (Mbiti 1969:98).
- B. **Marriage or matrimonial covenant:** It is believed in African Cosmology that from the beginning of human life, the Supreme Being commanded people to get married and bear children. Marriage therefore is a solemn obligation “a sacred duty” to be obeyed by every normal person (Mbiti, 1969:98). Consequently, there exist native cum religious laws and practices by which most marriage partners must embark on a covenant with each other. First, the criterion is the bride price or wealth which cements the relationship between the contracting families. The bride wealth brings about oneness, friendship, communion, and the establishment of the readiness to form a “marriage covenant.” In some African societies like Ibibio and Igbo among others, a partner or both partners are required to take an oath of chastity to ensure fidelity to the contract of marriage. When the oath is

taken at that moment, there is an immediacy with the sacred reflected, providing a sense of equality between the parties they covenanted together and it protects them (Ring, 1988:86).

Also, since Africans believe in community through bearing of children in marriage covenant, the children are also covenanted to connect to ancestors. This is succinctly captured by Magesa (1997:93) in the Northern Nigeria situation as he states that:

In northern Nigeria, a parent may offer a sacrifice and pray to an ancestor, "I give you this cock and this infant, watch him, and take care of him". Among the Thonga of South African, a medicine man may present the child to the ancestors with the similar invocation: This is the child! May he grow! May his perspiration be good, may impurity go away".

Waapela has rightly stated that, once the spirit(s) have accepted the covenant, often characterized by the brewing of beer and slaughtering of an animal, they accept the role of guardianship (Waapela, 2008:120).

- C. **Initiation Covenant:** Magesa (1997:95) stated that, in African religion, initiation covenant refers to the "process of induction into certain groups, oaths of secrecy or commitments". Many ethnic groups in Africa find it necessary to seal the initiation covenant with an impression of an indelible mark on the body of the initiate at least once in a life time. He further maintains that, Africans almost generally bond up this initiation covenant with the divine or ancestral spirits through a sort of surgery in which blood (as a symbol) is spilled. Here, circumcision or scarifications of parts of the body are the usual types of operation for boys. In the girls, initiation covenants may involve clitoridectomy, the excision or enlargement of the labia, perforation of the ears or lips, scarification of parts of the body or a combination of these. Similarly, Mbiti states that, "this

circumcision blood is like making a covenant of a solemn agreement between individual and the people (Mbiti, 1969:93).

- D. Age-set or peer group:** In this covenant, all young people initiated together form an age-set and such people enjoy a special, social and moral bond of loyalty and devotion with one another... when a man of the same age-group injures another, it is serious offence; they are like blood brothers; they must not do any wrong to each other. It ranks with an injury done to a member of one's own family (Magesa, 1997:106-107). In age – set covenant, relationship is determined and regulated in terms of the strictest equality, loyalty, group solidarity and trust, no matter what position they hold in society. As a rule, they call and refer to each other as brothers and often as twin members of a given age-set therefore considered the parents of each of them as “Father” and “Mother” and their female siblings usually as “sisters” with appropriate respect accorded them. This covenant promotes harmonious living and reduces possibility of violence.
- E. Blood pact or pact of blood brotherhood:** This is a covenant entered into voluntarily; it is a relationship characterized by similar demands and duties imposed on the individuals or groups involved. The main aspect involved in this covenant, as the name implies, is that blood is exchanged between parties involved in some form, either by mixing it in the food and eating or by sucking one another's blood from an incision, for the sake of love. They must not betray each other. Among the Yoruba, they may use kolanut to rub each other's blood and eat it. Whatever they pronounce based on the covenant will come to pass. This makes those concerned to live the life of the other by “giving one's life over to the other” with an oath to uphold the covenant no matter what it costs. The parties involved consider themselves committed to live as brothers, with much concern for one another (Waapala 2008:122) Blood covenant is very common between a girl and a boy when they are in love. Both will drink each other's blood and seal it with intercourse and expect curses on themselves if they break the relationship.



- F. **Sexual covenant:** This is the covenant that involves sexual intercourse in the cemetery with the major purpose of making money. The lady that is engaged in the sex will be afflicted and die. In some cases, the covenant may be between a man looking for money and a mad woman. This covenant is usually facilitated with the man having regular sex with the mad woman. However, if the mad woman becomes pregnant and bears a child, one of the legitimate children of the man will die.
- G. **Covenant with demons for power and protection:** Some people make covenant with demons or the dead for protection and possession of extraordinary powers. For example Asuquo Ekpo explains that, when a town is seeking for protection and refuge from the demons or gods of the land, the king of the town together with the high priest would go into the bush at the midnight and consult with the demon and whatever the demon demands as a token of the covenant has to be given.
- H. **Unknown ancestral covenant:** These are covenants made on behalf of someone without the person knowing about it. For example, the parents enter into a covenant on behalf of their children without the children knowing about it.
- I. **Secret society Covenant:** This covenant exists within the community, voluntary associations or societies and is usually secret. Groups like dancers and singers, medicine men and women and people with special skills are often practitioners of this covenant, usually forming their association. These people often claim to be connected with the spirit of their profession or association, and to act through its power (Waapela, 2008:124). In secret society covenant, the covenanting process is usually elaborate, secret and awe-provoking as can be seen:

In the polo society of the Temne (Siere Leone), a fowl is seized, its head placed on a large stone and severed by another stone. It is then thrown to the members... while the head is being severed, a polo official says a ritual word and to which the boys give the

appropriate reply. This is repeated over each fowl in turn, and the ceremony is a warning to the boys that the same kind of treatment will be given to them, if they divulge any polo secrets to non-member (Magesa, 1997:133).

Bolaji (1973:157) points out that, members of such secret societies enter into pacts of cooperation through thick and thin for the achievement of their purpose, and to make sure that, no member betrays the other. According to Enang (1976:19), by keeping the knowledge strictly within the limits of the confidants, there is an occultation of their doctrine with the intent of self preservation and the keeping of the structure from demolition.

- J. **Covenant with the God or Goddess:** This is a type of covenant in African society; this covenant is made where there is land dispute. It involves the earth goddess. The process requires that the parties involved present their case to the chief Priest and show him the land in dispute. The priest of the land deity goes to the site of the land, enters on it and walks around it without uttering a word. He only shows the edge of the land or demarcates the land with a sacred tree. As he goes round the land, he is closely followed by the elders, not necessarily from among the two parties. While surveying the land, they almost remove their foot wears. After showing the demarcation of the land, the priest goes away without talking, and none of the people who follow him will also talk or ask questions as they go round the land. Moreover, no edible item is eaten during this exercise. Whoever has a covenant with the earth goddess does not answer calls at night and he does not eat any food prepared outside his house. This covenant is usually made between brothers from the same kindred or villagers from the same town or community.

### **The Importance of Covenant in the African Cultural Setting**

Covenant plays very significance roles in African society. According to Megasa 1997:97 covenants stress the major areas of ethical concerns in the life of the individual, society, and religion, the mystery of life and death, domestic and social values, sex and sexuality and the forms of self identity. Thus, during the initiation covenant, the wisdom of the ancestors, religious wisdom, wisdom for living well and fully for one's sake and for the sake of the community are important. Waapela(2008:127). Akiga reports that Tiv of old circumcise youths who reached puberty age of 16-18 years. Circumcision graduated the Tiv pre-colonial child into a youth ready for marriage in order to contribute his quota to the propagation of children to perpetuate the lineage and the society. Covenant as a life pact enhance peace and positive development as well as assure complete cessation of hostility in communal and inter-group relation. Communal and inter-ethnic conflicts resulting from land dispute, murder, kidnapping, adultery and such others if they entail covenant making is performed by the legitimate representatives of the group. Bassey (2007:156). A typical of these are blood and age set pacts. According to Bassey (2007:157) these links authomatically becomes sacred bonds between them to the extend that by the traditional law of most African communities they must not kill or harm each other . This view is corroborated by Aper Apav from Ikurav Tiev before resolution with covenant, the fighters did not tamper with the compounds and properties where their daughters were married and even did not kill children born of their daughters.

The spiritual involvement in covenant making ensures compliances among parties involved. Therefore attempts to divorce the spiritual from conflict resolution practice deny an essential component of healing and social restoration that permits conflicts to be experienced as resolved. Since covenant involves the spiritual, it becomes imperatives in conflict resolution when gives parties more confidence in the resolution. In fact the whole of person to person, and divinity – to- person relations have their bases largely in covenants. It is the final process of arbitration in which parties concerned, witnesses, ancestors and the gods are involved in ensuring peaceful coexistence. Hence when administered, any default in punished by the spiritual forces. So to the Africans, the effectiveness of covenant making in peace pacts requires the spiritual dimension which makes it different from from any ordinary form of secular agreement and contract.

Covenant is entered into, to help safeguard the life and confidence of the parties involved in the covenant agreement. It serves as a rallying point for a people. Through covenants, humans and their institutions are enabled to enter into dialogue. It helps to consolidate man's desire to maintain peace, orderliness, and harmonious living among themselves hence it tries to eliminate deep-seated hatred and calm frayed nerves especially on issues concerning land disputes and other communal or individual squabbles. It strengthens the unity between the reconciled individual groups and communities.

### **Conclusion**

Covenant serves as a memorial event with memorial symbols and rites, these serve as a reminder to the future generations. Whenever parties involved see the symbol of a covenant, they have entered it reminds them of their solemn promise and spiritual consequences of its violation. Covenant making performs a healing function among African societies. It re-affirms and re-establishes relationships not only for past and former protagonists but between all people as well as with God and spirits. From this work, we have discovered that covenant plays a vital part in African traditional society; we have found it in every strata of the traditional African society. Covenant is very sacrosanct and parties involved need to adhere strictly when engaging in covenant relationship with each other. Okeke (2012:73) concludes that covenant is a mechanism of consolidating an alliance and management of external affairs between individuals.

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