

# Traditional Oath-Taking for Effective Leadership and Good Governance in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

*Nigeria is blessed with natural and human resources but no thanks to bad governance and leadership that have piloted the affairs of the Nation. The country has remained underdeveloped for decades due to the attitudes of various leaders who have never deemed it fit to work out modalities of how to improve the country 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 flout the oath they took before the public holding in the course of their duties, as symbolized by 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 dare 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 behaviour 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.*

*Keywords: oath-taking, good governance, traditional oath, leadership*

## **Introduction**

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 him/her in activities that will dent his/her 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 walk 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).

### **The Concept of Oath-Taking**

An oath of office is an oath or affirmation a person takes before assuming the duties of an office, usually a position in government or within a religious body, although such oaths are sometimes required of officers of other organizations. Such oaths are often required by the laws of the state, religious body, or other organization before the person may actually exercise the powers of the office or organization. It may be administered at an inauguration, coronation, enthronement, or other ceremony connected with the taking up of office itself, or it may be administered privately.

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 does this or that to say what one knows (the Catholic Encyclopaedia 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.

### **The Concept of Good Governance**

The United Nations Development Program (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./).

## Types of Oath-Taking

Oaths bond parties together and creates an atmosphere for peaceful co-existence, as a 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 (*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2016). 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, Urhobo, 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 fulfil in future, calls on the Super sensible or deity to bear witness of his declaration and finally calls for a curse which should befall him in the event of failure to fulfil his promises.

### African traditional oath

In the African traditional setting, oaths are to seal agreement. Oaths once taken must be kept as the consequences are sacrosanct; 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 in 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.

### Oath-Taking in Yoruba Society

Oath-taking is universal though it is believed to serve the same purpose(s), its processes differ from one culture to the other. Oviasuyi et al. (2011) aver that "Oath from the Anglo-Saxon oath is an explicate pledge invoking a god, spirit, ancestor, place, or sacred object as witness unto the truth of the words sworn, and is among the most ancient forms of ritual solemnity. A much-venerated pagan relic is the Hippocratic Oath, a pledge of medical ethics held in high esteem among healers from the 1st century onward. Its preamble calls forward the gods of curing to bear witness to the oath: "I swear by Apollo physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, pg34." The oath concludes by pronouncing that he who remains true to the oath shall prosper, while he who does not shall attain "the opposite lot," inviting the scrutiny of the gods themselves upon his actions pg 56." The implication derivable from the nature of oath is that it has to be honoured by the oath taker and the god by whom such oath is taken. This is evident from the wordings of oath in which the oath taker placed his/her life and possessions in the hand of the gods through whom such oath is sworn. Failure to honour the contents of traditional oath is believed to have a great adverse effect on the violators for such being is bound to face the wrath of the deities in the presence of whom the oath is taken.

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

It is pertinent to reiterate that for the invocations of the gods during oath-taking and symbols of these gods are used as instrument of oath-taking. Some of these instruments include thunder stone (*edunara*), and waden (*osesango*) for Sango and cutlass (*ada*) for Ogun as god of iron. Olaoba (2001) aside from the iron object (sacred to the god of iron) used for oath-taking, the Yorubas also use *apasa* (weaving instrument) and *iru* (chiefly scepter), royal shrine or religious sanctuaries are also used. The wrath of the gods is used for eliciting facts of the dispute. Such gods as Sango (god of Thunder), *Yemoja* (goddess of river) and

*Ayelala* (guardian of social morality) are used to ascertain the veracity of the story told by disputants.

### **Oath-Taking for Effective Leadership and Good Governance**

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 control and dictate 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 post-dated 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.

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 indigenous oath taking is very effective in the punishment of those who do not keep to their promises/pledges; that is why politicians run away 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 in still 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 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 lose 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, in 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, 2009)

In respect to the effectiveness of the traditional oath, The Nation (2010) has it that a renowned king OluwadareAdesina 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. 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”pg 37. He maintained that the political office holders use the traditional oath to get what they want and abandon it when it is 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.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria is blessed with natural and human resources but no thanks to bad governance and leadership that have piloted the affairs of the Nation. The country has remained underdeveloped for decades. The various leaders of this Nation have never deemed it fit to work out modalities of how to improve the economy of the country 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 dare 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 Africa 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 symbols of the two religions mentioned above pay homage to the local deities in their communities and patronize them when they are in need. Thus, this paper has advocated that the traditional oath-taking be employed in the swearing-in exercise, even though if such a person has taken the conventional oath.



## Recommendations

1. Political office holders should be subjected to take the traditional oath of office even though they have taken the conventional oath.
2. Advanced societies should support and empower local agencies that are involved in the fight against corruption, through capacity building, and technical assistance.
3. Finally, advanced societies should consider the deployment of secret agents/intelligent personnel in their embassies in Nigeria and abroad and strengthen collaborative initiatives among agencies fighting corruption in Nigeria and all justice administration agencies in their countries. This will expedite requests for assistance made to them on economic and financial.

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