



COVENANT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

Covenant practice is common in almost all religious traditions of the world including Africa traditional religion. Covenants in the ancient world were solemn agreements by which societies attempted to standardize the behaviour of both individuals and social organizations, particularly in those contexts in which social control was either inadequate or nonexistent. This study examines the origin, nature and uniqueness of covenant in the Bible and its perspective from the Africa traditional religion. Covenant is a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between God, individuals, and nations. It has social, legal, religious and moral implications. It can take the form of oath taking, bonding and initiation. This work uses majorly documented religious history and phenomenological approaches as research methods. Covenant is one of the most important themes in the Bible because they act as the skeletons upon which the entire redemptive story is built. African people provided ethical principles through the framework of covenant expressed in indigenous African religious culture. Covenant as used in this study refers to a religious agreement or treaty between two or more parties and is of different types and each type has its own peculiar method of processing.

Key words: Covenant, Traditional religion, guarantees, bonding, initiation, oat-taking

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Introduction

Among the cultural heritage that transverses countries and continents even African communities are covenant bonding and covenant-keeping. Covenant as solemn agreement was used in the ancient world to regularize the behaviour of both individuals and social organizations. It is a promise or agreement under consideration, usually under seal or guarantee between two parties, and the seal or symbol of guarantee is that which distinguishes covenant from modern contract. The concept of covenant has been of enormous importance in the tradition rooted in the Hebrew Bible. The Bible is traditionally divided into the Old and New Testaments (Old and New Covenants). Covenant both in ancient and modern times can take the form of oath taking, bonding and initiation. In post biblical Judaism the concept of covenant has been a major source and foundation of religious thought and especially of the concept of the religious community, but the nature and content of covenant ideas have undergone an extremely complex history of change, adaptation, and elaboration. A covenant is a promise that is sanctioned by an oath. This promise in turn was accompanied by an appeal to a deity or deities to “see” or “watch over” the behaviour of the one who has sworn, and to punish any violation of the covenant by bringing into action the curses stipulated or implied in the swearing of the oath. Because individuals can bind only their own persons by an oath, covenants in the ancient world were usually unilateral. The oath was usually accompanied by a ritual or symbolic act that might take any of an enormous range of forms. One of the most frequent of these was the ritual identification of the promisor with a sacrificial animal, so that the slaughter and perhaps dismemberment of the animal dramatized the fate of the promisor if he/she were to violate the covenant.

Covenant, according to Fleming (1990), 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. Daniel (2005) sees covenant as a contract under seal, a promise to do or not to do certain act or that a given state of thing shall exist or not. Because of its complex nature, Yoruba people of Nigeria do not have just a single word for covenant. As Arulefela (1988) observed, Yoruba words for covenant include; promise, oath, vow, bargain or agreement.

Whitney Woollard (2006) says a covenant is a chosen relationship or partnership in which two parties make binding promises to each other and work together to reach a common goal. They are often accompanied by oaths, signs, and ceremonies. Covenants contain defined obligations and commitments, but differ from a contract in that they are relational and personal. In modern society this can be simply called a contract; however, this is a very intimate kind of contract. The basic theme of such a covenant according to Ogunleye (May, 2013), is 'what is mine is yours'.

Covenant, Ogunleye (May, 2013), maintained has three major characteristics. These are: parties involved, terms of references and 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 objective of achieving peace.

Origin, Nature and Function of Covenants

Woollard (2006) opined that the covenantal story began long ago in the Garden of Eden. It is there that God created humans in his image to be in relationship with him and to act as partners to help him spread goodness throughout the world. The word "covenant" (Heb. berit) is not explicitly used in Genesis 1-3, but the details of the relationship are similar. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were to live as priest-kings on God's behalf, replicating and ruling over the world and representing his righteousness to all. They would enjoy the blessings of eternal life with God as long as they did not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis chapter 1:26-28; 2:4-25 presented a historical account of God's creation of all human beings including Africans as a special being not a product of evolution (v. 27; Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6). Both man and woman were created in the "image" and "likeness" of God. On the basis of this image, they could respond to and have fellowship with God and uniquely reflect His love, glory and holiness. They were to do so by knowing God and obeying Him. That human beings were made in the image of God does not mean they are divine (Stamps, 1988, pp. 5-6). All human life is derived initially from Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:20; Romans 5:12)

God's relationship with human being is described throughout the Hebrew religious sacred book (the Bible) in terms of "covenant". There are, however, five explicit covenants that form the backbone of the Bible: those God makes with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David and the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus. Stamps (1988) observes that by understanding God's covenant with the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), we learn about how God wants human to live in covenantal relationship with Him (p. 6). God special covenant name as revealed in the Bible is

Yahweh (translated as “LORD” Genesis 2:4, Exodus 3:14). Inherent in this covenant name is God’s loving-kindness, His redemptive concern for the human race, His faithful presence with human beings and His desire to be in fellowship with humankind and to be their Lord. According to Stamps (1988) study notes, the fundamental promise of the covenant is the Lord promise “to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee” On this promise rest all the other promises that are a part of the covenant. It means that God firmly binds Himself to His faithful people to be their God and that His grace, protection; goodness and blessing are given to them in love. The ultimate goal of God’s covenant with humankind was to bring salvation, not just to one nation (Israel), but to the whole human race. God extended His covenant grace to the nation of Israel in

order that they might be “a light to the Gentiles (nations)”. In the various covenantal arrangements that God made with humans throughout Scripture, two principles are operative: God alone initiated the promises and obligations of His covenant and human beings were expected to accept them in obedient faith. On some occasions God outlined fully ahead of time the promises and responsibilities for both parties, at no time, however, were people in a situation where they could bargain with God about the stipulations of the covenant.

Evaluation of Covenants in the Bible and Its Implication on African Religious Tradition.

Schreiner (July, 2017) says, if one understands how the covenants function in the Bible, one will have a good grasp of how the Bible fits together. If we see the big picture in Scripture, we will do a better job of interpreting the details, and the covenant plays a fundamental role in seeing the big picture. A covenant should be distinguished from a contract because it is a personal relationship which people voluntarily enter. The definition of covenant here is rather broad, but that is because there are many different kinds of covenants in Scripture. Marriage is a good illustration of a covenant, for a man and woman choose to enter into a relationship with one another and make promises to one another. Not all covenants were alike in the ancient world. In some covenants a person with more authority made a covenant with those having less authority and power. Such was the case when a king made a relationship with his subjects.

Some scholars have said that covenants always presuppose an already existing relationship. The Gibeonite story shows that this is not the case, for Israel did not have any relations with the Gibeonites before entering into a covenant with them (Josh. 9:3–27). Also, some say that all covenants are enacted with blood, but this is not true of the marriage covenant or the covenant between Jonathan and David (1 Sam. 18:1–4). Nor is there evidence of a sacrifice at the inauguration of the Lord’s covenant with David (2 Samuel 7).

Since covenant partners obligate themselves to one another with promises and call curses upon themselves if they disobey, we are not surprised to learn that virtually all covenants have both conditional and unconditional elements. There are clearly conditions in the covenant with Israel made at Sinai. Some scholars say that the covenant with Abraham and David are unconditional, but when we look at the text carefully, conditions are clearly present (e.g., Gen. 17; 2 Sam. 7:14). What needs to be investigated is how the conditional and unconditional elements relate to one another. The principle enunciated here, however, also has exceptions. The covenant with Noah, for instance, seems to be unconditional. Some scholars doubt whether there was a covenant with Adam, but we have good reasons for seeing a covenant at creation. Even though the word covenant is lacking, the elements of a covenant relationship are present. The word covenant does not need to be present for a covenant to exist since the term covenant is not found in the inauguration of the Davidic covenant. The claim that all covenants are redemptive is not borne out by the use of the term in the Scriptures. The elements of a covenant were present at creation, for blessing was promised for obedience and cursing for disobedience.

The covenant with Noah is a covenant of preservation, signifying a new beginning for human beings and the continuance of life on earth until the time of the end. In many ways it replicates the creation covenant. The flood testifies to what human beings deserve on account of

wickedness, and it is a type of the final judgment to come (Matt. 24:36–41; 2 Pet. 2:5). The bow in the clouds, the sign of the covenant, testifies that God has withdrawn his weapons of war, that he will preserve the world until redemption is accomplished.

God promised Abraham offspring, land, and universal blessing. The promise to Abraham finds its culmination in Jesus Christ as the true son of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). All those who belong to Jesus Christ by faith are children of Abraham. The promise of land was fulfilled when Israel possessed Canaan under the leadership of Joshua and Solomon, yet Israel lost the land and went into exile because of sin. The promise of land was realized prophetically in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for his resurrection represents the arrival of the new creation, and it will find its final fulfillment in the new creation—the new temple over which God and the Lamb will reign (Rev. 21:1–22:5). The promise of universal blessing is fully and finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ through whom people from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation are included in Abraham’s family.

Thomas R. Schreiner (July, 2017) in his book “Ten Things You Should Know about the Biblical Covenants” shows how the kingdom of God has advanced through the progression of distinct

covenants, collectively serving as the foundation for God's promise to bring redemption to his people.

The covenant with Israel was gracious, for the Lord freed his people from Egyptian slavery. The covenant was also patterned after suzerain-vassal treaties in the ancient Near East. Blessings were promised for obedience and curses for disobedience. Israel failed to abide by the covenant stipulations, summarized in the Ten Commandments and as a result was sent into exile. The prophets declared in covenant lawsuits, which detailed Israel's violation of the covenant, that judgment were coming. The covenant with Israel had a built-in obsolescence and focused on Israel as a nation; it did not transform the heart of those who heard the covenant demands.

The covenant with David stands in continuity with previous covenants. The rule over the world originally given to Adam would be realized through a Davidic king. The promises of offspring, land, and blessing given to Abraham would be secured through the Davidic ruler. In a similar way the blessings promised in the Mosaic covenant would come to fruition under faithful Davidic kings, but if they strayed from the Lord, then the curses would come. Despite the conditional elements, the covenant with David was ultimately unconditional. God guaranteed a Davidic king on the throne but the covenant promise would only be fulfilled by an obedient king, and the New Testament claims that this person is Jesus of Nazareth. As David's Son, he now reigns at God's right hand and will come again to consummate his reign.

The new covenant represents the culmination of God's saving work among his people. God regenerates his people by his Spirit and renews their hearts so that they obey him. The basis for such renewal is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for by his atoning death and resurrection complete forgiveness of sins is achieved. Hence, a new and bold access to God that was not available in the old covenant is obtained. The covenant with Israel has passed away, and now the promise is fulfilled in the restored Israel, which consists of both Jews and Gentiles. All the promises made to Abraham and David is fulfilled in the new covenant.

The new covenant is the culmination of God's saving work in his people. He promises to make an everlasting covenant with his people in which he will write his law on their hearts, bring complete forgiveness of sin, put his Spirit in them to empower them to love and obey his commands, raise up a faithful Davidic king to rule over them, bring them back into the land to

reunify them into one people of God, and cause them to be a light to the nations Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-32; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-22. The new covenant is (explicitly) introduced by the prophets in the context of total failure. The kings, the people, and even the religious leaders failed to keep God's commands. It turns out that God's covenantal people were

nothing but covenant-breakers! The curses of the covenant came upon them as they were exiled to Babylon. But there, the prophets give them hope—God would one day bring about a new covenant. The anticipation of this covenant pushes the story forward into the pages of the New Testament where we are introduced to Jesus, the one who will fulfill all the prophetic promises and bring about blessing for all peoples. There are no stipulations to this unconditional covenant of grace. God both gives the promises and brings them about through the work of his faithful Son Jesus. In Matthew 26:26-29 and Luke 22:19-22, Jesus connects his death to the new exodus/new covenant themes highlighted in Isaiah and Jeremiah. While Pentecost activates new covenant themes from Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31, so the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit can be seen as signs of the new covenant.

Thomas R. Schreiner (July, 2017) sees the covenants progressively built upon one another forming a backbone of sorts to the redemptive storyline. God preserved the world through Noah, initiated redemption through Abraham, formed a special people through Israel, promised a shepherd-king through David, and then fulfilled all of his covenantal promises through Jesus. With each covenant, God's promises and plans to save the world through the seed of the woman become clearer and clearer until redemption through King Jesus (pp. 42-45).

Jesus perfectly succeeded at every point humans failed. This makes him the guarantor and mediator of the new and better covenant (see Hebrews 7:22 and 9:15). Now people from every nation including Africans from every tribe and tongue who are joined to Jesus in faith are part of God's covenant family and experience the rich blessings of the new covenant. In this new covenant all humans get total forgiveness of sins and cleansing from shame. Woollard (October 2019) added that humans can get new hearts of flesh and the indwelling Spirit, causing man to love God's laws and to walk in his ways. Man can actually do justice and righteousness, and so be a light to all the nations. He maintains human can walk in freedom and light, rather than sin and darkness. Through this covenant men have bold access to God and stand in the realm of grace and trust that a renewed world is coming where peace and righteousness will reign forever under the rule of King Jesus. And it's all possible because of him, the perfect covenant-keeper (p.46).

According to Norman Solomon (2001) covenant language is one of several metaphors used in Bible and Jewish tradition to express relationships, in particular the relationships between God and Israel and between God and his creation. The biblical Hebrew term *brit* "covenant," or "contract," covers a range of agreements among people or between God and a person or group of persons (pp. 142-172). That covenants most probably originated in remote prehistoric times is indicated by the fact that they were already well-developed political instruments by the 3rd millennium BCE George Emery Mendenhall (1954). To judge from later parallels and from the

modern observations of anthropologists, (Mendenhall (1954) says, covenants may very well have developed at least in part out of marriage contracts between exogamous tribes or bands; i.e., those groups that stayed within the required patterns of intermarriage. Whether or not this was the case, the most important functions of covenants for 1,000 years before the Sinai covenant

(11th century BCE?) had to do with the creation of new relationships, both familial and political. Though the old theory of “social contract”—i.e., the basic agreement about the social and political order—as the basis of large social organizations has not for some time been much in favour among social scientists, very early historical evidence seems increasingly to suggest that covenants may have been much more instrumental in society than has been realized.

Typically, so far as existing sources now reveal, a covenant between social groups regularized in advance the relationships between two societies after one had been subjugated by a superior coercive force, usually by military action or the threat thereof. In the Mari documents (18th-century-BCE archives from the palace at Mari in Syria), such a covenant was called a *salimum*, a “peace,” probably because the promises made by the vanquished brought to an end the necessity of military operations against the vassal ruler or state. As is the case throughout so much of human history, ancient states characteristically seem to have regarded their neighbours as either enemies or vassals. Thus it is not surprising that covenants made under duress had little vitality, particularly when the terms of the covenant called for a considerable annual tribute to the overlord state.

About the beginning of the late Bronze Age (c. 1500 BCE), there occurred a major step forward in both the form and the concept of political covenants as is attested by treaties of the Hittite empire of Asia Minor. Though the realities of political life were probably little changed, since the foreign policy of the Hittite empire was primarily military, the structure of suzerainty treaties from this time on included rather strenuous efforts to demonstrate that the vassal’s obligations to the Hittite overlord were really founded upon the former’s self-interest, not merely upon the brute military force of the latter.

By far the most evidence for international treaties in the ancient world comes from Hittite sources, which were contemporary with the events that preceded and led up to the formation of the ancient Israelite federation of tribes in Palestine. According to Mendenhall (1954), the treaty form in written texts was highly developed and flexible but usually exhibited the

following structure: preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, provisions for deposit and public reading, witnesses, and curses and blessings formulas.

(1) The preamble names the overlord who grants the treaty-covenant to the vassal. The titles and laudatory epithets of the Great King are also given. (2) The historical prologue describes the previous relationships between the two parties in some detail, usually emphasizing the benevolent acts of the Great King toward the vassal. Thus the covenant is based upon the demonstrated benefits that have already been received and therefore holds out the expectation of continuing advantage for faithful obedience to the covenant. There is an implication that obedience to obligations is based upon gratitude. (3) The stipulations, which in form are much like those of the ancient Mesopotamian law codes (case law), define in advance the obligation of the vassal in certain circumstances. In addition, there are also generalized statements of obligation of a type that has been called “apodictic law” (regulations in the form of a command). The obligations deal particularly with military assistance, the treatment of fugitives, and foreign policy. Treaty relationships with other independent states are a violation of covenant. (4) Provision is made for deposit of the treaty in the temple and for periodic public reading. Because the temple is the “house of the god,” the written document

was placed there for the watchful attention of the deity. The treaty obligations, however, were also binding upon the vassal’s citizenry, and so at stipulated intervals the text was read to the assembly, both as a reminder and a warning. (5) The list of witnesses included, in addition to the major deities of both states, deified elements of the natural world, such as mountains, rivers, heaven and earth, winds, and clouds. The witnesses were those powers that were believed to be beyond human control and upon which both individual human beings and society as a whole were regarded as completely dependent. They were invoked to apply the appropriate sanctions of the covenant. (6) The curses and blessings formulas are the sanctions that furnish not only negative but also positive motivations for obedience. They include the natural and historical calamities beyond human control, such as disease, famine, death without posterity, and destruction of the society itself. The blessings are of course the opposite: prosperity, peace, long life, continuity of kingship and society (Mendenhall, 1954, np).

In view of the obsession with rituals that characterized Hittite culture, some elaborate ceremony probably accompanied the ratification of covenant, such as the account of one preserved in the document known as “The Soldiers’ Oath,” but it is not described in existing covenant texts. Beginning in the 20th century, European and American scholars noted an

astounding similarity between this treaty structure and the biblical traditions of the Sinai covenant. Publication of texts in the mid-1950s was followed by an enormous amount of scholarly discussion, but as yet no conclusions can be said to represent a scholarly consensus. The formal similarity to biblical traditions cannot be denied, but the problem of what historical conclusions can be drawn from the formal similarities is highly sensitive and controversial. While the following synthesis is a probable, and historically plausible, interpretation, it must be admitted that other possibilities can by no means be excluded.

Covenant in Africa Traditional Religion Setting

By the doctrine of Africa Traditional Religions, 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. Religion, more than anything else, colours the Africans' empirical participation in the universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. This is the philosophical understanding that underlines African myths, proverbs, oral traditions, symbolic values, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, ethics, covenant and social relationships. In addition, as far as history is concerned, this traditional religious attitude maintains an almost absolute monopoly over African concepts and experiences of life (Mbiti, 1975, p. 262). In African world, relationship exists between religion and culture. Religion is inextricably linked to culture, exerting enormous influence on human beings; and at the same time, animating both his/her personal and communal activities in the society. Igwegbe (1995) asserts that, African Traditional Religion is "inherently holistic." This feeling of wholeness is an important aspect of African life (p.41). Ikwuagwu (N.D) quoting Igwegbe (1995) maintains that the religion permeates almost every crucial aspects of the African life, namely: marriage, birth, naming ceremony, initiation rite, illness, healing, covenant and death. According to (Mbiti, 1969) in the African Traditional Religion one could hardly distinguish the secular from the sacred, the religious and the non-religious, the spiritual

and the material areas of life. Both of them are interwoven. 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 (p.2). With this in mind, African people often handled the phenomenon of covenant with utmost care in order to move the society forward. Another point of interest 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. On the contrast, among the Africans, man values nature, preserves it and relates well to it. Ikwuagwu (n.d.) maintained that the attentive observation of nature and natural phenomena, comprising life cycles, birth, growth, death, transience of beings and man's limitation by sickness and death characteristically distinguish Africans from other races. Being observant lovers of nature and imbued with the sense of mystery and wonder, they come to have a sense of the existence of God (p.16). The awe of nature evident in the African experience of and relationship to hills, mountains, thick forests, big trees, rivers, rocks, deserts, and wild animals manifest the wonder of the Creator and dispose the Africans to arrive at the conclusion that God exists as the Being who is the Creator and – the origin and source of all things. In their different languages and cultures, Africans address this Being with different names according to their experience with and of him. Africans do not attribute life to nature like earth or inanimate objects, as the source of life rather they see nature as mediating life. The Igbo people use the word Omenala to describe custom. This word sometimes is interpreted as tradition. Aru means abomination or pollution. In addition, Nso Ala refers to the behaviour contrary to the laws of Ala, which is the earth deity. Nso Ala or Aru are two words used when speaking of contraventions against approved social and religious norms of Ndi Igbo (Ilogu, 1974, p.22). The breaking of covenant is one of the Nso Ala or Aru among Igbo people of Africa. When a member is in sorrow others share it with him. Likewise, when one rejoices, others share the joy with him. It is also characteristic of this religion to be community-oriented. The individual practice his religion in communion with the community in which he lives. The individual does not practice religion in isolation of the community, but rather in and with the community. To the average African, religious cult is an imperative. Religious worship, rituals, and ceremonies involve the whole community (Igwegbe, 1995, p. 44). Material things are owned and shared together, punishment too are shared together corporately in form of feeling of pain or sympathy (Abioye, 1986). Covenant therefore enhances oneness and helps to rid society of evil since an evil done to a member will surely affect others.

In addition, covenant prevents unfaithfulness in the Africa 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 favor is duty bound to keep it. Anything contrary to the oath leads to disaster. Worship in Africa Traditional Religion takes the form of prayers, offerings, sacrifice, observance of certain customs and participation in certain ceremonies. Kayode and Adelowo, (1975) maintains that the goal of worship in the African Traditional Religion is not oriented to personal salvation or sanctity, but directed to gain favour or to thank God for a favour obtained or to ward off a disaster, and to be looked upon favourably by the spirits and the ancestors. Covenant

therefore gives meaning and cohesion to society and enhances the sense of seeking for the good of others and the community in which he/she lives in its totality.

Types of Covenant in African Traditional Religions Setting

There are different types and levels of covenant among the African people. We shall look at a few of those most commonly existing among Africans. These include; covenant between friends, husband and wife, king and his chiefs and between man and divinity. Covenant between friends can be in form of an ordinary spoken agreement between two friends. This type of covenant is often sealed with sharing of kola nut. Among the Yoruba, it is a taboo to share kola nut with a person and then speak ill of him or her. Kola nut is an important fruit in the Yoruba spiritual life. It is believed to be capable of warding off death, diseases and even pestilence. Ogunleye (May 2013) maintains that a covenant made in form of oath, taking either in front of divinity or religious emblems makes Yoruba people to comport themselves well in the society. A newly enthroned king who swears to deliver justice without fear or favor is duty bound to keep it. If two or more friends shared a piece of kola nut, the act becomes a covenant. Anybody therefore, who betrays the term of covenant is surely attracting evil on his/her head (p. 2).

Secondly, there is covenant between husband and wife. 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 a covenant. According to Arulefela (1988), this type of covenant is often made in secret without the knowledge of their extended family. To go about this, the man would incise his body (usually left arm) and the woman would do the same. They would each rub a piece of kola nut in each others' blood and eat it. After this, they must not betray each other.

Another type of covenant is the one between kings and their chiefs. Kings in Africa especially among the Yoruba people did not rule their kingdoms alone. They did so together with the council of chiefs. In order to be sure of their absolute loyalty, kings of various domains often enter into a covenant with their chiefs, at least once in a year. What usually takes place at Ile-Ife (the cradle of Yoruba race), according to Ogunleye (2008), during Olojo (a festival in honour of Ogun-the Yoruba god of iron) shows the covenant relationship that exists between kings and their chiefs in Yoruba land. During the festival, precisely on the fourth day, the king, who is the chief celebrant will lead a long procession of traditional chiefs to the Ogun Shrine. At the shrine, all chiefs would bring out their swords of office and the Ogun priest will mark them with chalk and can wood powder. After this, the entire chiefs will enter into a covenant of absolute loyalty

with the king. It is this covenant-making that will mark the end of the fourth day of the celebration.

Besides, there is a covenant between man and divinity. Unlike the biblical covenant where it was God that entered into covenant with his people, in the Africa Traditional Religion, reverse is the case. The initiative is usually from the people and divinities were only called upon as witnesses. Failure to keep such covenant usually results to death of the offender. This type of covenant is very much like the one described by John Ruganda (1973) in his book titled: *Covenant with Death* in which he showed that a man's word is his bond once he entered into a covenant with a divinity. Entering into a covenant relationship with certain divinity is often precipitated by one pressing issue or the other. It must be noted here that, once one is in covenant relationship with certain divinity, the person must be ready to fulfill his own part of the pact. This is because any covenant with a divinity in Africa especially in Yoruba land cannot be altered (Ogunleye, May 2013, p. 2).

Covenant Initiation in African Traditional Religion

Initiation represents one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in African Traditional Religion. It means to admit (Ikwaagwu, n.d.:62) with necessary introductory rites or forms into some society or observance, especially, of occult character. According to Eliade (1995) initiation exists almost in every culture and religion and it features in different forms with the aims to bring the individual (the initiate) in contact with the sacred. It involves not only the religious life but also the entire life of the individual. It indicates a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person. The initiates bind themselves together in a covenant not to disclose the secret or mystery of the cult group. He further maintains that by undergoing the process of initiation one acquires the knowledge of the secret mysteries of a religious cult which gives him/her the privilege to behold and participate in certain dramatic acts of mysterious character. Its actualization is so holy and so secret, that only a limited number of people are allowed to attend to it. Moreover, it is strictly forbidden to depict or describe the cultic act in question (pp. xix, 18). However, it can mean the disclosure of an esoteric truth in the sense of a secret doctrine which is taught or exemplified by dramatic action. Ikwaagwu (n.d) believes one can witness such possession of esoteric truth in secret societies such as the Rosicrucian Order, Ogboni Fraternity, Inkankar, Olumba Olumba, Greco-Oriental mysteries, the society of Lyangombe (among the people of Rwanda), or the Ekpe, Cult of certain Igbo, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River areas, Omabe and Odo

masquerades cult of certain areas of Enugu State of Nigeria et cetera (p. 62). It is performed individually or for comparatively small groups. It includes all types of rites for entering into a secret society. It features mostly in secret societies and is mostly limited to one sex, and is very much jealous of their respective secrets.

The solemn moment of the initiation is when the Spirit, through the mediation of the sponsor, his representative, forms an unbreakable alliance with the neophyte. This occurs by the rite of the blood pact, his spouse by the rite of initiation, and his table companion by the rite of the meal as communion. In the course of this the Spirit, the initiating medium, and the recipient put food into each other's mouth; the initiate becomes another self of the Spirit.

In African Traditional Religion adherents enter into different mystical covenant through initiations to the gods or spirits. By accepting to be initiated into the religious cult of African Traditional Religion one knowingly or unknowingly enters into covenant with some mystical powers in the religion. These are some of them:

Initiation with a Mystical Vocation: Quoting from (Bulletin, 18, Rome: 1971, 173-174) Ikwuagwu says, this occurs in connection with a mystical vocation. On the level of primitive religions, he opines that the vocation of the medicine man, Nwadiibia (native doctor or

Shaman) falls within this type of initiation. A specific characteristic of this group is the importance which personal experience assumes in it. However, those who submit themselves to the ordeals typical of this category of initiation are destined to participate in a more intense religious experience than is accessible to the rest of the community. Ikwuagwu (n.d) believes this form of initiation is the same as the one that occurs in the Christian Religion, example, in the ordination to the catholic priesthood. We may note that the last two forms of initiation – initiation required for admission into a secret society and the initiation requisite for obtaining a

higher religious status – have a good deal in common, and may be regarded as “two varieties of a single class.” What distinguishes them is the element of ecstasy which is very central in shamanic initiation (p.65). Bleeker (1965) classifies African Traditional Religion's initiation covenants into the following headings, namely:

1) Initiation into the tribal community: All young people, both boys and usually girls, participate in this form of initiation. The initiate are introduced to the knowledge of the myth and the rules and the customs of the tribe.

- 2) Initiation into certain societies of men or women: This ceremony is generally celebrated by rites which have either a symbolic or a realistic character; in the latter case they can consist of cruel ordeals.
- 3) Initiation into a closed society which possesses an esoteric truth, sometimes in the form of a secret doctrine.
- 4) Participation in a type of cult which dramatizes a religious truth of such a mysterious character that only privileged people are allowed to attend to it.
- 5) Initiation into an office which requires certain personal or extraordinary knowledge, such as the function of the shaman, the king, or the prophet.
- 6) Initiation into religious truth which happens when a man embraces a certain belief or is converted (p.49).

Arunsi (1994) affirms that Egbala cult exerts overwhelming influence on Edda community and communities around her. He testifies that the initiates and anyone that has insight into the worship and secrets mystery of the cult is bound under strict oath which applies especially to the rituals. He maintains that the rigorous spiritual and ritual activities that qualify one for this, lasts a period of nine or eight years. It is a type of schooling and military training in Edda culture (p. 85).

In African Traditional Religion, Nabofa (1999) says different villages enter oaths of different degree to make sure there was peaceful co-existence, oath-taking, initiation and covenant keeping work together to bring sanity in African religious environment (p.79).

Conclusion

This study examined the origin, nature and uniqueness of covenant in the religious cultures of human beings especially from the Bible the sacred book of the Hebrew people. Among the cultural heritage that transverses continents and countries even African communities is covenant bonding. The study revealed that covenant as solemn agreement was used in the ancient world to regularize the behaviour of both individuals and social organizations. As a promise or agreement under consideration, covenant is usually under seal or guarantee between two parties, and the seal or symbol of guarantee is that which distinguishes covenant from modern contract. Woollard (2006) opined that the covenantal story began long ago in the Garden of Eden. It's there that God created humans in his image to be in relationship with him and to act as partners to help him spread goodness throughout the world.

God's relationship with human being is described throughout the Hebrew religious sacred book (the Bible) in terms of "covenant". A covenant should be distinguished from a contract because it is a personal relationship which people voluntarily enter

Since covenant partners obligate themselves to one another with promises and call curses upon themselves if they disobey, we are not surprised to learn that virtually all covenants have both conditional and unconditional elements. What has been investigated is how the conditional and unconditional elements relate to one another. The new covenant is the culmination of God's saving work in his people. He promises to make an everlasting covenant with them. According to Norman Solomon (2001) covenant language is one of several metaphors used in Bible and Jewish tradition to express relationships, in particular the relationships between God and Israel and between God and his creation.

By the doctrine of Africa Traditional Religions, 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. Religion, more than anything else, colours the Africans' empirical participation in the universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. This is the philosophical understanding that underlines African myths, proverbs, oral traditions, symbolic values, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, ethics, covenant and social relationships. Mbiti (1969) in the African Traditional Religion one could hardly distinguish the secular from the sacred both of them are interwoven. Africans seek the well-being of one another and avoid any action that amounts to the breaking of covenant and handled the phenomenon of covenant with utmost care in order to move the society forward (p.2). Covenant binds people together, thus, a member does not live his life alone. He is a member of the corporate body. The breaking of covenant is one of the Nso Ala or Aru among Igbo people of Africa. Covenant enhances oneness and helps to rid society of evil since an evil done to a member will surely affect others. Covenant prevents unfaithfulness in the Africa 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.

These are the different types of covenant in African Traditional society - covenant between friends, husband and wife, king and his chiefs and between man and divinity. In African Traditional Religion, adherents enter into different mystical covenant through initiations to the gods or spirits. By accepting to be initiated into the religious cult of African Traditional Religion one knowingly or unknowingly enters into covenant with some mystical powers in the religion.

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