

Covenant Making in Traditional African Societies and its Implications on Political Campaign Promises in Nigeria's Current Democratic Landscape

Asukwo Edet Oko, Ph.D.

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom*

&

John Clerk Koko, Ph.D.

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Rivers State University, Port-Harcourt*

Abstract

This article explored the place of covenant making in traditional African societies and its implications on political campaign promises in the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria. An overview on the socio-political and economic scenes in Nigeria shows an ugly phenomenon in which political leaders usually make lofty political campaign promises during electioneering period but fail to fulfill them. Thus, Nigeria as a democratic state is now being characterized by innumerable problems resulting from this obvious failure of government to keep to her promises. The paper argues that to address Nigeria's innumerable socio-economic and political vices, politicians need to learn the art of covenant making in traditional African societies which promotes unity, brotherliness, faithfulness and social justice and apply same today. To achieve this, the paper used the discursive approach in presenting data gathered through literature review and personal observations. It reveals that the socio-economic, religious and political vices in Nigeria are the consequences of the failure of government to fulfill political campaign promises. Therefore, it recommends a re-visitation of the art of covenant making in traditional African societies in form of oath-taking as a remedy.

Keywords: Covenant making, Traditional African Society, Politics, Democracy and Campaign Promises

Introduction

Nigeria is a country that is made up of over 250 ethnic's nationalities or identity with three major religions via Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. According to Idowu, (1982), Africans, which in this case are Nigerians, are very religious people, and one of the religious elements that unite or bound them together is covenant-making which

formed a substantial part of their lives. As observes by Oluseebi, (2017), man has always believed in the power of bonding and one major means of bonding is covenant-making. Covenant and covenantal relationships are as old as religion. In the traditional context, this covenant-making are expressed typically in symbolic actions, prayers declarations, dances and rituals. During electioneering campaign, the art of covenant-making usually manifests in form of political campaign promises where electorates are persuaded to vote for political candidates of the various political parties. In some cases, the covenant-making may even involve giving and taking of oaths especially during delegate election of political party's primaries. Sadly, in almost all cases, these campaign promises are not usually kept by the elected thereby breaking the trust of the electorates. Therefore, this paper examines the implications of covenant-making in traditional African societies and its implications on political campaign promises in Nigeria's current democratic landscape. It is the thrust of this paper that campaign promises are modern manifestation of traditional oath-taking or covenant-making and as such should be fulfilled at all cost. This is because the whole of human life as Frederick (1997) observes centers on person-to-person relations which have its basis largely in covenant-making. Again, Ogunleye, (2013), captures this correctly by noting that covenant-making is a relationship with promise and benefits for obedience. Therefore, understanding its implication on human society is absolutely necessary.

The Concept of Covenant Making in Traditional African Societies

According to Fleming (1990), covenant is an agreement between two or more persons with laid down conditions and guarantee benefit 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 things shall exist or not. According to Nyoyoko (2003), the relations between man and man, and the divinities have their basis largely in covenant. He asserts that covenant ideas are found in the social religions and political aspects of the people's life, and every case of covenant making in Nigeria and Africa at large, the human party is enjoined to be in a perfect state of active goodness towards one another in both religions and social endeavors. The Supreme Being that is the divine party sees to it that the terms of covenant are kept strictly and in the event of a breach it punishes the offender. And this happens so that the society does not disintegrate since the society is basically moral and religious. Nyoyoko (2003) sees covenant as the basis and structure of the African society. In many traditional societies like Nigeria, traditional leaders make declarative covenants concerning their kingdom's wellbeing. It is believed that he has the embodiment of eco-relational wholeness of the kingdom and their words are often regarded as the word of God mediated through the ancestors. For Kaunda (2018), the people believe that the authority and the power of God and ancestors are embodied in the traditional

leaders, who act as the unionization of spiritual and material reality and the wellbeing spring of the kingdom. According to Ogunleye (2013), there are three characteristic features of covenant via the parties that involves in the covenant, the term of references and the punishment/reward that will accompany the obedience or otherwise to the terms of the covenant. For him, this is a commitment that hinges on solidarity and reciprocity with the purpose of achieving peace in African society.

The fundamental backdrop upon which the African socio-religious and cultural reality is founded, serves as the assumption upon which Mbiti (1975) lights the nature of the typical African society. For Africans, the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon. Man is a religious being living in a religious cosmos. Man is religious in the sense that Africans see a purpose in every phenomenon and a divine influence with a direct or indirect connection with his particular or communal existence. Africans who have already known about covenant and its implications as an important aspect of culture are therefore called to abide by covenant and are aware of the implications of their covenant with God. Since the people are fully aware of covenant obligations and consequences of not being faithful to the terms of their agreement, they are best suited to live the covenant life of the new people of God in today's society (Nyoyoko, 2013). Sawyer (2009) sees covenant as a political agreement or treaty between two parties. Therefore, covenant is of different types and each type has its own peculiar method of processing it.

First, there is the covenant that exists between friends in traditional African societies. For example, in African traditional religion, covenant can be made between friends and this type of covenant can be through spoken word, agreement or promise between two friends. During this covenant, the two friends are expected to lock their two hands together and the pronouncement is made between them. In some African societies like Yoruba land, sacred objects are usually involved. The parties usually seal such covenant by breaking and sharing of kola nut, and it is believed that if any of the parties betrays each other or say ill of the other, then such is capable of warding off death, disease and even pestilence. The Yoruba people sees kola nut as a fruit of spiritual life that when shared between friends, its bind them together and if there is any betrayal of trust among the parties, this can attract evil upon the offender.

Another type of covenant-making that existed in traditional African society is that which occurred between husband and wife and may best be referred to as marriage-covenant. For example, whenever marriage is contracted in traditional African society between husband and wife, there is a bond that keeps them together. This bond is usually seal with covenant whereby the husband and wife enter in order to retain their marriage agreement. According to Arulefel (1989), this type of covenant is often made in secret without the knowledge of

the extended family members or friends. The couple can incise their body and make some pronouncements and thereafter lick their blood. But in the case of Yoruba traditional society, kola nut is usually broken into pieces and the parties involved will rub a piece of kola nut in each other blood and eat (Ogunleye, 2013:82). Among the Efik/Ibibio this vow is normally taken in the presence of the priest and members of the congregation.

Perhaps, the most related form of covenant-making with respect to this paper is the one between Kings and their subjects. It is believed that in every traditional society, kings do not rule their kingdoms alone but with the help of other king-makers or their subjects. According to Olupona (2014), kings are said to possess mystical, life-sustaining powers with their well-being intimately of their people, land and institutions. For Kaunda (2018), the people believe that the authority and the power of God and ancestor are embodied in the traditional leaders, who act as the unionization of spiritual and material reality and the wellbeing spring of their kingdoms. It was based on this assertion that Mbiti (1969: 170) avows that traditional leaders or kings are not simply political heads; they are the mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The individual as such may not have outstanding talent or abilities, but their office is a link between human rule and spiritual government. They are divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. Awolalu (1976) maintains that covenant-making plays a crucial role in inaugurating and sustaining the Kingdom or the society. It is typical of traditional African societies for Kings not to rule alone but do so with their subjects or council of chiefs who are members of their cabinets. However, in order for kings to be sure of the unalloyed support of their subjects, they often enter into a covenant with their chief at least once in a year. With this the trust of their subjects is guaranteed.

Finally, there is also the covenant between humans and divinities in traditional African societies. This type of covenant relationship with divinity is often precipitated by one pressing issue or the other. Once this covenant relationship is established, the individuals in such a covenant relationship with a being or divinity are expected to fulfill his part while the divinity fulfills its part. This kind of covenant can be likened to the covenant relationship between God and the children of Israel.

The Concept of Politics

The term "politics" appears to have a more precise definition, although scholars differ in their approaches on how it should be defined. For example, in defining the term, the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010:978) describes politics as "the science of civil government that involves the activities or intrigues of a political party". In essence, the concept of politics by this dictionary definition has

something to do with the activities of a political party and government. The Greek concept of politics according to Akubor (2018:108) refers it to be a process by which people debate matters concerning the political community and take actions in an attempt to realize the public interest or the common good. Hence, he notes that politics concerns the management and allocation of resources for the benefit of the greatest number of people in any given society using political parties as vehicles in seeking the mandate of the people (Akubor, 2018:111). In politics, there is usually a social contract between the government and the citizens of any given society as Gough (1936:2-3) has noted. In this light, Hornby (2000:899) conceived politics simply as the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. The implication of Hornby definition is that politics concerns the process of taking power and using this power to influence public life either negatively or positively. But Nmah (2007:127) adds that politics does not only have to do with the process of adjustment and interplay of power but also of interest as well within the public life and affairs of a society on national and multi-national levels. By and large, it is safe to define politics as the process which involves the acquisition of power from citizens through the use of political parties and political campaigns for purpose of providing governance to such citizens within a given state or society. To acquire this power, politicians in their political campaigns usually make promises of the things they intend to do (Sibani and Oko, 2013).

The Concept of Democracy

Like politics, the term “democracy” has been variously conceived and defined in different ways. This is due to the widespread notion that democracy is the best form of government. According to the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010:341), the term “democracy” could be defined as:

A theory of government which, in its purest form, holds that the state should be controlled by all the people, each sharing equally in privileges, duties, and responsibilities and each participating in person in the government, as in the city-states of ancient Greece.

However, Becker and Raveloson (2008:4) noted that democracy originates from two Greek words: *demos* meaning the people and *kratein* connoting to govern or to rule. Thus, they literally translate the term to mean “government of the people or government of the majority”. It should be noted that democracy as a state form is to be distinguished from monarchy, aristocracy and dictatorship. This explains why Abraham Lincoln cited by Becker and Revaloson (2008:4) describes it as “the government of the people, by the people and for the people”. They also argue that true democracy must be characteristics of the

following principles: fundamental human rights and freedom, elections, rule of law, separation of powers, the parliament, democratic pluralism, the government and the opposition and public opinion and freedom of the media (Becker and Revaloson, 2008:4-13). With this, democracy places emphasis on equality of all citizens and freedom of expression in a manner that legitimizes power in the people rather than on government. Accordingly, Dunn (1994) highlights some indispensable principles of democracy to include freedom and equality of all citizens, supremacy of the rule of law and a commitment to the progress of the political entity. In this light, a state can only be said to be democratic if such a state or society recognizes as Salami (2006) observes the differences in human interests and strives to provide the basic structures required to meeting such needs using politics as the sphere of negotiation. In the Nigerian democratic situation however, some of these basic tenets of a true democratic state are obviously lacking. What has emerged in Nigeria instead is a form of pseudo-democracy in which politicians usually make promises during their political campaigns but after acquiring political power abandon the masses to their fate. In the next, section, we shall consider some campaign promises that were made by the present government but which the government has failed to fulfill.

Campaign Promises by Politicians in Nigeria

There are myriad of unfulfilled campaign promises by politicians from the inception of the fourth Republic in 1999 till date. However, we shall focus attention only on some key political campaign promises that were made by this present democratic government (APC government) during the 2015 and 2019 political campaigns in order to win the favor of the electorates but which the government has completely turned a blindfold fashion to it. Some of the key campaign promises as highlighted by the Editor of the Cable Network News include:

1. Public declaration of all assets and liabilities by all political appointees.
2. State and community policing.
3. Ban on all government officials from seeking medical care abroad.
4. Implementation of the National Gender Policy, including 35% affirmative action (35% political appointive positions for women).
5. Revival of Ajaokuta steel company as a stepping stone to industrializing the country.
6. Increasing power to at least 20,000MW and 50,000MW of electricity within four years with a view to achieving 24/7 uninterrupted power supply within 10 years.
7. Empowerment scheme to employ 740,000 graduates across the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory.

8. Creation of 1,000,000 jobs per year across the 36 states and the FCT.
9. Exchange Rate of 1 Naira to a U.S Dollar.
10. Making the Nigerian economy one of the fastest-growing economies in the world with a real GDP growth averaging 10% annually.
11. Creation of a social welfare scheme of at least N5000 for 25 million poorest and most vulnerable citizens in Nigeria.
12. Recruitment and training of at least 10,000 officers into the Nigerian police force and establishment of a Federal anti-terrorism agency.
13. Provision of one free meal daily for all public primary school pupils.
14. Promote national unity by eradicating state of origin and replacing it with state of residence.
15. Provision of adequate security for all citizens in the country.
16. Establishment of a conflict resolution commission to help prevent, mitigate and resolve civil conflicts within the polity.
17. Reviewing and ensuring that all political office holders earn only the salaries and emoluments determined and approved by the Revenue Mobilization and Fiscal Commission RMFAC.
18. Complete diversification of the economy by making information technology, manufacturing, agriculture and entertainment key drivers of the economy.
19. Balancing the economy across regions through the establishment of 6 new Regional Economic Development Agencies (REDAs).
20. Restructure the country by amending the 1999 Constitution to include resource control.
21. Reviving and reactivating of the existing refineries and building of new ones in order to stop importation and end subsidy regime.
22. Provide at least 2 million houses for the middle-class in the first year in government and 1 million new homes annually.
23. Building of 4,800km of modern railway lines- one third to be completed by 2019.
24. Building of at least one functional airport in each of the 36 states of the federation.
25. Prioritizing and revamping of the educational system- free education, infrastructure and manpower development.
26. Upgrade all government-owned hospitals to world class standard within five years.
27. Ensuring timely payment of retirement benefits for all pensioned senior citizens, etc.

Regrettably, the APC government which made these lofty campaign promises has turned a blind eye to them after winning the favour of the people with it. Indeed, it is a well-known fact that rather than growing the economy and tackling insecurity headlong as the

government had promised, Nigeria is currently facing the worst economic crises in decades. Thus, it could be argued that this government like other previous ones has also failed to keep to her campaign promises. For example, it is glaring that insecurity has become the order of the day in Nigeria as this could be seen recent killings of worshippers at Roman Catholic Church Owo. Prices of food items have become unbearable; exchange rate of the naira to a U.S Dollar has become inconceivable; electricity supply has become all time low; etc. It is against this backdrop of obvious failure of the APC government to keep to her campaign promises of 2015 and 2019 that an examination of covenant making in traditional African societies and its implications for political campaign promises in Nigeria have become imperative in the next section.

Implications of Covenant Making on Political Campaign Promises in Nigeria

So far, we have examined the dynamics of covenant making in traditional African society and the obvious failure of Nigerian governments, especially the APC administration to keep to her lofty promises of 2015 and 2019. Therefore, in this section, we would examine the relevance of covenant making and the possible implications on political campaign promises in Nigerian democratic space.

Covenant Prevents Unfaithfulness

One glaring fact about covenant making in traditional African society is that it prevents any form of unfaithfulness in the course of fulfillment of promises made. For instance, in African society, covenant is usually made in form of oath taking either with religious emblems or in front of the divinity which made them to comport themselves appropriately in the society. For example, whenever a chief or *Akpaha Oro* is to be enthroned in Oron traditional setting, he is usually made to swear to an “itai” to deliver justice without fear or favour and for this he is duty bound to keep to his vow that he has sworn. However, in a situation where such a chief fails to oblige to his oath of office or allegiance, he could invite the wrath of the gods and bring disaster to the people and the community. This explains Ogunleye’s (2013) submission that covenant gives meaning and cohesion to a society and enhances a sense of seeking for the good of others and the community. The implication is that where the terms of a covenant are ignored within a society as we have seen in the case of the 2015 and 2019 campaign promises in Nigeria, such a society is most likely to experience socio-economic imbalance that could eventually culminate into different forms socio-economic vices. It is not misleading therefore, to link the current socio-economic and religious vices in Nigeria to the government’s inability to keep to her campaign promises.

Covenant Promotes Unity in African Societies

Another obvious fact about covenant in traditional African society is that it promotes unity and brotherliness among members of the community. For example, in a typical traditional African society, there is usually the belief that humans are in covenant relationship with their object of worship and with one another. This implies that any harm done by one man affects other members of the family or society. It is this sense of understanding of man's covenant relationship with other members of his society that promotes unity and brotherliness among the diverse groups- religious, cultural, social, political, and civic. This is because with this understanding, the diverse groups in such a society apparently seek for the well-being of one another and avoid any action that could amount to breaking the terms of the covenant binding them together. This corporate form of existence resulting from their understanding of the place of covenant helps to unite the people together (Atanang, Ekanem and Oko, 2022). In fact, Abioye (1986) remarks that this sense of brotherhood or cooperate existence usually helps members of such a society to share their gains and pains together. It is also in this light that Ogunleye (2013) observes that covenant enhances oneness and helps to rid society of evil since an evil done to a member will surely affect others. Unfortunately, in the case of the current democratic dispensation, this understanding of the importance of covenant in maintaining the equilibrium of society appears to have been lost. This explains the reason for the obvious failure of government in implementing or fulfilling campaign promises as we have seen above. Therefore, it is reasonable to trace the present disunity among the diverse ethno-religious groups in Nigeria to the inability of government to fulfill campaign promises.

Covenant Promotes Social Responsibility

Another implication of covenant making in traditional African society on political campaign promises in Nigeria is that the fulfillment of it can promote a sense of social responsibility among citizens of the country (Okoko, 2017). For example, in a typical traditional Abua society, covenant making between a King and his subjects was largely done on the basis of mutual responsibility in order to maintaining the equilibrium of society. In pursuance of this mutual social responsibility, the covenant in which case is the king was expected to keep to his own terms of the covenant by protecting the people and providing for their general welfare while the covenanted in which case are the subjects were expected to show unalloyed allegiance and support to the King as well as keep the bond of unity among members of society. Thus, there was peace and harmony in such a traditional society because each of the parties involved had a sense of social responsibility. With this, societal rules and regulations were decisively kept and protected not only by the King but also his subjects. Regrettably, in the current state of affairs in Nigeria, where political

leaders make lofty promises and fail to fulfill them, such mutual social responsibility is difficult to achieve because citizens feel betrayed by their leaders. This in parts explains why intelligence gathering has been very difficult in Nigeria and insecurity has continued to be on the increase in the country with no one taking responsibility. It is so because citizens feel sidelined and betrayed by their political leaders, who usually make promises and, in the end, fails to fulfill them.

Covenant Eradicate Evil and Promotes Social Justice

The final implication of covenant making and fulfillment in traditional African society is that it helps to eradicate evil and promote social justice in such a society. For example, in traditional Abua society, covenant making serves two purposes. On the one hand, it serves to preserve the equilibrium of society by preventing possible abuses of power by leaders in order to avoid imminent disaster that could arise from the gods as a result of such abuses or excesses of leaders. In this way, covenant making was an instrument of checks and balances for leaders in traditional society. On the other hand, covenant making also serves to preserve the equilibrium of society by promoting social justice in traditional society and where social justice exists, peace, stability and harmony become easily attainable (Oko and Ogbodu, 2022). Also, covenant making and fulfillment usually inspire unalloyed allegiance and trust of the covenanted or subjects on their leaders. Unfortunately, the persistent failure of the present democratic government to fulfill campaign promises diminishes this unalloyed loyalty and trust of followers on their political leaders in Nigeria. This in a way explains why there have been several agitations from different groups in Nigeria (Oko, 2020). Hence, it is safe to argue that one major contributory factor to the crisis in Nigeria is the government's inability to fulfill her political campaign promises to the citizens.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to draw some implications of covenant making in traditional African society for political leaders in Nigeria, especially in the present democratic dispensation. It is obvious that since the birth of the fourth republic in 1999, that is, the beginning of this democratic dispensation in Nigeria till date, political campaign promises have simply become a political instrument that politicians usually deploy to deceive voters to vote for them to acquire political power. This ugly situation has become more pronounced in this present APC government and accounts for why the Nigeria state is currently bedeviled by innumerable problems. Therefore, to address the problems bedeviling the Nigerian state, there is absolute need for politicians to learn to keep to their campaign promises as the case in traditional society has shown.

References

- Abioye, A. (1986). *Advance Studies in West African Traditional Religion for Higher Schools*. Oyo: NP.
- Akubor, E.O. (2018). "Politics and Politicians in Nigeria: Establishing the Nexus Between the Actors, their Actions, and Nation Building", *Annals of the Ovidiu University Constanta-Political Science Series*, 7, 105-131.
- Arulefela, J. O. (1988). *Covenant in the Old Testament and in Yoruba land*. Ibadan: Daystar.
- Atanang B.E; Ekanem, J.B; Oko, A.E (2022). Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria: Christianity in Focus. *Niger Delta Journal of Gender, Peace & Conflict Studies*. Vol.2,3, 197-211.
- Awolalu, J.O. (1979). *Yoruba Belief and Sacrificial Rites*. London: Longman.
- Becker, P. and Raveloson, J.A. (2008), "What is Democracy", A Project Work of the University of Hamburg, Germany.
- Daniel, J.E. (2005). *The Impact of Biblical Covenant on Isara Remo Society*. Ondo:
- Dunn, J. (1994), *Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fleming, D. (1990). *Bridge Bible Directory*. Brisbane: Bridge Way Publication
- Federic, C.G. (1997). *Covenant, Encyclopedia America*. vol.8, USA: Grolier Incorporated.
- Gough, J. (1936). *The Social Contract*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hornby, A.S. (ed.) (2000). *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*. London: Oxford University.
- Idowu, E.B. (1982). *Olodumare: Godin Yoruba belief*. Lagos: Nigerian Limited.
- Kaunda, C.J. (2018). *The Nation that fears God Prospers: A Critique of Zambian Pentecostal Theopolitical Imaginations* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *The Prayers of the African Religion*. London: SPCK.
- Nmah, P.E. (2007). "Religion and Politics in Africa: A Paradox". *Journal of Religion and Human Relations Unizik*, 119-127.
- Nyoyoko, V. G. (2003). *The Sinaitic Covenant. A Spirituality for Liberation in African Society*. Port Harcourt: Department of Religious and Cultural Studies. Port Harcourt.
- Ogunleye, A. R. (2013). Covenant-Keeping among the Yoruba People: A critique of Socio- Political Transformation in Nigeria. *International Journal of Huamanities and social Science*. 3, 9.
- Oluseebi, C. B. (2017). The Role of Covenant and Taboo in African Traditional Religion. Retrieved on 12th May, 2022 at <https://www.academia.edu/33124220>.
- Olupona, J. (2014). *African Religions: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Okó, A.E. (2017). Leadership Responsibility, Justice and Integrity in Public Life: A Panacea for Sustainable National Development. *Contemporary Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 3, 2, 83-93.
- Okó, A. E. (2020). Social Need and Injustice in Nigeria: An Appraisal. *Sapienta Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies*. Vol.3, 2, 187-196.
- Okó, A. E. & Ogbodu, C. N. (2022). Rediscovering and Preserving African Identity In the Globalization Process. *KIU Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 7, 2, 19-27.
- Sawyer, J.F.A. (2009). *A concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception*. Louisville: West minister John Knox Press.
- Sibani, C.M. & Okó, A.E. (2013). The Politics of Gender and Power in Nigeria: The Christian Analysis. *Journal of Theology, Religious and Cultural Studies (JOTRAC)* 1, 1, 28-44.