

ENGAGING THE AFRICAN DEITIES IN THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL THEATRE: TOWARDS FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nenman Danjuma Wapwera

Department of Religion and Philosophy University of Jos

wapweran@unijos.edu.ng

&

Nakam Nanpan Kangpe

Department of Religion and Philosophy University of Jos

nakamkangpe@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of religion in national development in African in continent is something to be reckoned with. Religion in Nigeria has played a very significant role in governance, even in the selection of leaders. Nigeria is referred to as a nation of high religious tenets with the clear presence of three dominant religions; Christianity, Islam and traditional religions. With its religious presence in almost every aspects of governance, one would have expected greater developmental strides as most of the leaders of the nation profess one form of the religions (Christianity or Islam) or the other and also because of the teachings of these faiths, but reverse seems to be the case. Most public officeholders take oaths using either the Holy Bible or the Holy Quran before the commencement of their service to the nation, but it seems they quickly forget the implication of that vow. This paper aims at x-raying the reasons behind the non-commitment to the vows by the public officers and also to propose the engagement of African deities in oath-taking which comes with immediate repercussions to defaulters. This study was carried out

through a careful study of the African deities, their functions and responses to oaths taken before them. Sources of this study were basically the submissions of African scholars on African deities in books and journal articles. Results from the study revealed that active involvement of the deities in the political theatre will propel conscious commitment to stewardship from the political officeholders, as the judgment of the deities is claimed to be instant, thereby keeping the political officeholders always in check.

Keywords: African deities, oath-taking, political theatre, faithful stewardship, national development

Introduction

Politicking has been part and parcel of virtually every community, globally. Selection of leaders, whether by electioneering process or by appointment, usually undergo political processes. Most nations of the world adopt the democratic process of governance because it allows them to select the leaders of their choice, those they feel can lead them to achieve the desired development in the community and the society at large. Many who aspire to be leaders (especially in Nigeria) always align themselves with one religion or the other, and most often with the most popular ones within the community they are aspiring to lead. When the leaders are either elected or appointed, they usually take what is referred to as the ‘oath of office’ before the commencement of their stewardship. At the point of the oath taking, the leaders are made to take the oath using either the Holy Bible or the Holy Quran, vowing to do their best while in office, with the help of the God they profess. The general notion is that the Bible or the Quran they swore with will keep them in check, but it seems they no longer have regard for or even remember the oath or its sacred object afterwards.

Oath-taking can be viewed as a statement or declaration made under penalty of divine retribution for deliberate falsity. Oaths are taken to ensure the establishment of truth, maintenance of good human relationship, maintenance of the confidentiality of an institution, and sometimes when criminals are being sorted out (Nana 208-209). In the African societies, most especially in the religious aspects, oath-taking is never taken for granted when the need arises. The people are always conscious of the repercussion of engaging in such with filthy hands or hearts.

Lawrence-Heart observed that the hunger for political offices in recent times is overwhelming. The reason for such, according to her submission, is as a result of believing that such offices are accompanied with plenty financial benefits which are capable of catapulting a person from poverty to a life of wealth and recognition (1). And because such is the mindset of the politicians, they seem to pay less attention to any other business of governance, even with the oath they have taken when they are in office.

It is obvious that traditional oath is being denied during swearing-in ceremonies by political officeholders. Lawrence-Heart opined that the denial has made the phenomenon lose its potency. She insisted that people's religion should be scrutinized before they are allowed to take the conventional oath. If the politicians are found to be those who patronize the African deities, even if they claim to be either Christians or Muslims, traditional oath-taking should be enforced on them (5). Furthermore, Chinua Achebe observed that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with Nigerian climate or water, air or any other thing else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility to the challenge of personal example, which is the feature of true leadership (2). This scenario depicts the true picture of Nigerian leadership which is characterized by greed and selfishness. Honest, visionary and dedicated leaders are

lacking in Nigeria since independence in 1960 to the present democratic dispensation.

It is imperative to understand that religion in Nigeria has become a veritable means in the hands ‘political gladiators’, both the active and inactive ones, for the ‘psychic and emotional manipulations of adherents’ (Ajayi and Oluwafemi 105). Ajayi and Oluwafemi also maintained that religion through its teachings has positively affected the Nigerian people (107). The effect is felt everywhere, as one cannot succeed in most ventures without some religious elements attached to the success. They also observed that out of the three religions in Nigeria, traditional religion is the least politically active (108). The point, which they actually raised, is vital, but one should also note that their (traditional religious adherents) involvement is mostly underground, as some of the adherents also profess the other religions, but in practice they belong to the traditional religion.

This study aims at investigating the reasons behind the non-commitment to the oath of office by political officeholders despite using either the Holy Bible or Holy Quran for such oath and also to propose the introduction of oaths using African divinities, since it looks as if the leaders are scared of the wraths of the African deities rather than those of either Christianity or Islam. This will be carried out through a careful study of the nature of the Nigerian politics, African deities or divinities and the reasons for the non-commitment to the oath taken.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section deals with the clarification of some concepts as used in this work. The concepts discussed are; ‘politics in Nigeria’, ‘African deities’, and ‘religion and national development’.

Politics in Nigeria

Politics in Nigeria has had a long history. Before and after colonization, Nigeria has undergone various stages and forms of leadership, ways of ascending to power and different patterns of governance. The population of Nigeria, as it is today, consists of diversity of ethnic groups living in their own territories with different languages, traditions, social and political structure as well as way of life and other cultural traits and having their own separate histories (Stokke 9). As the nation experiences growth in diverse ways and the citizens are becoming more enlightened, there is competition at the elite level among a growing number of qualified people for a limited number of positions and these competitions usually have tones of ethnic and sometimes religious overtones (Stokke 15). This competition in its way contributed in bringing religion into politics. The first pointer of every politician who ventures into politics in Nigeria is ‘which religion does s/he belong to’.

Administratively, Nigeria became one entity in 1914 under the leadership of the then Governor General Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard. This was the year the Northern and the Southern Protectorates, which were formally independent of each other, were formally amalgamated. With constitutional development from one colonial administration to the other, the pattern of the country’s politics has been taking different forms and shapes to befit the constitution at hand. This has been the practice even up to the stage the country got her independence.

Nigerian political history, as observed by Ajayi and Ojo, is filled with failed electoral processes and the condition is described as a cyclical failure that returns the country to the scratch (116). Ajayi and Ojo also viewed socio-political inequality as being prominent and permanent features of democracy, particularly in Nigeria, which has widened the gap between those who have access to power and public funds and those who do not (110). This created democratic gap does not speak well of the leadership of the country which is mostly

occupied by strong adherents of religions with God who watches over and is believed to be concerned about the affairs of humankind.

The stage of the Nigerian politics seems to be very competitive between adherents of the two major religions - Christianity and Islam (Wapwera 107). Most of the actions taken by the other, stems from the reaction on the action from the other end. Tar and Shettima noted thus:

...throughout Nigeria's postcolonial history, the tides of Pentecostalism and Christian Revivalism have often been strengthened by specific national political event and factors- for instance, the adoption of Shari'a by some Northern states since 1999 and the admonition by two former "Muslim" Presidents (General Buhari and Shehu Shagari) that Muslims not vote for non-Muslims. Presently, Pentecostalism has become an entrenched part of Nigeria's social and political landscape. Obasanjo only tapped into his burgeoning religious-political movements by using his personal and political circumstances to identify with, and garner support from the Pentecostal community (17).

It is expected that those who benefit from the coffers of religion to get into political offices and leadership should be able to put in their best not to disappoint their faith and the God they serve. This is supposed to be the normal but most often reverse is the case and as such, the people that the office holders are representing are always disappointed.

African Deities (Divinities)

It is very important for one to understand that Africans believe in the existence of two worlds- the visible and the invisible. The visible world is inhabited by God's creatures, while the invisible world is inhabited by the Supreme Being and other spiritual agents (Spirits and

deities). The position occupied by these spiritual agents is very significant to the Africans.

The belief in the existence of deities or divinities in African traditional religion is not questionable among the Africans. African deities have the attributes of the Supreme Being. They are sometimes referred to as His direct offspring. They are “variously described as sons, servants, manifestation, refractions of the Supreme Being” (Metuh 54). Mbiti also added that they are associated with the Supreme Being and often stand for His activities either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature (75). Concerning their origin, Idowu argued that it will not be correct for one to say that the divinities were created, instead he opines that it is correct to say that they were brought into being, or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe (169). The researchers felt that is just a matter of semantics or language usage as ‘brought into being’ or ‘created’ could mean the same thing. It is believed that they were brought into existence for some specific functions, as each of the deities is saddled with a particular responsibility. Each of them, according to Ugwu and Ugwueye, has its own territory or jurisdiction (38). The deities are dependent on the Supreme Being - the source of their existence. They take directives from him, and as such, they are considered to be a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Despite the fact that the deities owe their existence to the Supreme Being, the Africans believed that the deities are also powerful, and if man is to avoid any misfortune, he has to be in constant rightness with them. The deities can be good and at the same time bad. They can be used to inflict sickness or other misfortunes, even death, on the innocent. Such is also their weaknesses, as the general belief is that only the Supreme Being is perfect. The function of the divinities is to ensure that God is not bothered with petty problems from the earth ((Awolalu and Dopamu 77; Kanu 102).

Awolalu and Dopamu categorize the African deities into three major groups. The first category is the divinities of heaven. They are believed to be with the Supreme Being from the creation of the universe. The second category is the deified ancestors. These are human beings who had lived extraordinary and mysterious lives on earth so that when they were dead, they were deified or canonized as gods. When an ancestor is deified, he is no longer an ancestor, but has become a deity. A good example is *Sango* the fourth king of Oyo who, after his death, was deified as thunder deity of Yoruba land. The third category of the divinities is the personification of natural forces and phenomena. Such myriad forces are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rock, caves, and trees, etc (74).

The deities are many in number and they vary from one African locality to another. Their number may range between 201, 401, 600 and 1700 in Yoruba land. Some communities even have less number (Awolalu and Dopamu 74). Few among the deities shall be discussed in this study.

i. *Ogun*

Ogun is a divinity of Yoruba land. *Ogun* is a god of war, iron and chase. Invariably, one can say he is the god of warriors, blacksmiths, hunters and all who deal in iron and steel. This deity is believed to be very fierce and warlike. He is an instrument of God's wrath. Any oath sealed before *Ogun* must be fulfilled. When one is suspected of evil intention, the person is made to swear before *Ogun*. Calamity always befalls any person who swears falsely, for the deity demands justice and fair play. The deity is also benevolent in some aspects, as hunters believe that he protects them from dangerous animals.

ii. *Songo*

Songo, who happens to be the fourth king of Oyo empire, is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. When he was king, he could kill by spitting fire from his mouth. He became

deified after his death and he took on the attributes of Jakuta, the original thunder divinity of the Yoruba land. He represents divine wrath upon the children of disobedience. He is more dreaded than any other divinity for its malevolence. He hates and punishes lying, stealing and poisoning. In the flashing of the lightning and thunder, the Yoruba are constantly reminded of the presence of the God of judgment. Those who commit crime live in fear when there is lightning or thunder.

iii. *Amadioha*

Amadioha is the Igbo thunder divinity. People believe that his position is second only to that of *Ala*. This divinity or deity is also a manifestation of the wrath of God. Amadioha descends on moral offenders like witches, sorcerers, those who poison thieves and those who break his laws. His punishment is royal punishment just like that of *Songo* of the Yoruba. He does not only specialize in punishing moral offenders, he is also believed to be the sender of rain and the giver of fertility.

iv. *Ojukwu*

This is Igbo god of smallpox. He is much dreaded. This deity also is an expression of the wrath of God. He hates evil people and keeps back his help from them. His punishment is also a royal punishment as the victim does not receive normal burial.

v. *Ogiuwu*

Ogiuwu is the thunder divinity of Edo land. Through thunder and lightning, he brings death on the children of disobedience. He is also regarded as an expression of divine judgment. The Edo people believe that it was Ogiuwu who brought them into the world, despite being the son of Osanobwa (Supreme Being). It is believed that he has the power to bring into existence and can also terminate life. Those who fear his anger

and do not want to be summoned prematurely from the world usually pray to him.

There are many deities in different African communities or nations which the people believe in their capabilities to do and undo and who also help in overseeing the actions of men with the intention of blessing those whose actions are right and punishing those who are evil. In their summary on the divinities in West African traditional religion, Awolalu and Dopamu made a rough categorization of divinities into their various departments to include;

- i. Arch Divinity: Orisa-nla or Obatala (Yoruba); Ala, Ana or Ani (Igbo); Olokun (Edo); Egbesu (Ijo); Obumo (Ibibio); Gunnu (Nupe); Mawu-Lisa (Ewe Fon); Tano (Akan and Ga); Dugbo (Kono).
 - ii. Oracle Divinity: Orunmila or Ifa (Yoruba); Fa (Ewe-Fon); Agwu (Igbo); Ibinokpabi (Igbo).
 - iii. Earth Divinity: Sopono (Yoruba); Sagbata (Ewe and Fon); Ojukwu (Igbo); Amakiri (Ijo); Isong (Ibibio); Asase Yaa (Akan); Oto (Edo).
 - iv. Divinity of Iron: Ogun (Yoruba); Gu (Ewe-Fon); Ta Yao (Ashanti).
 - v. Thunder Divinity: Songo (Yoruba); Hevioso (Ewe-Fon); Gua (Akan); Sokogba (Nupe); Amadioha (Igbo); Ogiuwu (Edo).
 - vi. Divine Messenger (trickster): Esu (Yoruba); Legba (Ewe-Fon); Agwu (Igbo).
 - vii. Water Divinity: Osun, Oya, Olokun (Yoruba); Bosomtwe (Akan); Binabu (Ijo).
- (72-115).

Religion and National Development

The term 'National Development' is all-encompassing. Its facets cover virtually every aspect of the individual and the nation. The development of a nation has to be holistic in nature. It includes full growth and expansion of industries, agriculture, education, social,

religious and cultural institutions. When such an experience is felt, one can confidently say that there is national development.

The United Nations Decade Report, as shared by Bawu, defined national development as “a growth plus change. Change in turn is social and cultural as well as economic and qualitative as well as quantitative”. Some of the parameters for measuring national development include; development through a planned national economy, increase in agricultural production through application of modern technical know-how, harnessing industrial production, development of human resource and application of science and technology in the production sector (np).

Pat Williams observed that without the close collaboration of religion and development in the past, Nigeria would have experienced slow pace in terms of development. He opined that Nigeria’s national development had had the assistance of religion and still does (32). The implication of this submission is that the contribution of religion to development is positive.

Ikechi-Ekpendu et al opined that religion is an interactive force in the society because it has power to shape collective beliefs. According to them, religion provides a cohesive social order by promoting a sense of belonging in collective enterprises. They, therefore, came to the conclusion that religion and development have a meeting point (82-83). Religion provides a platform for mutual and harmonious living amongst individuals in the society. It promotes growth as it teaches people to be honest, disciplined, hard working and not to be involved in harmful activities (Ikechi-Ekpendu et al 85). Development will definitely be experienced where people practice the teachings of religion truthfully.

It is true that a greater percentage of the key actors in the Nigerian political arena claim to be people of religious affiliations. This is typical of Nigeria, as the nation is adjudged to be one of the most

religious countries in the world. According to Onapaja, Nigeria is confirmed to be the ninth most religious country in the world (112). The level of religiosity in the nation is supposed to propel fairness and commitment to leadership which will in turn bring about national development, but it is far from being visible in sight. People tend to forget the oath they take to lead the people in fairness and love for the country as contained in the oath. The researchers feel their actions and inactions are as a result of the slow pace of judgment by the God in whose name the oaths are taken. It is true that both the Christian and the Muslim God's judgment is full of grace and mercy, through which an erring person has the time to amend his/her ways and might possibly be forgiven. This delay in judgment, which is generally a good one, might not suit the Nigerian state now, as the country is in need of drastic and radical response to the issue of corruption and bad leadership. This work can be done by the African deities if they are engaged in the political theatre.

THE DEITIES IN THE THEATRE OF POLITICS

The Seventh Schedule of the 1999 Constitution Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides for Public Office Oath Taking using various open religious beliefs to protect and uphold the Constitution and the interest of Nigerians whose resources they are to manage on their behalf. In most occasions, as mentioned earlier, only the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) are considered in the Public Office Oath Taking, as most of the politicians seem to align only with them publicly, even if their loyalty is to the traditional religion or others. Oath-taking is a situation where absolute loyalty or adherence to certain agreements and conditionality is prescribed and administered to the beneficiaries of the agreement (Oviasuyi et al 1940).

Oviasuyi et al argued that godfatherism and fetish oath-taking through the use of juju, witchcraft and voodooism have negatively affected development in Nigeria (193). They might be arguing from the point

of manipulation by selected few who administered the oath to them and who hide under the oath to cart away the resources of the people. In our opinion, it is the lack of public acceptability of the traditional method of oath-taking to be part of the political process that pushes the people whose loyalty is to the traditional religion to hide and secretly take the oath to avoid public embarrassment. And anything that is done in secret will surely follow secret means of operation and development which will make a physical thing to be lacking.

The well-known indigenous way of swearing an oath of office in Nigeria, as observed by Ogunleye, is entering into a covenant by both leaders and followers. The main reason for engaging in such agreement is to enhance adequate socio-political and ethical relations in the society. The religious concept, according to his submission, was brought or introduced in form of oath of office to involve pledging loyalty to perform the duties associated with the office one is to serve in faithfully (83). Ogunleye further explains that the oaths taken which are mostly either the Christian or Islamic ways usually seem ineffective maybe because the Christian or the Muslim God postpones judgment till the judgment day. His suggestion of the inclusion of the African traditional method of oath-taking is that the African gods are capable and known for instant justice (84). If the gods' justice system is truly instant, which may mean the possible way of constantly keeping the leaders on check, it should be encouraged.

In traditional African societies, deities and ancestors are called to be witnesses to the agreements between the subject and the object of the oath. This is because oaths in Africa have religious undertones and there is always a call to a deity to witness the proceedings of the oath-taking in which the oath takers are very much aware of the presence of the deity(ies). During the rituals of oath-taking, words signifying misfortune and death are used in the pledge-making, stating that a person will keep to his/her part of the covenant (Nana 201; Lawrence-Heart 2). The Africans believe that any deviation from the grund

norms of the society attracts severe consequences or immediate punishment. The Africans in a true sense fear greatly anything that has to do with traditional oath-taking.

The African deities are greatly feared by the Nigerian politicians. The politicians are not only afraid of the deities but even their shrines. The judgment of the deities is quick and instantaneous for any erring followers. The deities execute the assignment given to them by the Supreme Being. Some of the greatly feared deities include; Songo, Amadioha, Ogun, and Ojukwu. Most of these deities are expressions of God's divine judgment. When their wrath is individual(s), it is seen as royal punishment and such individuals are not given proper burial rites.

The departmentalization of African deities according to people's activities, experiences and socio-political structure is to allow them carry out the task without stress, as each deity or divinity faces only that which concerns him. Example of such departments of divinities are; of war, iron, smallpox, earth, thunder, health, weather, water and the likes (Awolalu and Dopamu 114; Mbiti 75).

Engaging the deities in oath-taking will definitely make the politicians who take their oaths before them to be faithful to the oath, as failure to abide by them attracts their wrath which sometimes is deadly. With the knowledge of their deadly wrath in view, the politicians will sit up and carry out their responsibilities as stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to avoid possible action. Imagine engaging a Yoruba divinity - *Orunmila* who, according to the submission of Mbiti, is "reputed to be omnilinguist divinity who understands every language on earth and who represents God's omniscience and knowledge" (75). The politicians, knowing well that they have no hiding place from his wrath, will watch their steps as it concerns service and management of people's resources.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that the present-day Nigerian politicians do not keep to their oath of office - service to the people. Greater percentages of those in leadership are corrupt, dishonest, greedy and visionless. Even those that seem to be good before being called for service usually become corrupt when they get to offices. Many institutions are put in place to check the excesses of the politicians and to call them to order for better service, but it looks as if these institutions are not doing the expected, rather they are used as tools in fighting oppositions or political rivals by those in power. Leaders do not seem to abide by the oaths of office; maybe because they look at the oaths as normal rituals and have forgotten about the repercussion of not abiding by the tenets of the oaths. This might be possible because they do not see anybody being punished for going against the oath by the Supreme Deity they took the oath before.

The drift from the traditional form of oath-taking is mostly as a result of the consequences in the event of failure to conform to the tenets of the traditional oath of office. If the potency of such oaths is assured, the society or nation could give it a trial; maybe positive result of good leadership could be achieved.

Engaging the service of the African deities might be a viable solution, as defaulters of any oath are dealt with instantaneously. Even if their judgment is not instant, the politician will still be on their toes because of the fear of the unknown.

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