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### Oath Taking as an Aspect of Indigenous Diplomacy in Ogba Land, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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#### **Abstract:**

This paper examines oath taking an aspect of indigenous diplomacy in Ogba land. Oath taking is a statement or assertion made under the penalty of divine retribution for intentional falsity. Oath taking is believed to serve same purpose(s), its processes differ from culture to culture, however, its potency cannot be denied. The religious root of oath taking emanated from the reality of human fallibility and the belief that human beings are subject to a supreme being that controls their day to day activities. People interact with one another in Ogba land due to the dynamism of the society and in these interactions, there was need for the establishment of a diplomatic seal to prove one's sincerity to the other party. This is one reason for the establishment of oath taking in Ogba land. This study reveals that fear and past experiences are two vitals to oath taking and that, oath taking ensures good relationship, as it places both moral and mystical obligation to the parties and refusal to obey is met with great misfortune. The work adopted historical methods in its collection of data and is both descriptive and analytical.

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## Introduction

Oath taking is universal. Though it is believed to serve same purpose(s), its processes differ from culture to culture. However, there is no authentic and reliable account on the origin of Oath taking in Ogba land. Otto (2019) opines that, it is probably a device propelled and accepted by people to protect and preserve inter-personal relation, mutual trust, collateral agreement and social interaction. Many Nigerians, including the Ogba people, believes in the supernatural and the efficacy of traditional oaths (Ekhatior, 2018). The act is a common feature of the Ogba people, the Ijo, Hausa, Yoruba and many other tribes. In most tribes, women and minors (children) are not allowed to engage in oath taking with serious consequences. However, oath taking is seen in every facet of an Ogba man ranging from issues of criminality to civil issues as it helps not only to conserve diplomatic ties and enhance international peace.

Oath taking, according to Odumakin (2009) is a distortion of value in politics to the extent that it transfers allegiance from the system to the individual, who for raw ambition or depravity, decides to take the place of God in the life of the oath taker. Okorie (2009) sees oath taking in the traditional sense as a situation where absolute loyalty or adherence to certain agreement and conditionality is prescribed and administered in the beneficiaries of the agreement. It is expected that parties should not breach this agreement and if they do, such party will face the wrath of the gods. In a similar vein, Nwankwo posits that oath taking as a statement or assertion made under the penalty of divine retribution for intentional falsity. Proceedingly, Nwankwo expounded four reasons why oath is taking in Igboland. The first reason is for the establishment of truth of what is said. Secondly, for the maintenance of good human relationship. Thirdly to maintain the secrecy of an institution or an organization. Fourthly, they are taken when criminals are being sorted out. Oath taking which is a fearful ritual compel adherence on the parties not to break diplomatic agreements. Oath taking has being one of the principal tools in curbing societal menace and has aided diplomatic understanding in Ogba land.

Oath taking have been practiced by Africans from time immemorial but we have to recall that in England, oath was introduced by equity which John Seldon remarked somewhat cynically that “Equity is a rog wish thing....” At that time, when a petitioner comes before the chancery, the chancellor after duly satisfying himself that the cause of action was disclosed, would direct the attendant to respond to the petition since such petitions were not backed by royal writs, such as were employed in the common law courts. The chancellor had to devise an alternative means of securing the defendant’s presence. This was achieved through the instrumentality of the sub-poena which is an order addressed to the defendant directing him to appear before the chancellor or forfeit a sum of money during the ensuring proceedings. The defendant would be required to respond on Oath to the plaintiff’s complaints. So, Oath and writ were introduced by equity. Equity as known was concerned with conscience. (Ekwenze, 2012)

The religious root of oath-taking emanated from the reality of human fallibility and the belief that human is subject to a supreme being that control and oversee their day-to-day activities. The roots of oath of office could be traced to the social contract between leaders and the led. The religious practices whereby individuals invoked God as the witness to their faithfulness and truthfulness in respect of declaration made on a subject.

However, some schools of thought traced the origin of swearing of an oath before deviance symbols to be the Sumerian civilization. In this light, an Iranian called Mithra was, for example, regarded as the

god of contracts, that is, the guardian of oaths and truth, (New Encyclopedia Britannia, 1998).

The Old Testament in the Bible is replete with instances of oath taking in the ancient Jewish society. It has been noted that the Hebrew term *sher'ah* (oath) comes from the same root as the number seven, which refers back to a vow in which seven ewe lambs were used as witness that the patriarch Abraham made with the philistine king, Abimelech. (Genesis, 21). It was also used in confirming covenants (Genesis, 26: 28), deciding controversies (Exodus, 22:11). Oath taking is also practiced in Islam. It is noted that a Muslim may make a *gusam* (oath) in which he swears, for example, upon his life, soul, honour or faith. Its gravity is highlighted in the remark to the effect that because the *gusam* is primarily a pledge to God and a false oath is considered a danger to one's soul (Ekwenze, 2012)

### **Philosophical Background to Oath Taking by Ogba People**

Fear and past experiences are the two vitals to oath taking. The first thing that will weigh on the mind and spirit of the oath taker is what he believes in. This is because, according to the stoics, "Every human being, just by the virtue of being human contains a portion of divine". It is this inherent divine nature that anchors the fear of God in man. However, religious convictions are more grievous than that of secular conviction. Secondly, past experiences of what oath taking has done and its potency in result, makes most oath takers vomit the truth before it is taking or do not joke with the process as stated by Ekwenze (2012). A false oath is considered as a danger to one's soul.

In Ogba land, oath taking is called "*Ira-Hein*" or "*Ira Irishi*" implying the physical action performed while carrying out the operation. In the words of Ellah (1995), Ogba society is a dynamic one in which people are interacting with one another at different levels. There are interactions between a man and his family, between one family and the other, between one village and the other, between a man and the deities and so on. In each of these relationships, there is need for an establishment of a diplomatic seal to prove one's sincerity to the other party. Consequently, there are different types and cases of oath taking in Ogba land.

One of the types of oath taking to be considered in this study is Oath of agreement (*Irita- Owhor*). An agreement is an understanding between entities to follow a specific course of conduct. However, for there to be an agreement, there must have been a disagreement between tending parties. The prime importance of this oath is to build peace and promote good diplomatic relations among and within Ogba people and her neighbours. Conflict is multi-facet so is its solution. Thus, there are different oath of agreements. For instance, there is oath of agreement for settling boundary disputes called *Imekube-oke-ali*.

The Ogba people have their main occupations as farming and fishing (Ellah, 1995; Otto, 2019). These economic occupations cause great attachment of the Ogba people to their land. Consequently, due to population increase, greed, and infertility of the soil; man began to strive against his fellow man. This type of oath taking is done when after much troubles or harm have being done, the both sides decide to give peace a chance. This oath of agreement is administered at the adjusted site especially at the boundary in question (Otto: 2019). Items such as two tubers of yam (*Iji*), goat (*Ewu*), water (*mini*), native chalk (*Uror*), and the ritual staff (*Owhor*) are presented by both families as prescribed by a priest. To administer this type of oath, each adult male family head and some village elders meet at the point of dispute, the custodians after much orientation, request for the *Owhor* of both family head, placing them beside each other. In the same view, Okafor reported that, as part of the oath taking

process, a hole is dug, the goat is slaughtered and the blood is allowed to enter into the hole. Thereafter, the yam, goat and other condiments are used to cook a meal that both parties eat, signifying peace and this restores the lost relations between the parties as opined by Otto (2019).

The traditional Ogba enclave was a close society. The concept of neighbourhood and neighbourliness was highly a restricted one. The farther, the blood ties, the more distant and shallower the friendliness. Thus, there are often mutual tensions and hostilities between neighbouring towns. More often than not, towns and clans are regarded as potential enemies and to be dealt with at the slightest provocation (Otto, 2019). In the case of Umu-Ezikere of Okposi Vs Umu-Ezikere of Omoku as reported by Obua (2020), the search for greener pastures made Mr. Ifeanyi and his group to leave Okposi and dwelled in Omoku but was still given the privilege to farm in the land in Okposi village. In the course of development, the land gains relative importance and the people of Mr. Ifeanyi refused the Umu-Ezikere of Okposi from gaining access and insisted that the land be allocated to them always even as they practice bush fallowing and communal ownership. This feud got so severe that Mr. Monday Obuah took an oath affirming that the land belongs to the Umu-Ezikere family of Okposi which led to the settlement of the dispute.

Another type of oath taking evident in Ogba land is Oath of Exoneration. Whenever there is a breach in diplomatic relation, the person or persons accused of causing the breach may want to exonerate himself or nation from such pariah position in order to foster good relations and be at peace with himself and the world at large. Thus, if this oath is not taking, the person or people will be isolated. In Ogba land, the Oath of Exoneration is taken in an Eke market day according to Chimuyia (2020) at the shrine of the deity chosen by his accusers. The items used are Kolanut (*Oji*), native chalk (*Uro*), and gin (*kai kai*) including other items like the ritual staff (*Owhor*) owned by the priest. At this point, the accused is ordered to kneel in-front of the deity where his head is shaved off and the oath is administered to him after libation and incantations by the priest. In turn, the priest also makes his accusers swear that he will not harm the accused in order to show that he (accused) is really guilty. The period of this oath of exoneration is usually six months, if the accused dies, then he is responsible, if not, he has been exonerated from the guilt. For instance, in the case of Christian O. Akiti Vs Okposi community as reported by Ladi (2020), Christian O. Akiti was accused of been a member of a fraternity but he denied the accusation and decided to take an oath of exoneration to prove his innocence. After a period of six months, he still lives and as such is considered innocent of the accusation.

### **Places for Oath Administration in Ogba land**

The type of oath and its desired effect or efficiency determines its method of administration. Generally, oath taking takes place in a shrine (*Ihni-Erishi*), waterways (*Ogulgulo-mini*), frontage of a family compound (*Ali atezni*), and T-Junctions. A shrine is a sacred place dedicated to a specific deity. Among the Ogba people, shrine is usually the place where oath taking is done because it is believed that judgment will be taken instantly other than invoking the busy gods or goddess to the scene of the event. According to Okafor in (Otto, 2019) shrines are built with such trees as velvet, cherry and Oha trees which do not die and can live for hundreds of years and its leaves are delicious, medicinal and edible. The administration of an oath in a shrine is headed by a priest who perform the incantation, prepare the person for the ritual, and prescribe what to do at the end of the oath taking.

Ogba communities have water pathways that are natural channels where water from streams, rivers or rain drains out. Such water channels serve as a place in which oath can be administered in Ogba. This

spot for oath taking is usually in cases of witches or sorcerers. In administering of this oath, the priest, chiefs, and elders are usually present. Similarly, the frontage of the family compound “*Ali-etezni*” located at the front of that particular building, said to be a mere floor or ground is used for the administration of oath by a family head or an invited priest. Disputes between husband and wife, co-wives dispute, and issues of confidence are settled in the family compound. There is also a three-way junction in which three arms of road intersect at a point. Oath taking is done at this point, it could be administered by a priest or a compound head usually to curb invaders and for witches or sorcerers.

### **Status, Symbols and Credentials of conflicts mediators among Ogba people**

The status of a mediator among the people of Ogba land and her organizations varies. Ogbaland consists of three clans namely, Egi, Igburu and Usomini and these three clans have their central kings or Ezes who are known or referred to as: Eze-Egi, Eze-Igburu and Eze-Usomini. However, Egi has four (4) zonal arrangements, which according to Otakpo (2020) are for political expedience. Each of these zones has a central king who oversees the affairs of all the towns and villages in his jurisdiction. Among the several villages and towns infused into these zones is an administrative group called the OCHIOHA’s; whose duty is to preside over the activities that affected the communities under her control.

In addition, the several communal administrators give report to Eze-Igburu, Eze- Egi, Eze-Usomini, and Eze-Iyasira. Among these offices, the Eze-Iyasira, although regarded as the Prime Minister in the Oba’s palaces, is also charged with the duty of managing affairs in Omoku metropolis. Consequently, the variation and slit arrangement in the political and social structure of Ogba land prompted different diplomatic status, symbols and credentials in Ogba land. In Ogba land, men of great reputation are sent to engage in diplomatic affairs with the community members and her neighbours. Thus, in order to distinguish who is sent and who is not sent, different symbols and credentials are given to such a person to be easily identified by the receivers of the message.

A Status is referred to a person’s position or standing. In Ogba land, the priest, men of high profile (reputation), kings, kings’ messenger and Eze-Ognah of Ogbachi society are those that has this diplomatic status to conduct diplomacy which oath taking is an integral part. A priest in Ogba according to Otto (2019), refers to any person who holds the spiritual staff ‘Owhor’. His functions are pouring of libation, offering sacrifices, praying for his people or leading them in public prayers, interceding for the people, functioning as a political head and final arbiter in religions matters. There are four notable classes of priests in Ogba. These are Eze- Ali, Okein Obodo, the Okein Ornumra Ornukepu and the Eze Utu (priests of deities). Each of these priests perform different diplomatic functions for the smoothing of a community.

Otto (2019) further explained the different priests in Ogbaland. The Eze- Ali (The priest of the earth goddess) is in every town and village. The priest among other responsibilities plays a mediatory role. This priestly office is given to the first dweller of the community and as such, has enough knowledge of the customs and traditions of the people which he uses in conflict resolution and adjudication. Due to the acephalous system of Ogba land, various lineages enjoy political independence and as well do have a religious head called Okein Obodo (Lineage Head). The eldest male is called Okein and he held this position. Among other functions, he performs and mediate between his lineage and the village; he also doubles as an inter-mediator between his lineage and other lineages. Consequently, he acts as a settler of conflicts in the lineage. Okein Ornumra/Ornu-Ukpu (Minor Lineage Heads) also function as

priest. In all ramifications, these categories of religious specialists do the same thing as the kindred heads apart from the fact that their area of jurisdiction is usually smaller.

Furthermore, Eze-Utu (Priests of Divinities) are another set of priests in Ogba land that functions as diplomats. The various kindred groups in Ogba have one deity or the other associated to them. Their deities have specific names like Ajuku, Utumini and so on. These deities interact and embarks on diplomatic missions to different clans, kingdoms and states when the need arose. Onyekachi (2020) reported that Mr. Emma who was his colleague, beat-up his girlfriend and the girl angrily left the house that night lamenting with pains. Unfortunately for him, that was the day the goddess of Okposi was hosting different deities in her shrine situated at Okposi. When the lady lamented, they took it upon themselves to fight for her and struck the young man with a plaque that nearly took his life. This report was commemorated by Otto (2019) when he said, “These deities have specific names and each of them like the lineages, is autonomous. These deities relate to one another on equal basis. The diplomatic duty of a priest is to mediate between the lineage members and the deities”.

Furthermore, men of reputable character also assist as diplomats when the village through the village council conferred on them the responsibility to carrying out diplomatic functions. Whenever there is an issue, it could be a negative or positive issue; the community sent messengers of reputable character to go and mediate between them and their counterparts. In the case of an evil occurrence like death of a person, the family sends a diplomat to the family of the deceased, notifying them that their daughter is dead. Thereafter, the family respond by asking what led to her death. This is usually done before any burial arrangement is discussed. The person sent must have some qualities which among others includes integrity, honesty, ability to negotiate, must not be a drunk, respect the customs and traditions; and must not be a liar according to Samson (2020).

Apart from burial cases, the community also select persons to represent them in negotiations while dealing with other communities. In the case of Okposi community, notable persons like Barr. Richard Aduche, Odinaka Ogu, Samson Obua, Uche Wokocha, Monday Ogu, Uju Adiela and Elenwa are usually appointed. For instance, when the Ogbachi Society had a conflict with Deeper Life Bible Church in Okposi community, the community sent people to mediate and resolve the conflict. It is on record that during the festive period of the Ogbachi Society as reported by Barr. Aduche (2020), the church was instructed to desist from holding any religious gathering, an instruction the Pastor of the Church in Okposi neglected and opened the church for regular activities. Consequently, he was beaten by members of the society called the Okorusu Group of Ogbachi Society. He fled for his life and later reported to the police at Ahoada Divisional Headquarters stating that the community cultural activity is barbaric and sue the community for compensation. The community sent emissaries in the persons of Barr. Aduche R., the youth president and some reputable members of the community. Aduche stated that they agreed to pay the compensation requested by the church but demanded for certain items from the pastor to appease the gods of their land; secondly, that the community has decided to give them (the church) a quit notice to vacate their land. It was now the turn of the pastor and the church to plead with the community to rescind their decision to vacate them. After much pleading, a truce was reached and the issue served as a lesson to other religious groups not to disobey the customs of the land. Achebe (1958) through his novel, “Things Fall Apart” show that great men in pre-colonial Igbo societies were equally used as emissaries in the negotiation of truce. This was the case of Okposi and Deeper Life Bible Church.

In addition to the foregoing, Kings and Kings’ Messengers also play diplomatic roles in Ogba land. When issues arise in Ogba land, the King send people as spies to gather information and report back to

him. After the collation of information from the different quarters of Ogba land, such information or report is used to achieve the aim and aspiration of Ogba land. Sometimes, the king travel to represent his people in other climes in matters of common interest to his people Also, the king has a head of government called the Prime Minister. The position of Prime Minister is held by the Iyasira Onuobdos. The position is ranked next to the king and he acts in the absence of the king. According to Ellah (1995), he does not remove his cap while greeting the Oba and does not respond to the Ishaili greeting from members of the community as reported by Chief Louis Chukwudi (2020), the 13<sup>th</sup> Iyasira of Ogba land. The family earned this high-ranking position because of their victories against the Abohs and their heroic exploits across the rivers and lakes.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined oath taking as an aspect of indigenous diplomacy in Ogba land. It gives the reader an insight to the concept of oath taking by looking at several definitions of the concept and also gives a background history of oath taking from different perspectives. In discussing the philosophical background to oath taking by Ogba people, it revealed that fear and past experiences are two vitals to oath taking. This is because, according to the stoics, “every human being, just by virtue of being human contains a portion of divine and it is this inherent divine nature that anchors the fear of God in man”. Past experiences of what oath taking has done and its potency in result also makes oath takers to be serious with the process. The paper also discussed the various types of oaths and places where oaths are taking in Ogba land. It also discussed the status and credentials of people who administer oaths and act as conflict mediators in Ogba land.

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