HUMANUS DISCOURSE Vol. 4. NO 4. 2024
ISSN 2787-0308 (ONLINE)

Biblical Oath Taking (שְׁבוּעָה): A Panacea for Moral Rejuvenation among Yoruba People of Nigeria

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Abstract

An oath is a solemn promise, often invoking a divine witness regarding one's behavior. The Hebrew words' shebu'ah, and niseba' (to swear) are affirmations by parties to seal their trust and fidelity to each other. This may be witnessed by physical or metaphysical beings. The paper juxtaposes the concept between the two religio-cultural settings (Jewish and Yoruba people). With the adoption of the comparative method, the findings revealed that oath-taking among the ancient Yoruba people was very effective and a tactic for averting fraudulence, deceitfulness, and lying in society. This is synonymous with the Old Testament concept, but today, false oath-taking has become so rampant and famous to the extent that people hardly see it as an act of dishonesty but smartness. This, in turn, has made society semi-hell too. Thus, the paper concluded that to abstain from obscenity society, honesty and sincerity must be observed and injected into our policy.

Keywords: Biblical, Oath taking, Moral Rejuvenation, Yoruba People

Introduction

Oath-taking has been in existence for decades. It is a solemn pledge, vow, or promise made to a deity, ruler, or another entity (not necessarily present) to attest to the statement or sincerity of one's desire to fulfill a contract. Oaths can be made on different occasions such as; during marriage, among the secret societies (especially to the new intakes), at the gods' shrines, and in political and economic settings. Among the ancient Yorubas, in most cases, an oath has been made when shocking incidents occurred such as; sudden death, epidemics, famine, war, and many others, to know the source and the solution to the predicaments. Beyond reasonable doubt, this concept among the South-Western Yoruba people of Nigeria is synonymous with Jewish understanding and practice of oath-taking, but today, this has been bastardized due to insincerity and dishonesty that radiates the people's system. To maintain a sustainable society, false should be considered as illegal with severe punishment.

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Scholarly Discussion on Oath-Taking

To Helen[1] and Pederson,[2] Oath taking has been traced to a pre-religious and pre-animistic period of culture when Supernatural beings were unknown and the man believed that he possessed magic power that could produce any desired result. A vehicle for this power was the curse which could kill as effectively as physical force; it worked through the magic inherent in the word. The harm invoked was arbitrarily chosen by the speaker and worked with the force of fate which was deemed to the gods. However, the uttered curse became an entity of its speaker's will and man could determine both disaster and victim (the victim could be himself). The term oath-taking (bond) is commonly practiced in the Semitic world; the practice is an antecedent leading to the concept of covenant (berith) in the Old Testament. To the Akkadian, it is referred to as *riksumamitu*, while Hittite, Phoenician, Hebrews, and Aramaic refer to it as *lahiul*, *krt'it*, *berith*, and *gzridy*.[3] The classical term for the treaty was crystallized in the middle of the second millennium BCE. In Mesopotamia and Anatolia, it is *riksu/maritu*, this expression is comprised of two words; the first riksu expresses the bond of the obligation while the second mamitu refers to the bond between the suzerain (king) and the vassal (subject).[4]

According to Mendenhall, the specific term attached to oath-taking in the Semitic world means (in Akkadian) *biritu* –'' to clap'' or to fetter'' similarly, in Hebrew, the term *berith* denotes a bond, pact, or treaty.[5] It signified a formal agreement between parties that effected specific impositions and liabilities which uniquely interrelated those parties together. Eilee opined that oath-taking or swearing is mostly viewed as taboo. It is also attached with some benefits if properly observed. It can lead to tighter bonds and a harmonious environment. In other words, it indicates how close another person feels to the swearer. The most obvious advantage of oath-taking is to communicate effectively. By taking the oath, one is not only communicating the meaning of a sentence but also showing an emotional reaction to something that is associated with the expression of solidarity without having a resort to empirical violence.[6] Oath-taking is a self-curse uttered in a conditional form, operating irrevocably upon the occurrence of the condition. Oath-taking as a self-curse continued to operate automatically by the inherent magic of word after the onset of the animistic period and even after the discovery of divine beings. As a means to avert evil from the then society, whosoever swears falsely will face the consequence. But today, things have taken another dimension, most especially, in our law courts, among the politicians, family members, etc. people are seen to swear by binding themselves with an oath that requires a curse, and yet this does not stop them from breaking the oath. Eghosa, revealed that Ekwenze, Ogege, Akhilomen, and Oronsaye amongst others have looked at the oath-taking from an African point of view, suggesting traditional oath-taking as a strategy to

[1] S. Helen, ''The Oath,'' The Yale Journal 68, no. 7, (2015): 1329
[2] J. Pederson, Der Eidbel den Semita (New York:University press, 2015), p. 215-217
[3] S. Helen, ''The Oath,'' p. 1329
[4] R. Beacham, ''Ancient Near Eastern Covenant,'' Journal of Ministry and Theology 15, no. 1 (2017): 234
[5] G. E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburg: Biblical Colloquium, 2015)
[6] F. Eilee, '' Swearing: The good, the bad, and the ugly,'' ORTESOL Journal 34, (2017): 21

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ISSN 2787-0308 (ONLINE)

curb the incidence of corruption in Nigeria.[7] He further reported that Tade and Olaitan's research conducted in the Iraye-Oke community in Lagos State established the functionality of traditional oath-taking in checking crime and its preference over the use of modern social control structures.[8]

Oath-Taking in the Context of Yoruba Southwestern Nigeria

The people of Yorubaland encompass Lagos State through the Western Region of Nigeria into Ilorin and Kabba Provinces in Kwara State. Yoruba people also spread across the Nigerian border into Dahomey where the people are commonly known as Anago. Yorubaland consists of several kingdoms such as Egba, Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, Ondo, Ibadan, and Lagos are particularly large, while others are relatively very small. Each kingdom consists of a metropolis and a surrounding territory of villages and towns. The people believed that Ile-Ife is their original homeland and that Ooni of Ile-Ife was their central traditional ruler.[9]There is no cohesive political machinery uniting all of them since they are in several sub-tribal groups and each sub-tribal group has her own traditional Obas (kings). Among the people, oath-taking is their major feature of solidifying justice and it predates Islam and the Christian order of conduct. There were traditional courts (shrines) among the people and they could get justice for cases by visiting the indigenous courts which were presided over by a chief priest (Aworo or Abore).[10] The Aworo is the custodian of the court and the intermediary between the inhabitants and the deities. Before the advent of the colonial rulers, the people offered justice and settled issues to maintain peaceful co-existence through oath-taking, as well as offering a series of sacrifices.

Even today, this system still exists and is culturally accepted among the people, executing laws and orders by one's hand (trial by ordeal) is being considered an illegal act.[11] Oath falsely taking at the gods' court at times results in death, disasters, and destruction. An oath is taken to entrust the two parties of their assigned roles. During this process, gods, deities and perhaps cosmic beings are called to be the witnesses of the agreement because, during the process, words connoting calamity such as curses and death are used to pledge, and death and wellbeing are used as a seal to secure the promise and agreement.[12] Duration of time is given in most cases as an expected time for the fulfillment of the promise. For instance, a barren woman takes an oath at the gods' shrine for the fruit of the womb, and instruction is given to visit the gods' shrine annually; failure to commit her fidelity to this might lead to the death of the baby or

[7] E. Eghosa, Traditional Oath-Taking as an Anti-corruption Strategy in Nigeria, in Combating the Challenge of Corruption in Nigeria: a Multidisciplinary Conversation. (Nigeria: Black Towers Publications, 2019), p. 309-336
[8] Ibid., p.337
[9] G. O. Abe, History and Theology of Sacrifice in the Old Testament (Benin City: Seevon Press, 2017)
[10] G. J. Ojo, Yoruba Culture: Geographical Analysis (London: University Press,2017)
[11] A. Ajisafe, The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People (London: University Press, 2018)
[12] P. O. Nwanko, God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010)

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herself.[13] Ogunleye[14] opined that Oath-taking enhances oneness and helps to get rid of evil in a society since evil done to a member will surely affect others. Thus, the oath prevents unfaithfulness in the Yoruba traditional setting. Taking oaths either in front of divinity or emblems makes Yoruba people comport themselves well in the society.

According to Anekan, Odumakin saw oath taking as a distortion of value in politics to the extent that it transfers allegiance from the system to an individual for raw ambition or depravity that decides to take the place of God in the life of the oath takers. However, oath taking in the traditional sense is situated where absolute loyalty the adherence to certain agreements is conditionally prescribed and administered to the beneficiaries.[15] This expected that whoever has taken such an oath will not escape the punishment or sanction of a certain supernatural force or deity if the oath is flouted. An oath is a fearful ritual and most often words that connote calamity and death are used to make pledge, stating that a person will keep to one's part of the agreement.[16] It is observed that many people believe strongly in the potency of traditional oath-taking in curbing irresponsible resource management. Oath taking plays very important part of any customary arbitration process among Yoruba people of southwestern and Nigeria at large. It is a method of ascertaining the veracity of evidence in traditional African settlement. Traditional oaths are accommodated within the modern legal system as forms of statutory oaths.[17]

During colonialism, both the colonial and native justice systems existed side by side as it was obtainable till the present moment in Nigeria. The native justice system was recognized as inferior by the British Empire; indigenous religion was seen as primitive and termed paganism. Under the British colony, traditional chiefs were allowed to rule as native authorities, and oath-taking in traditional religious temples was used to regulate society thereby guaranteeing peace and order in the southwest. The importance of covenant to the socio-political upliftment of any given society cannot be over emphasized because covenant to a large extent influence behaviour in a society. Man as a social being is gregarious living in physical and moral isolation to his nature. Covenant or oath is relevant to the people's social justice life; and the economic welfare of special groups and as such demands a proportionate share of the social parties in the fruits of their economic cooperation. Social justice further demands a proportionate and equitable distribution of the wealth of a nation among different classes in society. The concentration of a nation's wealth in the hands

[13] O. Adewoye, The Judiciary system in Southern Nigeria: 1854-1954 (New Jersey: Humanities press, 2017)
[14] A. R. Ogunleye, ''Covenant-keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-political Transformation in Nigeria,'' International Journal of Humanities and Social Science 3, no. 9 (2014): 84
[15] E. N. Anekan, ''African Traditional Religion Oath taking and Resources Management in Nigeria,'' International Journal of Religion and Human Relations 4, no.1(2020):208-211. In Y. Odumakin, The Ultimate aim is to short-charge the Public goods, Nigerian Guardian, July 11, 2009, p. 10
[16] S. I. Oladipupo, ''Traditional Oath taking as a Panacea to Democratic corruption in Nigeria, Journal of Philosophy and Culture 9, no.2(2021):11-19
[17] A. R. Ogunleye, ''Covenant-keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-political Transformation in Nigeria,'' p.84

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of a few extremely rich families while the majority of citizen lives in abject poverty is against the principle of social justice.[18] However, what is needed is the full spirit of the covenant, the oath of office ''so help me God'' indicates that God is invited as a witness to the oath. The implication of this is that the swearer will account their deeds to God sooner or later. It is when the spirit behind the oath is allowed to operate fully in our society, then, there would be true justice and fair hearing.

Similarities and Dissimilarities of Oath Taking between Jews of Old Testament and Yoruba People of Nigeria

The Jewish faith and belief is based on the historicity of the bible. There is no history for its own sake, but historical accounts are recorded for the lesson which they teach. However, man could not be left to run his life without adequate safeguards to make sure his personal choice or desire endangers or goes against the very Being of the Universe and the regulation of their society. Then God therefore had to devise some means of keeping the rebellion-prone-man in check so that men's ways of living may run smoothly. The way out was achieved by the invention of certain codes of punitive, and these codes came in the form of taking covenant or oath. The most important thing to be noted in oath-taking between the two socio-cultural settings is moral norms. These norms are not theoretical but also attached to explicit moral problems since our social life is of ethical judgment with the combination of facts and moral belief. Factual elements in an ethical judgement can be verified as well as fortified by the use of normal evidence derived from critical observation, experimentation, reason and survey. From both cultures, certain actions are ethically approved or disapproved by Olodumare (Yahweh), that is, God demands pure discipline from humankind, morality therefore is of vital importance in the life of the people as well as determines the situation of a person both on earth and in the hereafter. The components of the codes have been transmitted continually from generation to generation and forbidden criminal actions include. Hence, the similarities are;

According to the findings, it was noted that oath-taking in both socio-cultural settings brings settlement, restoration, reconciliation and cordial relationship between suzerain and the swearer. Oath taking also leads the swearer to righteousness and justices, moreover, injustice, selfish indulgence and other anti-social acts would be put in check and cease. It enhances a better future for the swearer and their forthcoming generation. From the research, the judgment of the offender (the breaker) either by small pox, sickness, death, humiliation, famine, exile, and plagues comes directly from God to show his wrath. Oath taking helps to expedient and sanitize both societies by imbibing the fundamental religio-cultural ingredients. Emblems, symbols and statues were highly recognized to represent the present of God or deities.

[18] O.S. Bello, ''Hermeneutics of Musar (Discipline) in Leviticus 26:3-20 and its Implications for the Yoruba People of South- western Nigeria,'' International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Management Studies 4, no.9(2018):44-55

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It could be noted that the only difference lies in excessive fake oath-taking among the contemporary Yoruba people of Nigeria. This has saturated all sectors; religious, socio- political and economic. Imagine a situation whereby leaders who were appointed or elected to occupy a particular position in society, took an oath of obligations to strictly observe and follow the rules and regulations attached to the position, thereafter fracturing the oath without punishment. No wonder most of the natives are agitating for the use of deities' emblems such as iron, guns, and many other harmful charms for swearing rather than using religious books because of high levels of pretense and injustice. In the Old Testament, oaths were taken between suzerain and vassal class, between two vassal classes, yet the key to the oath since they value its purpose and the havoc that follows when anyone breaks the oath. But to the contemporary Yorubas, despite their understanding of the consequence of breaking the oath, yet they see it as smartness (another way to get hold of wealth). Then, they are the people financing project in the church and mosque. A question arises, are they doing this to bribe God? It is obvious that as a result of this wicked behavior, society is fading gradually.

Biblical Oath Taking: An Application for Moral Rejuvenation among the Contemporary Yoruba People of Nigeria.

In Talmud, an oath does not involve words alone, however, the person taking the oath must also hold a sacred object. This requirement is deduced from Abraham's example, since he told his servant ''put your hand under my thigh''. The object that should be used is a Torah Scroll which is the most sacred object. However, some rabbis argued that tefillin, which contains Torah verses is also acceptable.[19] Moreover, the term curse (’alah - אָלָה) freely interchanges with oath (shebu'ah- שְׁבוּאָה) in Genesis 24:8 and 41, the exchange of the related verse in I Samuel 14:23-24 and the pair yoke in Numbers 5:21-24 and Nehemiah 10:29-31 is the basis of the contrast in Isaiah 65:15-17 between someone who invokes a blessing on himself (mitbarekh-מִתבָרֵךְ) and someone who swears, invoking curse upon himself. The close link between oath and curse lends color to the suggested derivation of the terms *hishbi'a*- הִשבִּיא (adjure), *nishba*- נִשבָּה (swear), and *shebu'ah* (oath).[20] According to the Jewish traditions, *sheba'* (seven curses) is used repeatedly. For instance, Leviticus 26.18, Deuteronomy 28.7, and Job 5.19 repeated 'sevens' in the curses of treaty. The original sense is to lay curses in sevens on someone or to take courses in sevens on oneself. Oaths were associated with an invocation of God or some sacred and powerful equivalent as the king (II Sam. 15.21), either as witness or in order to convict the perjurer of sacrilege desecration of the divine name. The invocation means; ''nasashem Yahweh''- take up, utter the name of Yahweh (Exod. 20.7) or ''hizkirshemelohim''- mention the name of God (John 23.7).[21] The Jew shall stand on a sow's skin and the five books of Master Moses shall lie before him, and his right hand up to the wrist shall lie on the book and he shall repeat after him who administers the oath of the Jews. That sulphur and pitch that flowed

[19] M. Sandowicz, Fear the Oath! Stepping back from Oath-taking in the First Millenium BC(Chicago: University press, 2018)
[20] M. A. Orr and D. D. James, '' Entry for Covenant in the Old Testament.'' International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, p. 93-98
[21] Ibid, p. 97-100

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over Sodom and Gomorrah, flow down upon your neck and the same pitch that flowed over Babylon flow over you, but two hundred times more, and may the earth envelop and swallow you up as it did Dathan and Abiram. May your dust never join other dust, and your earth never joins other earth in the bosom of Master Abraham if what you say is not true and right. And so help you Adonai (Lord).

You have sworn the truth, If not, may you become as leprous as Naaman and Gehazi, and may the calamity strike you that the Israelite people escaped as they journeyed forth from Egypt's land. And may a bleeding and a flowing come forth from you and never cease, as your people wished upon themselves when they condemned God. It is true by the oath that you have sworn, by the soul which you will bring on the Day of Judgment before the Court, so help you God and the oath you have sworn. [Amen].

Oath-taking is very common and occasions for oath-taking are raging from the personal oath and the trivial. The parties being termed ba'aleshebu'ah- בַּאֲלֶ שְׁבוּאָה (oath-partners) in Nehemiah 6:18 provides no external legal sanctions for oaths; punishment for false oaths is in the hands of God who will not hold guiltless one who swears falsely by His name (Exod. 20.7) thus, the swearer may not have access to God's holy place and his blessing. The Bible makes extensive use of the practice of oath-taking. Biblical oaths govern the relationship between fellow Israelites and between Israel and God. Acceptance of God by non-Israelites can also be expressed through an oath of allegiance. Though, the root of the oath never occurs in Proverbs but only three times in Ecclesiastes. Oaths can be made binding on future generations who are not present or alive as at the time the oath is taken. In the Bible, Israelites used oath in a wide variety of contexts to guarantee protection, fidelity and truth.[22] There are many instances in the bible in which oath involves comprehensive interaction between two parties, such examples are interaction between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31.44-49), David and Jonathan (I Sam. 20.8-12), Saul and the people of Israel (I Sam. 11.7-15) by mention few. Yahweh and his people also embarked on an oath to seal the relationship that the people promised to fulfill. Nehemiah, during the renewal of the covenant, also made the people recommit themselves to the covenant with God. In the adjuration of the suspected adulteress;

‘’if no man has lain with you… be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that includes the spell. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband… may Yahweh make you a curse and an imprecation among your people as Yahweh causes your thigh to say and your belly to distend...and the woman shall say, amen (Numbers 5.19-22). May God do this to me and more so, if before sunset I taste bread or anything else'' (II Sam. 3.35).

The invocation of God in oaths was highly appreciated for its confessional value. ''you must revere Yahweh your God, him shall you worship, o him shall you hold fast by his name shall you swear'' (Deut. 10.20). Swearing is synonym to adhering by Yahweh as stated in psalm 63.12, Isaiah 19.18, Zephaniah 1.5 and

[22] A. Sol, ''The use of the Biblical Oath and its Development,'' International Journal for the Semiotics of Law 29,no.3(2021):685-707

Jeremiah 44.26. Thus, Pentateuch and Mishnaic oaths are taken by holding the scroll of the Torah in one's hand and swearing by God.

God need not be mentioned by name but may be described by one of his attributes. The post-Mishnaic oath is taken without holding the scroll and without mentioning God; however, a contrary rule is given to the effect that the scroll should at least be held out to the deponent to instill fear. Although serious warning must have been given to the deponent of the gravity of the oath and the inescapable divine punishment for any false oath this is not required for the post-Mishnaic oath.[23]

Oath immediately raises the empowerment that can be useful for personal and social endeavors. Oaths and scriptures stand out in their focus on truth; scriptures must be totally and essentially true, and oath is one of the most powerful ways to create true speech. Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian law generally recognized the binding focus of oaths.[24] This force was based on two sources; the will or consciousness of the swearer, as manifested in the wording of the oath; and the performance of the speech-act of the oath, especially the divine invocation. In the Jewish text, an oath cannot be taken privately, rather, wear the authority of the relevant institution, recognition of the power and danger of private oaths in creating independent and unauthorized obligations. The section on oaths and vows in the Damascus covenant which is embedded with regulations was summarized into seven summaries; the obligation to fulfill all vows, to fulfill any oath to perform a Torah commandment even at the price of death, not to fulfill any oath which goes against the Torah commandments even at the price death, husbands or fathers should not annul a woman's oath in cases, in which they don't know if it should be kept, husbands and fathers should annul an oath to violate the covenant, not to consecrate by vow to the altar anything acquired by force, and a fragmentary regulation on violating property by which injures another.[25]

However, these codes of conducts are similar to the code of Hammorabi of 1550 in the Ancient Akkadian Era as a leeway to promote morality and it does not contravene the law of the Torah in the bible. Christians started swearing on holy books more or less at the same time as Jews recorded this practice.[26] This first appears in the 380s in a poem by Gregory of Nazianzus and sermon of John Chrysoston. Gregory's poem is a dialogue with a person who swears often and provides much information on what the common swearer may have done and thought about oaths, at least as reflected in Gregory's argument. In 2 Corinthians 1.23 and Galatians 1.20, Paul swears oaths and in Hebrews 6.17, God himself swears an oath.

During Jesus time, Jews particularly pharisaic types took ceremonious oath but Jesus says in Mathew 5.33-35 that;

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[23] A. Sol, ''The use of the Biblical Oath and its Development,'' p, 685-707
[24] B. Moshe, ''Swearing by the Book: Oaths and the use of Scripture in the Roman Empire, ASDIWAL: Reveue genevoised' anthropologieetd' hisioire des religions 12,(2017): 53-72
[25] Introduction to the Biblical Oath, Available at: https://brill.com>Bej.9789004163435.i-309_002.xml
[26] E. W. Nicholson, God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)

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again you have heard that the ancients were told, you shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem for it is the city of the great king, nor shall you make ban oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be yes, yes, or no, no; anything beyond these is of evil.

Most Christian apologists have concluded that this verse is either Jesus using hyperbole to emphasize his point, or failing to mention exceptions to this rule that would have been implicit to his audience. Calvin believed that only oaths counter to God are wrong but Quakers and Mennonites rejected all oaths in their submission.[27] By looking at this biblical submission as it is stated by Jesus Christ is not actually against oath taking as the people's way of sealing their trust parse, but they must develop to an extent of maintain their standard by determination. That is; ''let your yes be yes and no be no.'' Among the Jews, the people believed that Yahweh was the utmost and incomparable, who possessed no associate. This Jewish tradition was seen in Jesus by referring to heaven as God in his teaching in the book of Mathew. However, due to the proliferation of interdenominational churches and theological advancement, accompanied by different doctrines and biblical misinterpretations, the verse has been picked up in opposite part against what Jesus intended to pass across to the public.

Among the 21st century Yoruba people, oath of office is an affirmation of taken oath before undertaking the duties of an office; such oath is sometimes required by officers of other organizations. It often requires the law of the state, and religious body before the coronation and inauguration exercise. Most of these oaths are statements of loyalty to constitution and it may be considered treason to betray a sworn oath. I will discharge my duties and perform my functions honestly to the best of my ability and faithfully by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the law.[28]

Conclusion

The Yoruba people have made the oath of office a frivolous undertaking as most of them commit crimes, and corruption without guilt of conscience. The paper revealed that oaths are taking falsely among the people, and in Nigeria at large. Many are living flamboyant life style and see embezzlement as an opportunity for God to drain their society. They do not maintain the essential beauty and the virtues of their integrity in the position they occupy. In light of this, the paper recommended that it is time to revert to the Old Testament concept of oath-taking which is very much synonymous with that of the ancient Yoruba people before the adoption of Western culture. Furthermore, the Government should be practicable rather than theoretical about the tenet spelled out in our constitution towards the execution of right justice against violation of oath-taking at any level and our law courts should be the last hope for the hopeless citizen. Hence, sincerity, trust, and diligence in terms of oath-taking have to be

27 R. T. France, The Gospel according to Mathew: an Introduction and Commentary (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1985)

28 G. Bobson, A Social Critique, Available at www.Vanguard.com/2015/02/politicians-oath-office-African-deities

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properly observed and maintained among the contemporary Yoruba people of Nigeria.

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