RITUAL AS A TOOL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Socio-cultural studies have shown that human beings are conflict-prone and communal life is always characterized by conflicts between individuals or groups. Just as conflicts lead to divisions, violence, and wars, they have also led to the search for an institution of various methods of conflict resolution and transformation. One of the tools people use in resolving and transforming conflicts between conflicting parties is ritual. Ritual has been employed to bring about peace between parties since it is seen as a form of religious drama and system of communication to transmit a collective message to the parties. Ritual taps into the core of people's perceptions and beliefs about their world and molds their beliefs into symbols. Ritual uses these symbols to communicate and actions to recreate and transform the world, especially, the world of conflict. Ritual in conflict resolution and transformation regulates relationships between individuals, groups, and communities, and serves as a way of defining identity and means of relating to and rebuilding peace-bridges between parties. The Igbo people adopt various methods in the resolution and transformation of conflicts. In any method employed, ritual-actions are at the centre. This paper is an attempt to explore the central role of ritual and posit it as an effective tool in conflict resolution in Igboland.
Key Words: Ritual, Conflict resolution, peace, symbols, identity

INTRODUCTION

The nature of human living in society is most often marked with different kinds of conflicts. Conflicts are, therefore, by-products of human societal living. Conflicts form part and parcel of human life in a society. It is difficult to think of any human society or organization without conflict. It is from this perspective that Cloke and Goldsmith assert:

> Every society and every organization produces a culture of conflict, a complex set of words, ideas, values, behaviors, attitudes, archetypes, customs, and rules that powerfully influence how its members think about and respond to conflict. Cultures of conflict are shaped in and by our social experiences.[1]

Indeed, many nations of the world today have never seen peace and harmonious coexistence between different cultural groups for more than half a century. Indubitably, in the present historical period, there are conflicts between nations and peoples of the world, that every child of this century

knows that conflict is a common feature of human life in the world of to-day.

We are living in a conflict-ridden world. Conflicts, if not properly han-dled and resolved, can lead to interminable chains of violence and wars. This is why the recognition of this dangerous nature of conflicts has led societies both in the past and in present to look for ways of managing, re-solving and transforming conflicts between persons, groups, and commu-nities. It is true that most societies that have experienced the disastrous nature of conflicts have also experimented on various methods of its reso-lution and transformation. Thus, scholars of social science do not only talk about the reality of conflict and its causes, but they also talk about various methods and processes employed by different societies to resolve and transform conflicts. These western-based transformative conflict programs have neglected to see the power in the oldest form of dealing with conflict. Lisa argues that ritual taps into the core of our perceptions and beliefs about the world and molds these beliefs into symbols. She went to affirm that rituals use these symbols to communicate as they act to recreate and transform the world of conflict.[2] Therefore, it is a truism of the socio-cultural studies that just as human conviviality gives rise to conflicts; it also generates modes and methods of conflict resolution. This is what is ob-servable in every people and nation of the world.

The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, like any other society in the world, has experienced different forms of conflicts. Over centuries, there have been various kinds of inter-clan or town or village conflicts. In view of this, Francesca and Joseph in their article on the nature of conflicts in Igbo tradi-tional society have this to say:

> Igbo society in the pre-colonial period was not at all times peaceful. There were moments, as we witness today when tensions and open physical conflicts ensued. Examination of human affairs has in many cases showed that interactions among human beings are sometimes characterized by intolerance, which in turn engenders tensions and conflicts. In other words, as long as human beings exist and interact, conflicts are bound to ensue amongst them.[3]

Indeed, the Igbo people, like other nations of the world have witnessed various kinds of conflicts. However, despite this, the Igbo people have consistently sought ways of settling and recreating the peace and harmony that define the unfathomable depth of their social relationships. Indeed, in most difficult moments of conflicts, the Igbo have demonstrated the rare art of resolving issues and rebuilding peace bridges using ritual and other appropriate grassroots methods of conflict resolution and transformation. This research is an attempt to look at the central role of ritual in different

types of conflict resolution methods used in Igbo communities. Thus, it goes to identify the nature of conflicts in Igbo society, bringing particular attention to the unique role of rituals in different methods of conflict resolution and transformation. It is the research finding of this paper that in all the methods used in conflict resolution practices, rituals play a very significant role in restoring peace and harmony, and rebuilding relationships between groups and communities in conflict.

THE NATURE OF RITUAL AS A CULTURAL REALITY

As a cultural and religious reality, a ritual is defined in accordance with its use and role in society. Rituals can be seen from its rhythmic, dramatic, and performative aspects, but we are more inclined to their religious roles in this paper. The *Encarta Concise Dictionary* conceptualizes ritual as an established formal behavior and a prescribed pattern of observance; it is the performance of actions or procedures in a set, ordered, and ceremonial way. In the same way, Mari Womack defines it as a behavior that is repetitive, sequential, non-ordinary, and 'powerful.'[4] She explained that ritual is repetitive as it cannot accept or tolerate innovation since it has to conform to tradition and has to be performed the same way every time. It is sequential since it follows the order of performance. The sequential order makes it meaningful in understanding the symbols. Again, a ritual is non-ordinary since it is set apart from ordinary reality by time and space.

From socio-cultural and religious perspectives, a ritual is ceremoniously performed and takes place in sacred places and at sacred times. It cannot be performed without a ceremony or celebration. Indeed, here we are not concerned with every form of social rite (as in respect of national flags or mace), but we are more interested in sacred rites that affect the behavior and relationship of people, with their signification drawn from mythical enunciations. According to Louis J. Luzbetak, ritual and myth are linked together and share the same power of signification, since sacred rites reinforce beliefs and beliefs reinforce rituals[5]. According to him, rituals are the dramatization of myth since in ritual; myths are not only narrated but are also performed through prescribed, repetitive social acts. Ritual-actions re-enact the interpenetration of the human world with the spiritual world. In fact, through ritual-actions, one gets in contact with the holy, and actively participates in the collective process of community regeneration. It is in this sense that ritual acts as a potent instrument of reconciliation, regeneration, and transformation. It is from this perspective that Leonard Boff argues strongly that ritual celebrations reconcile everything and for a short time create a paradisiacal world, a *mundus reconciliatus.*[6] Similarly, Mari

Womack argues that those who perform it consider ritual powerful.[7] Ritual has the 'power' to change the world, either by the intervention of supernatural entities or by the transformation of the participants. As a cultural reality, ritual plays multiple roles in various forms of cultural communication systems. Emphasizing on this fact, Lisa Schirch, says:

> Rituals are forms of communication, which transmit both verbal and nonverbal messages. Ritual communicates a unique way, using symbols rather than verbal forms of communication and using the entire body of senses, rather than just verbal.[8]

Rituals, according to scholars, can involve any number of activities and practices, such as eating, singing, dancing, religious ceremonies, and other cultural celebrations.[9] These rituals are ingrained in the culture, help share and develop knowledge, and promote relationships and reconciliation between people.[10]

THEORIES OF RITUAL

The complex nature of ritual and its various roles in cultural operational dynamics has given rise to different forms of theories. Indeed, different theorists have different conceptions of rituals. For some, it is a positive means of checkmating the social life of the people, while for some others, it is a repressive means of stopping perceived violence. Indeed, for some cultural anthropologists, scholars of religion, and even theologians, ritual is directly linked to religious beliefs. Given this, some theories see no difference between ritual and religious beliefs. For some others too, beliefs, symbols, myths, and creeds are mental forms that act as blueprints that motivate and inspire ritual actions. It is from this point of view that the Descriptive ritual theory regards ritual as action and distinguishes it from other aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myth. For some of these scholars, belief and action are interwoven in ritual functions. It is in a sense that Catherin Bell argues that ritual, like action, acts out, expresses, or performs these conceptual orientations.[11] Edward Shils argues that ritual and belief are intertwined and yet separable since it is conceivable that one might accept beliefs, but not ritual activities associated with them[12]. He concluded that beliefs could exist without rituals, but rituals cannot exist without beliefs.

The Functional ritual theory describes ritual as a type of functional or structural mechanism to reintegrate the thought-action dichotomy. The Functionalists explore ritual actions and values to analyze society and the nature of social problems. One of the proponents of this theory is Cliford Geertz, who argues that ritual has meaning only on the account of its func-

tions more than being a simple analytical tool. From a different perspective, Performance theory is very dissatisfied with the traditional categories brought into ritual theories.[13] For this theory, a ritual is simply a performance. It is from this point of view that some of its proponents like, Victor Turner and others, focus mainly on sports, drama, and media as universal factors of performance.[14] Indeed, for these scholars ritual, through its performative functions communicate its embodied religious content that indirectly affects social realities. Equally, from a social theoretical point of view, Emile Durkheim holds that ritual is a sacrament of social solidarity. According to him, religious rituals provide a means of organizing the sentiments of the group, thereby making possible the maintenance of social solidarity.[15] Equally, from the perspective of conflict and violence theory, Rene Girard's negatively proposes that the root of violence could be traced back to the mechanism of mimetic conflict. For him, religion or ritual is a form of organized violence in the service of social tranquillity. Girard believes the origin of ritual and religion is traced to this mechanism of mimetic conflict.[16]

Therefore, as a cultural reality, a ritual is an essential part of religion that has a great impact on the life and behavior of the people in every society. It is this important role of ritual in the socio-religious life of every society that makes it a potent instrument in every method of conflict resolution and transformation. In fact, in every part of Igboland, like in most African societies, ritual plays a very central role in the various processes of conflict resolution and transformation.

CONFLICT AND THE NATURE OF ITS OCCURRENCE IN IGBOLAND

To understand the role that ritual plays in the various methods of conflict resolution and transformation, it is important to highlight in a very brief way the reality of conflict and the nature of its occurrence among the Igbos.

Definition of Conflict

Indeed, both scholars and students of social sciences agree that conflict is a reality of human social life and something that happens every day. It is encountered within the arena of human interactions as we encounter oppositions and counter oppositions where different human desires and interests are incompatible. Although conflict is a thing of daily occurrence, it is a difficult reality to conceptualize. According to Stobbe, the definitions of conflict are as varied as the numbers of conflicts that are occurring inside us, and around our families, workplaces, communities, and the world[17].

Deutch, Coleman and Marcus define conflict as a disagreement in varying degrees between two groups.[18] However, this definition does not indicate at what level such disagreement produces a real sense of conflict. In view of this, Coser, defines conflict as a struggle over scarce power, status, and resources in which the aims of the opposing groups are neutralized, injured or even eliminated by their rivals[19]. Baron, on the other hand, defines it as a social situation in which incompatible goals and activities occur between two or more parties who held antagonistic feelings towards each other and attempt to control each situation.[20]

In fact, in their attempt to understand the reality of conflict from the analysis of dysfunctional societies, some conflict theorists ask the fundamental question of "why does conflict arise between humans?" This question tries to probe deeper into the possible sources of conflict. In their attempt to proffer answers, some of these scholars explain that when human interaction becomes disrupted in a dysfunctional society, conflict may ensue. Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Freud in their separate writings advanced theories of conflict in societies. It is an underlining fact of their convictions that societies consist of conflicts and that when conflicts are not openly taking place, processes of social domination that give rise to them exist. Summarising the views of Karl Marx Darwin and Freud, Stephanie Stobbe writes:

> Social psychologists, such as Darwin, Marx, and Freud, emphasized conflicts as competitive and destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Darwin saw conflict as "the competitive struggle for existence" and "social Darwinism" saw conflict as the "survival of the fittest" (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Marx focused on conflicts as class struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Freud viewed psychosexual development and conflict as the struggle between the biologically rooted impulsive "id" and the socially conscious "superego."[21]

A conflict could be defined therefore as a rift in a social situation that occurs when opposing parties vehemently disagree over a contending issue of good interest to both. In every social order, where groups and individuals try to advance their interests over others, conflict or violence is likely to arise. In most cases, the policies and ideologies of such individuals or groups portray the real self-interests hiding behind them to control and dominate. It is in line with this thought that Karl Marx opines that the world is a place of domination and conflict. He saw class divisions defined by economic interests as the most recognizable source of social conflict. According to this theory, it is the economic factor (substructure) which is the most decisive of all these elements of society and which largely determines the nature of divisions that leads to conflict in the society.

CONFLICTS IN IGBOLAND

The Igbo ethnic group is one of the three most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are profoundly religious adhering to two major religions: Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The Igbo occupy and live in the South East of Nigeria with a population of about 35 million people. Igbo culture has lots of structures of social control. Cultures and their associated mechanisms for social control always represent restrictions on human freedom. In Igboland, people are expected to conform to certain normative standards that symbolize oneness of membership and participation within the same group. The cultural norms act as the moral guidelines in different spheres of human life and activities, both in dealings with individuals and groups. However, in spite of all these norms, it is often impossible for individuals and groups to adhere to those standard norms of social conviviality. Thus, there is always the tendency to breach the established norms of social justice and conviviality. And such breaches only give rise to one form of conflict or the other. Speaking about this, Francesca and Joseph say:

> Igbo society in the pre-colonial period was not at all times peaceful. There were moments, as we witness today when tensions and open physical conflicts ensued. Examination of human affairs has in many cases showed that interactions among human beings are sometimes characterized by intolerance which in turn engenders tensions and conflicts. In other words, as long as human beings exist and interact, conflicts are bound to ensue amongst them. In the pre-colonial period, some of the issues that sparked off conflicts among individuals, communities and states have remained the same in the present time. These include issues arising from marriages, inheritance, religion, land, boundaries among others. It is important to understand the fact that conflicts, though may cause division and enmity, would always occur so long as human beings live and interact with one another in a given society.[22]

Just as these authors testify, in the Igbo society, there are different kinds of conflicts, and it is important to say that there are hierarchies of conflicts. There are conflicts arising from common children's play in competitive sports, quarrelling and fighting among adults. Other sources of conflict are cases like stealing, incest, murder, and poisoning (which are serious crimes forbidden by tradition). Some of these conflicts occur between individuals or groups over issues of interests or domination. Just as Coser, testifies, conflict occurs when two or more people struggle over values and claims to status, power, and resources, in which the aims of the opponents are

neutralized, injured or eliminated by their rivals.[23] Conflicts occur between groups of opposing parties and between communities and even religions. Indeed, besides the cases of murder, rape, incest, marital infidelity, other issues that generate conflicts are land problems, chieftaincy tussles, and desecration of ancestral shrines. Some of these crimes are considered as abominable and sins against the sacredness of the land. Therefore, such crimes, when they are committed, need ritual procedures for redressing them to restore the sanctity and integrity of the land. This indicates the centrality of ritual and its use to restore the integrity of the land reconcile and transform conflicts between individuals or groups.

THE NATURE OF IGBO RITUALS AS A TOOL

As indicated above, a ritual is a very potent tool of conflict resolution and transformation in Igbo society. Even though there are various methods of resolving or transforming conflicts, but there is no method that does not use one form of ritual or the other. In most cases, ritual formulas are enacted at the beginning of the process and at the end. In every method of conflict transformation, ritual action processes are enunciated by the appropriate authoritative personalities with the use of ritual instruments. Therefore, before we go into the different methods of conflict transformation, it is important to highlight more on the nature of Igbo ritual and the roles of the ritual personalities and instruments.

In the Igbo traditional society with its sacred cosmology, every form of life is embedded in ritual actions. Indeed, there is no Igbo celebration that goes without rituals. Some of these rituals could be formal or informal, personal or communitarian. Ritual generates the sense of a feast or celebration in any cultural festival. In this way, rituals order the calendar of events and sustain the life of the individual and the community in their life cycle. Some rituals are associated with certain personal or communitarian events. Writing about this, Ekwuru says:

> Just like any African, the Igbo is aware that he is socio-ontologically inserted into a mesh of intimate relationship with other beings visible and invisible. He believes that in order to maintain and sustain ontological peace and ethical order, which engenders peaceful living and harmony, he has to perform series of rites from conception to death. Ritual-actions therefore vary from simple family and communal acts of everyday life to complex ones. There are festivals and festival circles lasting for days, weeks, even months and years. Typologies of Igbo ritual practices could be branched into two major categories: personal rituals and community rituals.[24]

There are various types of rituals employed by the Igbo for one ceremony or the other. Each ceremony calls for what type of ritual to be employed. As Ekwuru notes, there are both personal and community rituals. Personal rituals range from birth through various forms of initiation to death. Rites of passage mark the transitions in the life of individuals. In Igbo communities, rituals are performed at birth, naming ceremonies of children, at their circumcisions and at their puberty. Rites of passage are also marked at death, marriage and age-grade ceremonies. According to Turner such periods of transition are socially 'dangerous' because they involve a realignment of the position of the individual with respect to society.[25] Societies may also undergo a 'dangerous' change of state, as when a community goes to war. In some parts of Igboland, such as in Ehime Mbano, Etiti and Ihitte Obowo, all in Imo State; Aro communities in Imo, Anambra, Abia and Afikpo in Ebonyi State, the Age grade ceremonies and rituals are held very high. Any young man who did not celebrate with his age grade will not be regarded as a worthy member of the community no matter how wealthy he might be. He will be isolated and will not be part of any communal activity. It has to be performed no matter your status in the society.

Community rituals are those public rituals that include collective rituals of initiation, fertility, the commemoration of major cosmic events and New Yam festivals, purification of the land. On those occasions, people prepare themselves interiorly and externally to celebrate. Inwardly, people fast and purify themselves while they prepare themselves by providing all the materials needed for personal and collective decorations. Indeed, people spend time in various forms of rehearsals and practices of songs, music, dance, that will form part of the celebration. The day of community ritual is marked by festive moods and unrestrained excitement. It is considered as a day of joy and reconciliation. In fact, rites of reconciliation mark moments when the community through rituals celebrates the reconciliation of victims of conflicts with their oppressors. It is a time when people who have been quarrelling for a long time are once more united with a stronger bond of friendship that the ritual process guarantees. Such conflicts arising from murder, rape, incest, desecration of sacred places, are reconciled through religious rituals.

Among the personalities needed for any conflict resolution, are the Elders of the community. The elders are heads of families. In fact, Kopytoff argues that elders can initiate reconciliatory processes and facilitate peace and harmony in the land.[26] Community elders are men of integrity and respect, and it behoves on them to be upright and firm in matters of testifying to the truth in the community. Their interventions in community or family disputes are important. However, besides the college of the elders, the political and social harmony of any given community lies in the hands of the traditional rulers known as the Ezes/Igwes and their cabinet. While

the elders and priests administer oaths and rituals, the Ezes, Igwes see that there is peace in the community. Through negotiation, dialogue and mediation, the mechanisms of social harmony are pursued and actualized in the community. The Ezes are the custodians of ancestral norms and guarantors of security in their communities. Equally, the Age Grade Association, Umuada, Masquerade cult and others have roles to play in conflict transformation in Igboland.

RITUAL INSTRUMENTS IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Indeed, in any ritual celebration, certain symbolic instruments are very vital to the ritual process. Thus, there are symbolic objects of ritual-action stick known as *Ofo* and the object of warding off evil powers referred to as *Ogu*. As symbolic objects or principles of justice and moral rectitude, they are always invoked together as *Ofo* and *Ogu*. Indeed, Igbo people believe in the concept of justice symbolized in *Ofo* and *Ogu* as a governing principle of retributive justice. The idea of justice (upheld or denied), is invoked through the instrumentality of *Ofo* and *Ogu* in any process of conflict resolution and transformation.

METHODS OF RITUAL RESOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF CONFLICTS

The Igbo have various ways and means of resolving, reconciling, and transforming conflicts. In their social and religious conflicts, and as they occur in the family or between families, villages, communities and inter-communities, there are ways of resolving and transforming them as well. Indeed, whether the conflicts arise over issues of land encroachment or over economic trees, the methods are there to be applied. When there are cases of opposition and encounter-opposition, concurrently there arises the immediate need for a dialogue, which can be initiated by any of the opposing parties, or a third party interested in the reconciliation of the two conflicting parties. Some of the conflict resolution methods used include the normal adjudicative (process) to a more complex oath-taking and covenant-making process.

Adjudication

Igbo people, like other African countries, in some cases, adopt the method of adjudication in resolving disputes. Adjudication is one of the procedural means of adjudging the right or the wrong in any conflict, with a view of arriving at a proper judgment of its cause and proper mode of resolving it.

In Igbo societies, adjudication, in most cases, follow a less pronounced ritual process. The forum is constituted by the ritual personalities and within a sacred location or community square. At the beginning of the process, the ritual action instruments (*Ofo* and the statues of the deities) are brought out and the conflicting parties are meant to swear that what they are going to say is nothing but the truth. The elders of the land constitute the adjudicating panel and their decision is final. This process of adjudication cannot be compared with the Western method of litigation. Litigation as the western alternative of dispute resolution is a non-violent process of resolving conflicts through a court of competent jurisdiction. The decision of the court is binding on the parties involved in the conflict. In the Igbo case, the elders are considered as to be competent in dealing with issues of conflict and can decide with authority. The nature of the conflict determines what type of ritual to be applied within the process of adjudication. Indeed, a ritual at the end of the conflict seals the bond of friendship and re-establishes the relationship.

Oath taking

Oath taking is one of the methods used to reconcile disputing parties in Igboland. It is one of the oldest tools in conflict resolution and transformation in Igboland. It is believed by the Igbo that oath-taking is a ritual practice, which compels the disputing parties and their witnesses to prove their sincerity over the issues under contention.[27] Oath-taking is a potent socio-religious control and conflict resolution mechanism among *Ndi Igbo*. It derives its power from the people's belief system embedded in their culture. There is the Igbo belief system that swearing an oath traditionally guarantees an immediate result. Conflict breeds mistrust and breaks relationship. It generates and suppresses truth. This is one of the reasons to resort to oath-taking. The oath can take place at any of the community shrines before the community's god or goddess if the conflict involves the community. It can as well take place before the elders on the village square. On the other hand, conflicting individuals can reconcile through swearing an oath at a designated place depending on the offense committed and its gravity. Every oath-taking is time limed. Generally, the duration is between one month and up to a year. It does not exceed one year. Within the period in view, if any sickness or death befalls any of the parties, it is attributed to the oath sworn and therefore the victim is guilty of the offense. It is believed that the victim has committed an abomination and would need to sacrifice to the deity concerned for cleansing. The rites of purification, it is believed, would pacify the gods, cleans the family or community and reconcile them.

Traditionally, the Igbo believe in the immediate intervention of the gods when beckoned upon. The gods and goddesses are believed to control the mysteries of nature. They are consulted through ritual processes for the well-being of the people, especially during the feasts of the gods (deities). Those who want an immediate solution to their problems resort to them (deities). Onuigbo affirms that though the deities and the ancestors help the people in one way or the other, nonetheless they can inflict some punishments to a person(s) due to some evil acts they perpetrated[28]. It is the reason practitioners of traditional religion resort to the ancestors and the gods to intervene in their conflicts with their belief in the power of the deities, weak Christians too, patronize the shrines for their problems. There is no single process and formula in traditional rites of conflict transformation. Each community has its own formula and different instruments for the process.

In the process of resolving disputes, the disputing parties are usually first listened to by the constituted council of elders before the oath-taking where it is deemed necessary. In fact, oath-taking is considered as the last resort in a very difficult dispute. And various items used in administering the oath include *kola nut (oji)*, *ofo*, water, *live animals* or animal blood. Kola nut is common in Nigerian cultural traditions and is very significant in every ritual socio-cultural gathering. In Igboland, it is called *Oji* and symbolizes life, hospitality, goodwill and good wishes. It is generally used for ceremonies, and to welcome visitors. In ritual ceremonies of oath-taking, the eating of *Oji* by both parties is the culminating point of the binding force of the oath. In some communities, water is used for the same purpose. Thus, drinking or washing your hands or legs with the water provided within the context of this ritual, and the words pronounced over it form the essential part of the ceremony. When any of these is done, the chief priest of the shrine and the striking of the ofo stick on the ground seal the swearing of the oath up with the declaration. *Ofo* is a sacred symbol. Arazu argues that *ofo* is used to make contact with the ancestors and other benevolent spirits. It opens vistas of a world inhabited by the living, the life-after-death inhabitants of the great beyond and the gods of the race. He went further to affirm that *ofo* is the baton in the relay race of the prayer life of the nation.[29] Its use in ritual reconciliation is symbolic, connecting, purifying, and harmonizing.

From the moment the oath is taken, the two parties are at the mercy of the gods for the expected consequences of this ritual ceremony. The parties to the oath are forbidden to relate in any way and will not talk with each other or eat together within the duration of the oath. At the end of the duration of the oath, if nothing happens to any of the parties (if no person died or falls sick), the parties can rebuild their friendship and trust, relate and eat together without fear of each other. It is publicly celebrated. The

reason for oath-taking in the process of conflict transformation is to re-build trust, re-establish the broken relationship, and ensure that members of the group concerned keep party's secrets.

Covenant making

Covenant making (*Igba ndu*) is another form and means of resolving dis-putes in Igboland. It is different from oath-taking. The covenant-making is a ritual ceremony whereby two parties that have been quarrelling, and or, suspicious of each other is given the opportunity to declare before the gods, and in the presence of the chief priest and the community, that they will never do anything to harm each other. *Igba ndu* means to bond or life bonding. It is a part of Igbo judicial system employed to effectively bring about reconciliation and the re-establishment of broken relationships. The central item of covenant-making is blood, but modernity has affected the use of blood. Kola nut, water, palm oil, etc, are some of the items of cove-nant-making. Arazu asserts that kola nut summons the Igbo man to pray-er. By eating the kola nut at a public gathering, we celebrate our unity in diversity and appeal to the cosmic forces called up in our consciousness when the kola nut is shared and distributed according to custom, to be favorable on our behalf. It rebuilds trust among the covenanting people, reassures solidarity and re-enforces the spirit of unity within the group.

Equally, in most cases, it is used to purify the land and appease the gods when some abominable crimes like incest or homicide are commit-ted, or after a war in the communities in which so many people are affect-ed. Whenever this takes place, it serves as peace and trust-building mech-anism for the disputing parties or the entire community. It also checkmates the activities and behaviors of the parties against each other. Indeed, as long as the covenant lasts, it assures the disputing parties and the entire community of security of life and properties. There is however no single method of covenant-making. But in each method adopted, varied forms of rituals are involved. In the different possible formulas, apart from the cov-enant-making ritual process, there are some ritual demands and obliga-tions made on the disputing parties in the whole of Igboland. It is accepted that this ritual communion and bond of union re-established during the covenant rituals are under the surveillance and custody of the gods. Any-one who breaches the covenant terms will face the wrath of the deities.

RITUAL AND PUBLIC SERVICES

The Igbo are very religious whose cohesion as a people is tied to their be-lief in gods and goddesses. This is evidenced in many shrines that dot the Igbo landscape. The belief in the gods and goddesses by the Igbo influ-

ences their actions in both private and public life. It is expected that the Igbo man carries along and brings into his public life his religious belief system. In other words, he imbibes the moral and customary obligations into his work. He should not separate the two. His attitude to work is therefore a confession of his faith in the Supreme Being and the deities. It is on this basis that people are made to swear according to their belief system at the beginning of their public service. The Christian is expected to swear on the Bible, the Muslim on the Qur'an while the traditionalists do so, on the sacred traditional symbols like the *Ofo* in Igbo land**.** The form (words) and matter (Bible) of swearing constitutes the rites.

Public rituals have unfortunately become symbolic rather than practical life of commitment, service, truth and responsibility. It has resulted in non-productiveness in the public sector. It is too why many public institutions have collapsed in Nigeria. Corruption has become endemic in our body system. It is partly because of a lack of proper understanding and meaning of what we swear to, and the living out of the meaning of their ritual values. The political class takes an oath of office, and so do many officers in Nigerian societies. How they keep to the oath of their office leaves many questions to be answered as related to the ritual values they took. It is only in appreciating these values and living them out in private and public lives, that we can experience a new responsible society, with fewer tendencies to corruption and conflict.

CONCLUSION

The adoption of ritual as a potent tool in methods of conflict resolution and transformation goes to show its centrality and significance in Igbo belief and tradition. In this sense, it could be said without equivocation that rituals, taps into the core of Igbo perception of reality and beliefs about the universe, and molds these beliefs into symbols. In its unique socio-religious roles, it uses these symbols to communicate, re-enacting the deeds of the gods and recreates the world. In fact, it has the power to resolve and transform conflicts in the most exceptional ways. As ritual suffuses and permeates every element of the socio-cultural life, it forms part of the essential cultural baggage that is handed down from one generation to the next.

As some social scientists and cultural anthropologists like Luzbetak, have testified, rituals play a central role in the social drama and cultural life of every society.[30] In the Igbo society, this is witnessed dramatically in the installation of traditional rulers, burial ceremonies, age-grade ceremonies and rites of passages. In rituals, we can change our perceptions of the world around our conflict and us. The Igbo are very much at home with ritual transformative actions from time immemorial. As we have variously

testified, the Igbo people perform many ritual ceremonies that greatly affect the surface and deeper levels of human relationship, toning down tensions and building bridges of peace and harmony across families and communities. Therefore, it is important to rediscover the power of rituals and adopt them at the national and international levels of conflict resolution and transformation. It is important to note at this point that although ritual practices influence the everyday life of the people, yet, it is an area that is so neglected in post-colonial African studies that there is a paucity of literature in the area. It is necessary, therefore, to revive the interest of scholarly research in this area of cultural life, as it will help to understand the unique roles of rituals in the lives of the Igbo people and other peoples of the world and rediscover its embedded potentiality in resolving and transforming conflicts.

NOTES

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