

Blood Pact in East-Central Africa

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Even though the blood pact is not to be encouraged and is not practiced now as in the past, the concept of blood covenant has helped some in African cultures, particularly in Rwanda, to understand the Christian message.

The Meaning of Blood Pact

A blood pact is a traditional way of putting an agreement into effect in some African cultures. It is generally used for serious agreements and considered a much stronger binding than a signature or other binding methods. The blood pact requires that all parties shed blood into a container. In some cases, the blood is used to sign a document. In other cases, the blood is drunk by the people entering into the agreement. Breaking a blood pact incurs lasting damage to the culprit's reputation. Depending on the nature of the agreement, there may also be legal and/or, as some people believe, supernatural consequences. It is blood from each party that is placed onto the bottom of the pact next to the signature of each of the parties involved. Amendments to the pact cannot happen without the presence of all former parties.¹

Blood pacts are rooted in people's superstitious beliefs about blood and fear that awful things will happen if they violate a promise that was "sealed" by taking some of their blood and using it in some kind of ritual, or to sign a document. The pacts are only as strong as the superstitious beliefs.²

In some areas, a blood pact is also called a "blood oath." A blood oath is "an oath taken by two or more people in which they ceremonially use or exchange each other's blood."³

Blood Pact Ceremony in Rwanda

In traditional Rwanda, the blood pact was often used to seal the friendship between individuals and families. The ceremony needed four groups of people: the officiating person, the two friends and the witnessing people. The facilitator will call for the people's attention and introduce the ceremony by telling people the reason of the meeting. The two friends who are going to seal their friendship with a blood pact will bring a knife, sorghum flour, a leaf of *erythrina abyssinica* (Fabacées), and a mat. The facilitator will take a knife and cut the wound of the two friends who are going to seal their friendship with the blood pact. Then he will get the blood and mix it with

the sorghum flour on the *erythrina abyssinica* leaf, and the facilitator will give it to the two friends to drink. He will say the following words: "I unite you, if anyone of you breaks the pact with his friend or with the close or extended family members or with his friends, he will die." He will add that there will be a curse on the one who breaks the pact.

The two friends get up at the same time, hug each other, and exchange gifts. The gift may be a cow, a goat, or a sheep. They could also give a hoe as a gift.

The purpose of this blood pact was to prevent people from wrong doing and to avoid losing time in judging or solving the conflicts among people. According to Beattie, "the participation in it involved a ceremonial exchange of blood, and implied reciprocal obligations of mutual aid and hospitality, a breach of which involved danger and perhaps death for the guilty party."⁴

Blood Pact and Christianity

In connection with the Christian religion, the blood pact is related to the shed blood of Jesus Christ at Calvary. The blood covenant of Jesus Christ seals the relationship between Him and human beings who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. It also seals the relationship between two or more people who believe in Jesus Christ. The blood pact has enhanced Christianity by preventing people from sinning and breaking the relationship they have with Christ and one another. The two covenants are made of blood and are based on love. The blood pact is compared to the biblical blood covenant with the difference that in the first, the blood is shed by both parties by the will of both; while in the biblical covenant, the blood is shed by one party and is initiated by God alone (John 15:16). The biblical blood covenant is a promise made by God that He will choose a people for Himself and bless them. The covenant was originally made with Adam and Eve, the representatives of humanity in the Garden of Eden, as a promise and foreshadow of the salvific covenant in the blood of the Messiah, the Son of God (Genesis 3). The covenants with Noah and other people of faith pointed to this same covenant in Christ. For example, the covenant with Abraham's physical descendants was later extended, spiritually, to all those who, like Abraham, believe God (Gal. 3:7; cf. Gen. 15:6). God's promise of eternal blessing is given only on the basis of faith in the saving blood of His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:12).

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. "Blood Pact," *Urban Dictionary*, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>; Jean Denoyer, "What are blood pacts? What happens if I break one?" answer April 4, 2018, accessed August 8, 2019, <https://www.quora.com/What-are-blood-pacts-What-happens-if-I-break-one>.
2. Mary Arneson, "What are blood pacts? What happens if I break one?" answer April 8, 2018, accessed August 8, 2019, <https://www.quora.com/What-are-blood-pacts-What-happens-if-I-break-one>.
3. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>, accessed August 8, 2019.
4. J. H. M. Beattie, "The Blood Pact in Bunyoro," *African Studies* 17, n. 4 (1958): 198-203, published online January 19, 2007, *Taylor and Francis Online*, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00020185808707064>.

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