

Religious syncretism in Africa: Effects on cultural heritage and values

**Authors:**

Elizabeth A. Odey¹ 
Ekpenyong Obo¹ 
Justus O. Okafor¹ 
Francis Felix Edet[†]

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Calabar, Calabar Cross River State, Nigeria

Corresponding author:

Elizabeth Odey,
elizabethodey75@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 29 July 2024

Accepted: 24 Oct. 2024

Published: 08 Aug. 2025

How to cite this article:

Odey, E.A., Obo, E., Okafor, J.O., & Felix Edet, F., 2025, 'Religious syncretism in Africa: Effects on cultural heritage and values', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(1), a3251. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3251>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The synthesis between Christianity and African traditional religion yields both favourable and unfavourable outcomes. To enhance and reinforce the African cultural heritage and values, it is important to discard the dehumanising and explicit elements while firmly embracing the positive components. The researchers employed a qualitative research methodology in the course of this study. This entails the widespread utilisation of the primary and secondary approaches, which rely on oral tradition, written material and periodicals.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article concludes that the process of indigenisation or Africanisation of Christianity is of great importance for the rejuvenation of African cultural heritage and values, and recommends inter-religious studies and dialogue as an indispensable strategy in gaining more knowledge about the two religious traditions. The study further emphasises that the cultural emancipation and the enculturation approach are invaluable tools for understanding religion. Religious tolerance between the two religions is recommended for inter-religious peace and cooperation.

Keywords: religious syncretism; Christianity; cultural heritage; values; African traditional religion.

Introduction

The impact of religious syncretism between African traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity on African cultural heritage and values mostly refers to the consequences of blending or merging both religions on African cultural heritages and values. The African cultural heritages and values have undergone significant and negative acculturation as a result of this unequal union. However, this blending of religious beliefs has resulted in notable advancements and changes in many cultural customs among Africans. Pratt (1992) opined in his work 'Arts of the contact zone', that syncretism is an indispensable structure that cannot be termed as a result of globalisation; as such cultural emancipation is what people should adopt in the interplay of culture and religion. This research article thus, focuses on the impact of the synthesis between Christianity and African indigenous religion on both the belief systems. Furthermore, Appadurai (1996) corroborated the above-stated views in his work titled 'Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization', stating that change and continuity continue to be part of synthesis of cultures as well as religion; therefore, quality change should be adapted while negative change should be negated, reiteratively. Gyekve (1996) further expounds that ATRs have coexisted with Christianity, leading to a unique synthesis that reflects local contexts. This adaptation often involves the re-interpretation of Christian doctrines through indigenous lenses. For instance, the incorporation of ancestral veneration within Christian practices illustrates how African communities maintain their cultural identity while embracing new beliefs. In this regard, this article fully explores the process of assimilation between Christianity and the African indigenous religion, as well as the resulting impact on African cultural heritages and values.

This article provides a literature review of the concepts of Christianity and ATR, highlighting the impact of their synthesis on their belief systems. It explores the process of assimilation between Christianity and the ATR, and the resulting impact on African cultural heritages and values. The article closes with potential benefits of incorporating indigenous elements into the Christian religion for the rejuvenation of African cultural heritages and ideals.

[†], birth: 02 February 1972 death: 22 December 2024

Research problem

Many researchers with a Christian theological and intellectual background have overlooked ATR because of the dominance of Christianity. Despite the significant impact of Christianity on ATR, it continues to gain pace in its quest for members. The historical exploration and documentation of the causes for this ongoing importance have been insufficient. The contrasting themes in the two religions have been an overlooked subject of rigorous and thorough examination in historical research. Several scholars who have written about either Christianity or ATR have seemingly neglected crucial factors that have consistently attracted followers of Christianity to ATR. With the exception of a few broad declarations, there has been a lack of focus on the integration, syncretisation and synthesis of ATR and Christianity. This article offers essential information for a more comprehensive examination into the syncretism between Christianity and ATR, and the overwhelming results of the synthesis of both the religions.

Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative approach that involved descriptive and analytical methodologies, together with three data-gathering approaches, to achieve a clear and thorough outcome. In order to achieve this objective, a significant amount of information was collected through a comprehensive investigation carried out on primary and secondary historical sources. A total of nine individuals took part in the focused-group discussion (FGD), consisting of five individuals who practise Christianity, two of whom have converted to the religion. Conversely, one quarter of ATR practitioners are de-converts. A convenience sample technique was utilised, involving the selection of readily available and knowledgeable individuals to gather information on the subject being studied. The method in addition entailed transcribing, analysing and reconciling the data with the audio-recorded version, with the aim of attaining a more equitable representation of the study. The secondary sources, such as books, journal articles and internet materials, were extensively utilised to provide more detailed information to supplement the limited data obtained from primary sources. Nevertheless, both the primary and secondary sources served to enhance each other by supplying the necessary historical information.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks adopted to evaluate the effects of syncretism between ATR and Christianity on African cultural heritage and values are as follows: Cultural Hybridity Theory, proposed by Garcia (1995), opines that cultural hybridity emerges when two or more cultures interact and merge, creating a new cultural form that incorporates elements from each original culture. However, by application, it connotes contextual utilisation which, in the context of ATR and Christianity syncretism, can help explain how the fusion of these belief systems gives rise to a new and unique expression of African cultural heritage and values.

This work also utilised the application of Colonialism and Post-Colonialism Theory proposed by Rutherford (1990) which critically elucidates that colonialism and post-colonialism explore the impact of colonial encounters on indigenous cultures and the subsequent processes of cultural negotiation, resistance and transformation. By applying these theories, we can examine how the introduction of Christianity during the colonial period influenced African traditional beliefs, leading to syncretism and shaping the contemporary African cultural landscape. Bhabha (1994) corroborated the above-stated in his theory, namely, Cultural Preservation and Adaptation Theory, which profoundly emphasises the dynamic nature of culture, highlighting the tension between preserving traditional cultural practices and adapting to external influences. By employing this framework, we can analyse how the syncretism between ATR and Christianity has influenced the preservation, adaptation or transformation of African cultural heritage and values over time. Hall (1996) also proffered a theory crucial in this research known as the Identity and Belonging Theory. This theory enunciates how individuals and communities construct their identities and sense of belonging through cultural practices, beliefs and interactions. Through this theoretical lens, we can investigate how the syncretism between ATR and Christianity has shaped African individuals' and communities' identities, sense of belonging and cultural expressions.

Kraidy (2005) also voiced in this regard through application of the Power Dynamics and Agency Theory. This theory examines power relations and agency in cultural interactions, considering how individuals and groups navigate and negotiate power structures to assert their cultural autonomy and expression. By using this framework, we can analyse the power dynamics at play in the syncretism between ATR and Christianity, exploring how African communities exercise agency in shaping their cultural heritage and values amid external influences.

Literature review

Christianity is a monotheistic religion that centres around the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its followers are known as Christians, a term that originated from the early church disciples in Antioch, Syria (Ac 11.26). According to Hopfe and Woodward (1991), Christian beliefs can be summarised as follows: Christians generally believe that Jesus of Nazareth is unique and that he somehow achieved the redemption of humanity through his death. They also believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Christians commonly adhere to the belief that baptism serves as an initiation into the faith, and they also place importance on the communion meal. They adhere to the belief that believers have a single lifetime to ascertain their fate for the afterlife. This fate is commonly believed to be either an everlasting state of happiness in paradise or an everlasting state of suffering in hell. Within the framework of Christianity, there exist numerous variations that revolve around these fundamental concepts.

The initial endeavour to introduce Christianity to Nigeria occurred in the 15th century through the missionary activities of Portuguese missionaries. Ihenwa (2014) elucidated that the early endeavours of the Portuguese missionaries were primarily focused on the coastal areas of the country. These missionaries achieved some temporary progress in the ancient kingdom of Warri. However, this progress diminished because of the reluctance of European visitors from countries such as the Netherlands, France and England to collaborate with them. Nevertheless, a steady and lasting mission activity emerged in the 19th century via the endeavours of Protestant missionaries from Europe and America, with Catholics joining in from the 1840s. Furthermore, in the year 1841, a more significant missionary effort was undertaken during the Niger Expedition. This reinforcement was deemed necessary because of the failure of the initial endeavour to spread Christianity in Warri and to establish a strong Christian presence in the North Africa region. Ajayi (1965) argues that the challenge at that time was not only to reintroduce Christianity in Africa, but also to guarantee its effectiveness in the face of the persistence of traditional beliefs and the assertiveness of Islam.

African traditional religion, on the other hand, is an autochthonous religion that originated from the cultural practices of the African people. Unlike many religions such as Islam and Buddhism, it does not have a designated founder. Omeregbe (1993) characterises ATR as a dynamic faith that is transmitted from one generation to the next. The overwhelming majority of the African population continues to engage in and adhere to this practice. African traditional religion is a religious system in Africa that endures via the process of socialisation. The religion practised by contemporary Africans is a living and organic tradition that has been passed down from their ancestors, mostly through socialisation. The core tenets of ATR are organised hierarchically, with a central focus on the belief in a single Supreme Being or God, as well as the recognition of divinities and ancestor spirits. These entities fulfil diverse roles and responsibilities within the African community. Omeregbe (1993) provides insights into the functions of two distinct worlds: the physical world inhabited by mortal beings and the world of spirits. There is a reciprocal relationship between these two realms, as the denizens of the spiritual realm provide assistance and safeguard people residing in the physical realm. The spiritual realm is populated by God, the deities, the ancestors and spirits arranged in a hierarchical structure. African traditional religion holds the belief that divinities exist as ministers of God and are subordinate to him. God is perceived as a sovereign ruler, an omnipotent ruler, accompanied by his subordinates (gods) who serve him. The gods are the ones who implement his commands and fulfil his desires (1993:152). African traditional religion is an integral component of African culture and cannot be dissociated from it. It resembles a natural component of a tree, such as one of its branches. In other words, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), African religion is not an outdated

belief system, but rather a religion that is actively embraced and practised by Africans today. This religion lacks written scriptures, yet its teachings are evident and accessible to those who are observant and perceptive. The cultural heritage is predominantly recorded in the collective narratives, traditional stories, musical and choreographic expressions, religious rituals and sacred places, as well as in the concise and meaningful expressions of wisdom. It is a religion with an unknown and unvenerated historical founder. Despite lacking enthusiasm for recruiting new members, this religion continues to captivate Africans of all ages. African traditional religion encompasses various ethical principles, such as honesty, truthfulness, justice and impartiality. These values promote peaceful coexistence and societal growth.

Religious syncretism is the process of combining elements from multiple religious traditions. It primarily arises from the amalgamation of many religious doctrines and theological interpretations. Furthermore, theological syncretism typically arises from the amalgamation of diverse exegetical and hermeneutical interpretations from different religious factions. The term 'syncretism' is derived from its Greek counterpart, 'Synkratein', which literally means to pour together. Mokotso (2015) provides a detailed explanation of the significance of the Greek term 'Synkratein'. According to Mokotso, this term refers to the act of pouring one type of liquid into another, such as pouring water into wine. This results in the creation of a whole new substance that is neither wholly water nor entirely wine. Based on its etymological definition, syncretism in religion refers to the inclination of Hellenistic philosophy to blend and blur various diverse faiths. It denotes a blend of rituals, practices and doctrines. From a theological standpoint, syncretism might be considered as a form of religious infidelity. Syncretism refers to the practice of amalgamating elements from different belief systems, ideologies and perspectives, even if they are contradictory, in order to create an entirely novel doctrine (2015:158). Religious syncretism can occur within a single religious denomination or between several religious denominations. The former primarily occurs inside a religious group as a result of the infiltration of false beliefs within that same group. Examples of this phenomenon can be observed in the diverse manifestations of doctrinal fusion occurring within certain religious communities. An example of this may be seen in Christianity, where the extreme prosperity gospel has infiltrated. This involves certain individuals who consistently preach that God favours the wealthy and not the poor, with the main intention of profiting themselves at the expense of the impoverished. Here, the church has utilised and integrated many hermeneutical techniques that deviate from the genuine teachings of Christianity. The Lukan narrative of Jesus' teaching on the poor widow and the rich men casting their contributions into the treasury does not indicate that poverty is forbidden by God in any way (Lk 21:1-4).

In African indigenous religion, there are instances of intra-religious syncretism when foreign incense and candles of all types, sizes and colours are used in making sacrifices and performing rituals for traditional deities. Eze et al. (2024) argue that the founders of ATR did not employ certain religious materials when interacting with these renowned deities. Providing a concrete instance of intra-religious syncretism in certain present-day Christian practices in Kenya, Kasomo (2012) cites Shorter to emphasise that, as a result of secularism, numerous religious movements like faith healing ministries have emerged. The majority of these movements conduct their healing and exorcism sessions in temporary locations such as restaurants, kiosks, halls, bus terminuses or outdoors. Occasionally, they conduct worship services in stadiums, as is the case with crusades and revivals. These movements assert the idea of the faith gospel, among other things, that every Christian should consistently enjoy good health and prosperity, and that anyone who is sick and destitute has experienced a personal failure. As a result of these principles related to health and money, the leaders of these groups accumulate significant riches and live luxuriously, often at the expense of their followers Kasomo (2012).

Inter-religious syncretism occurs when multiple religious organisations interact or merge, rather than taking place within a single denomination. An exemplification of synthesis can be observed in the blending of Christianity with ATR. This type of religious syncretism has the potential to give rise to a novel religious entity that is completely separate from the two original religions, or that is composed of a blend of their characteristics. Mokotso (2015) provides a comprehensive explanation of the several manifestations of syncretism that have taken place in Lesotho. According to Gill (1999), the movement began in Lesotho during the 1860s. The prophetess Mantsope played a significant role by combining elements of Christianity and traditional religion. She urged her people to reject the influence of Western culture and Christianity, and instead embrace their own indigenous culture. Mantsope argued that the path to God is more inclusive than what the Christian missionaries were teaching. In addition, there was another religious movement known as Secret Prayer (Thapeloela Sephin) that combined Christianity and the indigenous religion of the Basotho people. One of their main beliefs involved the practice of animal sacrifices to honour their ancestors. In the 1920s, Walter Matitta separated from the Paris Evangelical Mission Society and established an autonomous church that combined Christianity with Basotho traditional religion.

Religious syncretism, which refers to the blending or merging of different religions, plays a significant role in the religious transformations taking place in society. The outcome of the synthesis is heavily influenced by the intrinsic strength of resistance within the religions in question. For example, this might lead to acculturation, in which a host religion faces challenges in preserving its own elements when it encounters a more dominant guest religion. An exemplary illustration in the present age is the ATR endeavouring to preserve its fundamental characteristics despite the dominant influence

of Christianity. In certain instances, this can result in the emergence of a completely novel religious belief system. To rephrase, Uchegbue (n.d.) stated that a significant outcome of religious transformations in Nigeria is the emergence of new religious movements, which is a prevalent phenomenon in Africa as a whole and especially in Nigeria. These movements typically integrate aspects of the conventional or native religion with Christianity or Islam (ND:27). The amalgamation of multiple religious traditions yields various consequences for the individuals who practise these religions. In the same vein, Kalu (2008) postulates that syncretic practices often bolster community cohesion and provide a sense of belonging among individuals. For example, in many African communities, rituals that honour both Christian saints and traditional ancestors are common. These practices serve not only as a religious expression but also as a means of reinforcing communal bonds and cultural identity. Kwame (1995) corroborated this by stating that the blending of African traditional beliefs with Christianity has led to the evolution of unique identities. The emergence of African Independent Churches (AICs) exemplifies this transformation, where Christian teachings are infused with African cultural elements, thus creating a distinct spiritual ethos that resonates with local populations.

The subsequent section of this article will scrutinise some of these repercussions.

Religious syncretism and its effects on the African traditional heritage and values using Christianity and African indigenous religion as examples

Religious syncretism and its effects on the African traditional heritage and values

The impact of religious syncretism on the participating religions resembles a pendulum's oscillation, following a consistent rhythm. The impact on the religions involved is contingent upon their hermeneutical and exegetical approaches to it. Mokotso (2015) discusses a significant impact of syncretism on the Christian religion. Quoting Oleska and Schineller (2011), Mokotso explains that syncretism alters the content and elements of the original gospel message, particularly during the process of contextualisation, because of the inclusion of religious elements from the receiving culture. Similarly, syncretism has caused modification and distortion in the cultural legacy and ideals of Africans, and some of these effects are outlined here.

The religious implication of syncretism on African cultural heritage and values

The practice of religious syncretism has resulted in significant contamination of the African indigenous belief system. Prior to the introduction and assimilation of foreign religious traditions into indigenous African beliefs, Africans were deeply and consistently religious in all parts of their existence, particularly in relation to the notion of God. The integration of foreign

religions such as Christianity and Islam has caused a distortion in this particular facet of African culture. For example, the African notion of God and other subordinate spiritual entities are currently being viewed with disdain. Ihenwa (2014), citing Ugwu (1988), asserts that the authority of many divinities and deities is diminished, undervalued and consequently disregarded and trivialised. Furthermore, the traditional African approaches to connecting with God have begun to decline and are rapidly being supplanted by the methods brought by foreign missionaries. Nevertheless, in the present era, numerous prominent church leaders express remorse for the significant injustice inflicted upon Africans and their religious practices. Mokotso (2015), citing Adamo (2010), reports that during the Assisi inter-religious prayer gatherings for peace in 1986, Pope John Paul II sought forgiveness from traditional religious leaders for the church's past errors. Cardinal Arinze authored a pastoral letter titled 'Attention to African Traditional Religions', which became the first Vatican document acknowledging the syncretism of ATR and Christianity within the African setting. During the Catholic Bishop Conference in the Philippines in 1986, a suggestion was made to engage in a conversation with adherents of traditional religions. It was during this conference that Archbishop Fernando Capalla, following the example of Pope John Paul II, sought forgiveness from the leaders of traditional religious groups.

The social implication of syncretism on African cultural heritages and values

The amalgamation of ATR with foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam has resulted in significant and irreversible detriments to the social fabric of African societies. For example, the fusion of African indigenous religion with Christianity, primarily introduced by European missionaries, resulted in the Christianisation and Westernisation of African social life. In other words, this has led to the unwanted replacement of various aspects of African culture with European influences, such as clothing, music, proverbs, folklore and diets. Iwe (1979) stated that the process of evangelisation and Christianisation in Africa resulted in the convergence of African and European civilisations. Both cultures had mutually experienced shocks. Nevertheless, the African civilisation has seen more significant drawbacks as a result of this shock. The influx of missionary activity and Westernisation has cast a suppressive influence on certain cultural values of the Africans. Currently, they are engaged in a fierce battle to survive (Iwe 1979:78). The social life of Africans and their accompanying values are highly significant for the advancement of humanity. Many African proverbs, idioms and folklore include valuable educational and informational content. However, some of these cultural expressions are currently at risk of disappearing because of the blending of Christianity and ATR.

The economic implication of syncretism on African cultural heritage and values

Africans embrace the idea of a sizable population and collective or communal endeavours to effectively harness the rich economic resources on the continent. This is one of the

main reasons why polygamy was widely practised before the arrival of Christianity in the continent. Nevertheless, the early Christian missionaries and the church strongly disapproved of polygamy in favour of monogamy, which has had a significant impact on the economic productivity of Africans who rely on subsistence economy for their sustenance. The collective endeavours of numerous African communities were similarly impacted by the process of westernisation, which promoted specialisation and the division of labour. While these beliefs are not necessarily incorrect, they have had a detrimental impact on many aspects of our cultural heritage and values that are equally beneficial to Africans.

The moral implication of syncretism on African cultural heritage and values

African traditional religion has significantly contributed to the well-being of African individuals and society. The indigenous religion of Africa permeates nearly every aspect of African life, particularly in shaping its moral and behavioural values such as notions of justice, reverence for elders, integrity and veracity. Mbiti (1975) noted that being African in a traditional setting entails a genuine religious experience. It is accurate to state that Africans are widely known for their strong religious beliefs and practices. In the context of justice in an authentic African society, the ideal of justice for everyone is intricately intertwined with the religious beliefs of the people. Any act of injustice is met with severe punishment from the Supreme Being. For example, in Nise, a town located in the Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State, there existed a specific location known as Ala Ezi Okwei, where the principle of justice was upheld through the practice of oath taking (iñu-iyi). In this context, experiencing guilt results in the unfavourable consequence of a bloated stomach as a punishment from the deities of the region. As a result, a sense of justice was upheld. However, because of the amalgamation of ATR and Christianity, the traditional society has relinquished this significant element of their religious existence.

Historical implications of syncretism on African cultural heritage and values or loss of proper record of some essential cultural heritage and values

The majority of the legacies pertaining to African cultural history and ideals were lost as a result of insufficient recordkeeping. The missionaries neglected to conduct thorough research on the positive features of our culture, instead hastily concluding that African civilisation is inherently wicked based solely on its immoral and dehumanising elements. As a result, there is a lack of reliable documentation for certain cultural traditions and values, particularly those that are intangible and passed down through socialisation and oral tradition. Iwe (1997) explains that one of the reasons for the cultural clash between Africa and Christianity is the Christian missionaries' failure to fully understand and appreciate the positive aspects of African

culture and religion. According to Iwe (1997), the early Christian missionaries did not make an effort to incorporate African thought, patterns, ethos, ethical concepts and values into their religious teachings. The missionaries were deeply disturbed and appalled by the disturbing and temporary aspects of our culture. They chose to ignore the positive qualities of our cultural institutions. They believed that evangelisation would free us from a state of extreme unpleasantness, and they often depicted Africa in the most horrifying way possible. Therefore, the majority of these cultural assets and values were not recorded in writing format and as a result, they were lost. The fusion of the Christian tradition and the African indigenous religion has resulted in positive impacts on the diverse African traditional heritage and values, particularly in the transformation of certain dehumanising activities of our cultural heritage. A few examples of this transformation are provided next.

The transforming effect of syncretism on some dehumanising aspects of African cultural heritage and values

A prominent feature of African cultural history and values is the Africans' profound reverence for human life. Within Igbo traditional society, this fact can be confirmed by examining the names that individuals carry. For instance, the name Ndubuisi, when taken literally, signifies that life holds greater significance than anything else. Ekeopara (2011) supports the notion that life held immense value in traditional culture, to the extent that any means necessary were employed to protect and maintain it, including the removal of any hindrance that posed a threat to its existence. Life is the paramount priority in human society, and every other consideration can be disregarded if it leads to the acquisition, preservation and protection of life. The statement clarifies that the philosophies of Africans were practical in nature and their perspective clearly centred around human beings (Ekeopara 2011:124).

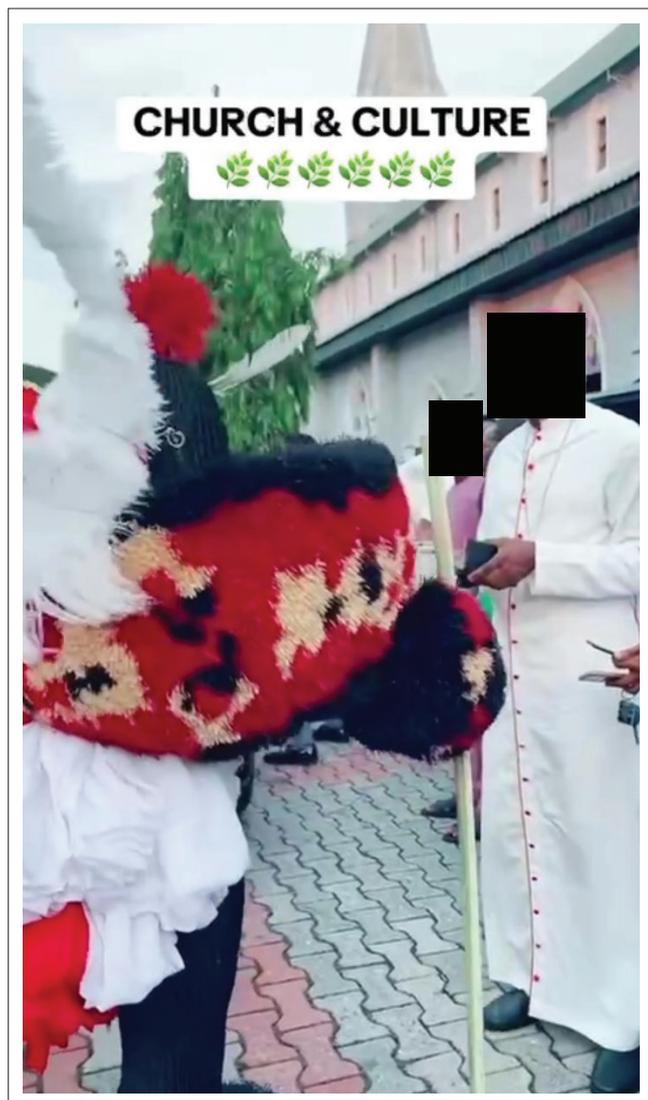
Nevertheless, the traditional African civilisation has a paradoxical perspective on the value of life. While it holds a profound reverence for human life, there are other elements within African indigenous culture that are inherently dehumanising. Examples of such occurrences encompass the homicides of twins and individuals with albinism, interment of esteemed figures such as kings or warriors alongside human beings and the exclusion of individuals afflicted with peculiar maladies. To rephrase, Jaja (2015) asserts that Christianity encountered African culture in a state of decline during its initial development. Several repugnant, horrifying and merciless characteristics of our culture were clearly apparent. The origins of Christianity witnessed our culture grappling with practices such as cannibalism, nudity, infanticide targeting twins, local and tribal conflicts resulting in bloodshed, widespread illiteracy, absence of written records, idol worship, superstitious beliefs, fear, human sacrifice, internal enslavement and witchcraft, among others (Jaja 2015:121).

The intercultural confrontation resulting from the religious syncretism between Christianity and the ATR has significantly contributed to the decline or extinction of certain dehumanising activities. Christian teaching and preaching play a crucial role in denouncing activities such as the death of human beings, abhorrent sacrifices, the caste system (known as *Osu* in the Igbo worldview), slavery and others. Ihenwa (2014), citing Ushe (2011) highlights a dehumanising practice known as the sacrifice of a group of individuals called '*Osu*' [outcasts] to appease the gods and protect the community from their anger. These outcasts face severe discrimination from the freeborn members of the community. The sermonising against this mindset occurred with the entrance of Christianity (Ushe 2011).

Furthermore, the amalgamation of ATR and Christianity contributed to the mitigation of social and gender-based disparities between the female and male sexes in various African societies. Prior to the introduction of Christianity in various regions of the Igbo nation, widows were subjected to intense suffering and agony as part of religious and traditional practices. This included undergoing a prolonged period of mourning while wearing black clothing, forcibly having their hair shaved, and in some cases being compelled to consume the water used to bathe their deceased husbands, particularly if they were accused of causing their husbands' deaths. Currently, the introduction of Christianity has had a beneficial impact on reducing or eliminating this detrimental custom.

Moreover, the amalgamation of Christianity and ATR, known as religious syncretism, had a significant role in enhancing the educational and economic structures of African cultural heritage. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, Africa relied heavily on informal methods of education, such as learning through oral tradition, observation and socialisation. Furthermore, the primitive technique of agriculture was diligently employed, but Christianity brought forth an enhanced approach to education and agriculture with the introduction of more viable and improved seeds, resulting in higher productivity in this domain. Religious syncretism, the blending of Christianity and African indigenous religion, furthered political consciousness in Africa. For example, several prominent leaders in Nigeria emerged from missionary schools. Jaja (2015) argues that Christianity, through education, played a significant role in enlightening the Nigerian society as a whole. Consequently, this has contributed to the decline of superstitious ideas that previously afflicted the culture. For example, the deaths of twin infants and the growth of political consciousness because of the influence of missionary schools led individuals such as Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo to join forces and advocate for liberation from colonial governance (Jaja 2015:92–93).

Religious syncretism between Christianity and African indigenous cult has had both detrimental and beneficial impacts on African cultural heritage and values. While it has adversely affected them, particularly in terms of dehumanising aspects, it has also brought about significant transformations.



Source: (2023) *Ekpe traditional culture and the auxiliary bishop of the Catholic archdiocese of Calabar*, [Photograph] Calabar: Elizabeth Odey and Justus Okafor

PHOTO 1: EKPE traditional culture and the auxiliary bishop of the Catholic archdiocese of Calabar.

Conclusion and recommendations

The amalgamation of ATR with Christianity has discernible impacts on both belief systems. The intersection of Christianity and African indigenous cult represents a process of religious acculturation, in which Christianity has greatly influenced the latter. However, the African indigenous cult is currently facing challenges in preserving its own religious traditions and ideals. Christianity has had a beneficial impact on African cultural history and values, particularly with regard to practices that are indecent and degrading. Conversely, the integration of Christianity into African traditional heritage has led to the disregard and disappearance of significant and valuable aspects of African cultural history. Therefore, during this process of blending religions, it is crucial for Africans to embrace the positive elements of Christianity while also maintaining the fundamental features of their culture and custom. Essentially, the process of Africanisation or indigenisation of Christianity is crucial for the revival and

resurgence of African cultural heritage and values. In other words, Iwe (1997) maintains that combining the essence and fundamental structures of our culture with Christianity will guarantee religious vigour, productivity and steadiness.

There should be further synthesis study of both African religion and Christianity. This will help researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of syncretism between ATR and Christianity on African cultural heritage and values. A study of this nature will provide a lens through which to analyse the complexities of cultural interaction, transformation and continuity within the African context, shedding light on the dynamics of cultural change and preservation in the face of external influences.

Interreligious studies and dialogue is an indispensable strategy in gaining more knowledge about the two religious traditions. Cultural emancipation through enculturation theory is also invaluable. Religious tolerance between the two religions is recommended for the inter-religious peace and cooperation.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Resource Library of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar as well as the State Library, Cross River State, the Ministry of Tourism and Information, Cross River State and the National Population Commission, Calabar, for providing necessary information for the research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

E.A.O., J.O.O. and F.E.F. contributed in the area of conceptualisation, methodology, resources, writing–review and editing, visualisation as well as engaging in validation, formal analysis, project administration and software.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Calabar, and ethics consent was received on 16 January 2023. The ethics approval number is UC/FA/EC/23/002.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Ajayi, A.J., 1965, *Christian missions in Nigeria: 1841–1891*, Longman, London.
- Appadurai, A., 1996, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.
- Awolalu, O.J. & Dopamu, A.P., 1979, *West African traditional religion*, Onibonye, Ibadan.
- Bhabha, H.K., 1994, *The location of culture*, Routledge, Treichler.
- Ekeopara, C.A., 2011, *Ethical order and stability in traditional Igbo Society*, U. C. P., Calabar
- Eze, O.C., Ugbudian, L.I., Adihikon, T.A., Nnabuchi, S.O.S., Eke, J.U. & Okolo, C.J., 2024, 'Rethinking contending themes in indigenous and Christian religions in contemporary Africa', *Acta Theologica* 44(1), 85–106. <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v44i1.7133>
- Garcia, C.N., 1995, *Hybrid culture: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.
- Gyekve, K., 1996, *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics*, Bismark Books, Ibadan.
- Hall, S., 1992, 'Identity: Community, culture, difference', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Cultural identity and diaspora*, pp. 222–237, Lawrence and Wishart, London.
- Hall, S., 1996, 'Introduction: Who needs identity?', in S. Hall & P. Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of cultural identity*, pp. 222–237, Sage, London.
- Hopfe, L.M. & Woodward, M.R., 1991, *Religions of the world*, Pearson and Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Ihenwa, C.N., 2014, 'Influences of Christian religion on African traditional religion and value system', *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4(9), 148–155.
- Iwe, N.S., 1979, *Christianity, culture and colonialism in Africa*, R. S. N. C., Port Harcourt.
- Iwe, N.S.S., 1997, *Socio-ethical issues in Nigeria*, Pacific publishers, Oboosi.
- Jaja, A.M., 2015, *Religion and socio-cultural change in Africa*, Alheri Books, Iwofe.
- Kasomo, D., 2012, 'An assessment of religious syncretism: A case study of Africa', *International Journal of Applied Sociology* 2(1), 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.5923/j.ijpbs.20120201.03>
- Kraidy, M.M., 2005, *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*, Temple University press, Philadelphia.
- Kraidy, M.M., 2005, *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Kwame, B., 1995, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Orbis Books, New York.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1975, *Introduction to African religion*, Heinemann Educational Books, London.
- Mokotso, R.I., 2015, 'Syncretism of Basotho traditional religion and Christianity: Gateway to the syncretistic teaching of Basotho traditional religion and Christianity in Lesotho Schools', *African Journal of History and Culture* 7(7), 157–163. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJHC2015.0260>
- Oleska & Schineller, 2011, 'Western and traditional heabal medicine in religion', *Journal of Nigera Association for the Study of Religions* 15(4), 144–160.
- Omoregbe, J.I., 1993, *A philosophical look at religion*, Joja, Ikeja.
- Pratt, M.L., 1992, *Arts of the contact zone*, pp. 33–40, Modern Language Association, Nigeria.
- Rutherford, J., 1990, 'Cultural studies in Britain', in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson & P. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural studies*, pp. 183–199, Routledge, Treichler.
- Social Sciences Unit, School of General Studies. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Research on Humanities and Social Sciences. ISSN (Paper 2224-5766); ISSN (Online 2225-0484) (Online) 4, 9.*
- Ugwu, M., 1988, 'Religion and African culture' in E.E. Uzukwu (ed.), *Inculturation-- a Nigerian perspective*, SNAAP Press, Enugu.
- Ushe, M.U., 2011, 'Implications of ritual symbolism in sustenance of culture and meaning in Nigeria: A case study of Tiv in North Central Nigeria', *Journal of Communication and Culture (JCC)*, 2(3), 30–40.