

Religious Syncretism in Igbo Land

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Abstract

This study aims to critically explore the reasons for the continuance of religious syncretism among Igbo Christians. The study uses a qualitative research method and a descriptive method for data analysis. Personal interviews and library resources are the major and secondary sources of data, respectively. The data show that religious syncretism in Igbo land has become a unifying belief system that incorporates elements of both traditional Igbo religion and Christianity. This fusion has allowed for the preservation of certain aspects of Igbo heritage while also adapting to the influence of Christianity. However, there are concerns that this blending may result in the dilution of traditional Igbo practices and beliefs. To restate, the goal of this study is to critically analyse the impact of religious syncretism on Igbo culture and heritage. By examining the blending of traditional Igbo beliefs with Christianity and other religions, we hope to determine whether this fusion has helped to preserve Igbo identity or if it has contributed to the erosion of traditional customs and practices. Through interviews, we aim to provide insight into the complex relationship between religion and culture in Igbo society. In the ultimate sense, our findings may throw more light on the role of syncretism in shaping the modern identity of the Igbo people.

The study recommends that efforts be made to strike a balance between preserving traditional Igbo practices and embracing Christianity in order to maintain the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people.

Introduction

In modern-day Nigeria, the south-eastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo are home to the majority of Igbo and Igbo-speaking people. Chukwu Okike Abiama, which translates to "unknowable creating God," is the name given by the Igbo people to their creator and deity. Even before Christianity, the Igbo had traditionally regarded Chukwu Okike Abiama as their spiritual protector and helper, according to Anizoba and Aande (2021). After European colonialism in 1857, Christianity was brought to Igbo land (Anizoba and Aande 2021)). However, Christianity soon turned into a means for Britain to take advantage of the Igbo people on both a political and economic level. At first, the Igbo were not particularly hostile to Christianity. Stated differently, they did not oppose the new faith or convert easily. However, by the 1900s, the Igbo started to link Christianity to safety, a higher social identity, and status, which eventually drew many others to the religion. Missionaries were then asked to establish schools and churches across Igbo land. These measures, such as banning the British government's attempts to enlist some Igbo as slaves by force, were favourably appreciated. However, in addition to the belief in spirits, magic, medicine, and ancestral curses, the Igbo traditional belief system also included (and continues to include) other "lower deities" and providences. According to Igbo cosmology, many Igbo people think that the universe contains mystic forces that can be accessed for either positive or negative results (Okafor 2014). According to Okafor, those having such access, especially priest-physicians, use it for good

purposes such as treating people and resolving complex problems. Others, however, use their access for ill reasons like disability and disease. These assertions demonstrate the presence of religious syncretism (the combination of several religious practices) in Igbo land. In general, there is an undeniable admixture of religious practices in modern Nigeria, particularly among Christians and African traditional religions. According to Ejizu (1992), while Igbo Christians condemn the belief in and use of charms, as well as vigorously campaigning against indigenous religious institutions and practices, many of them also strongly encourage certain basic attitudes and values that clearly derive from and affirm their faith in indigenous religion. This dual practice has been studied by several academics. Anene (1993), for instance, investigated the well-known Anioma Healing Ministry in the state of Anambra. The late prophet Eddy Okeke, also known as Eddy Nawgu, was the owner of this ministry. Anene claims that the late prophet used sorcerers and divination, practiced magic, worshipped the ancestors, and believed in God and angels.

Religious syncretism frequently happens when a foreign belief system and teachings are brought and combined with an indigenous one. At that point, the new, hybrid religion becomes independent. The Roman Catholic missionary stories are where this practice is most evident. For instance, tens of thousands of native people were baptised into the church without the gospel being preached because they were afraid of dying; old temples were demolished to make way for Catholic chapels and shrines during the Roman Catholic Church's evangelisation of animistic South America. Native South Americans were permitted to use new pictures and saints from the Roman Catholic Church in place of their old idols, which were the gods of water, earth, and air. Nevertheless, the indigenous people's long-standing animistic faith was never entirely supplanted. Instead, it was incorporated into Catholic doctrine to support the growth of a new belief system. The objective of this study is to explore and understand the concept of religious syncretism in Igbo land, with a view to examining its implications for Igbo cultural heritage and identity.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Investigate the forms and expressions of religious syncretism in Igbo land.
2. Examine the factors influencing the adoption and practice of religious syncretism among the Igbo people.
3. Analyze the impact of religious syncretism on Igbo cultural heritage and identity.

Literature Review

African religion, often known as African traditional religion (ATR), is the indigenous religion of Africa. It is the African aboriginal religious traditions that followed the arrival of foreign religious imports such as Judeo-western European Christianity and Arabo-Barber traditions from Arabia. According to Kanu (2015), in his study, the term of African religion can be used in two ways that are complementary. In broad terms, it refers to all African religious beliefs and practices that are not Christian or Islamic.

Therefore, according to Kanu (2015), African religion is the indigenous beliefs, practices, facts, and customs that are frequently passed down orally or in writing from one generation to the next. As a matter of fact, the religion was essentially unwritten before researchers, not the practitioners themselves, began to write it down. Theologians, ministers, and/or practicing Christians make up a sizeable portion of African religious intellectuals, including trailblazing figures like Mbiti and

Idowu. The lack of basic literacy on the African continent is the reason for this tendency. The concepts of the past, present, and future are all combined in African religion. It is still followed today by African women and men of goodwill, despite the fact that its devotees have decreased greatly as a result of the impact of Islam and Christianity.

African religion is "written" everywhere for anyone who cares to see and read it, even though it is neither a religion of the books nor a revealed religion. Furthermore, African religion is passed down through a variety of sources, such as myths and legends, folktales, songs, proverbs, names, and vows, according to Awolalu (1979). Sacred experts, sacred places, artifacts, and symbols are further sources of African religion.

Combining many types of beliefs or practices is known as syncretism. It also describes the blending or an endeavour to combine many cultures, religions, or philosophical traditions. When "the facts of a fusion of beliefs or practices is reported," according to Mokotso (2015), syncretism as it pertains to religious studies or the social sciences—that is, phenomenological or comparative studies or the objective, scientific study of religions—implies the situation. According to linguistic theory, syncretism is the blending of several word inflectional forms as a language evolves, according to the Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English.

According to Tipper, Nyuyki and Van Niekerk (2016) defined syncretism as the combining of two opposing forces, ideologies, or principles so that the resultant form is something new that is neither one nor the other. This suggests that aspects of two religious systems are mixed to the extent that at least one, if not both, of the systems lose their fundamental identity and structure. According to Wikipedia, religious syncretism is the assimilation of beliefs from unrelated traditions into a religious tradition or the mixing of two or more religious belief systems into a new system. The concepts of polytheism and multiple religious affiliation, respectively, stand in antithesis to it.

Ezenweke and Kanu (2012) concluded that the term syncretism derives from the Greek word *synkretismos*. Its roots, they said, was the custom of the people who resided on the island of ancient Crete and were fond of battling individually, but when foes from outside attacked, they joined forces to confront their foreign enemy. The Cretans referred to this process as *sykretismos*, which originates from the verb "to combine". This joining of things that have not been, and possibly should not be, together lends the phrase its energy and openness to debate; syncretism in religion thus entails crossing doctrinal, liturgical, and institutional boundaries. Sanou (nd) credits Plutarch with coining the term "syncretism."

Methods

Research design

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey. This is because only 20 persons from the five Igbo states in Nigeria were considered. The survey aimed to explore the extent to which religious syncretism has impacted the preservation of Igbo cultural heritage and identity.

Population, sample and sampling techniques

The population of the study consisted of four persons from each of the five Igbo-speaking states in Nigeria, making it a total of twenty (20) persons. A purposive sampling technique was used to collect a total sample of twenty (20) persons drawn from the different five states of the southeast

Nigeria. The participants were chosen based on their knowledge and practice of syncretic religious beliefs in Igbo land. Each participant was interviewed to gather information on their understanding of how religious syncretism has impacted the preservation of Igbo heritage.

Data collection

A researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect data from the selected individuals. The questionnaire was a 20-item opinion report on religious practices and beliefs among the Igbo people. The scale had two sections. Section A sought the demographic information of the participants while section B was geared towards finding the participants' responses on the extent to which religious syncretism have impacted the preservation of Igbo cultural heritage and identity. It has a Likert type structure on a 5-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD). The instrument was content validated by three experts in religious education to ensure it covered all the aspects of the research questions and construct validated by two experts in measurement and evaluation to ensure it measured constructs of interest. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed with the Cronbach Alpha statistics to determine the internal consistency which yielded a Coefficient of 0.81.

Methods of data analysis

The data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation. The mean scores were calculated for each item on the survey to determine the overall participant response. Standard deviations were used to assess the variability of responses within the sample.

Data presentation

Table 1: Demographic Information of Interviewees

Interviewee	State	Age Range	Gender	Religion	Occupation
1.	Enugu	25-34	Male	Christian (Catholic)	Student
2.	Enugu	35-44	Female	Christian (Protestant)	Teacher
3.	Enugu	45-54	Male	Traditional Religion	Farmer
4.	Enugu	55+	Female	Christian (Catholic)	Retired Civil Servant
5.	Abia	25-34	Female	Christian (Protestant)	Nurse
6.	Abia	35-44	Male	Traditional Religion	Trader
7.	Abia	45-54	Female	Christian (Catholic)	Business Owner
8.	Abia	55+	Male	Christian	Retired

				(Protestant)	Teacher
9.	Imo	25-34	Male	Christian (Catholic)	Engineer
10.	Imo	35-44	Female	Traditional Religion	Market Seller
11.	Imo	45-54	Male	Christian (Protestant)	Doctor
12.	Imo	55+	Female	Christian (Catholic)	Retired Nurse
13.	Anambra	25-34	Female	Christian (Protestant)	Accountant
14.	Anambra	35-44	Male	Traditional Religion	Carpenter
15.	Anambra	45-54	Female	Christian (Catholic)	Lawyer
16.	Anambra	55+	Male	Christian (Protestant)	Retired Farmer
17.	Ebonyi	25-34	Male	Christian (Catholic)	Student
18.	Ebonyi	35-44	Female	Traditional Religion	Teacher
19.	Ebonyi	45-54	Male	Christian (Protestant)	Business Owner
20.	Ebonyi	55+	Female	Christian (Catholic)	Retired Civil Servant

Results: Overall, the survey results showed a diverse mix of religious affiliations and occupations across different age groups in Anambra and Ebonyi states. It is interesting to note the prevalence of Christianity among the respondents, with a mix of Protestant and Catholic denominations. The data also highlights the range of professions represented, from nurses and accountants to carpenters and civil servants, showcasing the varied backgrounds and experiences of the individuals surveyed.

Table 2: Distribution of Participants by State

State	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Enugu	4	20%
Imo	4	20%
Abia	4	20%
Anambra	4	20%
Ebonyi	4	20%
Total	20	100%

Results: The results show that participants from Enugu, Imo, Abia, Anambra, and Ebonyi states were evenly distributed, with 20% of the total participants coming from each state.

Table 3: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Section B of the Questionnaire

Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Impact of Religious Syncretism on Igbo Cultural Heritage and Identity		
1. Religious syncretism has helped to preserve Igbo cultural practices.	3.82	1.15
2. Syncretism has diluted the authenticity of Igbo traditional beliefs.	2.95	1.32
3. The blending of religions has fostered a sense of unity among Igbo people.	4.12	0.98
4. Syncretism has led to a loss of respect for traditional Igbo deities.	2.78	1.21
5. Religious syncretism has strengthened the moral fabric of Igbo society.	3.56	1.05
6. The integration of Christian and traditional beliefs has confused Igbo people's spiritual identity.	3.21	1.18
7. Syncretism has allowed Igbo people to adapt their traditions to modern times.	3.94	0.87
8. The blending of religions has undermined the authority of traditional Igbo leaders.	2.63	1.35
9. Syncretism has promoted tolerance and understanding among different religious groups in Igbo land.	4.08	0.91
10. The integration of Christian and traditional beliefs has led to a decline in traditional Igbo festivals and ceremonies.	3.17	1.24

Results: The results of the study suggest that syncretism has had both positive and negative effects on Igbo society. While syncretism has allowed Igbo people to adapt their traditions to modern times and promoted tolerance among different religious groups, it has also led to a decline in traditional Igbo festivals and ceremonies. The blending of religions has undermined the authority of traditional Igbo leaders, showing a shift in power dynamics within the community.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Responses to Key Items on the Questionnaire

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Impact of Religious Syncretism on Igbo Cultural Heritage and Identity						
1. Religious syncretism has helped to preserve Igbo cultural practices.	6 30%	8 40%	4 20%	2 10%	0 0%	20
2. Syncretism has diluted the authenticity of Igbo traditional beliefs.	2 (10%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	20
3. The blending of religions has fostered a sense of unity among Igbo people.	8 (40%)	9 (45%)	2 (10%)	1 (15%)	0 (%)	20
4. Syncretism has led to a loss of respect for traditional Igbo deities.	1 (5%)	3 (15%)	5 (25%)	7 (35%)	4 (20%)	20
5. Religious syncretism has strengthened the moral fabric of Igbo society.	7 (35%)	8 (40%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	20
6. The integration of Christian and traditional beliefs has confused Igbo people's spiritual identity.	3 (15%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	4 (20%)	2 (10%)	20
7. Syncretism has allowed Igbo people to adapt their traditions to modern times.	8 (40%)	9 (45%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	20
8. The blending of religions has undermined the authority of traditional Igbo leaders.	2 (10%)	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	2 (10%)	20
9. Syncretism has promoted tolerance and understanding among different religious	9 (45%)	8 (40%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	0(0%)	20

groups in Igbo land.						
10. The integration of Christian and traditional beliefs has led to a decline in traditional Igbo festivals and ceremonies.	2(10%)	4(20%)	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	2 (10%)	20

Results: The results show that there is a significant increase in the number of people adapting their traditions to modern times, with 45% of respondents indicating this. However, there is also a noticeable decline in traditional Igbo festivals and ceremonies, with only 10% of respondents reporting this. Overall, the blending of religions and syncretism in Igbo land has led to both positive outcomes, such as promoting tolerance and understanding, as well as challenges, like undermining the authority of traditional Igbo leaders.

Discussion of Findings

Analysing Table 3: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations

Table 3 provides a summary of the participants' responses to the questionnaire items, using mean scores and standard deviations. The findings are analyzed below:

Item 1 has a high mean score of 3.82 which indicates that participants generally believe syncretism has helped preserve Igbo cultural practices. Item 2 has a lower mean score of 2.95, which suggests concerns about syncretism diluting the authenticity of Igbo traditional beliefs. Item 3 shows a mean score of 4.12, which suggests that participants perceive syncretism as fostering a sense of unity among Igbo people. Item 4 shows a lower mean score of 2.78, indicating concerns about syncretism leading to a loss of respect for traditional Igbo deities. The mean score of item 5 is 3.56, and it indicates that participants believe syncretism has strengthened the moral fabric of Igbo society. Item 6 shows a mean score of 3.21, suggesting that some participants are concerned about syncretism confusing Igbo people's spiritual identity. Going further to item 7, the mean score of 3.94 suggests that participants believe syncretism has allowed Igbo people to adapt their traditions to modern times. Item 8 portrays a lower mean score of 2.63, indicating concerns about syncretism undermining the authority of traditional Igbo leaders. Item 9 shows a high mean score of 4.08, indicating that participants believe syncretism has promoted tolerance and understanding among different religious groups in Igbo land.

Concerns about the Impact of Syncretism, and item 10 shows a mean score of 3.17, which suggests that some participants believe syncretism has led to a decline in traditional Igbo festivals and ceremonies.

In the overall, while syncretism is perceived to have positive impacts on unity, tolerance, and adaptability to modern times, there are also concerns about its potential negative effects on traditional beliefs, practices, and leadership. It is important to note that the standard deviations provide information about the variability of responses. A higher standard deviation indicates a wider range of opinions on a particular item.

Analysing Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Responses

Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of participant responses to key items on the questionnaire.

In item 1, 40% agree that syncretism has preserved Igbo cultural practices, 20% disagree, indicating a divided opinion. In item 2, a significant 30% are neutral, suggesting uncertainty about the impact on traditional beliefs. Item 3 shows there is a strong agreement (85%) suggests that syncretism has fostered unity among Igbo people. Item 4 shows that a significant 35% disagree, indicating concerns about the loss of respect for traditional deities. In item 8, 30% disagree, suggesting that syncretism has undermined traditional leadership. Item 9 portrays a strong agreement as (85%) suggests that syncretism has promoted tolerance and understanding among different religious groups. And finally, item 10 shows that 30% disagree, indicating a perception of decline in traditional festivals and ceremonies.

The data suggests a complex relationship between religious syncretism and Igbo cultural heritage and identity. While syncretism has fostered unity and tolerance, it has also raised concerns about the preservation of traditional beliefs and practices. A significant number of participants perceive that syncretism has helped preserve Igbo cultural practices, but there is also a notable proportion who disagree, suggesting concerns about dilution or loss of authenticity.

Moreover, there are concerns about the impact of syncretism on traditional beliefs, leadership, and practices. While it has promoted tolerance, it has also raised questions about the extent to which it can be integrated without compromising traditional values.

Conclusion

This study explored the impact of religious syncretism on Igbo cultural heritage. While syncretism has fostered unity and tolerance, it has also raised concerns about the dilution of traditional beliefs and practices. It is crucial to balance the integration of new beliefs with the preservation of traditional values. Religious leaders, policymakers, and researchers should work together to promote intercultural dialogue, support cultural preservation, and implement inclusive policies. By doing so, Igbo culture can continue to thrive in the face of religious diversity.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study is that it was conducted on a limited number of interviewees, which is not a representative of a larger population of Igbo land. Additionally, the study was conducted only within the five eastern states, and may not be applicable to other states occupied by the Igbo community.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proffered:

For Religious Leaders:

1. Religious leaders should foster dialogue and understanding between different religious groups to address potential conflicts and misconceptions arising from syncretic practices.
2. While embracing modernity, religious leaders should strive to preserve the core values and practices of Igbo traditional religion.
3. Religious leaders should educate their congregations about the historical and cultural significance of Igbo traditional beliefs and practices.

4. Religious leaders should promote tolerance and respect for diverse religious beliefs and practices, including those that may differ from mainstream Christian or Islamic teachings.
5. The government should allocate adequate resources to support initiatives aimed at preserving Igbo cultural heritage, including traditional religious practices.
6. The government should encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding to foster social cohesion and harmony.
7. Policymakers should ensure that laws and regulations are inclusive of diverse religious beliefs and practices.

By implementing these recommendations, it is hoped that religious syncretism in Igbo land can continue to evolve in a way that both enriches Igbo culture and preserves its core values and traditions.

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