

## NAVIGATING FAITH AND CULTURE IN SOUTH WEST NIGERIA: AN AFRICAN IDENTITY IN AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD

By

Dairo Faith Oluwapamilerin

The Redeemed Christian Bible College,

(An Affiliate of the University of Ibadan and Redeemer's University, Nigeria)

[dairofaith5@gmail.com](mailto:dairofaith5@gmail.com); 07066409703

&

Oyenola Babatunde Ishola

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy,

Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State.

[oyenola16001@run.edu.ng](mailto:oyenola16001@run.edu.ng); 08082681304

### Abstract

The cultural identity of South West Nigeria has undergone considerable transformation due to the introduction of Christianity and Islam. Although there are many studies on religious plurality and postcolonial cultural changes in Nigeria (Peel, 2000; Ojo, 2006), few have critically examined how indigenous African identity is maintained, transformed, or navigated in a globalised and faith-diverse educational setting. To bridge that gap, this study navigates how faith and culture in South West Nigeria's cultural and educational environments dynamically interact. In a region significantly affected by globalisation and religious hybridity, the aim was to explore how African identity is managed through both formal and informal education. Employing qualitative techniques including document analysis, ethnographic narratives, and interpretive historical analysis, the study centres on Yoruba communities in Lagos, Osun, and Oyo States. African cultural hermeneutics and postcolonial philosophy serve as guiding principles for the research. The findings reveal that education, both colonial and modern, has been a double-edged sword, serving as a platform for cultural resilience while also being a site of cultural degradation. The paper concludes that African identity in a globalised environment can be preserved by integrating religious literacy and indigenous knowledge systems into formal education.

**Keywords:** African identity, Indigenous Traditions, Christianity, South West Nigeria

### Introduction

The Yoruba ethnic group is found in South West Nigeria, which is well-known for its rich oral literature, deeply-ingrained indigenous religious traditions, and organised communal life. Before the introduction of other faiths, Yoruba cosmology was centred on ancestral devotion, deities (Òrìṣà), and an integrated moral code that was taught through festivals, rites, and unofficial schooling (Idowu, 1962:15). This cultural matrix experienced significant transformation through encounters with Islam and Christianity. Islam permeated the region from as early as the 14th century via trans-Saharan trade and scholarly networks, particularly influencing northern Yoruba settlements (Clarke, 1982:68). Christianity arrived more

forcefully in the 19th century through coastal trade, missionary expeditions, and the return of liberated Yoruba converts (Ajayi, 1965:121-125). These Abrahamic religions introduced new theological worldviews and institutional frameworks, most notably through missionary and Qur'anic schooling, which became central loci for selectively integrating, negotiating, and modifying cultural traditions.

Existing scholarship has extensively chronicled the growth of Islam and Christianity and their interplay with indigenous Yoruba spirituality. Foundational analyses by Peel (2000) on religious encounter and Ojo (2006) on Pentecostalism provide critical insights into syncretism and socio-political change. However, recent studies indicate a shift towards examining the ongoing negotiation of identity within contemporary, globalised contexts. Recent studies point to such phenomena as religious hybridity (e.g. Chrislam), the digitalisation of language, and the arguments about the inclusive curriculum (Adediran, 2024; Nolte et al., 2024; Yussuf and Olubomuhin, 2024). Nevertheless, a critical lacuna exists: few studies explicitly examine how African identity is actively navigated—preserved, altered, or redefined—at the interface of faith and culture within educational settings, despite education's role as a site for cultural resilience.

To address this gap, this paper investigated the interaction of the traditional Yoruba culture and Christian and Islamic beliefs in forming the African identity in a changing socio-educational context in South West Nigeria. Its major focus was to explore how faith and culture can be navigated in ways that evaluates the role played by formal and informal educational institutions in the processes of negotiating, maintaining, or redefining the indigenous identity. In an era of globalised education and increasingly dogmatic expressions of imported faiths, it is crucial to examine whether these systems can coexist without undermining local traditions. This paper concentrates on Oyo, Osun and Lagos States. Lagos is a focus on urban pluralism of religions and global vortex; Oyo, a reflection on the mission education heritage; and Osun a geographical centre of Yoruba tradition with the Osun-Osogbo festival annually and the Ifá corpus, has a way of shedding light on cultural resilience (Adeboye, 2012:34; Dopamu, 2003, p. 58). This combination facilitates analysis of the city-country continuum and modern negotiations of the cultures and religions in a balanced manner.

The significance of the study is three-dimensional. To begin with, it promotes cultural sustainability discourse with respect to exploring how learning faith and culture may be reconceptualised in order to integrate indigenous knowledge systems. Secondly, it provides practical suggestions to curriculum developers and policy makers on how to promote intercultural and interreligious literacy. Lastly, it discusses more general issues of African self-definition in the twenty-first century, such as whether African identity can be maintained or needs to be reimagined because of contemporary international pressures.

This study employs qualitative research methods, including document analysis, interpretive historical analysis, and engagement with ethnographic accounts. It is based on various sources, such as the mission school archives, the Yoruba oral culture, the policy documents of contemporary education and current anthropological studies. The discussion is put in the twin perspectives of Postcolonial Theory, which throws light on the hybridity and epistemic legacy (Bhabha, 1994) and African Cultural Hermeneutics, which focuses on the African worldviews as being the best interpreters (Oduyoye, 2001). This theoretical combination enables a contextualised analysis of identity navigation within and outside the classroom in South West Nigeria subtly.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In South West Nigeria, a solid theoretical grounding is necessary to comprehend the intricate interactions between traditional customs, world faiths, and contemporary education. The two interconnected frameworks of African Cultural Hermeneutics and Postcolonial Theory serve as the foundation for this investigation. These theories offer interpretive frameworks for examining how African identities are challenged, reconstructed, and passed down within educational and socio-religious institutions that are influenced by regional customs and outside forces.

The development of postcolonial theory in reaction to colonialism's cultural and epistemic legacies is essential to comprehending how religious imperialism, colonial government, and missionary education continue to influence African identity. Particularly pertinent to this study are the concepts of hybridity and ambivalence proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994) and Edward Said (1978) regarding Orientalism. Instead of passively absorbing colonial culture, Bhabha contends that colonised societies' "mimicry" and "negotiation" result in hybrid identities that defy complete absorption (Bhabha, 1994:86-88). An examination of how Yoruba communities have created syncretic forms of religious and cultural expression without completely renouncing their indigenous cosmologies is made possible by this approach, especially in the light of their interactions with Christianity and Islam.

Moreover, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) critiques colonial education for displacing African epistemologies and languages in favour of Eurocentric worldviews. His call for the decolonisation of the mind resonates with the current study's aim to uncover how educational institutions in South West Nigeria have either perpetuated or resisted this cultural displacement. In applying postcolonial theory, this paper investigates whether formal education, especially through faith-based schools, has functioned as a site of cultural erasure or a channel of resilience for Yoruba identity.

African Cultural Hermeneutics, a paradigm that emphasises African worldviews, symbols, and experiences as legitimate and authoritative sources for interpreting social and religious phenomena, is useful to postcolonial research. By emphasising African cultural backgrounds, this method, which was pioneered by academics like Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Kwame Bediako, opposes Eurocentric theological and educational perspectives. According to Oduyoye (2001:18), faith must be interpreted in light of African communities' lived experiences, particularly when it comes to gender, culture, and social justice. African cultural hermeneutics enables a contextual understanding of Yoruba traditions in the context of this study, not as "primitive residues," but rather as dynamic components in the creation of contemporary African identity.

This approach is particularly beneficial for exploring how cultural values such as respect for elders, communalism, *omolúàbí* (the Yoruba moral and ethical ideal), and spiritual interdependence are maintained or challenged in places of worship and education. The reclamation of African voices within a globalised knowledge economy is furthered by this hermeneutic approach, which integrates oral history, symbolic traditions, and indigenous pedagogies into the interpretative process. To critically evaluate how religion and education, as the two main pillars of cultural transmission, interact to shape identity among Yoruba communities in Lagos, Oyo, and Osun States, this study draws on Postcolonial Theory and African Cultural Hermeneutics. In addition to presenting justifications, these theories provide a way to restore African identity in a globalised, frequently homogenising system.

## Historical Overview of Faith and Culture in South West Nigeria

The Yoruba people of South West Nigeria had a well-organised social structure before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. This structure was characterised by political centralisation, religious diversity, and complex moral and cultural education systems. Powerful city-states like Oyo, Ife, and Ijebu, ruled by revered kings (Obas), who served as both political leaders and spiritual mediators, were at the pinnacle of the political order (Atanda, 1973:15). Elders, diviners, and priests (Babalawos) wielded important cultural and religious authority in these polities, which were founded on social stratification, communal values, and lineage-based governance.

The Yoruba had a very cosmic worldview. A pantheon of *Òrìṣà*, or divinities that mediated human affairs, was ruled by the supreme deity *Olódùmarè* (Idowu, 1962:25-29). Festivals, proverbs, rituals, *Ifá* divination, and oral traditions were all used to spread religious knowledge. Even though it was informal, education was methodical and based on the idea of *omolúàbí*, which meant respect, discipline, moral behaviour, and shared responsibility (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980:53). Besides being spiritual, identity was also linguistic, territorial, and based on mythical and historical memory.

Through trans-Saharan trade and interactions with northern merchants and clerics, especially in towns like Ilorin and Iwo, Islam gained ground in Yoruba territory in the fourteenth century (Clarke, 1982:68). Islam's early popularity was based on its ability to coexist with native institutions due to its flexible structure, economic networks, and Arabic literacy. Islam had significantly impacted administration and education by the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in areas of Yoruba land that were softly ruled by the Sokoto Caliphate (Loimeier, 2012:34-35). In the 19th century, European missionary organisations, notably the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, followed later by the Baptist Convention alongside the repatriation of Yoruba Christian converts from Sierra Leone, contributed to the more forceful arrival and institutionalisation of Christianity (Ajayi, 1965:121-125). Western education, Yoruba Bible translation, and a literary elite were brought by Christian missions. Because students were frequently dissuaded from following indigenous faiths and taught Euro-Christian ideas as superior, mission schools became places of cultural transformation (Sanneh, 1989:213). The emergence of the two faiths signalled the start of ideological struggles over authority, morality, and identity. The advent of the Bible and Qur'an undermined native epistemologies while also changing ideas about justice, history, and the sacred.

As Islam and Christianity expanded, native customs underwent substantial modifications. Once considered sacred communal ceremonies, traditional festivals were redefined by converts as demonic or pagan (Peel, 2000:149-151). Yoruba society was based on divination, ancestral ceremonies, and spiritual possession; these practices were either outlawed or vilified in mission and Islamic institutions. These religious groups did not, however, succeed in eradicating the entire culture. Rather, a selective appropriation process took place. For instance, many Yoruba Muslims still use both Arabic and Yoruba names for their children, and they still participate in customary rituals like the naming ceremony, *Isomoloruko*. Similarly, although using a new theological vocabulary, Christian converts continued to believe in witchcraft and spiritual warfare (Ojo, 2010:20). A syncretic negotiation between the foreign and the indigenous was reflected in the use of Yoruba drumming, proverbs, and clothing in Christian weddings, funerals, and prayer services.

Responses to the interaction between Abrahamic and indigenous religions in South West Nigeria ranged from outright rejection to compromise and hybridisation. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity is apt, as he argues that Yoruba Christians and Muslims

did not merely relinquish their previous identities but engaged in “in-between” activities that made it challenging to distinguish between their respective attitudes. Predominantly during the early missionary attempts to repress indigenous religions, tension remained high. However, to gain local acceptance, both Islam and Christianity eventually incorporated native symbols and customs (Adogame, 2010:78). While many Islamic customs in Yorubaland include drumming, praise singing, and other pre-Islamic traditions, Pentecostal Christianity, in particular, has integrated Yoruba cosmologies of spirits and battle (Kane, 2003:92). In South West Nigeria, individuals may partake in both Islamic and Christian worship while privately seeking guidance from Ifá or traditional healers. This cannot be regarded as a straightforward religious conversion; rather, it reflects a reality of layered religious identities and liturgical plurality. This demonstrates a lived religiosity that is difficult to categorise.

Due to urbanisation, population migration, and the growth of religious groups, South West Nigeria has experienced an increase in religious pluralism since Nigeria gained its independence. For example, mosques, churches, and shrines coexist in the same neighbourhoods in Lagos, one of Africa's most religiously diverse cities (Gaiya, 2004:46). Mainly in Yoruba communities, which are renowned for their religious tolerance and intermarriage, interreligious relations have generally been harmonious (Adeboye, 2012:33). Tensions do, however, occasionally arise, especially when political or educational policy collides with theological rigidity, as seen in discussions about the hijab in schools founded by Christians or the inclusion of religious content in curricula. It is interesting to note that many religious leaders today, regardless of their traditions, use Yoruba cultural representations to justify the authority they possess. Globalisation, digital media, and diaspora interactions have also contributed to the blurring of religious lines by introducing fresh interpretations and escalating identity conflicts. As a result, Yoruba society today exhibits a complex interaction between continuity and change, with Christian, Islamic, and indigenous identities interacting, clashing, and coexisting.

### **The Role of Education in Cultural and Religious Identity Formation**

The contentious field of education in South West Nigeria is where religious affiliation, indigenous heritage, and international educational paradigms meet, sometimes in harmony, other times in conflict. Current research shows how educational methods influence the formation of identities, particularly concerning religious knowledge, cultural content, and the usage of the Yoruba language. Substantial evidence demonstrates that mother-tongue instruction is essential for cultural transmission. According to Ogunniran et al. (2024:20-22), the shortage of qualified teachers and instructional resources has weakened the use of Yoruba as the language of instruction in early primary courses, even despite legislative directives. Yoruba education is strongly supported by parents, educators, and students who believe it fosters cultural pride and cognitive knowledge (Ezeokoli, 2023:45).

Bilingual Yoruba-English programmes improve literacy and fortify cultural identity, according to complementary data from the EYPAP initiative (Yussuf & Olúbòmèhìn, 2024). Bilingualism promotes academic success and cultural rootedness, according to Cummins (2021). However, policy-practice gaps persist. Despite the 2022 National Language Policy approving exclusive mother-tongue instruction in primary schools, classroom realities remain unchanged in largely English-dominant environments (The Nation, 2023). Challenges include inadequate teacher preparation, limited materials, and Nigeria's multilingual classroom demographics (Ifelunni et al., 2024; The Nation, 2023, para. 5).

Language proficiency and cultural values were found to be strengthened by resource-mediated education in Yoruba literature, including poetry, folktales, and proverbs. To promote understanding and ethical orientation, for instance, Deji-Afuye and Obadare (2021)

discovered that Ekiti State primary school instructors strategically use code-switching and Yoruba cultural content. Likewise, it has been demonstrated that integrating literature into social studies curricula strengthens communal ideals like *omolúàbí* (Adebayo & Adeniyi, 2022), even if teachers still need professional training.

The majority of current research on religious education concentrates on religious education in the Christian and Muslim faiths. To combat historical bias and foster cultural awareness, proponents of traditional religion in Oyo State have recently urged for the inclusion of TRK in school curricula (Oke, 2022:10). Similar instances, like *Chrislam*, show how Yoruba tolerance gave rise to syncretism, with spiritual education establishing itself in communities and schools (Adediran, 2024). These changes imply that indigenous spiritual traditions are becoming more widely acknowledged in the debate around schooling.

Globalisation presents opportunities as well as risks. Although access is expanding, Western cultural dominance in digital media, movies, and music frequently marginalises indigenous African values (Akinlade et al., 2021). But opposing forces have surfaced: NGOs like “Think Yoruba First” use internet platforms to engage diaspora youth, and the Yoruba Academy, which was established in 2007, is currently leading language standardisation and hosting webinars and immersion programmes (Yoruba Academy, 2023; Reddit Nigeria, 2024). These neighbourhood-based initiatives are examples of hybrid ways to pass on culture outside of the classroom.

Therefore, these works show how important education is in helping Yoruba people negotiate their identity. Strong facilitators of cultural continuity include mother-tongue education and culturally relevant pedagogy. However, the scopes are constrained by systemic issues like resource scarcity, teacher capacity, and policy deficiencies. There are intentional efforts to incorporate Indigenous spirituality through TRK inclusion and syncretic forms like *Chrislam*, despite the dominance of Christian and Islamic religious education. The homogenising impulse of globalisation is finally being resisted by digital and community-led cultural revivalism.

### **Negotiating Identity in a Globalised World**

The intersection of longstanding Yoruba cultural traditions with foreign religious identities, including Islam and Christianity, creates a dynamic space for negotiation. Globalisation has made these world religions more prevalent in South West Nigeria, but the area nevertheless exhibits a unique pattern of cultural continuity and integration. In towns like Èdẹ in Osun state, Yoruba populations have a remarkable ability to dwell peacefully with people of different religions. Despite having different religious beliefs, the residents, who include Muslims, Christians, and traditionalists live in harmony, sharing family relationships and celebrations of the community (Oyeweso & Raheem, 2021:1). Interfaith families and shared ceremonial participation are examples of how Yoruba social structures and moral ethos value ethnic unity (*àdúgbò*) over religious dichotomies.

Many Yoruba populations demonstrate religious embroidery, or the mingling of spiritual aspects, as opposed to rejection or drastic cultural substitution. This movement is best illustrated by phenomena such as *Chrislam*, which arose in Lagos and Ogbomoso. To provide inclusive forums that cater to Yoruba ambitions for spiritual potency, *Chrislam* intentionally blends Christian, Islamic, and indigenous religious practices. Bhabha's idea of hybridity is reflected in these movements, which represent an intermediate realm. Yoruba religious symbols have occasionally been suppressed or destroyed as a result of conservative believers' iconoclastic tendencies stoked by the globalisation of Christianity and Islam. However, researchers record a notable resurgence of traditional arts and practices, particularly through the Osogbo Art Movement (which has been going on since the 1960s) (Oyeweso & Raheem,

2021:1). Cultural resiliency in the face of colonial and contemporary religious homogenisation is demonstrated by these revivals.

Yoruba religiosity is characterised by religious syncretism. Chrislam and other similar movements combine Christian, Islamic, and indigenous aspects into unified spiritual systems (Janson, 2016; Williams, 2019), using the Bible, Qur'anic, and *Ifá* texts as means of salvation (Janson, 2016; Williams, 2019). Such hybridity is consistent with Falola's (2023) assertion that Africa's ability to blend religious traditions is an indication of adaptive resilience rather than disintegration. Moreover, aberrant movements are not the only instances of syncretism. Widespread syncretic activities among Nigerian Christians are noted by Jegede et al. (2023) as being driven by pragmatism, healing, and protection, factors that directly resemble Yoruba religious blending (Jegede et al., 2023).

Despite widespread religious conflict in Nigeria, Yorubaland is renowned for its harmonious interfaith connections. Yoruba pluralism, according to Nolte et al. (2024), is based on cultural oneness (Yoruba-ness), which cuts across religious lines and permits flexible social and familial ties (Nolte et al. 2024:435-436). Shared catastrophes, like the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthen interreligious cooperation at grassroots healing sites, allowing for spiritual interaction and appreciation beyond religious boundaries (Ossai, 2024).

The Yoruba notion of *omoluàbí*, which values honesty, respect, and collective responsibility, is fundamental to negotiation. In the face of doctrinal heterogeneity, it serves as an ethical anchor that transcends religious affiliation and strengthens Yoruba cultural identity (Vanguard, 2023). Whether encased in Christian or Islamic garb, this internal moral compass aids communities in preserving identity coherence. Through the integration of indigenous elements, religious communities establish hybrid practices, spiritual methods, and institutions, displaying a solid and flexible Yoruba identity. Following cultural cohesion, interfaith coexistence is still prevalent today. These successes are not without conflict; there has been cultural deterioration despite attempts to restore the African identity through digital preservation, indigenous Christian groups, and resurgent art.

### **Reimagined African Identity**

Religious lines are often blurred by Yoruba people, demonstrating a practical adaptability. A multi-layered religious self-concept is demonstrated by the coexistence of traditional faith and contemporary religions in both public and private ceremonies (Laitin, 2005; Yusuff, 2017). This flexibility is similar to postcolonial hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), in which cultural identification and religious attachments naturally coexist.

In South West Nigeria, major Yoruba festivals have developed into places of cultural solidarity that cut beyond religious boundaries. For instance, Ojude Oba in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, began as a Muslim celebration of remembrance following Eid al-Kabir, but it has since grown into a multi-religious event. To celebrate the Awujale, Muslims, Christians, and followers of other traditional faiths all take part in age-appropriate parades and equestrian performances. Cultural persistence is demonstrated by the event, which "marries religion with culture and tradition" (Tribune, 2024) and "unites Muslims, Christians, and followers of African traditional religion alike" (Leadership News, 2025; Daily Trust, 2024). This festival demonstrates that religious allegiance is often secondary to Yoruba-ness, approving cultural identity's primacy over spiritual divisions (Laitin, 2005; Aluko & Oladosu, 2025).

Instead of assimilation or displacement, this rebuilt identity represents a type of cultural layering. According to postcolonial and hermeneutic perspectives, this hybridity enables followers of the Yoruba faith to "wear" Islam or Christianity while maintaining cultural identities influenced by language, ethics, and festivals. It supports the concept of cultural

resilience, which is consistent with observable modern practices and echoes the work of Peel (2003) and Falola (2023).

### **Conclusion**

The data analysis employs postcolonial theory and African Cultural Hermeneutics as interpretive frameworks. The analytical process involves identifying recurrent themes (such as language as resistance, festival as negotiation, and curricular exclusion) across the data sources for each state and interpreting these motifs as contextual navigational practices rather than abstract tendencies. For example, the employment of Yoruba in a Pentecostal church in Lagos is examined as a particular method of localising faith. Finally, the analysis involves juxtaposing the navigational tactics and difficulties found in tradition-rich Osun, historically mission-influenced Oyo, and urban Lagos to create a complex, non-generalised picture.

By employing the three phases as targeted case studies to produce rich, contextual insights rather than generalisations, this methodological approach guarantees that the study stays focused on the how of navigation. The study concludes that, despite Christianity and Islam's dominance, Yoruba identity in South West Nigeria is preserved and even strengthened through syncretic practices of faith, native moral principles, and active engagement in traditional celebrations. Vital avenues for this rebuilding are provided by education and cultural events such as the Ojude Oba, which reinforce the dynamism and durability of Yoruba identity in a religiously globalised world.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. It is recommended that the Federal and State Ministries of Education update the curricula of elementary and secondary schools to include indigenous cultural information, such as Yoruba festivals and moral principles (such as *omolúàbí*). This recommendation is crucial as education is still the most reliable way to pass along culture, and indigenous values are at risk of being marginalised in favour of foreign standards if they are not formally acknowledged.
2. Interfaith involvement in traditional festivals like Ojude Oba, Eyibi, and the Olojo Festival should be formally supported by local governments and community cultural organisations in Lagos, Oyo, and Osun States. This is crucial because these celebrations serve as powerful instruments for maintaining cultural identity in the face of religious variety and external variables, since they represent shared cultural memory and strengthen communal cohesion.
3. It is recommended that studies on Traditional Religious Knowledge and indigenous religious systems be officially recognised and supported by cultural policy organisations and religious studies departments in Nigerian institutions. This recommendation is important since indigenous knowledge systems are underrepresented in Nigeria's current religious studies, which mostly concentrate on Christianity and Islam. Repositioning African spirituality as a component of Nigeria's intellectual and cultural legacy rather than a relic from the past would be made easier with institutional backing.

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