

## **NEGOTIATING FAITH AND CULTURE: MUSLIMS' INVOLVEMENT IN CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

By

Omoseni Ayodele Ahmmed

&

Usman Lateef Kehinde

Department of Religious Studies, College of Humanities,  
Tai Solarin Federal University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State

### **Abstract**

This study explored the complex dynamic of Muslims' involvement in cultural practices in Southwestern Nigeria, a region characterized by a rich cultural heritage and a significant Islamic presence. Through a qualitative analysis of Muslim communities in the region, this research examined how Muslims navigate their faith and cultural practices, incorporating traditional Yoruba customs into their Islamic practices while maintaining their religious identity as Muslims. It also highlighted the diverse ways in which Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria engage with cultural practices, including the traditional approach to conducting naming ceremonies, wedding ceremonies and funeral rites, and explored the tensions and debates that arise from the intersection of Islamic and cultural practices. It explored the cultural practices prevalent in the region, distinguishing between those deemed acceptable and non-acceptable within the Islamic faith. Through a nuanced analysis, this research assessed the extent of Muslim involvement in these cultural practices and their impact on the Islamic faith and the region. The findings also highlight the complex dynamics between Islamic principles and cultural traditions, shedding light on the ways in which Muslims in Southwestern part of Nigeria navigate their faith and cultural identities. By investigating the life experiences of Muslims in this region, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between the Islamic faith and the southwestern Nigeria culture.

### **Introduction**

Islam is one of the major religions in Nigeria with a significant presence in the southwestern region. It is a religion with a global presence, encompassing a wide array of cultures and traditions. While Islam provides a framework for belief and practice, it doesn't dictate specific cultural norms. Southwestern region of Nigeria is a region, known for its rich cultural heritage, with various ethnic groups having their unique traditions and practices. Muslims in the region, like other Muslims worldwide, express their faith within the context of their diverse cultural backgrounds, leading to a rich tapestry of Islamic cultures. Islam with its core principles originated from the Quran and the Sunnah (teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad), provides a foundational framework for Muslim's lives. The religion acknowledges and even encourages cultural diversity, recognizing that different societies and communities have unique ways of expressing their faith.

Cultural practices, including language, food, clothing, traditions, and social customs, vary widely across different Muslim communities and regions. In various parts of the southwest Nigeria, Muslims have adopted local customs related to food, clothing, and social interactions, while maintaining their core Islamic beliefs and practices. It is apparent that Islam and culture are not inherently in conflict. Many cultural practices can be adapted and incorporated within an Islamic framework, enriching the lived experience of Muslims. It is observed that some Muslims in the southwestern Nigeria strive to reconcile cultural practices with Islamic teachings, often filtering out elements that contradict the core principles of Islam and integrating beneficial cultural practices, while acknowledging the fact that some Muslims in the region still participate actively in the non-Islamic cultural practices impacting negatively on the spiritual development of those in the category.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine the historical spread of Islam in Southwestern Nigeria.
2. To analyze the interaction between Islamic teachings and indigenous cultural practices in Southwestern Nigerian Muslim communities
3. To evaluate how cultural and Islamic practices have evolved and coexisted over time in shaping the identity and daily life of Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the dynamic relationship between Islam and indigenous cultural practices in Southwestern Nigeria. By examining the historical roots of Islam in the region and its interaction with existing traditions, the study offers valuable insights into how religion and culture influence and reshape each other over time. This understanding is crucial in appreciating the unique expression of Islam that has evolved among the Yoruba-speaking Muslim communities, one that blends religious principles with local customs in a way that is both distinctive and deeply rooted.

Moreover, the study highlights how cultural identity has been preserved within Islamic practice, providing a framework for understanding how communities adapt global religions to fit local realities. Such an analysis not only enriches academic discourse in religious and cultural studies but also holds practical relevance for fostering peaceful coexistence in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies. By shedding light on the balance between faith and tradition, the study encourages greater intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and supports efforts toward building inclusive, tolerant communities. Additionally, its findings may serve as a useful resource for scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders interested in cultural integration, religious education, and community development.

### **The Origin of Islam in Southwestern Nigeria**

Islam is the complete and universal version of primordial faith that was revealed many times through earlier prophets and messengers. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). It is a way of life and a system which governs and controls the lives of more than 2 billion people around the globe ([www.worldpopulationreview.com](http://www.worldpopulationreview.com), 2019). Islam is the only religion recognized by Allah, as stipulated in the Holy Qur'an "*Truly, the religion with Allah is Islam...*" (Qur'an 3:19). In

another verse, it is stated that; *“And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers”* (Qur'an 3:85)

Islam has a significant presence in the southwestern Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba people. It was introduced through trade and migration, with the religion initially known as “Esin Imale” (the religion of Malians) due to its association with Malian traders. While conversion began earlier, it gained significant momentum in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the migration of Muslims into the Oyo kingdom.

In southwestern Nigeria, Yorubas came in contact with Islam in the 14<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa of the Mali Empire (1312-1337) through the travel of traders from the region. This explains the traditional name for the religion – *esin imale*, the religion of the people of Mali. The first Mosque in Yorubaland was built in Oyo-Ile in 1550 AD to cater for the spiritual needs of these foreigners, but large-scale conversion to Islam of indigenous people only began in the 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a result of mass migration of people into the Oyo kingdom. Many of these immigrants were Muslims who introduced Islam to their hosts. After Oyo was destroyed, Muslims from there, both Yoruba and immigrants alike, relocated to newly formed towns and villages and became protagonists for Islam.

### **Culture, Cultural Practices and Islam**

The term “culture” refers to the customary beliefs, social reforms and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture)). A culture is a way of life of a group of people. It is the behaviors, beliefs, values and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next (<https://people.tamu.edu>).

The existence of different cultures and societies is acknowledged and embraced in Islam. Surah Al-Hujurat, Q49;13, says; *“O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing and well-acquainted”*. This verse notes that each tribe or society has its own distinctive features that separate it from another, and it goes to show that these differences are not all condemned or disapproved but respect as part of creation.

Responding to cultural practices, Islam does not seek to radically change a society's culture. Doing so would be against the holistic nature of Islam as it sent to all of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad reportedly said, after permitting the playing of drums and singing by the Abyssinians in the mosque, *“verily, I have been sent with a lenient, upright religion”* (*Musnad Imam Ahmad*). What Islam seeks to do is to preserve what is good in society and eradicate what is bad, as seen during the time of the Prophet. The community in Mecca at the time practiced several traditions that brought ill to society, such as burying of daughters and sharing of wives among others. While these practices were prohibited by the Prophet, there are instances where he did not prohibit cultural practices by his community. Some even pre-dated his prophethood.

Aisha r.a reported: The messenger of Allah s.a.w came to my house when two girls were beside me singing songs of Bu'ath (a tribal song about the battles between Aws and Khazraj). The Prophet lay down and turned his to the other side. Then Abu Bakr r.a came in and spoke to me harshly, saying, “Musical instruments of Satan

near the Prophet?" The prophet turned his face toward him and said, "Leave them alone". (Sahih Al-Bukhari)

In another instance, also reported by Aisha r.a: It was the day of Eid and the Abyssinians were playing with shields and spears (a cultural performance). Either I asked the Prophet or he asked me whether I would like to watch and I said yes. Then, the Prophet made me stand behind him while my cheek was touching his cheek and the Prophet was saying; "carry on, O tribe of Arfidah." (Sahih Al-Bukhari).

Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali said in his magnum opus, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, that we can derive lessons from these two narrations:

- A. That it is permissible to perform such an act (singing and playing), undoubtedly it is part of the culture of the Abyssinians to dance and perform
- B. The fact that the Prophet said towards the performers "Carry on, O tribe of Arfidah" as a request that they should continue to perform.

The above hadiths show that it is permissible to be Muslims while preserving our cultural identity through practicing our cultural traditions, as the Abyssinians did in the presence of the Prophet, with an expression from him to continue their activities. The versatility of Islam has allowed it to adapt in diverse climates without negating its core values and principles, thus enabling Islam to manifest through a variety of cultures in the world.

Islam and culture are interconnected, with Islamic teachings influencing and being influenced by various practices. While Islam provides a framework of beliefs and practices, diverse cultural expressions emerge within the Muslim world. This interplay can lead to both harmonious integration and potential conflicts, as cultures may adopt or adapt Islamic principles in different ways. Islamic law (Sharia) acknowledges the role of custom (Urf) as a secondary source of law, recognizing that culture can shape how Islamic principles are understood and applied. Cultural norms can influence how Islamic rituals are performed, such as variations in wedding ceremonies, funeral practices, or clothing style. When cultural practices contradict Islamic teachings, conflict can arise. For example, practices like mixing of genders may be seen as incompatible with Islamic principles. Muslims often navigate the complex relationship between their faith and their cultural heritage, seeking to preserve aspects of their culture while adhering to Islamic principles.

### **Islamic and Cultural Practices in Nigeria among Southwestern Muslim Communities**

In Southwestern Nigeria, Muslim communities often blend Islamic practices with Yoruba cultural traditions, leading to unique expressions of faith and identity. While Islam provides the core religious framework, various cultural elements are incorporated into daily life, celebrations, and rituals creating a distinct cultural landscape. This blending is evident in ways such as:

#### **Naming Ceremonies**

Naming ceremonies are an important cultural practice in Southwestern Nigeria. Muslim participants observed incorporating Islamic elements into these ceremonies, such as reciting the Quran and performing the *aqiqah* (naming ceremony prayer), giving the child a traditional name and performing traditional rituals. This is evident in prominent figures in Nigeria like Bola

Ahmed Tinubu, the current number one citizen of Nigeria and Kayode Sikiru Adetona, the late Awujale of Ijebu land.

### **Marriage Rites**

Marriage rites are an important cultural practice in Southwestern Nigeria. Muslim participants observed incorporating Islamic elements into these rites, such as the nikah (Islamic marriage contract) and the walima (marriage feast). The nikah ceremony is performed to formalize the marriage in accordance with Islamic law. While traditional practices, such as the wearing of traditional wedding attire, the use of musical instruments by some Muslims and the idea of approach of the customary court to sign some agreements are also incorporated.

### **Traditional Clothing**

Some Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria incorporate traditional clothing into their Islamic attire. For example, Muslims men are seen wearing traditional Yoruba attire, such as the agbada, during Islamic occasions like Eid-el-Fitr and other religious functions. It's a way to showcase Yoruba cultural heritage while still adhering to Islamic principles." Muslim women in the Southwest negotiate their faith and cultural practices in unique ways. For example, some women are seen wearing hijab (Islamic headscarf) with traditional Yoruba attire, such as the iro and buba. They wear hijab with their traditional Yoruba attire to showcase their Islamic identity while still expressing their cultural heritage. It's a way to balance faith and culture.

### **Islamic Widowhood and traditional cultural practices by the southwestern Muslims.**

The Islamic form of widowhood is quite distinct from other forms practice elsewhere. The hadith of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) provides us with information on this. According to one hadith, widowhood practice in the pre-Islamic era requested that the woman stayed in the house for one year after which "she would throw a globe of dung". Explaining what throwing a globe of dung means, the hadith says: When a lady was bereaved of her husband, she would live in a wretched small room and put on the worst clothes she had and would not touch any scent till one year had elapsed. Then she would bring an animal, e.g. a donkey, a sheep or a bird and rub her body against it. The animal against which she would rub her body would scarcely survive.

Only then she would come out of her room, where upon she would be given a globe of dung which she would throw away and then she would use the scent she liked or the like (Khan, n.d). It is with a view to discouraging this dehumanizing practice among Muslims and to obey the Qur'anic injunction that the Holy Prophet Muhammad, as reported in the hadith, had to tell the Muslims on the pulpit that: "It is not lawful for a lady who believes in Allah and the Last Day to mourn for a dead person for more than three days unless he is her husband for whom she should mourn for four months and ten days" (khan, n.d).

The widow can go out to attend to some of her needs. We have it on the authority of Imam Malik that, Said B. Khabhab died and his wife went to Abd Allah B. Umar and informed him of her husband's death and said: "I have some cultivation in Qanab, if you permit, I may spend the night there". He forbade her from doing so. She then used to go in the morning from Medina, spend the whole day on the land and return to Medina in the evening and pass the night in her house (Rahimuddin, 1985). Again on the authority of Imam Malik, "Naif" reported that Abdullah B. Umar said: The woman whose husband should die, or whose husband should divorce her,

should pass nights at home” (Rahimuddin1985). Again on the authority of Abu Daud and Nisai, both great narrators of hadith, Jabir, a companion of the Prophet reported that his aunt while observing Iddah went out to cut the fruits of her date – palm and someone met her and told her not to do so. She then reported the matter to the Prophet who replied: “You may go out to cut the fruits of your date palm so that you may give charity out of it or do something good with it” (Doi, 1984).

However, the acceptance and practice of Islam in the southwest has not greatly influenced the traditional method of widowhood in the region. Traditional method of widowhood still largely subsists among Muslims in Yorubaland. Although, Muslim women stay indoors as required by Islam to observe 'iddah' the waiting period, some traditional practices like maintaining that no visitor is allowed to sit on the mat of the widow on which she sleeps throughout the period of her widowhood still subsists. Avoidance of hair plaiting during the period and being accompanied by a responsible adult if she must unavoidably live the house for any circumstance. Today, most of these practices are gradually disappearing.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the origins and development of Islam in Southwestern Nigeria, with particular attention to its interaction with indigenous cultural practices among Yoruba Muslim communities. It established that Islam, though of foreign origin, has been indigenized over centuries through a process of cultural accommodation and social integration. The early spread of Islam in the region was not marked by force or conflict but rather by peaceful preaching, trade relations, and the influence of Islamic scholars who worked within the framework of existing cultural norms.

The study also highlighted the ways in which Islamic and Yoruba cultural practices have coexisted, often blending in ways that shape unique religious expressions. Festivals, naming ceremonies, marriage rites, dress codes, and language use all demonstrate this blend. However, the interaction has not been without challenges. Tensions sometimes arise between strict Islamic doctrines and persistent traditional practices, particularly in matters of religious purity and orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, the resilience of both Islam and Yoruba culture has led to the formation of a distinctive Islamic identity in Southwestern Nigeria — one that reflects both religious commitment and cultural heritage. This balance between faith and tradition underscores the dynamic nature of culture and religion as lived experiences. The findings of this study, therefore, not only contribute to a deeper academic understanding of religion and culture in Nigeria but also encourage the continued promotion of tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect in pluralistic societies.

### **Recommendations**

1. Religious institutions and Islamic scholars should incorporate teachings that acknowledge and respect the cultural heritage of local communities. This would help bridge the gap between Islamic principles and indigenous practices, fostering greater understanding and reducing conflicts between faith and tradition.
2. Platforms should be created at the community and interfaith levels to discuss the compatibility and limits of cultural practices within Islamic frameworks. Such dialogue can

promote peaceful coexistence and a clearer understanding of religious boundaries in cultural expression.

3. Academics and cultural institutions should invest in documenting the unique ways Islam is practiced in Southwestern Nigeria. This would preserve these expressions for future generations and provide valuable material for religious and cultural studies.
4. Traditional and religious leaders should work collaboratively to guide communities on harmonizing cultural values with Islamic teachings. Their joint leadership can help reinforce positive values while gradually reforming practices that contradict core Islamic beliefs.
5. Government and civil society organizations should recognize the value of cultural diversity within religious practices when designing programmes in education, conflict resolution, and community development. Policies that are sensitive to both cultural and religious identities will be more effective and widely accepted.

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